



Contextualizing Culture

by Joanne Jones-Rizzi

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A Context for Learning

When I tell people what I do, that I develop exhibitions and programs for museums, the refrain is often something along these lines, “You must have so much fun at your job.” I haven’t always known how to respond; I now say that I do have fun, but that my job is like any job, there are fun aspects and there are challenges. It turns out that the challenges are what interest me; they are not always fun but bring an urgency to the work that is meaningful to me and I hope valuable for others.

This article represents an accumulation of a double-decade of community-centered work within the context of two museums. Each museum has very different audiences, geographic locations and approaches in pedagogy and process. I’ll attempt to describe my evolving perspective on the role of museums in presenting and translating cultural experiences for visitors. This perspective has developed and resulted in numerous iterations over the past twenty years; upon reflection, there is a consistency of theory and approach although my earlier motivations were quite different from what they are now. When I began working in at The Children’s Museum, Boston I was interested in issues of access; who was coming to the museum; who felt welcome at the museum and why. I did not yet understand the complexities and the connection between cultural relevance and audience development.

Three years ago I left my long-term position at The Children’s Museum; I had been there since 1985 in a range of positions. I started out as Community Outreach Coordinator and Cultural Resources Liaison to schools. Over the

years as these positions evolved, I was a Co-Director of Multicultural Programs, Director of Community Programs, Director of Cultural Programs, and finally Director of Community Programs and Partnerships. There was a joke about the various positions and titles I held over the years. In listing them here, I’m relieved to see a consistency in focus.

The eighties were a very dynamic time at The Children’s Museum, Boston: there was no shortage of fertile ideas; funding was available; and there was an amazing convergence of individual talent, wisdom, whimsy, generosity and good will amongst the staff. The city of Boston was in recovery from court ordered school de-segregation, neighborhoods were delineated and polarized, and there were numerous places within the city where people of color could not venture with the assurance of safety. Many of us at the museum were looking for ways to transcend this ugly aspect of our city. Recognizing that there was no neutrality anywhere, we offered the museum as an environment where some of the fierce hostilities widespread in Boston’s neighborhoods might be mitigated even for a few hours. Community, cultural, and science based programming was at the heart of our work. We were not in a bubble; we could not ignore what was going on in our community. The violence and hatred based on race and class so rampant in our city provided a framework for the next decade of work.

A Context for Concept Development

Wanting to take advantage of possibilities for engagement, we were fortunate to receive major, multi-year funding from The Jessie B. Cox Charitable Trust to support an institution wide multicultural initiative. Aylette Jenness and I were named co-directors. We worked closely

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with Patricia Steuert, the Associate Director of the Museum. The three of us were passionate about our work and contributed varying perspectives and experiences to the initiative. I was the new voice on the team—with little experience in exhibition development; my areas of interest were grounded in program development and issues of access and equity.

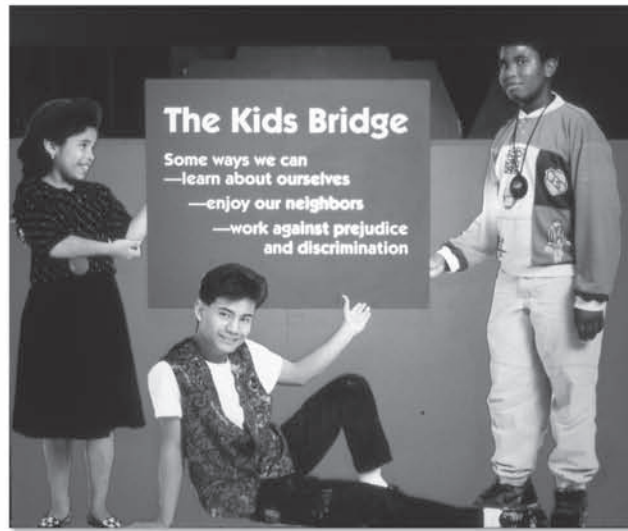
The goals of the initiative were to examine all aspects of the museum with regard to diversity. This required the involvement of staff, trustees, volunteers, and a range of representatives from varying constituent groups. The three-year initiative was to culminate in a large-scale museum exhibition utilizing multicultural themes. As we rolled out the program we were met with enthusiasm, skepticism, and resistance. The strongest support and advocacy for the program came from the Multicultural Advisory board. We established the group early on in the project. This ethnically, economically, professionally diverse group helped us to focus and define our programs. They became ambassadors for the museum within their communities, making connections for us when we needed specific areas of expertise; for example, translations, school and community contacts, child development resources, etc.

The programming aspect of the initiative was not difficult, but we struggled with the exhibition development. We convened the museum cultural developers to help us think through themes. We polled staff; we traveled nationally and internationally looking for inspiration; and we met with curators to try to determine how to translate issues of cultural diversity and pluralism into an exhibition format for children. We were clear that we did not want to overly simplify and trivialize

the topic. We knew what we didn't want, but we did not know how to articulate what we wanted. Senior staff at the museum increased the pressure; they threatened to hire an outside developer if we didn't come up with a concept. It was a terrible time. I remember worrying every waking moment about how we were going to succeed. I worried that we would not have the chance, that the museum would hire someone else. In retrospect we had already embarked on a very productive process of working with communities—through our advisors and through community based work at the museum. Because of the pressure we were under, I underrated this process and did not validate it for its contribution. Even though there was an awareness, respect, and value within our museum culture for community work particularly in the realm of the physical and natural sciences, the cultural exhibitions relied heavily on the rich collections and their interpretation as a model for cultural experiences.

Out of desperation we looked to the visitors for help. We made a hand written sign that said "*Help Us With a New Multicultural Exhibit.*" Underneath in smaller letters we created headers asking visitors—"What Do You Want To Know About People Who Look Different From You?" "What Do You Want Others To Know About You?" We received a range of responses asking about physical differences that kids noticed and about behavior. Two that I remember were "*Are There Blue-Eyed Asians?*" and "*Do Black People Have Red Blood?*" Visitors and staff were as interested in reading what others wrote as they were in responding to the questions. A synthesis of these questions, combined with child development and multicultural education theory

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Title panel of *The Kids Bridge*, which opened in April 1990. Courtesy of Don West.

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helped us to develop the goals of the exhibition. They were: (1) Children need to start with themselves, to have a sense of who they are ethnically, racially, and culturally; (2) Diversity enriches all of our lives; (3) Racism is a reality of diversity: children need tools to fight racism; racism has a negative impact on all of us, not just people of color.

When I write these goals now, they seem direct and simple, yet the process for articulating them was complicated and difficult. Knowing that our ideas were based on a theory of how children learn and understand cultural differences provided us with a structure to organize the exhibition, which eventually was named *The Kids Bridge*. The work of multicultural education theorists and practitioners Patricia G. Ramsey and Louise Derman-Sparks resonated with us. Clinical and developmental psychologist Phyllis A. Katz helped us to understand how and when children develop attitudes about ethnicity, race, and culture. Piaget's theory that children begin with intuitive comments based on immediate experiences and gradually become capable of increasingly complex and logical thinking translated into our sequencing of the exhibition goals.

A Community Context for Exhibition

The juncture between finalizing exhibition goals and moving to the actual development process came at an opportune time within the city. It was 1989 and Boston was once again in

the national spotlight as a racist city. Charles Stuart, a White man, shot himself and killed his pregnant wife at a busy intersection in the Mission Hill neighborhood (a predominately Black and Latino neighborhood). He fabricated a story about a Black man shooting them both, while they were stopped at a traffic light. In response, the Boston Police launched a man-hunt, knocking on doors in predominately Black and Latino neighborhoods. Weeks later Stuart's story unraveled; he committed suicide by jumping off the Mystic Bridge. I mention this account because the city was in an uproar, the Black community was under siege, and there was a climate of fear. The safety of neighborhoods was in question and Blacks and Whites were pitted against each other fueled by the media. As we began our community involvement for the exhibition development process people embraced the idea of becoming involved. They viewed our project as a positive step towards healing in an embattled city.

Process

We wanted "real" people of all ethnicities to have a visible presence in the exhibition. Initial contacts were made through the advisors; they put us in touch with friends and family, students, and cute/smart kids they knew. We also used our contacts with bi-lingual schools and community programs and visited all sorts of ethnic specific events in search of potential exhibit participants. There was a very active professional development program for teachers at the museum; they too provided us with

“What Do You Want To Know About People Who Look Different From You?”

numerous resources as we moved towards production. Our process was not innovative or new, yet it was not a traditional curatorial model where we were developing strategies for interpretation and design at our desks in our offices. Perhaps it was intuition, luck, or knowing that we were not able to use conventional methods, that we needed the perspectives and knowledge from those outside of our world to create an exhibition that would reflect Boston. One of three interactive videos in the exhibition, “The Greater Boston Treasure Hunt,” invited viewers to virtually explore four Boston area neighborhoods with young video guides. On the “treasure hunt,” viewers “met” the guides’ families and friends, and visited their homes and schools in search of culturally specific objects. The interactive treasure hunt aspect of the video provided visitors with a medium to explore and enjoy cultural diversity. The process for developing the “script” relied

heavily on collaboration with the youth guides (Rizzi, 1991). Conversations with individuals from within the neighborhoods helped us to determine the objects we would feature, the sites and distinguishing aspects of each community. As a result, each “neighborhood tour” was unique and culturally specific. I observed many young users clapping their hands as they “searched” and succeeded in helping the video guides find their objects.

Simultaneously we were working with The City Stage Theater Co, an educational theater that produced participatory theaters in schools. We hired them to work with us to produce one of the other interactive videos about racism, prejudice, and discrimination.

Staff from City Stage worked with fifth grade classes from the Boston Public Schools, gathering their experiences with racism and



“The Greater Boston Treasure Hunt” consists of an interactive video component supplemented by exhibit cases showing cross-cultural games, foods, and body adornments found in Boston area neighborhoods. Courtesy of Don West.

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discrimination, bullying, and teasing. After working with students for several weeks, they wrote a script. We then chose students from the same fifth grade classes that would appear in the video. The interactive video titled “Getting Across to Each Other” provided

exhibition as a catalyst for our multicultural work with schools, community groups, and as a professional development tool for staff, teachers, and other civic groups. We held two international conferences for colleagues in the museum profession using the multicultural initiative as a case study, co-authored a book about our process (Steuert et al 1993); and produced several children’s books (Jeness, 1993, 1994). based on the themes of the exhibition.

We worked with the Smithsonian Institution on developing a smaller traveling version; it opened in 1992 at The Experimental Gallery at The Smithsonian and traveled to 12 cities under the auspices of SITES (the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service). The positive results for us as an institution were profound: visitors resonated with the themes of *The Kids Bridge*, and families, school groups, and adult groups found their experiences reflected in the exhibition. The exhibition provided us with a context for discussion and grounded us in the realities of the cultural lives and experiences of the city.



Boston Black entry view. Courtesy of Michael Joyce.

a context and model for talking about the realities of prejudice, racism, discrimination, and anti-racism.

Living with The Kids Bridge

The presence of a 5,000 square foot exhibition that espouses multicultural themes suggested to the public that this was of value to the museum. We saw an increase of people of color at the museum and in the exhibition. A series of articles in the *Boston Globe* about Boston cultural institutions heralded The Children’s Museum as “A Beacon of Diversity”. We reveled in our accomplishment. We used the

A Hard Act to Follow

Why is cultural understanding so important? The simplistic answer is that we want to foster children’s cultural curiosity. We want all children to feel valued, and as museum audiences become more diverse we want children and families to see themselves and their experiences reflected in museum programs and exhibitions. The more complex response is that we want to be relevant, viable institutions where visitors “use” our exhibitions to learn and gain perspectives about themselves and others. After we de-installed *The Kids Bridge* in 1996, I began looking for what next. There

was a visible hole in the museum's cultural offerings. While the themes of *The Kids Bridge* were still relevant, after several million visitors it was well worn. Racial strife in Boston had shifted with a change in demographics. Boston was becoming a minority majority city, and there were more people of color than Whites. Neighborhoods were still delineated but less so, racism was subtler, but still very much there. The museum had a partnership with the Boston Public Schools where every kindergarten student visited the museum on a field trip. Using state standards we collaborated with BPS teachers on developing a program that helped five year olds experience our cultural exhibitions. As I observed the groups using the museum, I was struck by the predominance of students of color. In my observations, I noted that the students generally had positive experiences in the cultural exhibitions, but noted that in their program at the museum they did not see themselves or their cultural experience reflected.

I began asking the students how they identified. Were they Black? Were they African American? The responses they gave were varied and surprised me: they said they were Haitian, Dominican, Trinidadian, Cape Verdean; a few identified as African American. I began to explore the notion of diversity within, expanding on the idea that we each have multiple identities.

Further research on this theme helped me to understand the complexities of relationships within the Black communities of Boston and the lack of knowledge between groups about each other. With a planning grant from a local foundation and then from NEH I began to explore how to translate these complex ideas

into an exhibition format. Once again I formed an advisory board. Criteria for membership were based on cultural identity and areas of professional expertise. I wanted a range of perspectives and representation

from the Black communities of Boston, and I wanted professional expertise that would provide the scholarship in which I felt the exhibition needed to be grounded. The advisors were child development scholars, historians, anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, writers, artists, activists, and entrepreneurs. The group also included staff from the museum dedicated to and supportive of the project from its inception. We called the project ***Boston Black: A City Connects*** and developed the goals that would guide us for the protracted, seven-year development and fund-raising process. The exhibition communication goals were very straightforward: (1) There is tremendous diversity within the Black communities of Boston. (2) Black people have a rich centuries-old history in Boston and much of that history is not known. (3) It is important to support children and families in dialogues about race and identity.

We knew early on that we wanted an immersive environment that reflected the range of groups living in Boston. Determining which groups within the Black community to highlight in order to realize our goals was complex. We finally decided to rely on demographic evidence, limiting our emphasis on the groups of African descent with the highest populations



Three interactive games exploring cultural identity are embedded in the neighborhood motif of the exhibition. Courtesy of Michael Joyce.

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in Boston: African American, Haitian, Cape Verdean and Dominican. Our next challenge was how to present cultural variations in a context that worked for our audiences of young children and families and that supported the goals of the exhibition. We added to our team a talented design firm, based in New York, Argyle Design. They brought a clever and unique design aesthetic and a deep knowledge of child development and museum pedagogy.

Our concept development meetings consisted of a range of people who brainstormed ideas while Michael Joyce of Argyle Design sketched them. It was a wonderful and iterative process; we could “see” what we had been discussing and respond to how the exhibition components might look. We finally settled on a neighborhood motif, which included environments designed for engagement and for their ability to communicate the culturally specific aspects of each group. The Barbershop, Beauty Parlor, Café, Colmado (store) and Carnival Garage were all based on environments that are found in communities in the Boston area. On completion the exhibition looked rich, textured, beautiful, and was put to good use.

Shortly after we opened the exhibition, a group of Cape Verdean senior citizens visited the **Boston Black** exhibition. They were sitting in the Café- that we had named Café Sodade. In the Cape Verdean language *sodade* means longing for home. They were speaking in Crioulo, and the women were dancing with each other and teaching young children who were from varied backgrounds how to dance the Funana, a traditional dance. The men were at the game tables playing a traditional counting game called Ourin. When I asked them through

an interpreter why they were at the museum, they responded by telling me that they had heard about the exhibition in the community and wanted to see it for themselves. I did not need to ask them if they approved; I could see for myself that we had provided a powerful, relevant context for cultural learning.

The exhibition has also received criticism from a few Black museum visitors who are African American. The critique is that we are not showcasing the community in a positive light, that we have presented Black culture in environments that don't appropriately present the accomplishments of the community. They say the exhibition does not present evidence of the fact that Black people are successful professionals such as lawyers, doctors, and community leaders rather than beauticians and storekeepers. I was able to engage with a few visitors about their concerns. My response to them was that we chose the environments with the input of numerous members of the community and that the environments were selected because we felt that they provided the best possible context for learning. One visitor who was an attorney pressed me about why we had not included a lawyer's office as an environment. When I asked her what a young child might do in a lawyer's office, I could see that she got it, she understood. To my mind the exhibition was doing what we intended: here were two Black women discussing issues of cultural representation in a museum environment.

I am no longer at the museum to engage with visitors about **Boston Black**, but what I discern from comments, specifically from African American visitors, is that the internalized and overt racism experienced in our society is



Students from Central High School in St. Paul, Minnesota on Cafeteria Video production shoot. Courtesy of Science Museum of Minnesota.



The Museum visitor experience of *The Cafeteria* Video in **RACE: Are We So Different?** Courtesy of Science Museum of Minnesota.

profound. I know this from my own experience, and I regret that I am not in Boston to learn from the mistakes that the exhibition makes and to improve on what works. Perhaps ***Boston Black*** is too subtle, there are not yet enough positive examples out there so all children can see what is possible for Black people. I don't blame the critics for having high expectations, or for holding the museum accountable; this dialog is what we were after. The exhibition represents a complex idea, the notion of diversity within a group. I am in close contact with my colleagues in Boston and know that they recently convened a group of original and new advisors to help them to think about addressing the concerns raised by some visitors.

Minnesota and **RACE**

I joined the exhibits staff at The Science Museum of Minnesota (SMM) in February of 2005. A team of exhibition developers was working with the American Anthropological Association (AAA) on an exhibition about race and human variation. After being fully immersed in the ***Boston Black*** exhibition this project was a huge departure for me both in content and approach. The ***RACE: Are We So Different?*** exhibition was based in science; exploring the biology of human variation, the history of the concept of race as a human invention, and the contemporary lived

experience of race. In addition to developing specific components for the exhibition, another aspect of my job was to develop a series of comprehensive programs that would extend the key messages and learning experiences of the exhibition.

The AAA had an active group of advisors chaired by the Yolanda Moses who had initiated the idea of an exhibition and public engagement project about race over a decade ago. Primarily academics, many of the AAA advisors had been with the project since its early origins. We worked closely with them on the exhibition content. The AAA advisors imparted their realms of expertise and advised and reviewed content development in all forms, from initial concept ideas for specific components to reviewing copy for exhibition labels.

A primary factor in SMM collaborating with AAA on the development of the ***RACE: Are We So Different?*** exhibition was to increase conversations about race, amongst the staff and in the greater Twin Cities communities and to contribute to the national discourse on race. Simultaneous to the exhibition development process, we developed a comprehensive program plan that included working with schools, theater programs, a series of public

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forums focused on the three themes of biology, history, and the contemporary experience of race in society. Towards that end, we established a community advisory board, whose role was to work with us to promote the exhibition within their own communities and to help us to develop a program structure both in content and format that would engage the local communities and attract new audiences to the SMM.

We also offered visitors and staff an experience for reflection and engagement after seeing the *RACE: Are We So Different?* exhibition. The Talking Circle process used in the restorative justice movement in Minnesota derived from Native American traditions. It was inclusive and supported and validated a range of perspectives. The Talking Circles actively engaged over one hundred people as “Circle Keepers”. The “Circle Keepers” represented a range of professions, ethnicities and socio-economic backgrounds. What was striking was while many were civic-minded, and life-long Minnesotans, many of them had never set foot in the Science Museum of Minnesota before this project. *Editor’s note: see the Fall 2007 issue of Exhibitionist for reviews of RACE, including an evaluation of the Talking Circle programs.*

A contrast between the development process of the *RACE: Are We So Different?* exhibition and the others that I’ve described is that the Science Museum was hired by The American Anthropological Association to develop and produce the exhibition. Our interest and commitment to the topic transcended the traditional client /museum roles; however our relationship to the project limited an open community development process. Notwithstanding we did work with various

communities, and their perspectives are voiced throughout the exhibition. For example, the video titled “Where Do I Sit In the Cafeteria?” captures a youth perspective on race. We worked with an award winning troupe of youth actors and their teachers from Central High School in St. Paul to produce the video. Visitors to this part of the exhibition are introduced to a group of multi-ethnic students discussing candidly their experiences with race, racism, and issues of identity and community. While the *RACE: Are We So Different?* exhibition is not specifically for children we saw an increase in middle and high school group groups visiting the exhibition. School groups represent half of the three hundred Talking Circles we offered.

An Evolving Perspective

In closing I’ve offered these three case studies to provide some practical as well as philosophical perspectives on processes for presenting cultural experiences in a context for learning. Each project is worthy of a full article detailing both successes and failures with examples of both. My thinking has evolved from simplistic notions of “invite them and they will come” to providing a context for advisors and others to be actively engaged in exhibition projects and to be realistic regarding expectations for engagement. I’ve learned that persistence, commitment, and realistic expectations are key to community engagement. Not mentioned but critical to each of these projects was the courage and willingness of each institution’s leadership to take on sensitive and often unspoken topics. The support from the administration of each organization has been unwavering. I am very grateful.

In the words of Frederick Douglass-
“If there is no struggle, there is no progress.” ❁