Schools and museums in times of Covid-19

Lockdown or openup?

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The last three semesters of students in Austria were very much shaped by Covid-19. Lockdowns occurred, as in all areas, which also led to temporary school closures and prolonged phases of Distance Learning. These phases were stressful, nerve-wracking and sometimes associated with great frustrations, not only for parents but also for students. Many excursions and trips were cancelled, including those to museums and exhibitions, and this offer was missing as an enriching addition to the lessons.

At the same time, a lot has happened in the field of digital learning and offerings. In this article, on the one hand, the technical and social possibilities of pupils in the compulsory school sector in Austria are discussed and, on the other hand, the offers of various institutions from a pedagogical-didactic point of view are examined in more detail.

During the lockdowns, there was a perceptibly positive expansion of possibilities to view various exhibitions not only directly in the museum, but also comfortably from home. Of course, these possibilities are no sub- stitute for a real visit to a museum, which creates direct contact with an exhibit, but they did give visitors the chance to enjoy a little culture from the comfort of their own homes and to engage with history, found objects and archaeology.

Nevertheless, the first point in this article is to look at what technical and social possibilities pupils and their families had at home. Here I bring some examples from my school perspective that illustrates the frame- work well and that I believe could provide input for the digitalisation of museums:

First of all, let it be said that many pupils of a certain age own a smartphone and know how to use it to some extent. However, some of these devices are not up to date and sometimes they cannot play the latest software because they have too little memory or the device does not have the power to display graphics or videos smoothly. Beyond a smartphone, not all students or families have their own laptop or tablet to work on.

Furthermore, not all students and their families have a fixed-line internet connection at home, which allows them to use digital services with unlimited data volume. Since more videos were streamed or video confer- ences were held during the lockdowns, bottlenecks sometimes occurred. In addition, parents in the home office sometimes needed the data volume for video conferences or the available devices themselves in or- der to be able to do their work.

The financial side of such a shortfall is also a sensitive issue. During the lockdown, many people lost their jobs or were put on short-time work. This resulted in financial losses, which also affected the children. It was difficult enough for some families to buy new equipment necessary for their children's education. Additional expenses to provide education were only partially possible from a financial point of view. Some of my students also did not have their own study space or enough quiet time to concentrate on learning because they were living in close quarters with their families.

Technical problems also included the fact that many of my students grew up with digital offerings, but of- ten did not know how to find their way around the internet or how to make sense of different programmes. They often encountered digital barriers, such as apps or programmes that were not intuitive to use or did not display well on their devices because older websites did not have respon- sive design. Digital barriers also include programmes or websites that require a lot of memory or a constant, stable internet connection to be able to display the corresponding content properly.

International offers were partly very well structured, but only available in English. Here it would be helpful to offer translations into different languages or to offer the possibility to work with translation tools such as Google Translate directly on the website. But even in German-speaking countries, offers were sometimes made in a language that required a high level of specialist vocabulary. Espe- cially for younger pupils, a sim- pler language would be helpful here.

Of course, I am also aware that museums have only limited possibilities to present themselves out- side their premises. Here I would like to present some that have proven to be compatible either for the classroom or also for distance learning:

Virtual tours of a museum or an exhibition as a 3D animation: The advantages here are the simple handling and the low data volume. Different exhibits or pictures can be viewed more closely here. One problem here could be the technical components of different devices.

Video tours with curators or museum guides through a collection or exhibition are a great way to bring the museum into the classroom or your own living room. This can take place live or in the form of a recorded video. The advantage here is a direct approach. During a live broadcast, students can

even ask questions. The recorded version is good for revision or distance learning. Furthermore, the curator or the museum has the opportunity to set a focus here.

A playful approach that can appeal to all ages would be apps that give a tour on a certain topic and show suitable exhibits. Such apps are particularly exciting when pupils have the opportunity to answer questions in the app or have to solve small tasks in order to progress.

A more conservative method of bringing the museum to the school would be to give teachers working ma- terials in the form of worksheets or workbooks, pictures, videos or audio recordings so that they can inte- grate them into the lessons. It would be important for the museum to provide a good didactic presentation as well as detailed background information for the teacher.

In order to reach pupils in a low-threshold way, it is also helpful to present the various exhibits on an app or website in such a way that there is interesting, but also not too overloaded background information. This way, individual topics remain exciting and invite people to want to learn more.

A special highlight would be a virtual, location-independent exhibition that can be visited from the class- room or from home. This should contain interactive elements that can accompany the pupils in their learning process.

Which concepts are well or less well suited for schools? Which concepts are suitable for distance learning, and which are less so?

Good concepts for the classroom should include the following considerations: The digital equipment in the classroom, what resources (such as computers, laptops, beamers) are provided and whether there is a good, stable internet connection. Consideration should also be given to how work materials are prepared so that teachers and students can use them easily. Worksheets or workbooks and other "offline" materials always work, but a new type of app that requires up-to-date technology works less well.

For distance learning, it should be kept in mind that students and their families often have worse conditions than they have in the classroom. For example, tours using an app are possible in principle, but there is sometimes the possibility that technology is not available or that there is too little money, quiet or space available to bring the corresponding offers to the pupils.