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SECTOR SKILLS ALLIANCES

Mu.SA: Museum Sector Alliance

575907-EEP-1-2016-1-EL-EPPKA2-SSA

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STORYTELLING AND MUSEUMS

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MELTING PRO

Co-funded by the Erasmus+ Programme of the European Union

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Module:	Storytelling
Unit:	W.25.2
Learning Object:	W 25.2.1
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Abstract:	Museums are often seen as places of learning associated with the presentation of facts. However, they are also places where curiosity is invoked and where wondrous things can be discovered. Storytelling has the power to conjure up the magic of museums. In exploring the folklore surrounding an object, which in many cases has no factual basis, it helps to move away from notions of objective truth, and to explore the creative potential inherent in objects. We will explore the issue of storytelling related to museums as a means of cultural heritage valorization and audience engagement.
Keywords:	Museums, Storytelling, audience engagement, heritage valorization

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The document created in 2018 for the project Mu.SA – Museum Sector Alliance, funded under the Erasmus+/KA3 programme (project number 575907-EEP-1-2016-1-EL-EPPKA2-SSA).

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Layout design:

DAISSY research group, Hellenic Open University (http://daissy.eap.gr)

Project coordinator: HELLENIC OPEN UNIVERSITY

Project partners:

culture ACTION europe, ICOM Portugal, Symbola Fondazione per le Qualità Italiane, MAPA das Ideias, meltingPro Learning, Link Campus University, Regione Emilia-Romagna ibc istituto per i beni artistici culturali e naturali, U.PORTO, AKMI The Leader in Education, ICOM Greece

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Aim and objectives

This unit offers an overview on the basic concepts on Storytelling. It introduces participants to the importance for museums to use storytelling to reach a wider audience and valorize its collections.

Learning outcomes

After studying this resource, you will be able to: compare strategies adopted by museums embracing storytelling for cultural **heritage valorisation;** and compare strategies adopted by museums embracing storytelling for **audience engagement**.

Keywords

Museums, Storytelling, Audience Engagement, Heritage valorisation

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1. Introduction

Museums tell stories. Storytelling (digital or not) capture the attention, appeal to emotions, and encourage imagination and reflection. It also creates knowledge, comprehension and empathy. Finally, but rather central, it helps engagement. Is, therefore, a relevant tool for museums and museum professionals.

This module will introduce learners to what is storytelling and its techniques, focusing on the benefits of this approach for engagement in museums and cultural organizations alike as well as for cultural heritage valorization.

2. Why stories matter for museums

In a brilliant article by Anna Faherty for Museum Next, she points out how the common understanding of museums as "places that collect, care for, display and interpret objects" is a view that omits the human element of museums. An alternative approach is to think of **museums as places that collate and share human experiences**.

These thoughts were put forward and supported by Salvador Salort-Pons, Director of the Detroit Institute or Arts (USA). For more depth, read the following article: "Opinion: **Museums connect our past and present"** (2019).

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More fundamentally, Salort-Pons describes museums as spaces for empathy and "a bonding medium for our society".

The power of stories is well known:

> […] stories share personal experiences in an authentic and easily accessible form. They feel familiar, yet enable us to step into the shoes of others. They are full of detail, but leave space for us to insert our own thoughts, feelings and memories (…). At their core, stories make us care. They connect us with people and places, even stimulating the release of a hormone usually expressed during intense bonding experiences, like childbirth, breastfeeding and sex.
>
> This emotional connection is the reason stories are so powerful. As any advertiser knows, stories drive people to take action, whether that's buying a product, gifting a donation or making a difference in the world" (Faherty, 2019).

If we think about why museums might approach storytelling, there are some arguments to focus on:

- Marketing purposes: stories can help museums raise funds, encourage visits and trigger sale;
- Social and didactic purposes: stories help organizations drive change in society;
- Innovation purposes: stories can help museums to experiment technological and digital innovation.

Pragmatically, stories can be developed for:

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- Hetritage valorization: e.g. for exhibitions, to ease the visiting path, and let it more engaging;
- Audience development: e.g. for social media, programming and social media.

3. How to tell stories for museums

Quoting again Anna Faherty:

> Finding potential stories isn't usually a problem. There are stories are everywhere. Look inside a museum and you'll find stories about the foundation of the institution, the history of the building, the collection, individual objects and the people who made, used, sold or owned them.
>
> Museums are also full of people, who bring their own stories with them, from researchers and other visitors to staff and volunteers. There is never just one story to tell. The myriad options can make finding one single story to focus on feel overwhelming.
>
> The sphere in which museum stories live, undiscovered or untold, is vast. Like a marble slab waiting for the sculptor's chisel, the possibilities are endless.
>
> Finding the right stories is less about looking for them and more about thinking through what you need. **You need to know who you are as an institution, what matters to your audiences and what you want your stories to achieve.** Armed with this knowledge, you can start to make decisions about the sort of stories you want to tell. (Faherty, 2019, p.3)

3.1 The Joe Lambert' approach

Joe Lambert, founder of the StoryCenter in Berkeley (USA), an organization that supports individuals and organizations in using storytelling and **participatory media** for reflection, education, and

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social change, is the forerunner of a specific methodology for digital storytelling based on seven steps (taken by Digital Storytelling Cookbook):

STEP 1. Owning your insight

Why this story? Why now? What makes it today's version of the story? What makes it your version of the story? Who's it for? Who's it to? How does this story show who you are? How does this story show why you are who you are?

Step 2. Owning Your Emotions

Which emotions will best help the audience understand the journey contained within your story? Is there an overall tone that captures a central theme? Can you convey your emotions without directly using "feeling" words or relying on clichés to describe them? For example, how can you imply the idea of happiness without saying, 'I felt happy?

Step 3. Finding The Moment

Audiences like to hear about change because they're looking for answers about change in their own lives. However, rather than listening to someone share their wisdom and insights with us through a report or an essay on the morals or lessons learned, we prefer when it is told to us as a story.

Step 4. Seeing Your Story

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What images come to mind when recalling the moment of change in the story? What images come to mind for other parts of the story?"

Step 5. Hearing Your Story

In digital stories, voice not only tells a vital narrative but it also captures the essence of the narrator. The more the spoken voice is inserted into the written script, the more the qualities of a person will come across and pull the audience into the story.

STEP 6. Assembling Your Story

What are the necessary parts of my story? How will telling this part shape the story differently or take it in a different direction? As you determine how your visual and audio narratives are working together within each of these layers, ask yourself: Do I want them to be redundant, complementary, juxtaposing or disjunctive?

After your story edits are assembled, pacing is one of the final considerations in creating a digital story because it requires an assessment of how all the layers of information are working over the entire length of the piece. When pacing your story, ask yourself: How does the pacing contribute to the story's meaning? How would pace, or rhythm, bring emphasis to the moment of change?

STEP 7. Sharing your story

Considering your audience at this point in the production process may alter how you complete the final edits. If you know who the audience will be for your piece and what they know about you, then

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it will help determine how much context you decide to provide about the story.

Contextualizing information can be either within or outside of the story's script. If your intended audience already knows certain details about you and your story, then it will help determine which details you include in your script, and which details can instead be revealed through outside contextualizing information

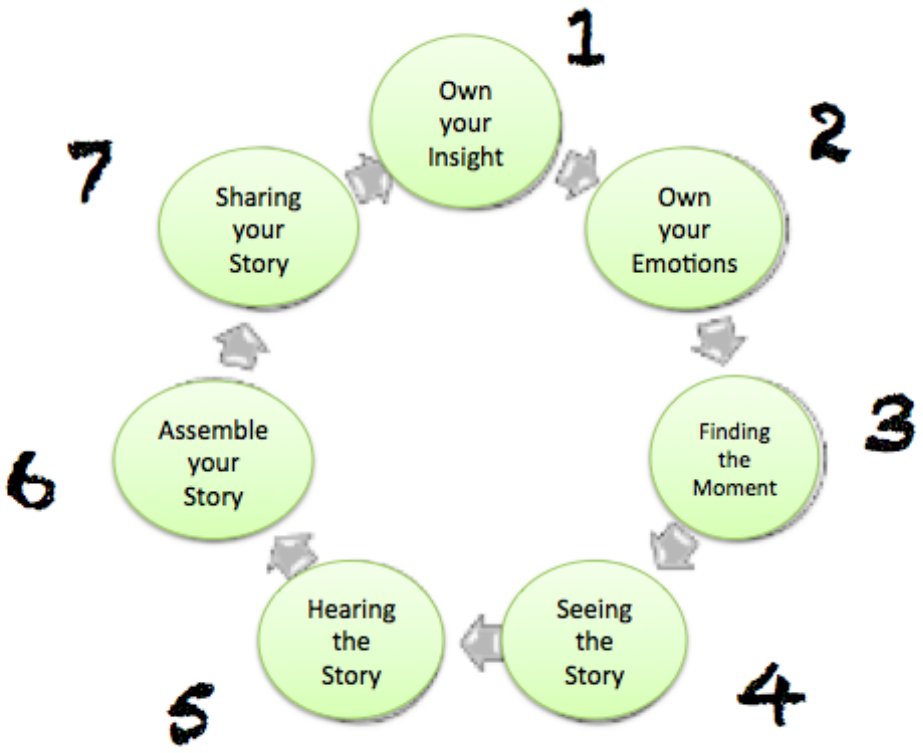

Fig 2. Joe Lambert's Seven steps, visual interpretation given by Melting Pro.

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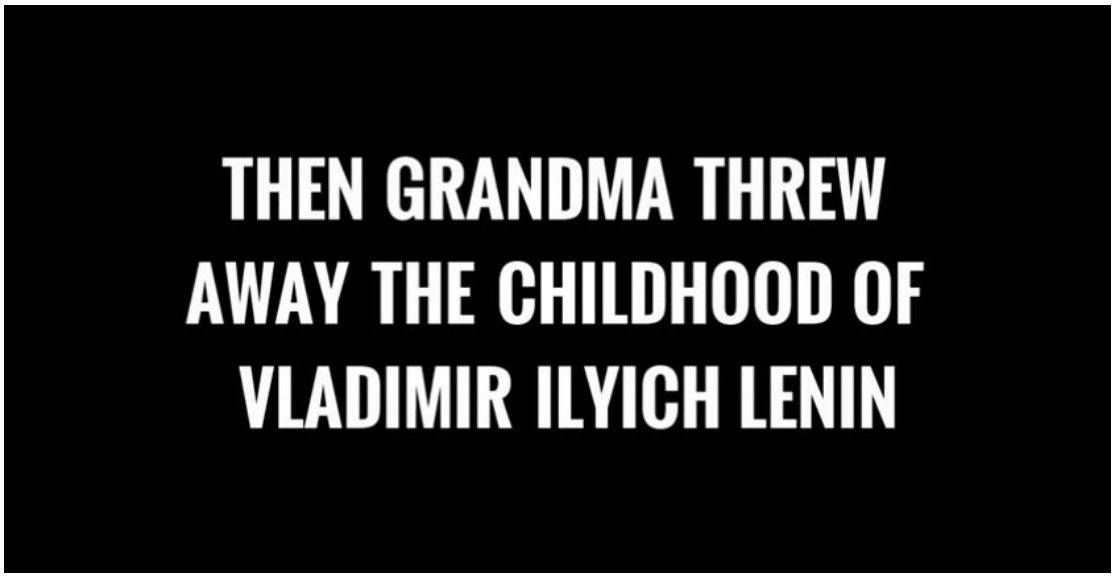
Following Joe Lambert Methodology, Melting Pro has facilitated many workshops for cultural operators. For example, a story interesting to share was made in Romania by a museum operator willing to tell the story behind the museum and her choice to work is such a place. Listen to the story here.



3.2 The Anna Faherthy' approach

Anna Faherty is a writer, trainer and consultant based in London who collaborates with museums to find and share stories in an eclectic range of exhibitions, digital and print projects.

She points out six questions that can help you make smart choices as you develop stories for exhibitions, programming, fundraising and social media. The following six questions are taken by "Why do stories matter to museums and how can museums become better

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storytellers?"

1. What is the story about?

Museums usually use objects as a starting point, but the most affecting stories are all about people. When we read, watch or listen to a story we want to identify with its central character, someone who takes action to overcome a challenge.

Museums that want to engage with diverse audiences need to deliberately choose central characters that feel identifiable to those target groups. In her article Faherty quotes Marleen Hartjes (Van Abbemuseum, Netherlands) referring to the concept of accessibility. This applies as much to stories as it does to physical access: "if the story is not about you," she says, "you will not come at all".(Faherty, 2019, p.3)

2. What point of view are you taking?

Are you telling the story from the point of view of the central character? Or from someone who encountered them? This may sound like a stupid question, but stories about women or other historically disadvantaged groups have, more often than not, been told from someone else's perspective.

3. What goes wrong?

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We find stories interesting and engaging because the main character encounters some sort of complication or obstacle. This might be a practical challenge or an emotional one.

The most powerful challenges are those we can all relate to – fundamental human issues like love, pain and loss. Complications like this effectively transform a story about one individual into a story of shared experiences.

The tensions created by this complication is what makes us want to get to the end of the story. We are driven to find out what happens or, if we already know, to discover how the situation was resolved.

4. What events will you share to move the story on?

Unlike the stories we all wrote as children, narratives aren't usually a chronological list of everything that happens. Once your audience is engaged by a sympathetic character and the challenge they face, a story needs a series of events that show how the character resolves the problem.

5. What details will you share?

In tandem with events that push the story forward, stories need information that adds context and detail. Mixing these two elements is a fine balancing act. Too many events and it's difficult to understand what is happening. Too much detail and you reduce your story to a stream of consciousness.

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Museums and archives are fantastic places for finding historical details. Archive resources reveal what people wore and read, how they decorated their home, what they ate, how they spoke and what they thought. More broadly, they can provide information about the weather, the cost of everyday things, social norms and attitudes to everything from health to wealth

6. How does the story end?

All stories come to an end. The conclusion of a story sees the challenge or complication resolved by the actions of the central character.

We find endings satisfying because they release the dramatic tension set up earlier in the story. They also provide an opportunity to consider what the main character has learned in the process.

Overall, good storytelling is about making smart choices. Choose a sympathetic character, an appropriate perspective and a compelling complication.

4.List of references

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7. Glossary

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