

Museum of Education: challenges and successes in a Greek University Museum

Magdalini Ntinou & Evgenia Vafeiadou

Abstract

University museums can perform as fundamental social agents while contributing to research and education. As such, it is important to explore and build on three key elements: effective student engagement, digital projects, and financial sustainability. This paper highlights the Museum's overarching goal to critically assess the integration of technology in order to enhance the visitor's experience without overshadowing the exhibits. Additionally, it presents the Museum's strategic plan which includes volunteering, sponsorships and partnerships. Finally, we elaborate on how the problem of restricted funds is addressed, what scientific expertise the Museum offers and how we invest in audience development.

Introduction

According to ICOM (2007, art. 3) a “museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyments”. This is the precise mission that a university museum (u-museum) aims to achieve. The fact that university museums are part of a larger educational institution adds to their identity, as they “comprise a wealth of information, documenting and representing cultural and natural diversity from across the globe” (CHATTERJEE 2010, 179).

The first example of a museum established within a university or an academy is traced in the original Lyceum of Aristotle around 4th century B.C. (BOYLAN 1999). Most of the u-museums were founded during the 17th century A.D., the first being Oxford University’s Ashmolean Museum. Today, there is an increasing interest in the international literature regarding u-museums as they “are the only keepers of the material evidence of how scientific knowledge was constructed and taught, and of when the physical archiving of nature started” (LOURENÇO 2002a, 52). Notably, their main objective is dual: the enrichment of academic teaching and the establishment of research. Possibly the distinctive role of u-museums lies in the nature of their service as they support not only the students but the faculty and the administration (GUTHE 1966).

In order to fully capture the role of u-museums it is essential to understand the role of the university itself as u-museums are built and organized within the university and they are often also integrated in a specific university department. Stanbury (2002) notes that universities are dynamic institutions that produce learning and research by sharing resources with the community and the public. They provide their museums the unique opportunity for cross disciplinary study among collections of exceptional artifacts, artworks and specimens. Therefore, u-museums “have been one of the important symbols of academic excellence and commitment in universities for several centuries and a valued part of the learning and cultural experience of students and the university’s wider community” (BOYLAN 1999, 55).

During the past decades u-museums were subjected to many transformations and as Lourenço (2008) notes they face continuing challenges in an era of crisis. Their aims, policies, needs, and methodologies are profoundly affected while they seek to keep their identity intact. It is, thus, evident that now more than ever u-museums need to re-evaluate their agenda and practices so that they remain relevant in the modern era.

Regarding the Greek museum landscape, the first u-museums and collections were established during the 18th century, today there are more than a hundred (TROULI 2006); the Universities of Athens, Thessaloniki, Ioannina, Patra, to name a few, house u-museums in many of their departments. The development of Greek u-museums is parallel to the historical development of the Greek university system (BOUZAKIS 2006). Their subject areas are defined by the departments they are attached to, while many of them belong to leading international organizations such as ICOM, UMAC, UNIVERSEUM (European Academic Heritage Network), UMG (University Museums Group).

Karavasili and Mikelakis (2003, 13) point out that their mission “is not only producing knowledge, but foremost place emphasis on the value of exhibited heritage and consequently highlighting the significance of its preservation and protection”. Nowadays, their operation has to overcome many obstacles, which applies to the majority of u-museums globally. However, we should consider these obstacles as an opportunity which has emerged in order to bring forward their research and educational role and further reveal their potential in acting as social agents.

Our agenda

The National University of Athens, is the first Greek University as well as the first university which was established in the whole Balkan Peninsula and in the broader region of the Eastern Mediterranean Sea. The University of Athens celebrated its 180th year anniversary in 2017; 180 years of promoting knowledge, research and culture. Its mission is to respond to new challenges such as the advancement of science, the upgrade of teaching and studying, the evolution of basic and applied research and the contribution to the social and economic development of the country. As Gavroglou (2014, 262) emphasizes “the University of Athens is the spine of the intellectual and academic life in the country”. Within this framework, the University of Athens hosts 16 museums, each attached to a specific Department according to its collection. The exhibits are scientifically and culturally important covering a vast range of disciplines.

This paper presents the Museum of Education which was founded in 1993 and housed at the School of Philosophy, the University of Athens. The Museum of Education preserves and presents exhibits from the whole spectrum of modern Greek history, as it has developed in time, through rich primary sources (pupils' objects, teaching equipment, textbooks) and vast secondary sources (photographs, maps, texts, models).

According to Labraki (2005) the Museum aims to:

- a) preserve the cultural heritage related to education and schooling;
- b) promote the research and study of history of education, pedagogy and schooling in Greece, both at an under- and postgraduate level from antiquity to the present in relation to Balkans, Europe and the world;
- c) train graduates in the fields of 1) museology and 2) documentation and conservation of school material which would be otherwise lost; and
- d) stimulate the interest of the educational community and society.

At this point, we will refer to the Museum's history, aims and programs. To begin with, the Museum's first long-term exhibition opened in 2000. Since 2004 the Museum has established its permanent exhibition entitled "Images of Modern Greek Education" based on the progress of Greek Education from the 19th to the 20th century. From 2013 onwards the Museum runs six educational programs and hosts school groups on a daily basis. The educational activities have been designed to address the needs of primary and secondary education students.

Our museum professionals participate in conferences, symposia and seminars related to education and culture. The Museum also organizes workshops that relate to its collections on subjects such as technology, sciences, books and theatre. These workshops are part of our outreach program to engage more audiences. In addition, students and professors of the University are often actively involved in museum activities and their contribution helps towards the Museum's development. Finally, the Museum of Education has created partnerships with other museums, institutions and organizations and they create collaborative exhibitions, activities and programs which are hosted outside of the Museum space. Geladaki (2006) summarizes the Museum's profile in the following sentence: it sets an example of a u-museum which has been transformed into an open, cultural and educational institution.

Museum learning meets technology

Every museum opts to most effectively promote thinking and discussions by continuously improving the presentation of its collection. Today, new technologies offer new possibilities in the museum experience, with digital tools museum spaces can create more relevant connection between visitors and museum exhibits. From 3-D scanning and 3-D printing to virtual reality and apps, digital technology is being used in a multitude of ways (ILNYTZKY 2016). Technology helps more people engage with art and culture and to bridge the gap between museum content and audiences (RIDGE & BIRCHALL 2015).

Nevertheless, using technology in the museum context must follow certain guidelines and should not be considered as a substitute of content. As Murphy (2015) warns that technology is not a magic wand that can alter the state of museum's outlook its ideas and objects. The use of technology needs to be carefully considered by museum professionals. Museums should not invest in digital components for the sake of keeping up with trends. It is important to embrace digital components in a more critical and constructive way which sets people and communities at the heart of museum practice.

University museums can deploy their community, both professors and students, to produce web tools which will enhance their collections' presentation. Corradini (2012,135) noted in her research that "web tools support an open and fluid approach to information in order to spread the community of university museums, to promote the participation of audiences and social inclusion and to involve them in the interest for cultural heritage".

In this vein, the Museum of Education embraces the benefits of technology as it complements our human resources - museum educators, facilitators and volunteers-but it doesn't substitute for museum content. More specifically, we have created an account on all popular social media, namely Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, in order to communicate essential information to audiences and attract more visitors. Furthermore, the Museum encourages the participation of postgraduate students - affiliated with different departments - who wish to undertake research on the development of educational software and the design of new mobile applications.

One such educational software ('Gaea: Approaching Earth') suggests an interdisciplinary approach for junior high school lessons of Geography, Physics and Mathematics. It contains four microcosms which engage the student with problems that need to be solved in a non-linear way. Students are asked to solve the problematic scenario using complementary data from different databases. The role of the teacher is to facilitate the whole process.

The educational software 'From the Present to the Past' was designed to familiarize students with periods of Greek history. Students choose a topic to be researched using historical sources, such as documents, pictures and objects. Then, they fill in a worksheet and discuss with their schoolmates the best way to approach the historical issue. The members of each team exchange views and then present their strategy and defend their chosen methodology. This program, can be used by school groups aged 12 to 15 years and offers a critical approach in seeking historical information both in shorter and longer historical periods.

The following mobile application applies the popular digital storytelling practice and is addressed to Primary School class visits. The key character of the narrative is Angeliki, a Greek pupil attending Primary School a century ago. A scenario is played during which this pupil guides the young visitors around the Museum of Education in a playful fashion. In every step the visitors examine one exhibit for which Angeliki provides some information and interesting facts. Through this 'trip' children engage with forty exhibits in an original and interactive way.

Experimenting with new technologies is part of our innovative approach which means allowing access to different stakeholders and sharing information and knowledge. We believe that the previous examples of collaborations are successful as there was a genuine dialogue and exchange of ideas between curators, university students and audiences providing positive feedback after their visits.

Sustainability and the Museum of Education

As many countries worldwide are now under serious financial strain, there is a direct impact on Europe with a dramatic effect on culture. Economic crisis has generated a drastic decrease in public and private financial support for museums (ICOM 2013). Thus, the mere existence of many museums and their collections is under serious threat, the resources are diminishing and the working conditions are deteriorating.

Since 2009, the Greek Government debt crisis has been profoundly affecting the financial and social status of our country. This crisis leads to critical consequences for culture as already limited government funding for cultural institutions is reduced further. According to the Committee for Cultural Policy (2015), the state authorities cannot implement any more projects concerning the effective protection, conservation and preservation of monuments and sites; research and excavations are being abandoned; and museums are closed or shutting down galleries and collection access. Due to budget cuts most of the Greek museums cannot afford to pay utility bills, keep their staff members or fund new exhibitions (DACIC 2016).

This particular situation also applies to the academic sector whose budget has been cut considerably with a direct effect on the operation or even the existence of university museums. This year a few network meetings were organized with the university museums' representatives from across the country in order to establish the Greek national branch of UMAC. During these meetings university museum representatives discussed the challenges of each university museum, the common needs and the possible implementation of a joint project seeking to confront the gloomy reality and deal with it drastically. The major aim is to bring these to the attention of the Universities' Governing Councils so that the financial status of the museums is secured and their collections are protected.

The Museum of Education is continually trying to ameliorate the preservation of the exhibits, improve the museum practices and implement a digital agenda despite the discouraging circumstances, always with the support of its affiliated Department which is responsible for its funding. More specifically, new showcases have been set up in the Museum, new equipment for necessary conservation procedures have been purchased and a new storage space has been established for the preservation of numerous exhibits. Furthermore, the Museum has accepted donations of new objects that will enrich the permanent collection. Last but not least, staff specialists in education, museology, conservation and computing have been employed for the most effective use of its programs.

The Museum of Education is currently carrying out a strategic plan for the two-year period 2016-2018 tailored to its needs and potential. In more detail, the Museum is receiving support not only from the undergraduate and postgraduate students of the University but also from volunteers regardless of age or background. This year a number of university student-volunteers took part in the programs assisting in delivering educational programs. They suggested that the experience acquired would prove invaluable both academically and professionally. The Museum has been sponsored by three companies either by covering various expenses or by supporting its outreach events. One Supermarket ('Sklavenitis SA') has provided bottles of water for daily school visits and one Bakery ('Mylonas SA') snacks for educational program participants. The stationery company 'Pelikan Greece SA' has contributed to all the activities of the Museum by supplying all stationery and crafting equipment, promoting the advertising of the Museum's work and enabling communication with educational consultants.

All the partnerships that have developed have offered the Museum the opportunity to revitalize its image and to reach out for more visitors beyond its basic audience, the school groups. We believe that all sections of the community should have a voice and be reflected in a museum's collections and displays. Indeed, we try to offer opportunities to people with less initiative to visit our collections and motivate them to learn more about our work while, at the same time, we try to inspire them to make their own voice heard.

Based on this rationale, we established collaboration with the local authorities and Care Centers so as to give the opportunity to elderly people to visit the Museum and create a program which will also use their personal stories. We implemented a joint project with the Ministry of Culture for engaging refugee families with the Museum. Through these activities the children not only learned about how Greek schools operated 100 years ago, but also compared their educational system with the Greek one. The aim of this project was to familiarize refugees with a new culture and to facilitate their integration in the host country. Events were launched in many cities of Greece at museums of the same subject areas but addressed to a wider community. Workshops for parents and their children were designed around themes such as modern Greek theatre, traditional Greek tales and scientific subjects (e.g. Chemistry, Astronomy). The members of the staff participated in national and European conferences in order to present their research projects, join the wider university museum community and to gain an insight into other museums' approaches and reflections. Our museum professionals seek to exchange ideas with university museum professionals from other countries and enrich their ideas in pursuing feasible solutions to ensure the improvement of the Museum.

Conclusion

University museums in Greece, as with the whole world, have improved their museological panorama immensely. More specifically, they have set up their legal framework, improved their educational operations, systematized their engagement with the students and audiences; and foremost they have established collaborations between researchers and practitioners.

The example of the Museum of Education demonstrates the overall progress of the u-museums in Greece, but at the same time the challenges they encounter. A systematic study of their history, as yet been uncompleted, is imperative. As Lourenço (2002b, 25) explains: "for as long as their history remains unstudied, the scientific and social roles of university museums and collections will remain undervalued, their identities will remain in crisis and their heritage will always be at risk".

To conclude, there is a prosperous future for the u-museums: they can re-invent themselves when needed, play a substantial role and receive the attention they deserve. Public u-museum are public actors at the epicenter of political, social and environmental discourses; they speak through their exhibitions and programs in order to anticipate concrete social needs and problems. In short, u-museums constitute a significant part of the nation's historical, artistic, cultural, and scientific heritage (THOMPSON 2002) and they commit to excellence (KELLY 2001).

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Contacts

Magdalini Ntinou, Museum Associate

Address: Museum of Education, University of Athens, 15784, Athens, Greece

E-mail: magntin@ppp.uoa.gr

<http://mouseiopaideias.ppp.uoa.gr/>

Evgenia Vafeiadou, Museum Associate

Address: Museum of Education, University of Athens, 15784, Athens, Greece

E-mail: j.vafeiadou@ucl.ac.uk

<http://mouseiopaideias.ppp.uoa.gr/>

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