Making the most of citizenship learning
across cultural institutions

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KEY POINTS
• Visits to cultural institutions are valued informal citizenship learning opportunities.
• Deeper learning occurs when there is a strong, sustained conceptual focus and opportunities for critical thinking across the pre, during, and post-visit learning.
• Revealing cultural institutions as spaces of critical encounter and dialogue about contemporary issues invites learners’ participatory responses.
This article explores how teachers and students can make the most of citizenship learning opportunities when they visit cultural institutions such as museums, galleries, and memorial parks. It shares insights from 150 Years: 150 Buses, a project that supported school groups to visit two or more of Wellington’s nationally significant institutions in 2015. Taking concept-led and critical-thinking approaches to the pre-visit preparation and post-visit follow-up made a difference to depth of learning that was generated. It is suggested that citizenship learning could be further enhanced by teachers considering the learning that occurs during the visit, for example, by taking a critical approach to thinking about the citizenship narratives being presented. As an example, the article offers a strategy for supporting learners to deconstruct, and then later reconstruct, their experiences in cultural institutions.

Learning citizenship from cultural institutions

Citizenship is primarily a lived experience of community and everyday life, learned from practice and in relationship with others (see, for example, Biesta & Lawy, 2006). Furthermore, young people learn to participate in society, and to be citizens, across a range of out-of-school contexts, such as their neighbourhoods, marae, or youth groups. Cultural institutions can form part of this broader, informal citizenship education landscape and include, for example, galleries, libraries, and memorial parks. In these settings, young people can be invited and challenged to reimagine their social worlds through direct and tangible experience. Cultural institutions can be important sites for engaging with citizenship concepts such as identity, belonging, and social change, and hold the potential to enrich at least three dimensions of young people’s informal learning. A visit to a cultural institution can be an experience that arises from their interests, motivations, or desires, which then becomes enfolded into their lifelong learning. It can form part of their life-wide learning as they circulate across different social settings and activities that are sometimes organised by their school. And it can contribute to life-deep learning, the values and worldviews developed as they encounter particular perspectives at each institution (Bell, Lewenstein, Shouse & Feder, 2009).

In light of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, authors such as Mai and Gibson (2011) have argued that children and young people have the same rights to access the cultural citizenship enjoyed by adults. This includes their right to be heard, and to participate without restriction, on an equal standing as adults, in cultural institutions. Terreni (2013) has further argued that in spaces such as art museums, children can face a range of physical, social, and intellectual barriers, with very young children being an especially under-represented group. While schools routinely provide out-of-school experiences that students might otherwise not have had, teachers report that this can entail a logistical and administrative load, and that the cost of travel is a significant obstacle to accessing Wellington’s learning experiences. Additionally, teachers experience difficulties in curating a visit to multiple sites (Rusholme, 2012), an extension of a more general issue about “joining up” the learning that occurs in a cultural institution with that of the classroom.

The central challenge that this article addresses is to “ensure that students have a connected, cohesive and cumulative experience of the activities taking place, as well as ideas involved and that these can be made relevant for their meaning making when moving across settings” (Charitonos, Blake, Scanlon, & Jones, 2012, p. 3). Because cultural institutions necessarily present particular narratives, a vital part of democratic citizenship education is to develop students’ capacities to critically reflect on these representations and their own meaning making.

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“Because cultural institutions necessarily present particular narratives, a vital part of democratic citizenship education is to develop students’ capacities to critically reflect on these representations and their own meaning making. Meeting this challenge can mean the difference between an excursion involving eclectic, ‘mile wide, inch deep’ experiences and an opportunity for maximising citizenship learning.”

TABLE 1. IDENTIFYING THE CONCEPTUAL FOCUS FOR LEARNING (EXPERIENCE WELLINGTON, 2016, P. 17)

Deeper levels of conceptual connectivity can be generated when learners are invited to consider their connections to, and the personal and social significance of, the cultural institutions that they visit. Understanding that cultural institutions play different roles in society, and how they variously contribute to public discourse and social change, is central to learning how to navigate “the different underlying assumptions and goals associated with education and development across the settings” (Bell et. al., 2009, p. 28). The following are examples of “big ideas” about citizenship which can be critically explored in relation to cultural institutions, allowing room for students to notice, for example, that cultural institutions can sometimes maintain the status quo, disengage young people, and marginalise some voices.

Six big ideas about cultural institutions and citizenship

Cultural institutions:
• are historically located and are built on particular traditions and values
• connect to the identities and lives of New Zealanders
• change, just as society does
• contribute to wider societal conversations and debates
• share particular perspectives, contested narratives, “angles”, and silences that can be compiled, compared, and contrasted
• can be agents of change, as can the students themselves

Bringing students to the capital

This article shares insights from research related to a pilot project called 150 Years: 150 Buses, funded by the Wellington Amenities Fund. This project offered low-to mid-decile schools in the region subsidised buses and teacher professional development to support a visit to Wellington’s nationally significant institutions.
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funding enabled 4,597 students to access the capital’s citizenship learning experiences in 2015, particularly those related to World War 1 commemorations and the 150th anniversary of Wellington. The research that sat alongside the project investigated the value-added educational outcomes of the visits, and asked “to what extent is children’s conceptual understanding about citizenship enhanced when educational opportunities are co-ordinated across two or more of Wellington’s nationally significant institutions?” The research particularly sought to address a gap in the literature about the challenges and opportunities that visits to multiple cultural institutions present for conceptual growth in citizenship education. Of the 56 schools that participated in the project, thirteen agreed to be part of the research. All but one was low- to mid-decile, all students were in Years 4–10, and over half the students identified as having ethnicities other than New Zealand European. Each school configured a visit across two or more nationally significant institutions², their selection reflecting an overwhelming interest in World War 1 during 2015. Only three schools focused on a different aspect of citizenship, Wellington as a capital.

Using a qualitative research methodology, three data sources provided insight into the impact of the visit. Through 13 pre-/post-visit questionnaires, teachers were asked about how they supported their students’ conceptual learning before and after the visit, and about their perceptions of the challenges, positives, and educational impact of the visit. We examined 291 student pre/post work samples of concept-led activity which teachers had selected and adapted from the ChangeAgents resource (Experience Wellington, 2015) for use with their whole class. The teachers typically drew from the “concept mapping” or “concept definition” strategies (p. 22, 24), and these were most often completed in groups, with each student contributing their ideas in a different colour pen. We conducted post-visit focus-group interviews with 136 students within 4 to 63 weeks after each visit, at each school’s convenience. The semi-structured interview questions elicited students’ responses to the visit, including its educative value, and the extent of conceptual connectivity in their learning. Students were asked, for example, how the sites they had visited were connected to the concepts they had been focusing on in class, which were printed on separate cards as discussion prompts.

These data sources tell only a partial story about the outcomes from the visits—a story that misses, for example, evidence from rich discussions about the learning that may have occurred before, during, and afterwards. Additionally, and in seeking to work flexibly with schools, there was inevitable variation in how the concept-led elicitation strategies were developed, and the conditions under which students completed these. Furthermore, while the strategies were intended to be open-ended, their visual design may well have constrained the students’ thinking. However, their great advantage was that, together with the student post-interviews, they enabled an “aggregate portrait” (Barton, 2015) of shifts in class groups’ conceptual understandings.

There is not the space here to share all the research findings. Instead, the next three sections share, first, key findings about what students learned from the visit. In light of evidence that students in three schools (A, D, and F) gained deeper levels of conceptual understanding, the following section considers how their teachers stimulated this through the visit preparation and follow-up. The third and final section considers an aspect of the learning experience that was harder to capture through the research design—that is, what happened during the visit.

What the students learned from the visit

Teachers and students in all schools reported that they highly valued the visit. Many teachers commented that they would not have been able to bring their students to Wellington, were it not for the funding. The post-visit interviews revealed that students were particularly entranced by details of the exhibitions such as the smells, and the larger-than-life models with extraordinary detail. They strongly emphasised the experiential value of the visit, that is, the real-life and emotionally-connected nature of the learning. As two students explain in relation to World War 1 exhibitions, the visit generated high levels of interest and was widely perceived as an educative experience:

There’s kind of two types of learning, the classroom learning and the outdoor learning, and if we didn’t go to the Wellington exhibitions, then we wouldn’t be able to learn like we would be able to learn the facts of things, but we’d never have the idea of what it would be like and a whole lot of other things which we can never really find on the internet and in the classroom. (Student interview, School A)

We wouldn’t be as humbled or have as much respect as we should do for what has happened to them … before you go in to an exhibition you think one thing and then when you come out of it you’re thinking entirely different thing because you have a new knowledge to grasp on. (Student interview, School B)

The students’ emotional connections considerably outweighed their conceptual connections, particularly where the focus was World War 1. This was partly
stimulated by the teachers, who saw affective connections as being an important learning outcome, and partly by the exhibitions themselves, which focused strongly on personal experiences of World War 1. Some students mentioned that they had developed greater empathy as a result, and that they better understood the gravity of conflict. However, a number reported that they felt emotionally overloaded in the exhibitions spaces that were focused on World War 1, and it may be that this had an impact on their conceptual understanding. The interaction between emotions, conceptual understanding, and critical thinking is complex and “what is often not known when youth encounter exhibits involving difficult subject matter is how their emotions are entwined with learning, and how this complex interaction may impact learning by either obscuring or clarifying knowledge” (Trofanenko, 2011, p. 482).

There was compelling evidence of durable, transferable conceptual understandings having been stimulated from the pre, during, and post-visit learning for students in three schools (A, D, and F), examples of which are picked up in this next section. Their concept activities and interview responses indicated the students’ ability to (a) transfer concepts such as conflict and commemoration across cultural institutions, and (b) critically link the concepts to contemporary issues, differences in perspectives, or their own lives. The following student, for example, uses a bundle of concepts to communicate an idea about the perspectival nature of remembering the past:

You can connect ‘values and perspectives’ and ‘remembering the past’ together, because if someone really valued what people had done in World War 1, they would remember World War 1 a lot, and if someone thought that being a pilot in World War 1 was really important then they would remember World War 1 from a pilot’s point of view. Also ‘personal significance’ it’s how you remember the past … so if you didn’t value World War 1 at all and you didn’t think it a significant event, you’d go ‘who cares about ANZAC day I’ve got better things to do’. (Student interview, School A).

This is not to say that the conceptual understanding was absent in other schools. Students in all interview groups could identify concepts related to their visit, such as commemoration or decision-making. Most could make connections between concepts related to the theme of their visit, for example, stressing that commemoration was a more appropriate concept to be using in relation to World War 1 than celebration. However, the students mainly struggled to formulate robust conceptual understandings with supporting detail drawn from each site. In the main, the findings from this study showed that there mostly exists an eclectic assortment of facts, information, and exhibition detail in the minds of the students who visited Wellington’s nationally significant institutions – for example, the “bricks, bells, and Australian gifts” at Pukeahu National War Memorial Park (Post-visit work sample, School G). Furthermore, most found it difficult to articulate how the institutions help people to think differently and critically about World War I or Wellington as a capital. There was a strong tendency to perceive the institutions as authoritative and the exhibitions as uncontroversial. While a number of students stated that the institutions presented different angles and perspectives, few could elaborate or explain how each space was asking them to think and feel in the way that this student could:

Well like as I said before each country has their own story to tell about the war like we might have as New Zealand a story to say on Gallipoli but then Turkish people or, not putting them on the spot really, but they might have a completely different side to the story and maybe the same thing with every other country in the world. Because we all had our own kind of part and our own moral values or beliefs that were in the war or against it but we still kind of participated in it, so yeah. (Student interview, School B)

How did teachers stimulate richer citizenship learning?

Returning to the levels of conceptual understanding demonstrated by students in schools A, D, and F, this section describes two key characteristics of the teachers’ visit preparation and follow-up that appeared to stimulate richer conceptual understandings in the minds of the students. Examples of the teachers’ practice are set alongside the kinds of responses evident in the students’ work samples and interviews. While these pedagogical characteristics do not completely account for the students’ conceptual outcomes, they offer a strong starting point for teachers’ consideration in curating visits to cultural institutions.

A clear conceptual focus to the learning

Students had better conceptual outcomes when the teachers’ planning demonstrated a clear conceptual focus. The teachers in schools A, D, and F achieved this focus in at least three ways: the visit was embedded in a sequence of learning (as opposed to a “one off” visit), important concepts were identified in their planning, and these concepts formed part of rich inquiry question(s) with a contemporary focus. Furthermore, this conceptual focus was sustained across the pre- and post-visit learning experiences, and was reflected in the teachers’ development of the concept-led elicitation strategies. In the example given in Figure 1, School F focused on the
The concept map was central to the visit preparation and follow-up; it was used to strongly emphasise the concepts of connectedness, conflict, and commemoration, and the three sites that the school would be visiting.

Excerpts from one student’s contribution to their group’s concept map is indicative of a rich picture of conceptual connectivity that the students built up through the pre-visit process. In this example, the student demonstrates a clear understanding of the public role of cultural institutions, their relationship to lived experiences, and the concept of connectedness.

Society = museums. We all can teach these ideas and information to our kids and juniors in our school. We can tell them the significance that these stories are. These places could influence our decision on what we think about conflict/war. Sometimes museums connect people together through relatives. Conscious objectors, Archibald Baxter, nurses. Connected to us and probably how our ancestors’ time were. They all are public and people friendly. They are all close to each other. They all acknowledge war and the history of it. (Student pre-visit concept map, School F)

After the visit, their teacher commented that “it was good to see and hear students making connections to ideas and information from the classroom inquiry. In fact one student said on returning to school, ‘I’ve made so many connections, my head hurts’” (Post-visit teacher questionnaire, School F). Back in class, the new learning that the students added to their concept maps revealed that the visit had largely affirmed their pre-visit ideas, and had enabled them to add greater detail to their schema. Their greatest conceptual shift lay in a changed ideas about and attitude towards conflict, particularly stimulated by learning about Te Puea Herangi’s resistance to the involvement of Tainui iwi in World War 1, with one student adding “PEACE is IMPORTANT” (Student post-visit concept map, School F).

Introducing critical-thinking opportunities

Students also had stronger conceptual outcomes when their teachers offered a critical orientation to the learning. For example, School F included “different viewpoints” among a bundle of important concepts related to their inquiry question. This explicit focus led to a great deal of debate within the class, and the importance of understanding different perspectives on conflict was reinforced during the visit when the students learned about Te Puea’s stance. The learning in School A centred on the question “ANZAC: Why do we remember?” and included critical thinking within big ideas such as “we have a choice to participate in commemoration or not”, “people choose to remember in different ways”, and
“remembering war has different meanings for different people”. Students in this school particularly stood out for their critique of the narratives presented in the World War I exhibitions, for example:

[...]

The teachers in schools A, D and F used a range of critical-thinking strategies throughout the learning sequence. This included imbedding critical-thinking prompts in a concept definition activity used before and after the visit (see Table 2). In another example, School D’s big question, “What is war?” explored present-day beliefs and attitudes towards conflict. Students debated a range of provocative statements about war, such as “war is fun”, “without war we can’t have peace”, and “taking part in war is like committing murder”. Later in the learning sequence they created a persuasive argument for or against conscription. The discussion in one student focus-group interview particularly emphasised differences in perspectives, for example:

And then there’s many people’s responses to the war now like, different people think different things, as like some people think that maybe war should never happened, and others think that, well most people think that and others think that then when it did happen somebody should go and fight for their country. (Student interview, School D)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>STATEMENT STARTERS SCHOOL A</th>
<th>STATEMENT STARTERS SCHOOL D</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other words for commemoration (synonyms) ...</td>
<td>My concept...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commemoration is ...</td>
<td>Synonyms...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commemoration is not ...</td>
<td>Is the opposite to...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is different from celebration</td>
<td>Can lead to...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>because...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some people commemorate war because ...</td>
<td>Why I think war happens...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ways that people commemorate WW1 ...</td>
<td>People commemorate war because...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Examples of commemoration in Wellington ...</td>
<td>What I think (values)...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>With my new learning what does this mean for me now...</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some people do not commemorate war because ...</td>
<td>____ thinks differently to me because...</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 2. PRE/POST VISIT CONCEPT FRAMES
(APRATED FROM WELLINGTON MUSEUMS TRUST, 2016; MINISTRY OF EDUCATION, 2009)

The teachers’ practice described in this section largely affirms the importance of aligning learning experiences in cultural institutions to valued outcomes (Aitken & Sinnema, 2008; Falk & Dierking, 2013) in order to avoid the learning being “a mile wide and an inch deep”. Their approach to the visit preparation and follow-up demonstrates how conceptual depth can be enhanced when students visit more than one cultural institution, and suggests in particular study that a more critical orientation to a visit has the effect of sharpening the learning focus and improving conceptual outcomes. Such an orientation necessarily involves teachers’ critical assessment of the citizenship narratives and “valued outcomes” in cultural institutions, in order to consider how alternative perspectives can be brought into the learning.

Strengthening citizenship learning connections across cultural institutions

The discussion so far has largely concentrated on how teachers curated the learning before and after a visit to multiple cultural institutions. What about the learning that occurred during the visit? A number of teachers and students reported that there was a lot to take in and process during the day, a consequence of the exhibition spaces themselves and schools wanting to make the most of the subsidised visit by seeing as much as possible. It was interesting to note that, other than determining the logistical aspects, teachers appeared to concentrate less on curating the during-visit experience. All schools placed themselves in the hands of the individual institutions that they visited, either as part of a guided tour or “self-drive” through exhibition spaces.

What could teachers do to lessen the cognitive overload experienced by students, and further enrich the learning across multiple sites? The important relationship between teachers and educators in cultural institutions cannot be overstated here—close collaborations can engender focused learning opportunities (Wright-Maley, Grenier & Marcus, 2013). This can include co-constructing a clear conceptual focus and a sharper, more manageable line of inquiry across sites with educators in cultural institutions, so that learners are not having to take in every aspect. This more-focused attention does not mean that visiting cultural institutions narrows thinking towards a predetermined outcome. Instead, such clarity serves as a starting point for critical and creative thought, because it enables students to “go deeper” by exploring the big idea, challenging assumptions, and noticing their emotional responses in different exhibition spaces. The shift being described here is from “knowledge absorption” to “question creation” (Marcus, Levine & Grenier, 2012) and sparking imagination through engaging with provocations and ambiguities of cultural institutions (Carr, 2011). One approach to question creation during the visit is to have learners “deconstruct” their experience as they are moving through each cultural institution, each armed with one or more of the suggested questions in Table 3. Back in class,
their responses to these questions can support students to imaginatively “reconstruct” their experience through, for example, presenting an alternative perspective to their peers, community, or cultural institutions.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DECONSTRUCTION QUESTIONS ACROSS INSTITUTIONS</th>
<th>RECONSTRUCTION QUESTIONS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Who created this exhibition, space, or site? Why?</td>
<td>What could we create in response?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is important here? Who decided?</td>
<td>What issues do we care about? What messages do we want to share?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What techniques are being used to attract my attention?</td>
<td>How will our response be compelling?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do I feel dis/connected from/to here?</td>
<td>How might others feel connected to it?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Whose stories are here? Whose are missing?</td>
<td>Which missing stories will we tell?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How am I being made to feel here?</td>
<td>How might others feel about our response?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How could someone else view this exhibition, space, or site differently?</td>
<td>How will our response invite debate and conversation?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do I see that others might not notice?</td>
<td>How will we help others to see what is not often noticed?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What do I wonder here?</td>
<td>How can we help others to imagine?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

TABLE 3. DECONSTRUCTING AND RECONSTRUCTING THE VISIT EXPERIENCE (ADAPTED FROM THE CENTER FOR MEDIA LITERACY, 2016; LINDAUER, 2008)

Conclusion

The findings from the 150 Years: 150 Buses project affirm that opportunities to visit Wellington’s nationally-significant institutions are highly valued by schools. While students’ connections to particular aspects of exhibitions and affective responses are necessary dimensions of learning, they are not sufficient by themselves. The hallmarks of teacher planning that unlocked a rich learning experience included a strong, sustained conceptual focus and opportunities for critical thinking before and after the visit. This article has suggested that a further consideration for teachers is the during visit experience. Curating visits that reveal cultural institutions as spaces of critical encounter and dialogue about contemporary issues, rather than repositories of information, holds the potential for the experience to generate conceptual and participatory outcomes, that is, an active response to the issues encountered in those spaces. The pedagogical shift that appears most needed in this regard is from what Paulo Freire (1989) called “banking education”, where students are positioned as the passive recipients of information, to a socially critical approach where students are invited to “read and re-write” their worlds. A critical approach allows students to thoughtfully consider issues, decisions and social change—and how they could take action as a result of learning from cultural institutions.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1 Approved by Victoria University of Wellington’s Human Ethics Committee, RM #26126.
2 This included the National Library of New Zealand (2 schools), Parliament (1), Reserve Bank Museum (1), Wellington Museum (2), Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa (8), The Holocaust Centre of New Zealand (2), Pukeahu National War Memorial Park (7), The Great War Exhibition (11), Government House (1), Petone Settlers Museum (2), and Nairn Street Cottage (5).
3 Three schools visited Wellington late in Term 4, and post-visit interviews took place 1–2 weeks afterwards.
4 For guidance, see Ministry of Education (2008).

References


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