

Children and learning in the museum: the challenge of reaching out to many

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Introduction

The Livingstone Museum is the oldest museum in Zambia and has the largest ethnographic, historical and natural history collections. The museum has an education department whose main responsibility is implementing the education programmes. One of the programmes in this department is the Museum Outreach Programme. This approach requires museum personnel to travel to communities to undertake the education activities. However, the Outreach Programme has faced many challenges that have made it extremely difficult to continue undertaking the expected activities. The main challenge is reduced financial support from government. This situation calls for new and innovative ways of engaging the community in museum education in their localities.

Museum education caters for many people in different situations. Economic and social dynamics have resulted in movements of people to places far away from their traditional homes. The movements have inevitably affected the way people relate to their traditions and cultures. Over time, especially in urban areas, there has been the creation of “new cultures” with a hybrid of characteristics from several cultures. The challenge for the children is to take on board the different cultural practices they are exposed to while holding on to their home culture. One way this cultural exchange takes place is through music and dance.

In Zambia, the education of the children on cultural issues is undertaken both actively and inactively by the community in general. Children in the past were exposed to educational settings through community interactions. The family in urban settings would find time to expose the children to life in the village (countryside) where the cultures are much more practised than in urban areas. Even in urban areas children had opportunities to play amongst themselves, and learn from one another about their different traditional songs and dance. However, over time, the level of interaction has reduced due to many different forms of entertainment that are available in homes (for example, internet, satellite television, etc.) and the reduced visitations by people in town to the village. There is also reduced interaction amongst the parents even when they live in the same neighbourhood.

In 2002 and 2005 the Livingstone Museum provided an opportunity to school children in Livingstone for them to take part in school cultural competitions. Several schools from around Livingstone town took part in these activities, and several visitors to the museum at the time enjoyed the performances. However, how much more children would this activity reach if radio was engaged in the process? This paper explores the possibility of museums using radio to reach out to many with the various educational activities that are undertaken by museums. The focus, however, is looking at the school cultural competitions that were held in 2005, and how the coverage could have been improved to reach out to many people.

Cultural diversity in Zambia

Zambia has diverse cultures with more than 73 tribal groupings speaking a whole range of languages and dialects. This diversity goes with various traditional ceremonies and customs. There are ceremonies like the Kuomboka among the Lozi of

western Zambia where they commemorate the seasonal (annual) relocation of their King from the Zambezi flood plains to the high grounds during the floods. This ceremony is characterised by a lot of song and dance as well as specific cultural practices.

In the eastern part of Zambia there is the N'cwala ceremony among the Ngoni, meant to celebrate the first harvest. In other parts there are ceremonies such as Umutomboko (a dance of victory that resulted from tribal wars), Ukusefya pa Ng'wena, and Lwiindi. All these and many other ceremonies are characterised by specific music and dance. The songs and dance are different for different functions such as traditional funerals, weddings, initiation ceremonies, and ancestral thanksgiving ceremonies. These cultures need to be shared and disseminated to many people who may have moved away from their original homes, and the museum, through its cultural dances provides such an opportunity. The cultural practices, while entertaining, have a lot of educational messages that are important for the constructive upbringing of children in the community.

School cultural competitions at Livingstone museum

The Livingstone Museum organised school cultural competitions in 2005 that involved several schools from around Livingstone town. The competitions involved songs and dance, and were performed on one afternoon each week (Wednesday) at the Livingstone Museum Courtyard. The competition categories included choral music, traditional songs and traditional dance. Each week two schools competed on an elimination basis in specific categories, until eventually an overall winner was declared. At the end of these competitions the museum provided small tokens of appreciation to the four (top four) winning schools in recognition of the schools' contribution to the cultural activities and for sharing the cultures of various groups from a school's perspective in a cosmopolitan environment.

The objectives of the school cultural competitions at the Livingstone museum focused on encouraging learners to take part in cultural activities and on providing an opportunity for learners, under the guidance of their teachers, to learn about culture from one another and to showcase their knowledge of cultural performances. The learners were free to select the cultures to represent in the competitions. These objectives were outlined at the planning stage of the school cultural competitions.

The competitions were adjudicated by professional artists and music educators from within Livingstone. The focus of this adjudication was looking at the coordination of the groups, the message/meaning of the songs, the dance format and the regalia (attire) used in the performance. While some learners and other museum visitors benefited from these performances, there was a challenge of increasing the number of people to be reached with these performances.

The challenge of reaching out to many

The cultural performances proved to be attractive to both the young and the old. The attendance kept growing from one week to the other as people informed one another about what was going on at the museum. Those who attended the performances had an opportunity to see and learn from the school performances. In addition, among the people who attended the performances were elderly people, who made advisory comments to the school groups as to how they could improve or properly represent their chosen cultural performance, which resulted in the performers learning from the elders.

The intentions of the museum to involve children may largely have been met through these school cultural competitions. However, there are a few challenges worth noting if such activities are to reach more of the targeted communities. Firstly, the school competitions were held on a weekday, during the school term in the afternoon. This meant that at most only the participants from a particular school could attend the sessions. In addition, it meant that other schools that were not participating at the time could not benefit from the performances of some schools, except for those that qualified to the next stages of the competition. Therefore, while the target was to involve the children, the timing did not allow a wider participation by the same targeted children.

The other observation made was that the learners that participated in the school cultural competition did not distinguish the drums to use for various cultural performances. However, the efforts were clear and one could easily recognise what was being represented by the schools, and several observations were made by the audience. Some people that attended the activities commented that in the localities where the performed cultures come from, the instruments used, such as drums, are specific for particular performances. The use of the same drums could have been as a result of the museum's failure to provide a wide variety of drums and other musical instruments.

Recognising the limitation in terms of the number of learners and the wider community that benefited from the school cultural performances, I propose the use of community radio as an alternative medium to transmit cultural messages performed by children to a large population of children.

Opportunities to reach out to many: the community radio.

Education through radio is one of the methods that have been used since the early 1940s to address issues of access to education and to convey agricultural messages to mostly rural communities (Jamison & McAnany, 1978). This form of education has taken various designs from one situation to another, and over time the formats have been improving. In some cases education through radio is supported by the use of local discussion groups, and sometimes it is “designed so as to permit and encourage listener reaction and comment” (Nwaerendu & Thompson, 1987). How then can museums use radio to engage the children in learning about their cultures?

Livingstone Museum is located in a town that has two radio stations – one commercial and the other community. The Livingstone Museum has worked with the local community radio through a promotional programme. This working relationship took place after the school cultural competitions. Looking back at the cultural competitions, I am convinced that the use of radio would have enhanced the capacity of the Livingstone Museum to reach out to many people in the community.

The school cultural performances would have been audio recorded, and then edited to create radio programmes that could have been broadcast on the local community radio station. The local community radio station has an average reach of 65,000 listeners at any given time. As such the use of radio to broadcast the performances recorded during the school cultural competitions would have provided an opportunity to a larger audience to benefit from what schools are doing to promote the local cultures through song and dance. In this way radio not only provides entertainment but also a lot of education. As Nwaerendu and Thompson (1987) note, in some cases education through radio provides the audience with an opportunity to “raise questions and to receive feedback.” In this case the use of radio could have

allowed a wider audience to comment on the performances, thereby providing the learners an opportunity to learn from such comments.

One of the major challenges of the museum has been the difficult to attract more people, especially local visitors, to the museum. Through community radio the people can be reached in their own localities, in their language, thereby allowing them to get on with their usual chores but at the same time listening to museum education through radio. One of the key features of community radio is that such programmes can be scheduled for an appropriate time slot to ensure maximum listenership of the targeted audience. In this case, the learners who missed because they were at school could benefit from the radio broadcast. In addition, this would be one way of marketing the museum to the local community.

This document recognises the limitations that come with the use of radio to broadcast performances. In my view the advantages of the broadcast weigh above the limitations to transmit the visual aspect of the performances.

Limitations of radio for museum education

The cultural performances through song and dance have two main aspects that are relayed to the audience – sounds and body movements. In addition there is the aspect of the regalia that goes with specific songs and dance. The aspect of dance is particularly important because culturally there are different types of dance for different occasions. For example, the dance for rainmaking ceremonies is different from that used at weddings or initiation ceremonies. Through the use of radio the visual aspect of the actual dance, the musical instruments used and the regalia, would be lost. The context may also change. However, music and dance are part of the people's lifestyle. The people would normally understand the music and identify themselves with it. As such they would still be in a position to comment about the music, which would benefit the other listeners and the performers.

Lessons shared from school cultural competitions

The involvement of learners in cultural dancing and singing through the school system provides an opportunity to the learners to practice their understanding of the various types of traditional music and dance they know about. As the schools compete they learn from one another, and this enhances their understanding of the various cultures of Zambia.

During the cultural competitions, many local children and other visitors to the museum showed interest in the performances. This could be seen from the large number of children that came to attend, including the “street children.” The performances provided an opportunity for people to learn about the various cultures in Zambia. However the arena proved to be too small to accommodate all the people that came, especially towards the final stages of the competition.

With the availability of a local community radio station, I argue that as the performances were taking place they could have been recorded for the purposes of broadcasting through radio in order to reach out to many. In my view this would have provided an opportunity for the museum to reach out to many, hence more people benefiting. Radio is one tool that as museums we should consider partnering with in many of our activities. It provides much more opportunities for advertising space and sensitisation. Through radio heritage materials produced by the community, in this case by children, can be spread to a wider audience, allowing many people to benefit from such material. This is a lot cheaper than undertaking outreach activities in the

conventional way of moving from one village to the other over time. If reaching out to many is your challenge, consider taking on community radio.

References

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