an other place

The Australian War Memorial in a Freirean framework

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Declaration

I declare that apart from sourced citations, this thesis is my own original work.

Signed,

Catherine Styles
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Abstract

My thesis is that museum exhibitions developed according to Freirean praxis would constitute a better learning opportunity for visitors, facilitate the process of evaluation, and enact the favoured museum principles of dialogic communication and community-building.

This project constitutes a cross-fertilisation of adult education, cultural studies and museum practice. In the last few decades, museum professional practice has become increasingly well informed by cultural critique. Many museum institutions have been moved to commit to building communities, but the question of how to do so via exhibition spaces is yet to be squarely addressed by the museum field. In this thesis I produce a detailed evaluation of a museum’s informal learning program; and demonstrate the potential value of adult education theory and practice for enacting museums’ commitment to dialogic communication and community-building.

To investigate the value of adult education praxis for museums, I consider the Australian War Memorial’s signifying practice – the site and its exhibitions – as a program for informal learning. I conduct my analysis according to Ira Shor’s (Freirean) method for engaging students in an extraordinary re-experience of an ordinary object. Shor’s program calls for students to investigate the object through three stages of description, diagnosis and reconstruction. Respectively, I testify to my initial experience of the Memorial’s program as a visitor, analyse its signification in national, international and historical contexts, and imagine an alternative means of signifying Australia’s war memory. The resulting account constitutes a record of my learning process and a critical and constructive evaluation of the Memorial as a site for informal learning. It provides a single vision of what the Memorial is, what it means and how it could be reconstructed. But more importantly, my account demonstrates a program for simultaneously learning from the museum and learning about its signifying practice. This dual educational and evaluative method would mutually advantage a museum and its visiting public. In a museum that hosted a dialogic program, the exhibitions would invite evaluative responses that staff are otherwise at pains to generate. Concurrently, visitors would benefit because they would be engaging in a more critical and constructive learning process. In addition, the museum would be enacting the principle of dialogic communication that underpins the project of community-building.
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