

One summer my family and I visited Colonial Williamsburg, the historically reenacted section of Williamsburg, Virginia. While we were there, I had the opportunity to visit the “gaol,” stand in the ballroom of the Governor’s Palace, and try out the stocks. My sister played a song on the harpsichord in the cabinet-maker’s shop, while I had bread “stolen” from me in a demonstration of the court system. Living history museums, whether on a large scale like Colonial Williamsburg or on a smaller scale like Rocky Mount in East Tennessee, can provide fun and exciting activities for children. Candle-making, role-playing, and other historical activities provide children with a glimpse from the past, teaching them about life in that particular time period.

However, some aspects of living history museums produce problems. The educational benefits for children are questionable. The museums research in depth, but how much solid history are the children actually learning? Living history museums do provide history education and thoroughly research their area, but do not always accurately portray their research, which results in questionable history education for children. In order to provide a better history education, the museums need to ensure that they correctly portray history while teachers can involve children in more activities to be sure they are receiving a beneficial history education.

Hands-On History: The Educational Methods and Benefits of Living History Museums

There are a number of educational benefits associated with living history museums, one of which is the experience itself. Jay Anderson of Western Kentucky University states: “Living history was considered a good way of making ‘history come alive’ at museums and historic sites often considered stuffy and dull.”¹¹ This experience could be helpful, especially for children, as DeWitt notes: “Most children are fully engaged with this natural combination of visual, auditory

¹¹ Jay Anderson, “Living History: Simulating Everyday Life in Living Museums,” *American Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1982): 295, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712780>

and kinesthetic learning styles.”¹² To be sure, the experience of living history museums potentially educates the visitors, including children, in unconventional ways.

While experiencing the sights and sounds of history is one educational benefit for children, another benefit may be helping those with learning difficulties better understand history. Zipsane states, “People who have learning difficulties in other environments suddenly become more efficient learners in a museum. This means that the museum can create positive learning experiences for people who under other circumstances actually are seen as losers.”¹⁴ This could be helpful for special education school groups or families who homeschool their children with learning disabilities. For such children, the living history museum experience offers an alternative approach to learning history, adding to living history museums’ benefits.

A third benefit of living history museums is that they provide a unique educational experience that “cannot be reproduced in the classroom.” They do so primarily through three different methods: immersion, activities, and interpretation to offer children a different way to learn history.¹⁵

Living history museums immerse visitors in history by utilizing all the senses as a way to enhance the learning visitors receive. Children especially could benefit from this, as they may not be able to read history books or display signs at a conventional museum as well as adults. In addition, they will gain a first-hand look at the historical setting. Activities are a second way that living history museums educate children. Granted, activities-based educational programs often end up teaching the children not so much about history as about other things, such as “team work” and “that people can live in a different way from what we do now” or “that certain things

¹² DeWitt, e-mail message to Katherine Siebenaler, November 13, 2012.

¹⁴ Zipsane, “The Learning Opportunities in Open Air Museums,” 438.

¹⁵ Krugler, “Stepping Outside the Classroom,” 83.

belong together in order to create a full picture in the imagination.”²⁰ One example of activities-based programming is Conner Prairie, a living history museum in Indiana, whose website lists several programs for children, one of which—“Indiana Indians”—has a description that notes the hands-on aspect of the program: “Celebrate Lenape Indian culture by learning about wigwams and clothing. Make a drum and listen to Indian songs.”²³ These hands-on programs can offer multiple educational opportunities for children, not only immersing them in history first-hand, but also using history to teach them in broader areas.

The third and most popular way that living history museums educate their visitors is through interpretation. This can vary from a guide taking a group to the different stops at the museum to employees dressed up and acting as if they were actually from that time period. Colonial Williamsburg contains both interpreters who act as “historical characters” and interpreters who simply wear costumes.²⁶ Those who are “historical characters” can add to the sense of being back in time, while the guides in costume can provide more factual information.²⁷ These guides can greatly influence the educational experience of the visit as they provide information to the visitors.

Interpreters in costume are an especially effective method of living history museums. Rosenthal and Blankman-Hetrick note, “At living history museums, historical characters that greet and converse with visitors are the core programming element.”²⁸ Therefore, interpreters in costume are key to the way living history museums educate their visitors. Additionally, they are a unique educational method. “Interpreters talk to visitors, they [sic] do not dramatize historic

²⁰ Ibid.

²³ “Prairie Tykes and Prairie Kids Club,” Conner Prairie Interactive History Park, <http://www.connerprairie.org/Learn-And-Do/Programs/Prairie-Tykes.aspx>, accessed on November 11, 2012.

²⁶ Krugler, “Stepping Outside the Classroom,” 82.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Rosenthal and Blankman-Hetrick, “Conversations Across Time,” 305.

vignettes as actors, nor present historic lectures,”²⁹ connecting with visitors face-to-face. In order to educate visitors to the museums, the interpreters at Conner Prairie, for example, have “post goals, or teaching emphases for each assigned station.”³¹ These include “*[m]onologue....[i]nterpreter prompts the entire group....[i]nterpreter interacts with adults....[i]nterpreter prompts children....[and r]eciprocal and reflexive dialogue....*”³² This method is helpful for children, as Rosenthal and Blankman-Hetrick note, concluding that “Learning conversation was more apt to happen between parents and children, if an interpreter had stimulated it.”³⁴ Interpreters are an important, influential, and effective method of teaching the visitors, including children, history.

Living history museums are beneficial educational tools, not only for history education, but also sometimes for broader lessons for children,³⁵ and they use different means by which to teach children. Despite the benefits of living history museums as educational tools, however, living history museums do have difficulties that present themselves in the research and portrayal of history.

Fact and Fiction: How Living History Museums Research and Portray History

Living history museums carefully research whatever story they are trying to tell. However, that research does not always come across clearly to the visitors at living history museums. If the visitors are at the museums simply for pleasure, this may not be a problem. But if the visitors are a school group using the museum as a field trip, all they may gain is some entertainment or a few random facts about daily life in a particular historical period. Living

²⁹ Ibid., 307.

³¹ Rosenthal and Blankman-Hetrick, “Conversations Across Time,” 309.

³² Ibid., 313-14.

³⁴ Ibid., 325.

³⁵ Zipsane, “Learning Opportunities in Open Air Museums,” 435.

history museums conduct careful research, but do not always portray it well in their attempt to meet institutional needs.

Living history museums carefully and rigorously research their topics. Interpreter Stephan P. Zacharias notes, “Each living history presentation you witness is as accurately researched and documented as possible, and the research never ends, even after the program has been presented to you, the public.”³⁸ And according to Anderson, “The best living museums mounted serious multi-disciplinary research programs enlisting as consultant historical archaeologists, cultural anthropologists, geographers, ‘new’ social historians, folklorists, and agricultural specialists.”³⁹ Rosemary Arnold of Conner Prairie points out that “[Conner Prairie has] built 2 buildings in Prairietown over the past few years, and both were built using period techniques and materials.”⁴⁰ These museums have taken much care and time to research their topics, providing visitors a chance to learn much about history.

Despite careful and thorough research, however, whatever it is the living history museums are trying to portray may not always be historically accurate. Krugler notes that sometimes the history at Colonial Williamsburg is politically correct history: “The Historic Area was too clean for a living eighteenth-century community; there were too many intrusions from this century; the picture of slavery was too benign. And there were lingering questions about historical accuracy that went unresolved.”⁴³ While Colonial Williamsburg and other similar museums have tried to fix this problem,⁴⁴ if it is still a problem, it means that living history museums may not be presenting children with the most accurate view of history. If educators are

³⁸ Ibid., 34-35.

³⁹ Anderson, “Living History: Simulating Everyday Life in Living Museums,” 299.

⁴⁰ Arnold, e-mail message to Katherine Siebenaler, November 15, 2012.

⁴³ Krugler, “Stepping Outside the Classroom,” 82.

⁴⁴ Rosenthal and Blankman-Hetrick. “Conversations Across Time,” 326.

using these museums as part of their history education programs, they must be aware of what is accurate and what is not.

While museums may not always present history accurately, museums may also partially tell or even incorrectly represent history. Chappell notes, “It is dangerous because the choices of what to show are subjective and the relationships among the parts are largely fictitious, however rigorously researched and assembled the fiction.”⁴⁵ Despite in-depth research, all the facts may still not be presented! Children visiting these museums may form a partially or even completely wrong idea in their heads about what these particular times and lifestyles were like.

Another way living history museums may not present history properly is by putting the other needs of the museum, such as financial and promotional needs, first. This may be necessary, but it must be kept in mind when considering the historical accuracy of the displays. For example, Krugler notes, “there are little anachronisms throughout the Historic Area [in Williamsburg], such as the annoying drone of a power mower . . . , to remind visitors they are still in the twentieth century. Most irritating are interruptions to the interpretations.”⁴⁹ These are ways that Colonial Williamsburg, at least, was putting operational needs before historical accuracy. Arnold notes that this happens in Conner Prairie as well: “Basically we do everything we can to make sure that what we portray is accurate, but we also know that sometimes we have to make accommodations for our guests’ comfort. For example, our historic village areas have way more benches than a real village would have in 1836, but that’s a small sacrifice for making sure people have a place to sit and rest.”⁵⁰ Putting these needs first may be necessary, but they may also harm the historical accuracy, something for educators to keep in mind as they utilize living history museums.

⁴⁵ Chappell, “Open-Air Museums,” 340.

⁴⁹ Krugler, “Stepping Outside the Classroom,” 82.

⁵⁰ Arnold, e-mail message to Katherine Siebenaler, November 15, 1012.

Living history museums engage in much research, but this research does not always translate well to the visitors. This may lead to misconstrued views of the historical topics presented at these museums, thereby negatively affecting the education of the children who are coming to the museums to learn.

Educational Exchange: How Museums Can Improve and What Teachers Can Do

Living history museums can potentially impact the history education of young children. However, there are some problems with the current system that need to be resolved so as to provide an even better experience with living history for children. Museums can provide better experiences and programs, while teachers can implement activities to help the children learn better.

One way that living history museums can provide better experiences and better educational opportunities is to ensure that the interpreters are correctly presenting information in an exciting way that will engage and interest children. This can include directly talking to the children,⁵⁷ as “[l]earning indicators occur most frequently after the family has been engaged in discussion with an interpreter.”⁵⁸ First-hand interaction—such as hands-on activities—may also increase children’s history education.

Teachers can also help solve the problem with activities before and after the visit to the museum. Activities before visiting a living history museum can include reading about the history that the museum represents to help students critically think about what the museum says and how well they say it, while also giving the students a fuller picture on the historical subject. After the visit, teachers could follow what Arnold notes: that “[teachers] tell us that they often

⁵⁷ Ibid., 314.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 316.

use the real life and hands-on experiences in our programs to build on their classroom lessons.”⁶⁸ Additionally, children could discuss or write a small reflection about what they learned from the museum and if it was different from what they learned in class. Engaging the children in analyzing and fusing information—even if it is simple in order to accommodate young children—may help them better learn history.

Conclusion: Engaging Education

Living history museums provide quality educational opportunities for children, but because of their difficulty in always properly relaying their dedicated research, they may provide only “snippets of history,”⁷⁰ as Krugler calls them. Lois J. Barnes notes, “The Living History approach to American history is an attempt to involve students in re-creating or re-enacting the past so that the study of history becomes a personal, living experience.”⁷¹ Living history museums can help form that “personal, living experience”⁷² of the “study of history”⁷³ with the interaction with history that they provide, but they must continue to strive for accurate information in order to maintain their visitors’ trust. When children connect well with history and have fun while doing it, they will view history differently. And, as Zipsane points out, they learn more than just “the actual skills of that historical time.”⁷⁴ They become a part of the living history community and this provides them with a historical foundation that they might not otherwise have known.

⁶⁸ Arnold, e-mail message to Katherine Siebenaler, November 15, 2012.

⁷⁰ Krugler, “Stepping Outside the Classroom,” 82.

⁷¹ Lois J. Barnes, “Living History in the Junior High School Classroom,” *The History Teacher* 11, no. 4 (1978): 509, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/492546>

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Ibid.

⁷⁴ Zipsane, “Learning Opportunities in Open Air Museums,” 435.

Bibliography

- Anderson, Jay. "Living History: Simulating Everyday Life in Living Museums." *American Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (1982): 290-306. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2712780>.
- Arnold, Rosemary. E-mail message to Katherine Siebenaler. November 15, 2012.
- Barnes, Lois J. "Living History in the Junior High School Classroom." *The History Teacher* 11, no. 4 (1978): 509-13. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/492546>
- Chappell, Edward A. "Open-Air Museums: Architectural History for the Masses." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 58, no. 3 (1999): 334-41
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/991526>
- DeWitt, T.J. E-mail message to Katherine Siebenaler. November 13, 2012.
- Jackson, Anthony. "Inter-acting with the Past—The Use of Participatory Theatre at Museums and Heritage Sites." *Research in Drama Education* 5, no. 2 (2000): 204-205. Academic Search Index (3529645).
- Krugler, John D. "Stepping Outside the Classroom: History and the Outdoor Museum." *Journal of American Culture* 12, no. 2 (1989): 79-85. Humanities International Complete (21330283).
- Nowacki, Marek. "Education in Open-Air Museums in Research Studies of Visitors to the Wielkopolski Ethnographic Park in Dziekanowice." *Studies in Physical Culture and Tourism* 17, no. 2 (2010): 183-92. Supplemental Index (52620790).
- Pattiz, Anthony. "Teaching History as the Reenactment of Past Experience." *Teaching History: A Journal of Methods* 30, no. 1 (2005): 15-31. Education Research Complete (16870527).
- Peterson, Jamie J. "An Applied Evaluation at a Living History Museum." *Journal of Interpretation Research* 12, no. 1 (2007): 69-73. Education Research Complete (26777003).

“Prairie Tykes and Prairie Kids Club.” Conner Prairie Interactive History Park.

<http://www.connerprairie.org/Learn-And-Do/Programs/Prairie-Tykes.aspx>. Accessed on November 11, 2012

Rosenthal, Ellen and Jane Blankman-Hetrick. “Conversations across time: Family Learning in a Living History Museum.” In *Learning Conversations in Museums*, edited by Gaea Leinhardt, Kevin Crowley, and Karen Knutson, 305-329. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Publishers, 2002.

Zacharias, Stephan P. “I Am a Living History Interpreter.” *Legacy (National Association for Interpretation)* 22, no. 6 (2011): 34-35. Education Research Complete (70488050).

Zipsane, Henrik. “Learning Opportunities in Open Air Museums—An Enormous Challenge!” *Acta Ethnographica Hungarica* 55, no. 2 (2010): 433-442. SocINDEX with Full Text (57356023).