Imaginative Education in action in museums and heritage settings

Jane Cockcroft
Ashmolean Museum
**THINK OF THE POSSIBLE...**

**Mind-mapping exercise (Stage 1 of Framework)**

**Gentle Spring**

Exhibited at Royal Academy in 1865

Artist: Fredrick Sandys (1829–1904)

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**Wonder of spring – amazing detail. Romance of ancient story.**

**Cold dark underworld vs radiant spring on earth. Extremes of climate and weather today.**

**Sandys celebrated as a draughtsman, but never made it as a painter. On periphery of movement – why? Argument with Rossetti?**

**Goddess: power to transform, resilient. Artist: attention to detail, concentration, determination, collaboration, hard work, imagination, meticulousness, teamwork.**

**Dedication on frame of painting: given to museum by Captain R Langton Douglas in memory of son killed in 1916.**

**Proserpina story – annual release from the underworld bringing spring with her. Story of the seasons. Sandys’ lively personal story.**


**Sandys linked to Pre-Raphaelite movement. Rebels – intent on breaking the rules of the Royal Academy. Pre-Raphaelite fantasy woman – problematic from today’s feminist perspective.**

**Or, as ‘second phase’ Pre-Raphaelite artist was Sandys just ‘conforming’ to established ideals?**

**Artistic collaboration/network. Sandys inspired by close friendship with Dante Gabriel Rossetti (they later fell out). Sandys’ sister Emma also artist. Painted in garden of poet and novelist George Meredith and exhibited with friend Charles Algernon Swinburne’s sonnet.**


**Why does it matter?**

- Vivid example of rebellious Pre-Raphaelite artistic skill and ideals
- Poignancy and relevance of myth of Proserpina and theme of changes in the seasons
Imaginative Education (IE) underpins the design of learning experiences which can achieve this kind of emotional engagement. The theory and practice of IE was developed by educational philosopher Kieran Egan, originally for use in schools, but is equally applicable to museum and heritage settings. It reveals and brings together a range of appealing and engaging ways into learning and meaning-making, using cognitive or ‘learning tools’ that are broadly familiar, as they operate in all sorts of learning and cultural contexts. IE articulates within a strong, coherent and theorised framework what we know intuitively makes learning engaging and memorable, combining a compelling rationale with practical tools.

This Guide and accompanying Framework make a case for an ‘IE way of thinking’ in a museum and heritage context. ‘Think of the Possible’ will explore the relationship between the imagination and learning and how it applies to museum interpretation, and provide a summary of IE theory. It will then translate IE learning tools and frameworks into a 4 stage Framework applicable to the design of museum and heritage learning experiences (such as led sessions, self-guided activities and exhibitions), and conclude with two case studies.

Use of this Framework will act as a filter to ensure that opportunities for imaginative and emotional engagement are not missed, making it distinct from, but compatible with, other museum learning theories, models and frameworks. It has been designed to be flexible enough to be applied pragmatically to any heritage content, in any setting, with any audience. It can be ‘cherry picked’, experimented with and adapted as required.

In association with CIRCE, the Centre for Imagination in Research, Culture and Education based at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, a further aim is to contribute to the discussion about the role of the imagination in museum and heritage settings. For IE inspired practical exercises, information about getting involved, and links to CIRCE and IE resources, please see back page.

The imagination and learning

‘It is the ability to think of the possible, not just the actual; it is the source of invention, novelty, and flexibility in human thinking; imagination is not distinct from rationality but is rather a capacity that greatly enriches rational thinking; it is tied to our ability to form images in the mind, and image-forming commonly involves emotions’ Kieran Egan

Egan’s definition of the imagination involves knowledge, psychology and emotion all working together. He argues that imagination can be the ‘workhorse of effective learning’ – if we harness it successfully. Knowledge only comes to life when it is presented in the context of human emotions via imaginative engagement.

‘All knowledge is human knowledge; it grows out of human hopes, fears, and passions. Imaginative engagement with knowledge comes from learning in the context of the hopes, fears, and passions from which it has grown or in which it finds a living meaning’ Kieran Egan

The importance of humanising knowledge has a particular resonance in the context of museum and heritage interpretation. Objects enclosed in cases and hanging on walls are divorced from the places and cultures in which they were used and the people who created and cared for them. This makes their humanity difficult to access. Intangible heritage (e.g., performing arts and digital heritage) and historic spaces are equally at risk. IE helps to unpack and illuminate the humanity inherent in all kinds of heritage.

IE theory

IE defines sets of learning tools connected to language development that help us to make sense of the world in distinctly different ways. In order to realise the power of the imagination, these toolkits must work in conjunction with each other to enable effective and meaningful learning.

Post it note left by visitor, as part of exhibition evaluation project, Helsinki City Museum, 2017*
### Sets of IE Learning Toolkits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tools of the Body</th>
<th>Tools of Orality</th>
<th>Tools of Literacy</th>
<th>Tools of Theoretical Thinking</th>
<th>Tools of Irony</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-language body based tools enable us to make sense of the world through our bodies</td>
<td>The tools we gain through oral language, as we hear and use it in our communities</td>
<td>Learning to read and write shapes new ways of understanding the world</td>
<td>Tools which enable us to understand abstract ideas and theory</td>
<td>The tools we need to develop a multi-layered, highly reflexive and often contradictory understanding of the world</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### *Explore bodily senses* (touch, smell, taste, sight, hearing)
- Explore emotional attachments and responses
- Draw out humour and silliness
- Involve play
- Explore musicality, rhythm and patterns
- Use the element of surprise
- Communicate with gestures and movement

#### *Find the story*
- Find a source of dramatic tension (explore abstract binary opposites)
- Evoke mental images with words
- Find the fun (jokes and humour)
- Adopt a playful approach
- Use rhyme, rhythm and pattern in language and numbers
- Use metaphors
- Identify the unknown (puzzles and mystery)

#### *Humanise knowledge*
- Identify heroic qualities
- Find the romance
- Stimulate wonder
- Reveal the rebel
- Illuminate limits of reality and extremes of experience
- Change the context
- Consider the collector in everyone
- Play with visual formats

#### *Stimulate a sense of agency*
- Explore abstract ideas
- Employ a meta-narrative structure
- Introduce general schemes and their anomalies

#### *Understand the limits of language*
- Accept ambiguity
- Enjoy and notice humour, particularly the Absurd
- Develop resilience in an uncertain world
- Recognise and use all IE tools flexibly in appropriate contexts

Adapted from Egan’s original tools outlined in *The Educated Mind: How Cognitive Tools Shape our Understanding* (1997) and *An Imaginative Approach to Teaching* (2005) both by Kieran Egan.

See [www.educationthatinspires.ca/tips-for-imaginative-educators](http://www.educationthatinspires.ca/tips-for-imaginative-educators) for more information about IE tools.

### IE Tools Translated into Interpretative Approaches

Three IE learning toolkits have particular relevance to museum learning and interpretation: **Tools of the Body, Tools of Orality and Tools of Literacy**. They have the potential to engage the widest possible audience, and have inspired three sets of interrelating interpretative approaches named after key IE tools:

- **Find the story**
- **Humanise knowledge**
- **Explore bodily senses**

These tools represent the ‘guiding principles’ of IE inspired interpretation translated into a museum and heritage context. Each interpretative approach within each set derives from an existing IE tool (see Stage 2 of the Framework, p.8).
1. **STORIFY: Tools of Orality**

Story is a powerful learning tool – we think, construct meaning, and remember in story form. Museums are repositories of stories and are made for storytelling. This set of interpretative approaches reflects the kaleidoscopic nature of story, and its potential to engage visitors in different ways, using story form and the ingredients of story. The term ‘storify’ refers to this process.

2. **HUMANISE (AND SURPRISE?): Tools of Literacy**

Bringing content to life in human terms is imperative. This set of approaches draws out human, emotional and heroic associations – human experience expressed on an epic scale.

3. **ENGAGE THROUGH THE BODY: Tools of the Body**

This set of approaches unlocks our emotional responses to heritage as experienced through the body, particularly necessary in museums where visitors can see but often can’t touch.

Tools of Theoretical Thinking and Tools of Irony are also relevant, particularly Accept ambiguity and Stimulate a sense of agency, but they are less immediately accessible.

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**Using the Framework**

The Framework is essentially a thought exercise providing practitioners and co-creators with a structured approach to interrogate heritage content (object, collection, historic space, or intangible heritage) from an emotional and imaginative perspective, enabling the design of engaging learning experiences.

This four-stage process stimulates discussion and debate, and is applicable to consultation exercises with stakeholders and non-users. It can act as a checklist to explore possibilities and enable divergent thinking, in order to define what really matters, and how to bring heritage content to life. It allows anyone involved in the design process to emotionally connect with content themselves, enabling them to imagine what visitors might find compelling. This often involves identifying universally accessible and relevant themes and ideas, such as the importance of ‘belonging’ or ‘innovation’. Far from dictating how visitors should feel, identifying emotional importance provides visitors with emotionally driven parameters in which to create their own meanings.

Inevitably, some elements of the Framework will be more relevant than others, depending on content, audience, budget and type of learning experience.

**‘Think of the Possible’ case studies**

To demonstrate how ‘Think of the Possible’ can be applied practically, two case studies can be found on pp.10–15, each inspired by Ashmolean Museum collections. Case study 1 is a planning exercise designed to show how the Framework could be used to interpret a single object in the context of a gallery session for two very different audiences. Case study 2 provides an example of how the Framework has been used to create a family trail interpreting a collection of objects. A paper trail format was chosen because it literally makes IE inspiration visible.

**Re-visit the familiar**

However familiar the tools, the process of unpacking heritage content and seeking out emotionally engaging interpretative approaches should not be dismissed as ‘too obvious’. An ‘IE way of thinking’ also helps us recognise IE tools operating in broad cultural contexts – advertising is an interesting place to start. As in advertising, museums and heritage settings have limited time to seize the attention of visitors and encourage them to care. Why not use IE to maximise the opportunities of capturing visitors’ imaginations, enabling more effective learning and a sense of ‘the possible’?
**Framework**

**STAGE I: Explore ‘Why does it matter?’**

- Use these ‘thinking prompts’ to mind-map relevant connections to content
- Refer to the tables opposite to help identify dramatic tension, heroic associations, and human emotions

- Identify imaginatively and emotionally compelling themes, ideas, questions, or arguments. These can be positive, difficult, controversial or contradictory

...and consider ‘Who is it for?’

- Adapt themes, ideas, arguments or questions for your audience

- Why does it matter?
  - And who is it for?
Identifying binary opposites will help locate dramatic tension. This ‘black and white’ starting point is intended to inspire the exploration of the shades of grey in between.

Heroic qualities extend from the everyday to the extraordinary: the patience and perseverance of an unknown craftsman has as much value as the bravery of a famous warrior. Anti-heroic qualities should also be considered, i.e. the abuse of power.

Drawn from IE lists of abstract binary opposites and heroic qualities. For more information please visit: www.educationthatinspires.ca/tips-for-imaginative-educators and click on ‘Find a source of dramatic tension’ and ‘Seek heroic qualities’.

Possible Emotions

Anger Acceptance Admiration Aggression Amazement Annoyance Anticipation Anxiety Apprehension Awe Boredom Confusion Contentment Contempt Determination Despair Disapproval Disgust Ecstasy Excitement Fear Grief Happiness Hope Inspiration Irritation Jealousy Joy Loathing Love Loneliness Misery Optimism Outrage Peace Pride Sadness Serenity Shame Submission Surprise Remorse Terror Trust
### Framework

#### STAGE 2: Storify, humanise (and surprise?) and engage through the body

- Select relevant interpretative approaches that most powerfully communicate ‘Why does it matter’ themes and ideas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Storify</th>
<th>Humanise (and surprise?)</th>
<th>Engage through the body</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tell Stories:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Bring humanity of content to life:</strong></td>
<td><strong>Include multi-sensory experiences:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Use live storytelling</td>
<td>○ Tell human stories (historical or imagined)</td>
<td>○ Object handling (replicas, props, different textured materials)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Storytelling in other media: film, audio, animation, projections, digital, comic-strip</td>
<td>○ Use quotes: ‘in their own words’</td>
<td>○ Smells</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Construct narratives with connected objects</td>
<td>○ Show images of connected people</td>
<td>○ Sound (music, spoken word, sound effects)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Include anecdotes</td>
<td>○ Provide visual context: a sense of place</td>
<td>○ Tasting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Evoke mental imagery with words: describe a moment in time in sensual language using the present tense.</td>
<td>○ Invite different voices and perspectives</td>
<td><strong>Integrate tangible playful activities and gallery interactives:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Story-shape content (e.g. journalistic approach):</strong></td>
<td>○ Invite empathy: role play, costumed interpretation, dressing up, digital interactives, through text, questions</td>
<td>○ Puzzles, games, models</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Use attention grabbing headlines</td>
<td>○ Express emotion through design, lighting, mood</td>
<td>○ Board and construction games, musical instruments, costumes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Layer content to build a story</td>
<td>○ Reference emotion (verbally, in text)</td>
<td><strong>Use visually stimulating resources, interactives and environments:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Summarise and raise questions</td>
<td>○ Avoid overly sensational language</td>
<td>○ Play with visual formats: images, diagrams, maps, digital interactives</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Create compelling beginnings:</strong></td>
<td>○ Express drama or conflict identified in content (in text, verbally or wordlessly (lighting, mood, music)</td>
<td>○ Prioritise good design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Use vivid or surprising imagery</td>
<td>○ Explore the ‘problem’ or ‘big question and possible ‘answers’</td>
<td>○ Use lighting and immersive design to communicate historical context and mood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Set the scene: key objects, film, projections or music</td>
<td>○ Acknowledge the unknown</td>
<td><strong>Involve Movement:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reveal dramatic tension:</strong></td>
<td>○ Explore the secret or hidden</td>
<td>○ Find opportunities for dance, movement, gesture and music</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Express drama or conflict identified in content (in text, verbally or wordlessly (lighting, mood, music)</td>
<td>○ Explore connected emotions</td>
<td>○ Involve actions, e.g., lifting the flap, opening drawers, crouching down to discover, or looking up in unexpected places</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Explore the ‘problem’ or ‘big question and possible ‘answers’</td>
<td>○ Acknowledge the unknown</td>
<td><strong>Prioritise physical comfort:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Acknowledge the unknown</td>
<td>○ Explore the secret or hidden</td>
<td>○ Provide comfortable seating and aim to create sufficient space for visitors to move, explore and engage; this will make them more receptive to learning.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Create an appropriate ending for audience:</strong></td>
<td>○ Offer a satisfying resolution</td>
<td><strong>Highlight Ingenuity:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Offer a satisfying resolution</td>
<td>○ End with ambiguity: no definite answers</td>
<td>○ Make human ingenuity visible: the process of making or problem solving (film, images, models, diagrams, stories) or reference in text</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Use metaphors:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Reveal extremes and limits of human experience and reality:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ In text, verbally (‘light bulb moment’)</td>
<td></td>
<td>○ Integrate surprising and awe-inspiring facts (text, verbally, visually within design): extreme cultural differences, the oldest, the biggest, the strangest, cutting edge technology (think Guinness Book of Records)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Visually (image of a light bulb)</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Uncover and debate the human drive to ‘collect’:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Use rhythmic language:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>○ Humanise collectors (tell their stories). Highlight and debate associated ethical and decolonisation related issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Use poetic and rhythmic language (verbally, in text)</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Prioritise multi-sensory experiences:</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Use repetition (particularly for younger audiences)</td>
<td></td>
<td>○ Object handling (replicas, props, different textured materials)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Integrate humour and playfulness:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>○ Smells</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>○ Tell jokes, use riddles and word play, and embrace silliness, spontaneity and playfulness (as appropriate)</td>
<td></td>
<td>○ Sound (music, spoken word, sound effects)</td>
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</table>
STAGE 3: Consider all opportunities for audience participation

✓ Check audience participation is built-in to the design of the learning experience
  Multi-sensory experiences (e.g., object handling), tangible interactivity (puzzles, games), digital
  interactivity, movement, role play, dressing up (see Stage 2) and opportunities for creative response to
  heritage (art, crafts, creative writing, music)

✓ Create physical space for audience reflection and response
  Seating areas, tables, immersive spaces, dedicated areas for visitor response

✓ Make time for audience to express views, feelings and opinions and encourage debate: make
this visible where possible
  Activities within learning experiences, i.e., discussion time, quizzes and Q&A (and as part of feedback
  process) and opportunities to respond and interact beyond visit (on-line forums, via social media)

STAGE 4: Assess learning via imaginative and emotional engagement
(applicable to formative and summative assessment phases)

✓ Assess response to ‘Why does it matter?’ themes and ideas
  Investigate ‘What did you care about the most/ find most memorable/relevant?’ to discover
  any correlations with themes and ideas identified in ‘Why does it matter’ (Stage 1)

✓ Select assessment method compatible with audience and type, mood and scale of learning
  experience
  Ranging from consultations, questionnaires and interviews to games and post-it notes

✓ Ask emotion-led questions when eliciting feedback
  ‘What was the most exciting/enjoyable part of this experience?’, ‘Which fact/activity/display
  was the most boring?’

✓ Use IE tools to inspire visitor activities that reveal extent of emotional engagement
  Write a story, play a game (quiz, puzzles), express response through movement or music

✓ Observe participants
  Look for clues of emotional engagement in body language and facial expressions
  (as appropriate and depending on audience and learning styles)

✓ Ensure practitioner/co-creator reflection time is integrated into planning process
  What worked, what didn’t, what could be improved?
STAGE 1: Why does it matter?

**People?** An unknown craftsman made this, although netsuke are often signed. Was it made for a Japanese merchant or a Western collector? Was it used as a toggle, or collected from the start to be admired? The only named associated person is Sir Herbert Ingram, the collector who gave it (along with many other objects) to the Ashmolean in 1956.

**Heroic associations?** Patience, concentration, attention to detail and creativity of craftsman. Heroism of protective dragon. Generosity of Ingram who gave netsuke to Ashmolean.

**Wonder-full ness?** For all the reasons listed: a mini masterpiece – exquisite, fascinating yet functional.

**Collecting issues?** Netsuke have been avidly collected, particularly since Japan opened to the West in 1853. What cultural impact has this had? Netsuke remain objects of desire – but why? Links to the complex story of Western fascination with Japanese culture and the ‘exotic’ and the ongoing debate in museums about cultural appreciation vs cultural appropriation.

**Content:** Japanese netsuke (netskay) in the form of a rain dragon coiled around a mokugyō, a Buddhist percussion instrument. Staghorn.
Made in Tokyo. c. 1880. Size: 3.1 x 4.3 x 4 cm

**Ingenuity?** Ingenuity and skill of craftsman: detailed carving of horn, smooth to touch (so as not to snag kimono silk), and ability to create such a tiny characterful item. Problem-solving dimension of the system of using netsuke on kimonos. Emotions? Pride and pleasure of original owner and later collectors.

**Extremes of experience and limits of reality?** Tiny object, opposite of how we imagine mighty dragons. Fantastical, magical thinking connected to dragon stories and their significance. Did this netsuke also act as talisman to bring good fortune?

**Binary opposites/dramatic tension?** Big/Small: a tiny object offering a significant insight into Japanese culture. Invisible/Visible: a small item that is easy to hide away, but is intended to be seen. Noise/Silence of object: the drum makes us imagine noise, but the object is silent. Fantasy/Reality: a fantasy beast with spiritual meaning, but a practical everyday item, associated with the living day to day practice of Buddhism.

**The unknown?** How did Sir Herbert Ingram acquire this netsuke? What is the meaning of the dragon and the Buddhist drum?

**Stories?** Association with rain dragon stories from Chinese and Japanese mythology. How does the dragon connect to Buddhist drum (also known as wooden fish)? Drum used during Buddhist chanting and to keep monks awake. Is the dragon protecting the drum? Dragon has a lugubrious, serious, and yet comic expression – good story potential. Connection to family memoir Hare with Amber Eyes (2010) by Edmund de Waal.

**Netsuke are small belt toggles, used by men in Japan during the Edo period (1615–1868) to attach purses or containers to the sash of their Kimonos. Popular with the merchant class who were banned from displaying wealth openly and had no political power. Instead, they invested in arts, fashion and a luxurious life style. Netsuke are inspired by broad themes including legends, folklore, history, animals, mythology and political satire.**
1. PROPOSED GALLERY ACTIVITY FOR EARLY YEARS (3–5)

The tiny toggle dragon from Japan

STAGE I: Adapted themes and ideas

✓ This tiny dragon tells us that the Japanese love small, beautiful useful things
✓ This dragon helps us play and tell stories about Japanese dragons

STAGE 2 AND 3:

✓ Selected Interpretative approaches and Participation

Compelling beginning: a replica animal netsuke whispering in the session leader’s pocket: “Shh, I’m a secret netsuke and have a dragon friend who lives here” (show enlarged image of dragon). Explain how he was used in Japan—how owners wanted to hide how special he was, but also show him off. Multi-sensory experience: handle replica netsuke and kimono. See how the toggle fastens the purse to the sash. Show photograph of man in kimono with netsuke in use. Feel how smooth it is to keep kimono from being torn. Movement, music and role play: show pictures of other animal netsuke. Which will you be? Pretend to be that animal, but all curled up and tucked in, as smooth as possible. Play ‘guess who’ game. Now be a dragon protecting your drum (listen to the sound of the drum being played). Storytelling: tell a short story/sing a song about a Japanese rain dragon and his drum. Ending: conclude with the netsuke going back into your pocket. “Shh, can you keep me a secret?” Could also clay model 3D netsuke to enhance learning experience, if access to studio space.

STAGE 4: Assessment

✓ Discussion/game: chat about what is wonderful about being small (like a netsuke). Roar like happy dragon if you’ve had fun! Sigh like a sad dragon if you didn’t.
✓ Practitioner/co-creator reflection on outcomes.

2. PROPOSED GALLERY TALK FOR ADULTS

Netsuke: objects of desire

STAGE I: Adapted themes and ideas

✓ Netsuke as objects of desire – why?
✓ Netsuke as windows into Japanese culture: Rain Dragon as focus object.

STAGE 2 AND 3:

✓ Selected Interpretative approaches and Participation

Compelling beginning (evoking mental imagery with words): describe moment in present tense, before hammer goes down on sale of netsuke for vast sum: tension, hot room, screen flickering with bids. Multi-sensory experience: pass replica netsuke around, explain function (use image of netsuke and kimono) highlight sensual appeal. Explore netsuke collection. Which ones intrigue you? Dramatic tension: how can such tiny objects pack such a cultural punch? Why so coveted and collected? Use Rain dragon as case study ‘window into a world of culture’ object: discuss history of netsuke, possible meanings, and explore broader themes of netsuke (pick out the most striking/unusual on display). Draw out heroism of craftsmanship and illuminate wonder: show short film (on iPads) of master netsuke maker carving netsuke i.e. visually stimulating resource. Humanise collector: who was Ingram? What else did he give to the Ashmolean, his interests etc. Example of Western collector fascinated by Japan. Reflective ending: not hard to understand why netsuke are so desirable, sum up. Involve visitors in discussion about collecting in this context, stress ambiguity of issues.

STAGE 4: Assessment

✓ Discussion: which netsuke would you take home if you could, and why? This should indicate level of emotional and imaginative engagement.
✓ Practitioner/co-creator reflection on outcomes.
Case study 2 (family trail)

STAGE I: Why does it matter?

Wonder-full ness of key objects selected? Zeus, huge, powerful, King of the Gods, romance that the original was found under the sea; gold necklace of acorns extraordinary skill of jeweller; Shoe maker pot gives an unusual and vivid insight into everyday life in Ancient Greece.

People and Stories? Multiple associations with people, mythical and historical, and their stories in the gallery, e.g., Copy of sculpture of Zeus, Homer (sculpted head), Athena (cup), Nike (series of pots). Odysseus and Theseus (pots). Greek myths and acts of heroism.

Content: a selection of objects from the Greece Gallery, Ashmolean

This family trail activity was inspired by the Ashmolean’s ancient Greek collection. The process of creating the trail involved identifying key objects with the most potential for engaging children and their families, and which offered ‘ways in’ to exploring life in ancient Greece. These included a variety of pots, grave goods, and sculptures.

The unknown? In the context of ancient Greece, so much unknown...

Rebellious or unconventional? Strains of rebellion run through much of Greek myth and classical thought and literature. Homer’s Odysseus is a true rebel, unafraid to defy and challenge the might of the gods.


Human emotions and ingenuity? Love and fear of the gods, hope for victory in war and sport, excitement inherent in drama of Greek myths and acts of heroism. Great ingenuity shown in terms of craftsmanship throughout.

Abstract binary opposites? War/Peace, Hero/Villain; Success/Defeat, Danger/Safety. Rich dramatic potential as mythical connections to selected objects were so strong. Identifying binaries made this clear and provided parameters for interpreting content.

Collecting issues? Relevant and complex. How were these objects collected? Should they be in British museums or repatriated? Issue not addressed in the context of this trail.

Extremes of experience and limits of reality? Greek myths are full of extremes - the trials and tribulations of gods and heroes reflecting those of humankind. Extreme scale of Zeus and ‘epic’ dimensions of Homer’s Odyssey.

This is a family trail activity inspired by the Ashmolean’s ancient Greek collection. The process of creating the trail involved identifying key objects with the most potential for engaging children and their families, and which offered ‘ways in’ to exploring life in ancient Greece. These included a variety of pots, grave goods, and sculptures.
This trail was designed for children aged 6+ and their families. Themes and ideas identified for this audience:

✓ Drama and excitement of an ancient culture that celebrated stories, gods and heroes in every aspect of life
✓ An exploration of heroism, and the idea that this can be expressed in many different ways

**STAGE 2 AND 3:**

✓ Selected Interpretative approaches and Participation

Family trails are all about participation. The challenge is ensuring the right type of activity matches the right object. Interpretative approaches selected: playful activities throughout, movement (mime), drawing out heroic associations, and using these and abstract binary opposites as inspiration for the big question ‘What kind of Hero would you be?’ Highlighting extremes and limits of experience and story-shaping with an appropriate ending. Use of humour.

See annotated version of ‘Heroes of Ancient Greece’ (pp.14–15) which highlights these approaches. To download trail: https://www.ashmolean.org/learning-resource-family-trails

✓ This selection of ancient objects reveal ‘what really mattered’ to people living in ancient Greece: a fascination with their gods, love of sport, theatre and hunting, the importance of warfare and social order
✓ The objects are bursting with amazing stories and imaginative energy: these myths remain as fresh, dramatic, exciting and relevant as ever
✓ This was a culture of heroes - we find heroism and heroic qualities reflected everywhere: from unknown hardworking craftspeople to heroic superstars such as Theseus and Odysseus and sporting champions
✓ Ancient objects like these raise multiple questions, not all of them comfortable: how were they acquired, and in what circumstances? What are the ethical and political issues? How should museums deal with this?

**STAGE 4:** Assessment

✓ Verbal feedback and evidence from questionnaires when testing the trail positive. High levels of enjoyment indicated: 8 out 11 families who completed questionnaire rated the trail 5/5. All indicated it made them discuss and look closely at objects. Wide spread of opinion regarding favourite activity. “Perfect for a 7-year old who is very interested in gods and heroes”.

Practitioner reflection: this continues to be one of our most popular trails, though one family has since indicated it is not dyslexia friendly. We plan to re-design the trail to make it more broadly accessible.
Participation: In the format of an object ‘hunt’ the trail aims to actively engage children and their families by encouraging them to look carefully at objects and take part in a variety of activities.

Visually stimulating: we worked with a graphic designer to make visual sense of trail content.

Heroic associations: This introduction flags up the many different ways of being heroic (which became the structuring device of the trail) while connecting the idea of ‘the heroic’ to Greek culture.

Dramatic tension, story shaping (compelling beginning): Exploring abstract binary opposites and heroic associations helped identify the purpose of this activity, i.e. the big question, and gives an epic ‘feel’ to the beginning of the trail.

Extremes and limits: Zeus is as extreme a god as you can get in terms of the scale of his power. This dictated the wording: ‘supreme ruler of the universe!’

Movement: Encouraging children to adopt a ‘power stance’ and physicalise the feeling of power is a good example of matching the heroic ‘why it matters’ with an appropriate activity.

Heroic associations: This drawing activity was chosen to express the slower, more meditative feel of ‘wisdom’.

Extremes of reality and playfulness: We wanted to make the most of the idea that Nike flies around bringing victory, much aided here by the lively design.

Movement (mime): An obvious interpretative approach to express the physical theme of sport.
Humour: Too good an opportunity to miss as it really looks as though the shoemaker is cutting his customer’s toe nails!

Extremes and limits: Asking children to ‘rate’ these objects seemed like a good way of expressing extremes, i.e., the ‘most’ skilled, the ‘least’ skilled.

Storytelling: Even though it was impossible to ‘tell a story’ (especially the entire ‘Odyssey’), this brief story synopsis is designed to express a sense of story.

Playfulness, humour: The image of Odysseus is so lively and full of energy and movement, this playful activity referencing speedy travel is a good match.

Dramatic tension: Involving children in exploration of drama inherent in stories (danger/safety and Success/Defeat) by imagining their own heroic role.

Participation and satisfying resolution: An opportunity for children to ‘answer’ the question themselves, having explored the options.
Practical exercises: warm up your ‘IE way of thinking’

✓ Select a heritage ‘item’ and try the mind-mapping exercise in Stage 1 of the Framework (p6). Which ‘thinking prompts’ were relevant? Did you find ‘Why does it matter’ themes and ideas easy to identify?
✓ Study IE toolkits on p.4. Actively seek out IE tools operating within cultural and learning contexts.
✓ Take Stage 2 of the Framework (p.8) with you on your next museum visit. Look for and critique interpretative approaches.

Links to CIRCE and IE resources

For more information about CIRCE (Centre for Imagination, Research, Culture and Education) please visit www.circesfu.ca. A wealth of information about the theory of IE, Kieran Egan’s publications and associated thinking and practice can be found on www.educationthatinspires.ca.

How to get involved

All feedback is welcome. Advice and support are available on request from Jane Cockcroft at the Ashmolean Museum, together with other case studies. There is still enormous scope for further exploration and research; for example, individual IE tools could be the focus of investigation.

Please send any ‘Think of the Possible’ inspired questions, ideas, comments or case studies (so these can be collated and shared) to:

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✓ @cockcroft_jane

It would be helpful to know about:

✓ Your experience of using the Framework: what worked, what didn’t?
✓ Audience impact: evidence that demonstrates learning via imaginative and emotional engagement

You may also like to join CIRCE’s Facebook discussion page and contribute to the dialogue about the role of the imagination in museums and heritage settings. Please visit www.circesfu.ca/2019/01/10/webinar-ie-learning-in-museums-cultural-contexts and request to join the closed group on Facebook. Please mention ‘Think of the Possible’.