

# Research Methodology Outline

## Colonial Tensions in Australian Museums

### *Introduction*

Public art galleries and museums have long carried a reputation for elitism, colonialism and exclusion, favouring western ideals and propagating a culture of passive engagement, subject to the expert control of the museum and their master narrative. Subsequently, art museums are often omitted from the field of adult education in Australia (Grosvenor, 2019). However, in spite of this historical reputation, research suggests that a majority of art gallery visitors believe that public art galleries and museums still have a crucial role to play in tackling controversial and challenging issues, prompted by new exhibitory and educational approaches that provoke critical, reflective and meaningful responses to local issues (Ryan, 2017).

In Australia, collections based education and display has been struggling to extricate itself from the lingering affects of its colonial history, as the second half of the 20th century saw Aboriginal art has move from the ethnographic museum to art gallery (Russell, 2001). With this progression into more mainstream 'fine art' discussions, and the general absence of constructive adult education programs, the contextual framework of aboriginal artwork in art galleries has fallen almost exclusively upon the shoulders of static, 'invisible' pedagogy (Charman, 2013), such as text labels, etc. (Wong, 2015).

### *Research Question*

By introducing non-formal adult education programs in Australian art museums, how might alternative pedagogical approaches and methods contribute to decolonising displays and encourage constructive, critical discourse between the community and institution?

Socio-environmental literacy was central to the previous iteration of this research question. Following literature review and further development of the question, the addition of socio-environmental concerns became problematic as there was minimal literature in Australian contexts from which to draw and build upon. Continued research has also led to the notion that, in Australia, one cannot think about environmental concerns without considering the original custodians of the land (Clover, 2018). And any art-based adult education with socio-environmental considerations, must

first acknowledge those Indigenous perspectives and consider how they are being represented in Australian art museum education.

By broadening and increasing research through adult education programs — in their abundant manifestations — these institutions' troubled educational aims may be turned to decolonise, assert alternate narratives, reorient authoritative practice, interrogate intolerance and privilege and stimulate critical literacies among more diverse adult publics (Clover, 2018, p.301). To reach this potential, however, museums are going have to adapt, 'especially with regards to their desire to control interpretation, their need to 'own' activity, and their fear of complexity' (Cross, 2002, p.2)

The aims central to this study are firstly to develop understanding of learner-driven, adult museum education in Australia. Why do children get to have all the fun in museums? Secondly, how might these alternative educational approaches positively influence their publics' understanding of First Nations culture. Finally, through research initiatives in adult education, how can Australian museums use this knowledge to change their curatorial approaches, appeal to a broader public and espouse contemporary narratives and discussions.

### *Methodological Approach*

Adult education in museums and the creation of meaning and applied/applicable knowledge therein, is an entirely individual experience. When we engage with an artwork or a cultural artefact, we enter into a conversation where draw from our own pre-conditioned cultural context to draw meaning from the information transmitted from the artwork (Holliday, 1999)(Wong, 2015). Considering the diversity of both the content of the art museum and their respective viewing publics and communities, the constantly shifting politics of display and the condensed/short-term nature of museum education programs, it is logical that a similarly reflexive and active research methodology would be applied to the study.

Participatory Action Research (PAR), as a form of qualitative research methodology, is characterised by two distinct qualities — firstly, incorporating an act/action that seeks to engender positive change; secondly, effecting these changes through an equal and collaborative exchange between the researcher and the community of research interest (Walter, 2013). The socially minded and participatory nature of the PAR methodology is distinctly mirrored by the present concerns of adult education in Australian art museums. By moving away from the gallery/researcher as 'expert', both the gallery and the research are in a unique position to draw from the diverse knowledge cultural contexts of its staff (beyond the education department alone), collections and visitors, with a view to best present effective adult education program that benefit the communities to which they contribute.

Within participatory action research the researcher becomes a tool for facilitating change, rather than the owner, director and expert in the research project (Walter, 2013). Equally, the public art

gallery and museum should act as a forum to encourage critical and meaningful engagement through their collection, rather than enforce or prescribe narratives to be passively absorbed. They equally require active participation, discourse and engagement between that which is studied and those studying it. While case studies are the most common qualitative approach to museum education research, PAR is an increasingly popular methodological approach to education research in Australia. Moving away from the standard linear model, PAR utilises a participatory and cyclic model that works through multiple iterations of planning, actin, observation and critical reflection (Lawson, 2015).

Beginning with an issue or desire for change identified by the 'community of research interest' — in the case of this proposal, the need for adult education programs that might contribute to the decolonising effects of contemporary Australian museum practices — a collaboration between the 'participants' and the researcher is established as they begin the planning phase. The proposed plan is then actioned — the adult education program, in its agreed form, is implemented. As the initial action culminates, any outcomes, observations and resulting data is collected for collaborative review and interpretation by the researcher and the 'community of research interest'. If this reflection leads to an assessment that the first action was effective, then the process of planning, action, observation, collection and reflection is repeated, learning from and building on this initial success. Equally, if the action is deemed unsuccessful upon reflection, relative to the anticipated or desired outcomes, then this is taken into account when designing subsequent actions in the iterative cycle of action, observation and reflection. Constantly building on and learning from the previous action cycle/s, the participatory method is repeated until the research cycle has reached its mutually agreed objective/end. One criticism that has arisen from the recent popularity Participatory Action Research is that it mandates continuing until the 'problem is solved', setting an impractical and often unfeasible time requirement. However, this concern is here mitigated by the generally condensed nature of museum education programs, where a single evening class or activity can form the basis of an action cycle, while longer courses or 'actions' may simultaneously run parallel to this, theoretically terminating the study once an effective process/routine of adult education design is engendered in the institution — appropriately tackling the issue.

Rarely are adults encouraged to create, dispute, perform, play, experiment or construct within public education. However, while museums do not encourage these learner-driven practices among adults, they form the mainstay of children's educational programming. Looking, listening, reading, watching, and walking along a predetermined path form the passive experience of most adults in museums. Tours, floor talks and lectures offer some potential interaction, but this is often relegated to polite questions at the end, and only if there's time. Assuming the audience will be comfortable speaking out, it is also expected these questions will be directed to the 'expert', not their peers (De Backer, et al., 2015).

Participatory Action Research draws from the expertise of its community of research, enabling the research team to, in this instance, draw from the educators' experience with children's education

programming and arts-based practices (Walter, 2013) to engage adults in alternative, learner-driven activities. Offering an alternative to current, passive practices, the research aims to gather data to expand their understanding of their communities' learning styles. Adults will naturally enter a museum with cultural baggage, with likes and dislikes with regards to how and what they learn (Cross, 2002). While they may not always be able to articulate their learning preferences, cultural or emotional baggage, by engaging in educational programming, such as that afforded by this educational action research, museums will be in a position to design, test and improve on their programs accordingly to their community's needs as they draw from the collective knowledge of their team.

Currently, within public arts programming, there exists an ongoing effort and discourse surrounding aims to both acknowledge and extricate the Australian art museum from its colonial foundations and its lofty image of the immutable 'expert' (Russell, 2001). In his essay *Hiding in Plain Sight, Decolonising Public Memory*, Aboriginal journalist and broadcaster Daniel Browning draws out some of the ways in which contemporary Aboriginal art is beginning to challenge collective cultural memories and master narratives within museums (Browning, 2018), using Aboriginal narratives and history as a means to interrupt the once unilateral history of Australia.

'In the Australian context, decolonisation is at least intellectually and aesthetically possible. Post-colonial thinking and the process of reimagination are evident in public artworks in Australia' (Browning, 2018, p.116)

In the case of Australian art museums, Aboriginal collections and cultural programming are integral, however, there still exists structural inabilities for the nation to 'confront its brutal past beyond the aesthetic and immaterial' (Browning, 2018, p.117). As visitors walk through exhibits, it becomes very easy to dismiss text, labels, aesthetic contexts, etc. By relying solely on these invisible teachers (Charman, 2013), this potential apathy is placated as there is only so much that can be contextualised on a 10x10cm label that may very well be ignored. To attempt to educate the Australian public within these traditional museological paradigms, that historically seen Aboriginal arts dislocated or misrepresented, as objects from another time, place and people, is to perpetuate these colonial powers that Australian galleries and museums are working so hard to dismantle (García-Antón et al., 2018). By involving the curators and critics who have a vested interest in this issue, the PAR has enormous potential to test and develop alternative adult educational experiences that at once remove adult education from its passive roots and engage multiple and alternative narratives. Once free from traditional museological constraints, in this learner-driven environment, Indigenous curators and educators can contextualise the heterogeneous narratives of the collections without having to accommodate the normative expectations of the art gallery and museum (Neale, 2014).

When conducting any research, particularly social research involving communities and cultures to which the researcher is an outsider there exist some important ethical considerations. In the case

of this research, these dilemmas are limited as the interpretation of the material and implementation of the action falls equally to the community to which the research benefits (Hostetler, 2005). The methods of data collection require similar considerations, however when conducting this research there would be trained and experienced museum educators, curators and administrators evaluating the efficacy and ethics of the educational approaches. Potential methods of data collection may include teaching observation, short student interviews/questionnaires, and analysis of art production or creative engagement. These methods of collection and evaluation would naturally fall in line with the agreed PAR/educational design.

## *Conclusion*

Providing valuable, critical, dynamic and engaging learner-driven educational opportunities for adults is enormously challenging. Yet it is a challenge that Australian museums must face if they are to continue to positively contribute to their communities, and have access to public funds (Isa & Forrest, 2011).

For public institutions offering adult education programs, there exist a great variety of expectations to navigate as they strive to maintain their position as a place conducive to important debate, and the images and narratives espoused by them to be trusted. As a socially diverse group, adults often act more readily upon their fears, negativity or settled views to the extent that they might avoid participating in experiences that may threaten to challenge them (Cross, 2002). In the wake of these obstacles, however, there exists the potential for provocative, radical and imaginative adult education activities in public art museums that can play an important role in the struggle for social change (Clover, 2018).

The ontological slipperiness of Indigenous art has given rise to consistent institutional debates that have confused and redefined, not only the critical approach to the art itself but also its educational context (Neale, 2014). It is clear that traditional museum educational approaches aren't working. Involving indigenous curators and educators — that have proven their ability to navigate this rocky terrain that aboriginal art manages to slip over like water — participatory action research benefits both the study and the broader museum public, as the knowledge gleaned from these education programs builds on continued curatorial development throughout the museum.

Art galleries and museums are by no means perfect and we need to continue to expose and critique traditions that perpetuate inequalities, maintain the status quo and support neoconservative agendas (Clover, 2015). In a country that often feels far from redemption, there remain important possibilities for teaching and learning to drive social change in the critical, creative, educational work of our cultural institutions (Clover, 2018) — they deserve more attentio

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