



■ Children sleeping in a Viking house



■ Life in the Viking village

Learning through experience

A study of visitors' experiences and learning at Foteviken archaeological open air museum

This is a thesis based on visitors' experiences and learning in order to gain insights into the correspondences between museum goals and what the audience gains from visiting an archaeological open air museum.

■ Ane Riis SVENDSEN
(DK)

Introduction

As a graduate student – and now Master of Arts (Education) Programme in Educational Theory and Curriculum Studies: Material Culture – I have followed the *LiveARCH* project since the autumn of 2007. My focus of attention has been on the didactics (see below for a discussion of the different meanings of this term) of material culture as it comes into play in archaeological open air museums. Specifically, the museum at Foteviken formed the basis for a case study used in my final thesis at the Danish School of Education (DPU), University of Aarhus. At the workshop, “*Didaktik for Children and Adults*” (at the seminar “*Quality and sustainability*” in Sweden), we facilitated a discussion, among participants from various museums, regarding

different didactical and methodological approaches to the dissemination of knowledge at different museums. This workshop, in combination with my own observations (among these participant observation) and interviews with visitors at Foteviken, formed the empirical basis of my thesis.

My aim was to investigate what motivated the audience to visit an archaeological open air museum – to explore what they experience, and what they learn by visiting this particular type of museum. What do visitors expect and what do they actually get – in their own opinion – from visiting Foteviken? In addition, I wanted to analyze how well these statements correlated with any pre-defined goals of the museum. Simply put, do the various strategies, methods and practices applied at Foteviken Museum actually obtain the intended results?

In the thesis, the *LiveARCH* project is used as a discursive framework in order to identify any similarities and/or discrepancies between the themes and discussions taking place within the *LiveARCH* framework and the expectations and experiences brought up by actual visitors during interviews.

In order to obtain an in-depth view into the experiences and learning of visitors, my choice of methodological approaches draws strongly on qualitative methods of research. I used interviews in order to gain first-hand impressions of the visitors' own perceptions, experiences and stated preferences, while I used observations (of both verbal and non-verbal actions) in order to – with all the relevant uncertainties of the chosen methodology in mind – “verify” the accuracy of my interviews.

The thesis and its results

Below I have included the abstract from my thesis, followed by elaborations on certain aspects. (Even though some repetitions may occur, I believe including my abstract is a good way to let readers know the actual wording of the thesis):

Experiences and learning are keywords in a knowledge society in which life-long learning has become a credo, and where consumption and culture walk hand-in-hand in an ever-growing ‘experience’ economy. Contemporary museums, therefore, find themselves challenged by a wide variety of competing attractions, many

of which successfully utilize experience as a strategic tool. As a consequence, museums of today are caught between, on one hand, the need to cater for an experience oriented audience, while, on the other hand, meeting their obligations as cultural torchbearers.

This (potentially) forms a divide between creating experiences and actually passing on knowledge – the act of teaching/learning. This divide is exactly what Foteviken, the object of my research, is trying to bridge. In these so-called archaeological open-air museums, the past is displayed in full-scale – meaning in life-size reconstructions of, for example, an ancient village, based on interpretations of archaeological findings and other historical sources. Since visitors can move freely throughout the village – i.e. can go *inside* as well as *among* the houses – they are effectively taken on a journey in time where all senses come in to play. Hence, it is one of my claims in this thesis that this particular type of museum is fairly well-prepared for the competition mentioned above.

Nevertheless, the question is posed as to how the *LiveARCH* museums carry

out the dissemination of knowledge in a way that allows for both the creation of experiences as well as maintain their cultural-political legitimacy? How well do actual visitor-experiences correspond to the agreed goals of the museums? And last, but not least, what improvements might be made in the future? Guided by a social constructivist framework, and utilizing qualitative methods of research, i.e. interviews with groups of visitors and participant observations, these are the questions I have sought to answer in this thesis.

My analysis of statements by interviewees at Foteviken has shown great variation in both the learning that has occurred and the type of experiences visitors have had. Regarding the latter, the experiences range from immediate, aesthetic sensory impacts to experiences with identity-enhancing potential. Regarding the learning aspect, data shows both cases of purely “assimilative learning”, where new knowledge is sought and fitted in with existing knowledge, and so-called “accommodative learning”, where cognitive frames must be re-ordered. A common denominator for all respondents, though, is the fact that they want to engage in social learning, i.e. learning that takes place in a relationship with surroundings and other people.

As a result of my exploration of the above mentioned, and contrary to my point of departure, it is my claim that to capture both the notion of learning and that of experience, as these take place at Foteviken, it is necessary to view the two as one inseparable term, since what characterizes learning at Foteviken is exactly that it is experience-oriented. As a result, I have invented the hopefully useful term “experience-learning” (i.e. “oplevelsesl ring” in Danish which carry slightly different connotations in order to capture this type of learning. Below, I will look further into this concept.

Experience Learning

Experience Learning captures the kind of learning through experience that takes place at Foteviken museum. It constitutes, in my view, a comprehensive frame through which to analyze visitor experience. Thus, the concept includes both a learning perspective to capture the internal adaptation of knowledge in the learning process, as well as the various driving forces (emotions) associated with the process. It focuses on the interaction that takes place in the meet-

house at first generated rather mixed feelings among the children (and parents, lest we forget). Eventually, though, this particular part of their visit made the strongest impression overall. This was the case because their personal boundaries were challenged – and they survived! The experience further gave room for reflections by the students (or pupils given their young age) on their own lives compared to that of the Vikings – that is to say on their own role in the historical line of past, present, and maybe even future.



■ Hides being tanned at Foteviken

ing between my respondents and the museum. At the same time, the concept also contains the perspective of experience, with its focus on the sensory aspect of the visit and the ‘physical’ memory. In this perspective the physical experience plays a facilitating role in the learning process.

As an example of experience learning, I will briefly mention one instance from my study. I followed for a couple of days a Swedish school-class whose accommodation in a Viking

I believe this example illustrates the importance of focusing on the experience, of organizing the experience, and facilitating different aspects of an experience, in order for learning to take place.

What did they learn?

The content of this learning experience, unfortunately, cannot be measured or weighed, but must be seen in an educational perspective. The type of learning the school-class experienced may be called

general education. Thus, students expressed that they had gained knowledge about both themselves as individuals, as part of a collective, and about their surroundings. That is to say, they have gained an enhanced consciousness of history. The experience learning that the respondents claim to have experienced during their visit must be seen in an educational perspective. In my interviews, the respondents thus express that they use experience learning in the development of their own identity. They do this by linking their experiences and newly-gained knowledge at Foteviken to their own life-world.

As a note, I would like to add, in regards to the sustainability of fact-oriented historical knowledge in the memories of the respondents (which is a central part, after all, of visiting Foteviken), it lies outside the scope of my thesis to draw conclusions. To obtain that kind of data, one would have to re-visit the same people after their departure from the museum for more interviews – possibly on several occasions with certain time intervals.

What Foteviken does well – and where improvements might be made

In my analysis, I used three themes as points of departure. I focused on “time travelling”, on the possibility of self-identification, and on distancing one self. In the following, I will briefly elaborate and conclude on these concepts.

The Time Travel

It is one of Fotevikens main objectives to take the visitors on a journey through time and I found it most interesting to see whether they succeeded. “Time-travelling”, in this particular sense, can have an external dimension in which you, in the present, move in the physical space of the past



■ A real Viking (left) and the entrance of the Viking village (right), the starting point of the experience

– e.g. the narrow streets and full-scale houses at Foteviken. But time-travelling also has an internal dimension through the use of one's imagination to “experience” the past.

My study indicates that Foteviken is able to activate both the internal and external dimensions related to time-travelling. My informants exemplify this as they state that moving through the reconstructed historical settings, in combination with the stories and historical knowledge passed on by the staff at Foteviken, caused them to “travel” back in history. When activating both the inner and outer aspects of travelling through time, the opportunity of visitors to actually “live” what they experience is greatly increased.

It appeared that children especially achieved this kind of experience, and quite a lot is done at Foteviken to facilitate both of the aforementioned aspects of journeying through time. With regard to tourists, the museum might consider doing even more to make sure that the visitors play an active role during their stay.

In this regard, my study indicates that the didactic reflections by visitors on their own role in the learning process are very important, and that this applies for children as well as adults.

First and third person interpretation

The staff at Foteviken guides the audience using both first and third person dissemination. The first person disseminator takes the audience on the aforementioned journey in time. With this particular mode of passing on knowledge the guide can effectively catch the interest of the visitors. Simply put, good stories get visitors to “live” their experiences and enable them to draw parallels – that is, to identify similarities and differences – between life as it was lived in a Viking village like Foteviken and their own everyday life. At the same time, each guide can also step back from the historical role playing and instead take on the part as a more “informative” or “neutral” third person disseminator. In this way, the visit becomes more than “just” an elaborate play because it thereby becomes a professional historical dissemination embedded in archaeological and historical academic traditions.

The role playing (first person dissemination) that I observed in my study proved to be quite successful in activating the visitor's personal journey through time. The fascinating tales from the rough life of a real Viking makes it easy for visitors to familiarize themselves with everyday life of the Vikings.

The possibility of interchange between the two modes of dissemination provides the tour guide with the opportunity to tailor the tours to match the (perceived, at least) characteristics of different groups. A group of younger school children may need more good stories, while other visitors' expectations might be met better by a more traditional fact-based approach.

However, it is important to keep a clear division between the two types of dissemination. My study shows both children and adults expressed doubts as to when a real Viking stood before them, when role playing was employed and when they are presented with factual knowledge. In my view, it is not conducive to the goal of learning when visitors are left confused between facts and fiction.

Identification, Distancing & Dialogue

An additional advantage of shifting between first and third person dissemination is the possibility for each tour guide to facilitate the visitors' *identification* with their experiences at Foteviken. Identification is important in order for the visitors to acknowledge the relevance of their visit – to feel the visit is worth their while (and money). Identification takes place, for example, when the

disseminator is able to connect the experiences at Foteviken to the everyday experiences of school children by showing the differences between children's lives now and then.

At the same time, it is necessary to leave room for *distancing* – meaning to ensure some distance between the visitors and what they experience at the museum. The visitors should not be left in doubt that what they experience at an open-air museum is neither the “real” present nor “real” past. Rather it is an interpretation of the past in the present. As an example from my study of this confusion are my interviewees from England who displayed some disappointment when they discovered that the Vikings at Foteviken did not in fact descend from real Viking lineage, and that they were actually paid to be there.

The visitors in my study express that they look for points of identification with their everyday life in what they experience at Foteviken. A Danish couple thus explained that they use their perception of the Viking lifestyle as an image of “the good life”, and that they are inspired in their everyday life by this particular way of living.

Finally, it became clear during my study that the most important factor in the process of passing on knowledge is the

living dialogue between the museum disseminator and the audience. Without exception, my interviewees point to the dialogue with the Vikings at Foteviken as the most memorable part of their visit.

Didactics (and Didaktik)

The subject of didactics is concerned with the nature (purpose, goal, substance etc.) of education and learning processes. It deals with questions of *how* teaching is carried out and, in this instance, *how* dissemination is planned and executed at archaeological open-air museums. During my study at Foteviken, and my work with the *LiveARCH* project in general, it became clear how important it is to acknowledge the different meanings and connotations that different pedagogic traditions apply to the term “didactics”. These country-/region-specific differences mirror, of course, the different ways in which one museum carries out dissemination compared to another. Therefore, it is not particularly fruitful to apply a set of uniform standards to be followed by all the *LiveARCH* museums. What facilitates learning when dealing with Scottish students does not necessarily generate the same outcome when applied to Swedish students, and vice versa.

In Denmark, the study of didactics (“didaktik”, to be more precise) is related to the continental European pedagogic tradition. It has a special significance in the German language area and in Scandinavia. Thus, even though it deals with teaching/learning and its written basis is like the Anglo-American concept of curriculum (“lehrplan” and “curriculum”, respectively), the concept of “didaktik” refers to a particular pedagogic tradition.

Research in the tradition of didaktik is distinctive in that it is analytically reflective, philosophically interpretive and

critical. In this tradition, the teacher (or the disseminator or guide when referring to a museum) is expected to be able to take part in discussions about the educational aims and contents, and to contribute to the development of the educational “toolbox”. Grounded in this tradition, I recommend that the individual disseminator/museum guide take part in all three facets of the process of didaktik/didactics (planning, actual dissemination, and evaluation). Preferably, the disseminator should also be aware of the pedagogic tools and psychological processes involved in experiencing and learning.



■ The village tower, a good place to get a view of the village

In this article, I have briefly presented the general didactical contemplations and pedagogical and psychological perspectives of my final thesis. It is my hope that this will be taken as constructive input into the general didactical discussion of how dissemination is carried out at individual museums, as well as inspires the exchange of experiences and ideas.

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Summary

Lernen durch Erfahrung – Eine Untersuchung zu den Besuchererlebnissen und zum Lernverhalten der Besucher im Archäologischen Freilichtmuseum von Foteviken

Es gibt eine mögliche Differenz zwischen dem Anbieten von Erlebnissen und der Vermittlung von Wissen. Eine Differenz, welche archäologische Freilichtmuseen mit Hilfe der originalmaßstäbigen Darstellung von Vergangenheit zu überbrücken versuchen. Dabei sollen die Besucher trotzdem auf eine alle Sinne ansprechende „Zeitreise“ mitgenommen werden. Das Prinzip des Lernens durch Erfahrung hilft den Besuchern ihre eigene Persönlichkeit zu entwickeln, indem ihre Erfahrungen und neuerworbenen Kenntnisse mit ihrer eigenen Lebenserfahrung verbunden werden.

L'apprentissage par la pratique - étude de l'expérience acquise par les visiteurs du musée- parc archéologique de Foteviken.

“Multiplier les expériences” et “transmettre des connaissances” ne répondent pas obligatoirement aux mêmes objectifs, mais les parcs archéologiques tentent de rassembler ces deux pratiques. En offrant une image concrète et tangible du passé tout en faisant appel à tous les sens des visiteurs, ils encouragent l'apprentissage actif et participatif. Cette approche joue sur la perception qu'ont les visiteurs de leur propre identité en établissant un lien entre les savoirs et savoir-faire acquis dans le parc et leur vie quotidienne.

■ Ane Riis studied for MA in Educational Theory and Curriculum Studies: Material Culture, at the Danish School of Education, University Aarhus. She works at the Educational Department of the Workers Museum and the Copenhagen Fortresses.