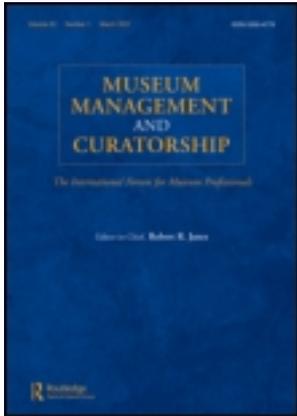


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On difficult history displayed: the pedagogical challenges of interminable learning

Brenda M. Trofanenko ^a

^a Acadia University , 238 Seminary House, Wolfville, NS, B2P 4R6,
Canada

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On difficult history displayed: the pedagogical challenges of interminable learning

Brenda M. Trofanenko*

Acadia University, 238 Seminary House, Wolfville, NS B2P 4R6, Canada

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The pedagogical purposes of public museums focus largely on the factual knowledge to be gained by attending an exhibit. What is often ignored are the affective and emotional responses prompted by the exhibit. The emotional response to difficult events may prompt youth to leave an exhibit with unintended, or interminable, knowing about the event itself. This article presents the results of a research study that examines a series of intergenerational interactions and conversations specific to war, which bears important educational consequences and implications for the learning of difficult historical events.

Keywords: museums; museum education; museum studies; pedagogy; difficult history; memory studies; museum exhibit

Introduction

The pedagogical imperative has been a mainstay of museums since their inception. Their dedicated focus on producing and presenting knowledge serves as a means to educate its attending public through exhibitions. The exhibits in history museums also seek to publicly contextualize an event and how it is to be remembered. Our youth are often expected to learn about the past from their encounters in the museum which are then ‘taken in and taken home’ (Bal 1992, 561; Macdonald 1996, 86). Those exhibitions undertaking difficult subject matter, such as events involving genocide, war, and death, have drawn increasing attention, but with primary emphasis placed on the processes of producing such an exhibit (Bonnell and Simon 2007; Macdonald 2008; Sandell 2006). Such a focus overlooks how various publics, notably youth, encounter these exhibits, even as the museum maintains its authoritative role as a pedagogical institution where education is a commodity museums offer (Hooper-Greenhill 1999).

By facilitating pedagogical encounters that predominantly focus on the factual knowledge to be gained by attending any exhibit, museums frequently do not consider the affective responses youth may also hold toward the exhibit. Public history museums continue to be conceptualized as institutions that provide privileged objects as evidence a past indeed existed, but where emotions have traditionally been disengaged in museums and exhibits except for commemorative spaces such as Holocaust museums (Cameron 2003). Intended or not, youth have been socialized both within and beyond the museum to think and know about the past as

*Email: brenda.trofanenko@acadiau.ca

chronological narratives, where the material objects commonly serve to 'bring the past alive' and offer an explicit lesson with a pragmatic educational purpose (Conn 1998). The museological preoccupation with creating an air of detachment and objectivity by presenting empirically supported information often demands separating the emotions from the topic in order to engage rational thinking (Williams 2001, 10).

What is often not known when youth encounter exhibits involving difficult subject matter is how their emotions are entwined with learning, and how this complex association may impact learning by either obscuring or clarifying knowledge. Yet, the emotions prompted by museums and exhibits, including nationalism and patriotism, do not always possess a relationship in historical understanding (Lubar 2007). For emotions to be effective in advancing historical understanding, scholars in history education have argued that youth need to hold a sense of perspective – taking that allows them the ability to understand emotional experiences from a perspective not their own (Davis, Yeager, and Foster 2001; Seixas 1998; Seixas and Peck 2004).

What these scholars have failed to acknowledge is how youth's individual emotions may impact their ability to engage in perspective taking, which requires a significant knowledge base. Absent within the field of history education is realizing how youth can gain a critical understanding of their emotional response and how their own emotional response influences their historical understanding when they witness genocide, war, and death through publicly displayed exhibitions.

This paper explores the seeming tensions faced by youth as they experience an emotional impact when learning about war, death, and dying as displayed in a museum exhibit. By presenting portions of the results of a year-long research project on how youth engage with difficult historical events displayed in public spaces, I offer a brief analysis of the pedagogical challenges educators and museum personnel may face with difficult and disturbing museum exhibits. The first part of this paper situates the research project within current literature in museum studies and education, pointing out the limited research within history education specific to the emotional responses to history. The second section addresses the research context, an ethnographic case study of one youth engaged in an inter-generational oral history project in order to highlight his attempts to understand war by comparing information displayed in the *Price of Freedom* exhibit with that elicited from a World War II veteran. The final section presents a discussion of the exhibit's pedagogical implications.

Review of literature

As important sites for cultural engagement, museums are faced with a number of challenges in relationship to the public it seeks to serve. In recent years, museums have had to address issues of relevance and to reexamine their roles and missions. The response has been to gauge their responsiveness to their audiences (Orr 2004). The results have witnessed an increase in visitor studies that focus primarily on assisting the museum to construct a more complete view of visitors' experiences (Dierking, Falk, and Ellenbogen 2005; Silverman and O'Neill 2004), with much focus on the museum as a site for knowledge creation. The idea that museums act merely as instruments of knowledge and instruction has been increasingly disputed

during recent years. In the past 20 years, a growing body of work in museums has addressed the issue of the emotive component of museum exhibitions (Cameron 2003; Witcomb 2003).

In writing about the ‘therapeutic turn’ occurring in museums, Linenthal (2001) suggest that museums are emphasizing emotions that differ from the civic ideas previously considered to be the essence of the museum as that of a pedagogical institution. The emotional response prompted by museum exhibits is both intended and accidental. The intended emotional response is utilized in order for the individual to relate to the museum through their emotions, often at the expense of intellectual engagement. This separation of emotion from the subject at hand is necessary to engage in rational thinking and to gain knowledge from the exhibit. Cameron (2003) suggests that emotions have traditionally been disengaged and ignored in museums and exhibits, except for the commemorative spaces of Holocaust museums. Witcomb (2003) points this out at the Museum of Tolerance in Los Angeles, where the physical space of the exhibit was such that it prevented opportunities to engage intellectually; instead, she suggests, the exhibit sought to appeal to an emotional response. Messham-Muir (2004, 98) states that many Holocaust museums aim to operate on both affective and cognitive levels, but focus primarily on the emotional with the end result being the ‘product[ion of] moving experiences for visitors.’ Such an experience, he suggests, enables the visitor to identify empathically with the victims.

Museums seeking to exhibit contentious topics such as difficult histories, taboo topics, and ‘hot’ contemporary issues are often faced with the difficulty in representing such topics (Cameron 2003; Cameron and Kelly 2010). Certainly, as Duncan and Wallach (2004, 52) note, museums ‘make visible the idea of the state,’ but cannot determine exactly what ‘idea of the state’ the visitor receives. Much is the same with emotions. Although there is often a realization that emotions may occur as a result of such exhibits, the emotive response in history museums often remains unknown and, as a result, is often considered secondary to the knowledge and facts gained by attending exhibits.

If an emotional response is expected from history exhibits, more often than not they are an increased feeling of nationalism and identifying with the nation (Lubar 2007). Even those exhibits focused on war, however, cannot presume to only present the facts about the war (e.g., the number dead, the progression, reasons for the war) without realizing how such displays may, or may not, be emotional for those attending. At both a collective and individual level, war can produce a wide range of emotional responses, including feelings of sorrow, sacrifice, and pain – museum exhibits solicit these responses without self-reflectively acknowledging the use of such emotions to engage the public (Hass 1998).

Given the exclusionary, nation-building purpose served by history and the intimate link that exists between it and museums, it is not surprising that many who attend history museums refute the possibility of an emotional response, even as history continues to prompt an emotional response. Traditional views often contend that, ‘the role of the museum [is] to present history not debate it’ (Macintyre 2003, 192), and the museum is perceived as a trustworthy source of information (Conrad, Letourneau, and Northrup, 2009; Rosenzweig and Thelan, 1998). National history museums, such as the Smithsonian, are under pressure to portray national history in a positive light, where a shared national identity can be delivered and cultivated while

ensuring the museum's historically defined role of providing civic lessons to the general public. But if the main focus of the museum is only to transmit knowledge and satisfy an ideal collective representation of the nation, institutions will continue to often ignore the emotional responses they are also cultivating.

Museums, and history museums in particular, remain affirmed sites from where to learn about the past and, as such, contribute to the formation of historical knowledge. Contemporary trends and debates around the necessary depth of historical knowledge supports that history education assists youth in constructing basic knowledge about the past framed within a discipline complete with particular rules and methods (Lee 2005). The construction of historical knowledge is not considered to be solely acquiring static and discrete historical knowledge about a 'true' and chronically arranged past. Yet, this is often how history is conceptualized within a museum. The physical objects serve as evidence that a past did, indeed, exist and the tangible object serves to represent a past in ways that can be understood by those attending. Objects presented in museums offer a meaning beyond the meaning they already hold as cultural objects, because they are involved in the telling of a story in an exhibition or display (Vergo 1989).

To expect that any object or exhibit can engage youth in knowing the past, and that a direct transmission of information from an object or exhibition occurs immediately, is a simple one. Although various scholars have examined how youth develop a historical consciousness through a series of questions, which are, as Seixas (2006) outlines, situated at the intersection of collective memory, citizenship, and history education, little research within history education or museums studies has posed such questions to youth while in a museum. While there is a paucity of research on this dimension of museum education, much research continues to consider museums solely as sites that allow for experiencing history and making connections to the past (Marcus 2007, 2008). Even as scholars claim that museums do create opportunities for youth to think critically about the past, there remains little research to suggest youth are asked how they come to understand histories of suffering and the resulting moral and emotional reactions.

Although museums are places that have the potential to change what people may know or think or feel (Weil 1999), youth attending museums can be engaged in the more challenging experiences that museums seek to offer the general public. The knowledge gained from attending a museum is no longer considered singular and determined solely by the institution. Instead, those attending can co-author a production of meaning. The museum's system of learning is not exhaustive, even as exhibits are organized around themes, narratives, and material objects that represent a past. While the exhibit itself may be static and a fixed meaning is offered, pivotal to the educational purpose is how the exhibit may open the door into something else. I suggest that museums can offer youth insightful strategies for exhibition critique. Not only can youth interrogate the style and story of the exhibit and the system of meaning, but they can also respond to how the exhibit structures specific information. Indeed, some youth have the sensibility to question the information presented and to ask what purpose such information serves (Trofanenko 2008).

While a developing, yet significant body of work wrestles with the pedagogies of interminable learning, what needs concurrent consideration is how unintended learning experiences are implicated in such pedagogies. Some students are able to learn even when this knowledge references historical atrocities and difficult events.

Learning from such events like war, death, and dying, as educational theorists Pitt and Britzman (2003) observe, might open students to question and engage critically not only the narratives but also the purposes of the narratives. Some youth can make this critical transition by positioning themselves in such a way as to reflect on their emotions. They transform their learning experiences about trauma into learning experiences about the learning of trauma.

To question what youth take away from an exhibit that may evoke an emotional response is not to present a cognitive/emotional binary. Instead, this line of inquiry reminds us about how emotions and knowing are inextricably linked. The objects displayed in a museum have the potential to elicit an affective response, but not always at the expense of gaining knowledge. Boler (1998) writes that emotions are cognitive or conceptual and are shaped by what we believe and perceive. Emotions, then, are aided by our conceptual understandings, which in turn influence our emotions. But for one youth (who was a participant in my study), attending *The Price of Freedom: Americans at War* exhibit at the National Museum of American History in Washington, DC produced a tension between knowledge and emotional identification. He sought to gain more knowledge about the personal experiences of war through conversations with a veteran. But the knowledge he sought was intertwined with an emotional response, notably sadness about the death associated with war, which was a departure from the original intent of the exercise (that being to gain personal information about World War II).

Displays of war, death, and dying

It is to be expected of any national museum that they would circulate national values, develop national histories, and advance national discourses. The Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of American History (NMAH) is no exception. On 5 September 2006, the NMAH in Washington, DC closed the popular war-themed exhibit *The Price of Freedom: Americans at War*. The exhibition sought to provide a 'comprehensive and memorable overview of America's military experience and the central role it has played in our national life' that honored those who 'sacrificed themselves in the service of the state and to celebrate the ideals they defended' (Smithsonian Institution 2005). In materials prepared for a special Blue Ribbon Committee in 2002, the Smithsonian laid out the intentions of the exhibition:

The Price of Freedom will explore the issues that Americans have deemed worth fighting for and the costs Americans paid to defend those ideals. Most Americans use the wars the country has fought as a way to understand the nation's history, and appropriately so, for our country has only gone to war when it thought it had something that seemed worthy fighting for. (Smithsonian Institution 2002, Appendix G)

The purpose of *The Price of Freedom* – to advance through a narrative how a nation evolved – can be easily considered one of the inherent functions of any national history museum (Rosenzweig and Thelan 1998). This exhibit offered the language of American exceptionalism and manifest destiny to justify war, an event deemed essential to the processes of nation-building. It married the concepts of sacrifice and freedom through object displays, all with an eye to advancing a national sentiment of the extraordinary sacrifices Americans faced during wartime. The larger educational

goal of the exhibit became one of how a sense of nationalism is developed by 'a well-formed sense of American history' through the Smithsonian Institute, a public institution that continues to hold a 'place of public trust in the public mind' (Smithsonian Institution 2002).

Three primary themes formed the exhibition's focus, all with a nod to the relationship between war and those directly and indirectly involved. The three themes focused on war as defining episodes in American history, that war holds social, economic, political, and technological dimensions, and that war demands personal sacrifice, both on the battlefield and on the home front (Small as cited in Smithsonian Institution 2005).

Toward the end of the exhibit's run, I was engaged in a year-long, ethnographic research project (case study) involving a grade 7 classroom at a Washington, DC charter school, where I worked specifically with five students (and their World War II veteran volunteers) throughout the project.¹ The selected theme for the year of study – war – sought to engage students in understanding how war creates a collective memory, and how collective memory sustains a community identity and makes possible the continuity of its social life and cultural cohesion (Assmann 1995; Phillips 2004).² An oral history project served as the main focus of the assignment and facilitated opportunities for the students to have access to a detailed and emotionally rich remembrance by a group of World War II veterans.

The inclusion of the World War II veterans may appear only to provide personal narratives about a war the students know through educational requirements, holiday remembrance, and, most recently, the National WWII memorial. However, there are two aspects to consider about the cultural memory brought about by the veterans' involvement. On the one hand, it may have produced a remembrance about pain, and on the other hand, it may also have served as a 'healing device and a tool for redemption' (Sturken 1997, 16), neither of which were part of the original intent. Instead, by involving the veterans in the project and by utilizing the exhibit as a starting point for the oral history project, the students were provided with an opportunity to consider the veterans' information as a source from which to further understand the exhibit itself, or to question the exhibition narratives about war – specifically how war defines an identity and how displays of war serve various nationalist purposes.

The research project is best described as an ethnographic case study of five youth involved in an oral history project about war.³ For the purposes of this paper, I have elected to focus on one individual (Sam) to highlight his conversations with one veteran (Joseph) as he attempts to grapple with war and death, as well as with the veteran's personal war experiences. Yin (2002) points to the strength of a case study as a strategy to understand a phenomenon within a context, which in this case is to understand how one youth – Sam – responded to the exhibit about war and the personal information obtained from Joseph. The case study seeks to answer the questions of how Sam responded emotionally and cognitively to displayed photographs and objects specific to war, death, and dying, and why Sam responded to the exhibit in the ways he did. Stake (1995) emphasizes that the foremost concern of case study research is to generate knowledge of the particular in order to discern and pursue understanding of issues intrinsic to the case itself. This paper, then, highlights Sam's responses in interviews, his conversations with Joseph, and his direct responses to the exhibit to provide an in-depth portrayal of one youth's point of view

about war, his response to the personal information provide by the veteran, and his response to the exhibit.

Confronting the grand narrative

The Price of Freedom was a public exhibition that was carefully constructed to honor US involvement in military activities and its success was supposedly reflective of a persistent US identity with the simultaneous message that war is a necessary activity. The death and dying associated with war became a common theme throughout the exhibit. The graphic displays of wounded and dead soldiers, along with pictures of caskets and cemeteries, came with a preemptive warning placed at the beginning of the exhibit to a public witnessing the horrors of war: 'This exhibition includes graphic images of war and its casualties that some visitors may find disturbing and inappropriate for young children.' The exhibit presented a running count of the total number of troops and the number of war dead for each military engagement, ending with video footage of rows of white headstones taken at military cemeteries around the world. One particular text of the exhibit – a series of pictures depicting soldiers carrying the war dead from World War II – directed attention to the horrors of war, the camaraderie among soldiers, and the possible death of those engaged in war.

This photograph presented a moment for Sam when his knowledge about the result of war (in this case, the death of the individual being carried in the photograph) came up against his capability of understanding death. His comment to Joseph that such photos provided evidence of how horrible he conceived war to be was met with a curt response from Joseph, who stated that he 'doesn't always talk about [war and death] all the time.' Sam could not understand why Joseph did not wish to engage in a conversation, and he expressed further confusion about why Joseph did not wish to discuss his own suffering in light of Sam's anxiousness to find out more about war. Sam's annoyance with Joseph, in which he later expressed as a sole desire to 'know what [Joseph] felt' when surrounded by war, death, and dying, grew out of the uncertainty Sam faced in attempting to learn more from Joseph about war. Sam could not understand why Joseph was not forthright in discussing the events depicted in the photographs. Sam's attempt to master all that he thought he needed to know and feel through conversations with Joseph did not become the intimate encounter Sam wished. Instead, Sam's frustration with Joseph was expressed at a later time during one of the research interviews.

At the time of the interview, Sam had completed his oral history project and his interactions with Joseph had ended. The interview, which was held in one of *The Price of Freedom* exhibition galleries, sought to gain further information about what Sam came to know through the project. When asked what he learned from Joseph, Sam began to cry softly. He reiterated his request for further information from Joseph ('I just wanted to know what it felt like to be in war. To have people die around you. To escape death but see it years later in a museum. What does that feel like?'), which ended with an expression of confusion ('Maybe he just didn't want to talk about it'), as well as empathy about the possible reasons for Joseph's reticence ('Perhaps it was just so horrible. I could not imagine how bad it was . . . not even by talking with him or seeing all those pictures'). Sam attempted to understand what Joseph might have felt when looking at the photographs, but his crying did not necessarily show empathy to such feelings. Rather, I would argue, Sam's emotional

response could have been frustration at not gaining the knowledge he felt he needed to secure for the project itself. This in itself could be explained by generational differences, where younger individuals like Sam are not necessarily reticent in expressing their feelings.

The overarching purpose of the *Price of Freedom* exhibit, as explained by David Allison, one of the exhibition curators, was to ‘get the basics [of war and its necessity] down in a clear chronological narrative’ to an ‘audience [who] is in many ways historically illiterate’ (Allison as cited in Thompson 2004). The coalescence of history into manageable displays reflects the general consensus about how people learn history in the public museum through the parallel narratives with object displays. The explicit pedagogical purpose as outlined by the NMAH was not lost on Sam. He noted the factual information presented on labels, text panels, and in the curatorial notes available in each gallery. He identified how the traces of lives lost in war were presented factually by the museum, in total numbers of war dead for each war exhibited (The total number [of dead] . . . it was recorded somewhere so I know they [the curators] aren’t just putting up a number’). He also noted that several conflicts justified war as the means through which a nation defends its democratic ideal (reading off a text panel ‘Americans have gone to war . . . I know, I know, for a lot of things.’ Like taking land and ‘winning their independence’).

For Sam, the death and dying depicted in the photographs and alluded to throughout the exhibit was an expected part of the exhibit. He held a sensibility about the museum’s responsibilities in ensuring a collective memory is advanced. He critiqued the exhibit and its dependence on showing war dead and the ongoing body count as a questionable way to advance the nationalist justification for war theme. Although he acknowledged that he learned more about World War II through the oral history project than by attending the exhibit, he commented on what he considered to be the museum’s pedagogical purpose: to invoke the patriotic emotion that ‘justifies killing people.’ This matter-of-fact comment is emblematic of the contemporary cultural sensibility youth may hold toward war and death and dying because they were not directly engaged in the war.

While the exhibit highlighted numerous wars, Sam focused his attention on World War II, which continues to hold a significant place in the US imagination through curricular requirements in US schools, popular literature, memorialization in public events surrounding significant dates, and in public museum displays like the *Price of Freedom* exhibit. When Sam asked Joseph to respond specifically to the pictures of soldiers carrying war dead and wounded in World War II, and to hear of Joseph’s own experiences about death and dying, Joseph commented on the large number of individuals who died (‘I think they [the curators] have gotten the numbers right. There were many who just didn’t return’), rather than telling anything personal at the time.

When Joseph attempted to tell of the larger impact war had on the physical, emotional, and social well-being of those who did not die, Sam instead wanted to know whether the pictures of the returning caskets were truthful. At the time of this discussion, an embargo remained on public photographs of returning, flag-draped caskets. Joseph did not respond to Sam’s question about caskets but continued to provide information. In this instance, Sam failed to hear what Joseph was saying. Sam referred later to the information Joseph provided (‘It’s more his reminiscence. I don’t think he answered my questions’) as not necessarily useful for his oral history

project. While such reminiscing may help to maintain, reconstruct, and assimilate memory for Joseph and further contribute to a detailed and emotionally rich remembrance of an event, it provided Sam with a personalized, individual, and painful reflection on the past with limits of which Joseph would not speak. Yet, Sam did not see the value of this information.

Joseph ended the conversation by not responding to Sam's questions and this premature ending of their conversation remained a point of concern for Sam. In a follow-up conversation, Sam expressed anger about the conversation and with Joseph for not being willing to discuss it more ('So where am I to get the other part of the story, the 'war is hell' idea?'). Again, Sam missed the information Joseph sought to provide. The conversation between Sam and Joseph attempted to provide a more nuanced sense of the past and created a shared story by symbolizing trauma (Cole 2001) – in this instance, what Joseph may have experienced but was not willing to share. As Olick (1999, 346) notes, 'there is no individual memory without social experience nor is there any collective memory without individuals participating in communal life.' In line with this view, Sam's comments reveal his own belief of the necessity of sharing memories if only to satisfy the project at hand.

Throughout the exhibit, several photographs of cemeteries with rows of white crosses, as well as a short film clip about cemeteries in Europe with buried US war dead, served to reinforce death as a necessary outcome of war. Sam declared such photographs a physical indicator of the extensive loss of life in World War II ('You can see how many died by how close the crosses are'). He asked Joseph about visiting cemeteries, with Joseph responding he only attended Arlington National Cemetery (Virginia, USA). Sam pressed him on the numbers of times he attended and Joseph did not answer. Sam asked again but the question was ignored. When Sam spoke about this encounter with Joseph, he first attempted to explain the reasons for no answer ('I don't think he heard me. He was too interested in the film'). He referred to it again during an interview when asked what emotions he felt while talking with Joseph ('I just think it is sad for him. He lived this and he almost died . . . And maybe he just don't want to tell me anything. I feel sad for him. . . . And I don't know what I'm to learn other than being sad.'). Such an evocation of emotion from Sam is central to his understanding of the representation of war and death. While Sam attempted to understand the meaning Joseph took from the photographs and film, he ignored the importance and effectiveness of such media in eliciting his own emotions. As Messham-Muir (2004) suggests, such artifacts are pivotal in producing emotional responses for visitors by enabling empathic identity with survivors.

At the end of the oral history project, Sam expressed exhaustion at the length of time spent on examining war. His oral history project highlighted Joseph's stories which aligned with what was presented in the World War II exhibit components. He spoke in an interview of the project's purpose and of his own engagement, albeit exhaustion, and saturation, in the project ('[I'm] just so tired of learning about [war] and all that comes with it'). The inherent risk in visiting war exhibits and conversing with those who experienced war is a dissonance between the expected learning outcomes and the unanticipated emotional response. Buruma (1994, 72) warns of the risks of attending exhibits, which cannot 'adequately express [its] actuality . . . because such visits stir up emotions one cannot trust.' For Sam, his visits to the exhibit and his conversations with Joseph touched on a connection he held with

Joseph that generated a powerful emotional response as well as a humanitarian concern specific to war.

The exhibit itself produced images and objects intended to be shared among the visitors, but this also allowed Sam to 'harbor the illusion of being present' (Huppauf 1997, 32). Sam's understanding of war and death, and his time in the exhibit, had the capacity to evoke direct knowledge of events. His experiences of war are different to that of Joseph's. For Joseph, the exhibit comes embedded in lived experience; for Sam, war is contextualized by historical narratives, objects, and his own knowledge and expectations. Each viewing of an image, or reading of a text, or attending an event in the museum has the potential to unleash a whole raft of cognitive and emotional responses.

Museums can contextualize an event within interpretive frameworks, but they cannot necessarily determine the effect. Sam's exhaustion at the topic and the project ('I just don't want to learn anymore about it now') showed his wish to stop learning about war. Sam's expression indicates how designed spaces like museum exhibits can provide 'unintentional, involuntary experiences of the learning self' (Ellsworth 2005, 26). In exhibits like the *Price of Freedom*, learning about war and death may produce an unexpected and unintended emotional response.

Discussion

In this final portion of the article, I return briefly to the possibilities of understanding one youth's emotional response to war from an oral history project. In presenting brief portions of this year-long research project, this section presents a more nuanced description of the interplay between emotions and learning, and how each are interlaced.

To attempt to understand difficult historical events, such as war, does not always mean the abandonment of oppositional narratives; for example, in this instance, we must consider Sam's response to the oral history project over time. By studying Sam and how his emotions remained prevalent in his conversations with Joseph (during his times in the exhibit, at the National WW2 exhibit, and at Arlington National Cemetery), we can see distinctions between which element of history he responds to and which he does not. He realized the emotions that shaped his understanding of the war and of death as significant, but not as bridging the emotional with the cognitive. To date, most studies examining the pedagogical purposes of museums have focused on sustaining visitor engagement, understanding visitor behavior, and measuring the public value of museum exhibits (most evident in the visitor studies scholarship), with little examination of how exhibitions prompt emotional responses and cognitive engagement.

Generally, as articulated in museum studies literature, emotion is seen as a response not easily understood or addressed (Crane 2008). Studies have identified the central role that emotions may play in education and in learning (see, Boler 1997, 1998, 1999). Yet, the emotional response to history museum exhibits is ignored and the cognitive outcome remains a prevalent expected outcome. The focus on the cognitive reality of learning from public exhibitions shuts out any critical examination of how historical knowledge is made, mediated, governed, and implicated in discourses of emotion (Britzman 2000; Pitt and Britzman 2003; Simon 2005).

The pedagogy of the NMAH and the *Price of Freedom* exhibit, while focused on presenting a body of knowledge to be consumed by the public, is not a closed system of knowledge exchange. Instead of a fixed or knowable body of knowledge, the exhibit (like every other exhibit created) presents a possibility for something else, notably an emotional response from the range of public groups who attend any exhibit. The opening of this possibility, what Felman (1987, 88) refers to (following from Freud) as ‘interminable learning,’ displaces the chronological narrative of history exhibits. Although the exhibit provided an end of the narrative with the displays of twisted girders from the World Trade Center and the request for our continued vigilance on the war of terror, the emotional responses Sam portrayed suggests the exhibit itself did not provide an ending but, instead, the impossibility of displaying war and death without prompting emotions.

As explained in the exhibition catalog, the purpose of this exhibit was to:

... explore the issues that Americans have deemed worth fighting for and the costs Americans paid to defend those ideals. Most Americans use the wars the country has fought as a way to understand the nation’s history, and appropriately so, for our country has only gone to war when it thought it had something that seemed worthy fighting for. (Smithsonian Institution 2002, Appendix G)

The official explanation does not explicitly state the need to know the chronology of war in the USA, but it did openly assert that war is the principle rational response to conflict. It also implicitly advances the ideals of freedom and a larger patriotic rhetoric.

As evident in Sam’s conversations, the relationship between content (the learning outcomes) and pedagogy (the displays of objects within a narrative structure) in the production of knowledge specific to war highlights a distinct learning relationship that occurred through this project. Without a doubt, Sam did gain additional knowledge about the war, death, and dying, but not solely as a result of his time in the exhibit. More specifically, I would argue that Sam’s learning (and in this case, I would argue his learning includes his own understanding of how his emotional responses occurred and why) occurred when he was able to comment, discuss, and question his knowledge with Joseph. The conversations focused primarily on Sam considering Joseph a reliable source and an affirmation of the exhibit. Joseph provided Sam with an additional perspective on war. Sam’s demand to know facts drawn from Joseph’s personal, lived experience prompted the emotional responses. What resulted was Sam’s frustration evoked by the insufficient information presented by Joseph. Sam then had to confront his own emotions and what he felt about war and its impact on individuals, including Joseph.

The degree to which this exhibit prompted Sam to be visibly emotional and open with his expression and explanation of his emotions shows how he experienced the ‘encountering the self through the otherness of knowledge’ (Pitt and Britzman 2003, 755). The knowledge Sam gained through this experience brought him up against the limits of what he expected to learn from attending the exhibit. The most significant result of his emotional experiences is the troubling consequences of his partial understanding of the exhibit, and how this disrupted his ability to comprehend and reconcile the meanings of war. This results in what Pitt and Britzman (2003, 759)

suggest is 'one's sense of mastery [being] outdone.' It also provides an individual with an opportunity to ignore what cannot be comprehended (Felman 1987).

For Sam, learning about war, death, and dying in a museum is context specific. Given that museums are considered to be pedagogical sites, are widely popular as repositories of objects that serve to educate, and are engaging in exhibiting difficult exhibits, they continue to occupy an interesting pedagogical position. Public exhibitions involving war, death, and dying often limit themselves to focusing on the event representations through object displays and narratives that overlook the social and embodied practices of memory. Even difficult events are set in predefined and logical formats. The issue facing educators is to work with youth in ways that understand the past in a manner that is not solely set into predefined scripts and collective memories, but that may also prompt an emotional engagement.

Conclusions

As institutions that hold significant authority and value in society, museums continuously work the tension of being both a temple and a forum (Cameron 2004), as they maintain their mandates of collecting and exhibiting objects while simultaneously ensuring the best of a nation is presented to the public. The museum is also an institution that is increasingly displaying difficult topics and events, which provides an opportunity for public discussion of timely and important topics. The acceptance of the museum as a medium to include exhibits that are both definitive and controversial is, as Cameron (2005, 213) suggests, a result of where museums are situated:

Museums globally exist in an academic, cultural and social context of contest and controversy. A long-established practice of exhibiting 'the facts', 'truth', 'national history' or unproblematic conceptions of 'other' places and peoples is no longer wholly sustainable in an environment where the self-evidence of all these things is under question. Topics of global importance that challenge, upset, intrigue and attract are now legitimate areas for museological investigation.

Museums cannot ignore the societal issues evident in their communities. These 'topics of global importance,' such as war, death, and dying are not shielded from particular groups, including youth. Yet, for such exhibits to be successful, they need to be intellectually accessible to youth. Museums cannot rest on their pedagogical laurels and continue to insist on their authoritative role. Rather, museums are evoking serious dialog in addition to stirring emotions, primarily through presenting contentious issues. Even though a research agenda has emerged to understand such topics, much of it has been limited to describing and deconstructing the controversies.

Although the limited examination of emotions evoked by the display of war, death, and dying serves as a point of departure for this paper, I would like to conclude by noting that youth may embrace difficult topics as a way of informing their knowledge or reflecting on an emotional response, to engage in debate, or transform their understanding. As the booming academic discipline of memory studies critically engages in the self-reflexivity of how people respond to difficult past events, there is a need for scholars in education and museum studies to engage in

examining how youth come to know, and not know, about the past – as the learning is entwined with an emotional tethering. Educators and museum personnel, I would argue, often seek to rationalize the knowledge gained through education; what is often forgotten are the uncertainties associated with learning. The emotional responses held by our youth to difficult historical events are not something to ignore. Instead, they ought to be explored through collective narratives within our public history museums and our classrooms. Historical knowledge is emotional and provokes questions about our own understanding of the world around us.

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Notes

1. The Day Spring Charter School (a pseudonym) had a total student population of 392, of which 58 per cent had family members serving in the military in upper administrative positions. Of the five students with whom I worked, two had parents with military positions. The school had an on-going association with a volunteer group who flew in World War II. The visitation program between the school and the veterans group was in its 10th year and had evolved into an inter-generational oral history project. The veterans would visit the school four times throughout the school year. For further information on the research project and the results, see Trofanenko (2008).
2. The teacher assigned the students an oral history project involving veteran volunteers in order for the students to gain various interpretations and experiences of World War II. In groups of two or three, students first researched selected themes of war (personal sacrifice, military engagement, and post-war experiences), created questions to ask of the veterans, and attended the NMAH *The Price of War* exhibit and the World War II Memorial on the Mall.
3. I focus solely on Sam and his oral history project with Joseph for several reasons. First, Sam was the only student who completed his oral history project; second, he lived in the school catchment area which allowed him easy access to the exhibit outside of school time; and third, he remained at Day Spring Charter School throughout the school year (unlike two students in the research project who left prior to the end of the school year).

Notes on contributor

Brenda Trofanenko is the Canada Research Chair in Culture, Community, and Education and an associate professor at Acadia University, Wolfville, Nova Scotia. She is also a visiting professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. Her research interests focus on exploring how public institutions – specifically museums and archives – are implicated in community engagement, identity formation, and collective memory formation. She is currently examining the sociology of race and identity in the public realm.

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