



the happy
museum

Case Study – real practice, real impact

Gwynedd Museum and
Art Gallery – audience
engagement through
technology and nudging

Gwynedd Museum and Art Gallery is council funded and has recently reopened under the new name of **Storiel** in a newly refurbished historic building in the centre of Bangor.

Gwynedd Museum and Art Gallery – audience engagement through technology and nudging

This case study is about how a partnership between a research institute and a museum led to the development of a software app that allows visitors to ‘tag’ objects and artworks with their own commentary. The app was tested to see if it increased audience engagement.

This case study is relevant to:

- Senior management team
- Learning and community engagement teams
- Curators

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Highlights

- **Museum willing to innovate and explore new ways to engage with audiences**
- **App developed to allow visitors to record their reactions to objects and to listen to the reactions of others**
- **Important partnership with researchers and academics established**
- **Nudging techniques tested to change visitor behaviour**
- **App has been made available to other institutions**



Museum profile

Storiell, formerly Gwynedd Museum and Art Gallery in Bangor, has a substantial collection of furniture, textiles, archaeological items

and other objects that show how people in the area used to live. The museum and gallery is funded by Gwynedd Council.



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Kathryn Eccles

Happy Museum activities

Gwynedd Museum’s Happy Museum project was called ‘What’s your story?’ and aimed to reimagine museum behaviour, by encouraging people to talk about the collection. Through a partnership with Oxford Internet Institute (OII) and the Wales Centre for Behaviour Change, an app was developed that allowed museum visitors to record their own audio comments about selected objects in the collection, and to playback the recorded

reactions of other visitors. The app is bi-lingual, in Welsh and English, the aim being to encourage more colloquial Welsh language to be formally included in the museum. The current app can be used on iPhones, though handsets are available for visitors if they need one. Future versions will be developed to run on other platforms. Several museums in the Happy Museum community of practice are exploring adapting the app for their own collections.

What happened?

“We also want to know if using the app encourages people to come back. Does it make their visits longer when they are using the app? We also need to consider if the app stops people coming – perhaps it makes the museum space too noisy for some people?”

Kathryn Eccles

Dr Kathryn Eccles of the Oxford Internet Institute, part of Oxford University, led development of the app. Her interdisciplinary research spans culture, heritage, education and technology.

“One inspiration for this project was a ‘crowdsourcing’ project called Your Paintings, which allowed members of the public to add meta data to an online art collection. Research showed that the tagging process had an impact on people’s wellbeing, and could be a way to support people who are depressed or people facing serious challenges in their lives.”

“Another inspiration came when I went to Museum Next and saw Hal Kirkland talk about Audio Tour Hack (creative storytelling sends people on fun, unexpected and interactive journeys) and MOMA Unadulterated (an unofficial audio tour of the permanent collection created by kids aged 3-10). The MOMA project in particular made an impression on me – the kids were really honest about what they were seeing. The project broke down the barrier that many visitors to museums feel, that there’s a required knowledge, your own reaction is not valid.”

“I am from North Wales and I approached Gwynedd with the idea of developing a software app to support those less comfortable with personal interaction. The idea of the app is that the technology can nudge people – people who might not ordinarily participate – to record a story or

a narrative or a comment related to a work of art or an object. The partnership included the Wales Centre for Behaviour change at Bangor University, which are an inter-disciplinary group, mostly psychologists, looking to embed behaviour change research into the design of local services.”

“This was the first time I had commissioned technology to test a research hypothesis and it has turned out to be a slow process. We had an issue with the first software developers we worked with. As a researcher, I am not used to waiting – usually doing research means springing into action. We did finally get it made to our specification.”

“The way it works for the visitor is that we put Quick Response (QR) codes on chosen objects in the museum. Using the app – which you can download onto your device or borrow one – you point at the QR code and click and the app brings up a picture of the object and short text description. You can then listen to what people have said about the object, and also record your own comment, listen back to it, add it to the collection, delete it or re-record it.”

‘Nudging’ techniques were introduced, such as footprint marking on the floor to lead people to recording points, as well as techniques to encourage audiences to be loud or extrovert, behaviour which is not ‘normal’ for museums.

“Gwynedd Museum is a very special place. Inside, there are a lot



“The app offers an emotional engagement too – some positive reactions, others sad and even perhaps distressing, depending on the context, the collection, and the stories. But crucially, people can select what they do or don’t do. The app also provides us with information and stories about the collections we can then recycle and share.”

Nest Thomas



of furnishings and paintings, and it feels very domestic. One room has a hearth, which was the hub of the Welsh home. People really enjoyed that room, they ignored the QR coded objects and recorded their feelings about the room. We had to rethink slightly the focus on objects and open the way for contributions about the spaces. This helped us realise that place and context are very important.”

“During the project we tested the app with students from Bangor. The anecdotal evidence is that it could have a positive effect and that made us wonder whether this app could be used in education or in a therapeutic way – could doctors prescribe it?”

“When the museum reopens, we plan to test the app again to see if it can make a difference to wellbeing, does that impact last or is it just for the time they visiting the museum. We also want to know if using the app encourages people to come back. Does it make their visits longer when they are using the app? We also need to consider if the app stops people coming – perhaps it makes the museum space too noisy for some people?”

For Nêst Thomas, Principal Museums and Arts Officer, the project was an exciting opportunity to join forces with a complementary institution. “The University was the lead and buzzing with ideas whereas we had the collections, venue and public to engage with.”

“We see the app as an important way of improving accessibility, providing a different approach to engagement and of bringing people together and sharing stories.

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“During the design phase back in October 2014, a group of student volunteers tested the app with University staff and the developer. The group assisted with assigning the ‘nudges’ – where and how the sticky feet signs on the ground would go. The feet help ‘nudge’ visitors towards the QR code.”

Here are some of the comments made by the testing group:

“I was initially reluctant but then had a lot of fun.”
Community Arts officer

“I found it to be very user friendly as a tablet and smartphone user. As a museums professional I really like the way the app will allow visitors to record their responses to art and artefacts. This in turn will provide us with a fountain of evidence and inspiration.”
Manager & Volunteer co-ordinator

“This is a new opportunity of engaging with collections that links to health and wellbeing and there may be other opportunities for the App to be used in other museums.”
Curator/HLF Project Manager

An art therapist also explored using the app as a therapeutic tool. The therapist led a session at the museum involving other art therapists. A number of QR code squares were put up around the museum in order to test the app.

“Hearing other people’s experiences adds another dimension and changes the museum experience.”

Participant in Testing Group

The consensus was that the app could become a valuable tool:

- Using the app in pairs could help people to engage, make conversation, learn turn taking and build trust.

- The app could provide an alternative way to help people make time to think, process thoughts, reflect, be heard (by a wider audience), share different opinions, stories and views.

Many found the app made the whole museum experience more engaging. After some feelings of unease and resistance some were surprised they quickly felt relaxed ‘...and overall it felt like a journey’. Listening was more inspirational than reading about artefacts, some found. “Hearing other people’s experiences adds another dimension and changes the museum experience,” said one.



What's changed?

"This is a new opportunity of engaging with collections that links to health and wellbeing and there may be other opportunities for the App to be used in other museums."

Curator/HLF Project Manager

Partnership: The museum and the Oxford Internet Institute have established a strong partnership with mutual benefits.

Audience engagement: The app aimed to engage all audiences and demonstrated the museum's willingness to do more to develop engagement. The app and related nudging encouraged active

participation from those who might otherwise remain silent in a way, offering them a channel that didn't require them to be social.

Innovation: Developing the app and using research insight to develop exhibition spaces and collections shows an appetite for innovation and change.



Happy Museum success factors

Since 2008, The Happy Museum project has been testing a set of working principles through commissioned projects. These 'action research' projects have helped us identify critical success factors of how, what and why museums might re-imagine

themselves in the light of these principles. The table below is a summary of our 'Story of Change' tool (More information here: www.happymuseumproject.org). This case study best demonstrates the aspects of practice highlighted in red.

Principles	How? Drivers	What? Delivery	Why? Difference we make
Measure what matters	Share a wellbeing vision Share a Story of Change	Use time, resources and scope creatively Measure what matters to people	To re-think what matters
Be an active citizen	Encourage active engagement Anticipate challenge and change	Work experimentally Use everyone's potential	To create happy, resilient people
Pursue mutual relationships	Share ownership Ensure mutual benefit	Work across hierarchies and teams	To create happy, resilient teams
All of which help re-imagine museums for better community LIFE*			
Create the conditions for wellbeing Learn for resilience	Consider playfulness, creativity, activity and aesthetics	Be a good host Broker relationships	Communities are: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning • Interacting • Feeling happy, satisfied and worthwhile • Environmentally aware
Value the environment and be a steward of the future as well as the past	Consider the social and financial benefits of being green	Use the museum's unique resources. Lead by example: care of people, place and planet	

* The Happy Museum Project is conducting a national LIFE survey, where LIFE = Learning, Interactions with others, Feelings and emotions, and Environmental awareness. More: www.happymuseumproject.org

Tools used



Story of change

The museum team used the 'story of change' to define their vision for the project and to plan the route to achieve that vision. The purpose of this tool (which is similar to theory of change, or logic modelling) is to make sure we start by focusing on the difference we want to make rather than on the activities we may use to achieve those ends.

Using a story of change challenges 'business as usual' thinking by starting with the overall purpose and working backwards. The process of 'measuring what matters' can then start at the planning stage – by defining the success factors for a project, a strategy or a change of direction. The tool is also valuable for helping to communicate a vision to staff, volunteers and all stakeholders, as well as the thinking that underpins it.

More on using a Story of Change can be found here:
www.happymuseumproject.org



Online resources

Museum website: www.gwynedd.llyw.cymru/en/Residents/Leisure-parks-and-events/Museums-and-the-Arts/Storiel.aspx

Wales Centre for Behaviour Change (WCBC): <http://behaviourchange.bangor.ac.uk/>

WCBC project page: <http://behaviourscience.org/projects/happy-museum/>

Kathryn Eccles article: <https://kathryneccles.wordpress.com/2013/09/>