

Article review: Trofanenko, B.M. (2010). The educational promise of public history museum exhibits. *Theory and Research in Social Education*, Spring, 38(2)

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The author of this article encourages educators to apply critical analysis to the educational mandate of national museum exhibits. In Trofanenko's opinion national museums are "public representations of the past" that form the "collective consciousness" of the past and are places "where the public affirms the museums authority to define and educate" (p. 271). She actively questions the authority of this institution to construction narratives of national identity.

Commonly perceived as presenting official versions of the past, Trofanenko questions the authenticity and authority of the institution as the purveyor of historical truth, and encourages educators to reconsider how "students come to understand what is defined as history in a museum"(p. 279). The key point is that neither the site, nor the exhibit is free of value-based subjectivity. The author advocates for more opportunities for visitors to critique and provide a more plural and critical analysis of the past. She asserts that "to be a citizen of any country one must know its history, a history that reaffirms the uniqueness of the nation" (p. 270). The article aims to encourage educators to critically question how "archives and museums both advance a nationalist purpose" (p. 270).

Guided by this framework of critical pedagogy Trofanenko analyzes the

Smithsonian Institute's exhibition, "*The Price Freedom: Americans at War*". She believes that "exhibits like "*The Price of Freedom*" typically advance a collective national identity through historical events while ignoring the moral issues of establishing a country through war and military engagement" (p. 275). She is not questioning the legitimacy of war and military as historical subjects of study, but suggests that we "need to know how to judge what is being presented as historical" and "to engage in historical inquiry to understand the past on display" (p. 271).

I agree with her analysis of the patriotic function of the exhibit and the authority purveyed by the Smithsonian as an institution. I also appreciate her suggestion that educators approach their visits with students in more engaging ways. In my opinion, however, she assumes the public does not critically assess the display or the narrative presented. I think she should give the viewing audience some credit. There was no evidence presented from visitors to the show regarding either students or adult interpretations of the exhibit, which would lend some credibility to her claims. Also, it would be helpful is she suggested specific strategies for critically engaging students in this particular exhibit, since it continues to exist on-line.

How I would integrate this knowledge into my teaching practice:

1. Pre-museum visit:

- Read the museum description of the exhibit on-line, talk about material culture, talk about the curatorial choices and presentation of objects.
- Review the relevant historical context and explain why we are going to this particular exhibit.
- Prepare a treasure hunt exercise with critical questions.
- Let some students draw or otherwise tell the story they have perceived from a portion of the exhibit.

2. At the museum:

- Ask to meet with the curator after the students have gone through the show?
- Have her/him explain to the students their purpose for the show and let the students ask them questions based on their own interpretations.
- Group discussion of thoughts, interesting aspects, observations, etc. and questions generated by the students.
- Apply knowledge to future visits to exhibitions at the Royal B.C. Museum.

a. http://www.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/Exhibit_Gall/default.aspx

3. Apply this knowledge to educational programs provided by Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. <http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/home> and <http://www.warmuseum.ca/cwm/education/teacher-resources>

4. On-line version of the Smithsonian Institute's National Museum of American History (NMAH) exhibit "The Price of Freedom: Americans At War" is available at: <http://www.americanhistory.si.edu/Militaryhistory/>

5. For an animated explanation of HISTORICAL ENQUIRY please see: <http://www.historicalinquiry.com/inquiry/explanation/explanation2.cfm>

6. First look at examples of historical War Propaganda Posters. Discuss the message, the design, the mood, the colors, & symbols used. Then look at the exhibit as a whole and ask is there are any similarities? If allowed to take photographs in the museum, bring digital camera's (if using on-line exhibit - use screen-capture and print on computer). Ask the students to create their own propaganda poster created from still images of the exhibit.