

Can Leisure Studies enlighten the development of cultural audiences?

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the article is to enlighten cultural policies for audience development by introducing an innovative approach from leisure studies that focus the attention on the leisure cultural experience of the citizen. The article begins with an approach to culture as valuable leisure experience and overviews the main features of the cultural experience from the point of view of Leisure Studies. Next, it approaches the reality of audience development, trying to apply in that certain area of management the theoretical concepts identified before. Finally, it concludes with a series of reflections oriented to the implementation of this new approach.

Keywords:

Development of cultural audiences
Access to culture
Cultural experience
Leisure

Introduction

Access to culture and wider participation in culture remain as a challenge across Europe¹. Available data and statistics regarding access to culture and cultural participation show that a significant part of the citizenship still does not participate in conventional cultural activities such as going to cinema or reading books² - the rates of participation are inferior in other sort of activities such as visiting museums and in population with lower income and education profile.

Cultural participation has not only been recognized as a human right, but also as a factor for social and personal development, fostering creativity and well-being among people. The importance of achieving a better and fairer distribution of opportunities to take part in culture life has been remarked by a set of Council conclusions in relation to: intercultural competences (2008); access to culture within 2010 Council conclusions on the role of culture in combating poverty and social exclusion; and cultural and creative competences (2011).

European cultural policies have been focused on improving the conditions of supply - many efforts, attention and resources on the supply of artistic and cultural production have been invested to identify and remove both physical and financial barriers in order to facilitate participation. Nowadays, institutions focus their attention in a wide range of policies, programmes and actions to foster wider participation in terms of creation of a demand or audience development where education is regarded as a key element³.

In the following pages we intend to enlighten cultural policies for audience development by introducing an innovative approach from a leisure studies perspective that focuses the attention on the leisure cultural experience of the citizen. This approach will enable a two-fold strategy – supply and demand - since it considers both subjective – motivations, benefits, values, etc. - and objective – time, space, resources, etc- issues that meet with the *Arts Council England* concept of 'audience development', which includes aspects of programming, commissioning, promotion, pricing, education, audience engagement and customer relationship management⁴.

The article begins with an approach to culture as a valuable leisure experience and overviews the main features of the cultural experience from the point of view of Leisure Studies. Next, it approaches the reality of audience development, trying to apply in that certain area of management the theoretical concepts identified before. Finally, it concludes with a series of reflections oriented to the implementation of this new approach.

Culture as a valuable leisure experience

Visiting a museum, listening to a concert or attending a theatrical performance are examples of different cultural activities that usually are part of the cultural offer of a city and that are available for all citizens for their pleasure and participation. However, a certain activity, such as visiting an exhibition in a gallery, can be perceived as a valuable leisure experience by some people whereas it is not by some other. Which features define the valuable cultural experience? To answer to that question, we will deal with those different involved elements: leisure, experience, valuable and cultural.

The perception and the concept of leisure have changed significantly through time. Thus, in traditional society, only the upper social classes, not involved in the world of work, seemed to have the right to leisure. For the rest of the population, who belonged fundamentally to an agrarian society, leisure was synonymous with idleness, a word with an evident negative meaning. With the advent of industrialization, the main functions attributed to leisure are those of rest and reward for work (Franklin, 1964). As early as the second half of the XX century, there's a broad consensus on Leisure Studies about the need of leisure in human existence and an area of personal development is searched in leisure (Dumazedier, 1964; Sue, 1980; Kleiber, 1999; Cuenca, 2000).

The concept of leisure that guides the Institut of Leisure Studies at the University of Deusto is based on three main pillars: freedom, autotelism and satisfaction. In other words, "Living leisure means being aware of the «non-compulsory» feature and the non utilitarian-purpose of an extern or intern action, having chosen that action according to the personal satisfaction that it provides" (Cuenca, 2011: 60-61).

Now we add the word experience to the concept of leisure. In that sense, our first reflexion refers to the subjective and personal feature of it, considering that it will be unique depending on the protagonist, or even, on the moment of time when the person lives the experience. Related to the temporary aspect, another characteristic element is the processual feature of the leisure experience, which is not limited by the moment when the cultural activity is taking place, but must be also born in mind the previous time (of preparation and setting up of expectations) and later time (of recalling and assimilation) (Cuenca and Goytia, 2012). In addition, related to its nature, the leisure experience is multidimensional. Thus, authors such as Kelly (1987) or Tinsley and Tinsley (1986) have proved that leisure is lived through a wide range of experiences.

¹ European Agenda of Culture (2007); The Council Work Plan on Culture 2011-2014, Priority A: Cultural diversity, intercultural dialogue and accessible and inclusive culture.

² European Union, (2011). Cultural Statistics, Eurostat Pocketbooks. Luxembourg: Publications Office of the European Union.

³ European Union, European Union Open Method of Coordination (2012). Policies and good practices in the public arts and in cultural institutions to promote better access to and wider participation in culture. Report produced by the Working Group of EU Member States Experts (Open Method of Coordination) on better access and wider participation in culture, October 2012. Brussels: European Union

⁴ European Expert Network on Culture (2012), Audience building and the future. Creative Europe Programme, Anne Bamford and Michael Wimmer EENC Short Report, January 2012

“WHILE CREATION DEALS WITH EXPRESSING
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DISCOVERING IT. [...] THE RECEPTION OF ART
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ACTIVE LOOK AND A CREATIVE EFFORT.”

According to Cuenca (2000), the leisure experience appears in five dimensions: ludic, creative, festive, environmental-ecologic and with solidarity. And, in addition to the previous statements, according to Csikszentmihalyi (1998, 2008), we defend that the experience can reach to be optimal, in a sense of being a producer of self development and psychological growth, as long as the challenges set up by the individual (spectator, visitor, etc.) and her/his own skills are balanced.

Finally, the cultural element places us mainly on the creative dimension of leisure, whose more determining features are personal development, which implies the training and the process of improvement, and self actualization, which becomes true when the set up objectives or challenges are reached. This features can appear through two different processes: the creation or the re-creation (Cuenca, 2000). The creative aspect, maybe the most evident of the two, focuses on the creative process that ends in an artwork. The re-creative aspect is the inner process of the individual that contemplates the artwork and that revives the process of the creation. While creation deals with expressing something, re-creation deals with discovering it.

As it is explained by Amigo (2000), from different disciplines such as arts or aesthetics, the reception of art is considered creativity, considering that this receptive process requires an active look and a creative effort. One of the most important authors that has dealt with the participation of the receptor is Umberto Eco (1979)⁵, who as early as 1961 published *The Open Work*. The concept of the open work is based on the several interpretations that a work can have, depending on the cultural and emotional load of the spectator. Along the same lines, López Quintás (2005) has defended for many years that the active reception is creative and Dewey (1949) points that receptivity doesn't mean passivity. According to this

last author, the aesthetic experience goes through two different phases: the first, a passive one, and the second, a creative one. In the first phase we need to immerse ourselves in the artwork and collect the different details that are physically dispersed in it. Once the aforementioned is done, we will be in situation to create our own experience, extracting the elements of the artwork that are really significant, that is to say, carrying out an act of abstraction. In order to be able to abstract the essence of the artwork, the spectator undertakes a process of organizing the elements that is similar to the process undertaken by the creator. According to Dewey, who remains in the passive phase, will not be able to perceive the whole.

However, in order to achieve that sentiment of self actualization and psychological growth, we have pointed out before that Csikszentmihalyi (1998) defended the balance between challenges and skills. Thus, when challenges are so high that they exceed one's skills a state of anxiety occurs and the opposite situation leads to boredom. Only a balanced situation between boredom and anxiety can guide us to optimal experiences. This situation of balance will be ephemeral and, in order to avoid boredom, each individual must enhance the complexity of the activity through developing new skills and setting up new challenges. In that process, the training, understood in the widest sense, is essential.

Application of the theoretical reflections in the development process of cultural audiences

The development strategies of cultural audiences are complex and concern several areas of the organization, intermingling educational, marketing and artistic processes, amongst other. In this complex

⁵ The work cited here corresponds to the spanish translation of 1979.

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context, leisure theory provides a link between different disciplines, laying fundamental pillars, and a common philosophy for the organization. The deep knowledge of the basis of leisure experience can simplify decision making and address it to those decisions that facilitate the experience to occur. Precisely, this is our first reflection. Organizations, given that they cannot be put in the place of the subject that lives the experience, cannot guarantee the experience to occur. However, they can favor the possibility conditions of it, bearing in mind the features of the valuable cultural leisure experience.

We aforementioned that the pillars of every leisure experience are three: the freedom of choice, the non-utilitarian purpose and the satisfaction of the individual. From the point of view of cultural organizations, it is difficult to intervene in any of those three aspects, which are subjective and personal. However, amongst them, the easiest one to handle may be the concept of freedom, a principle that collides with one of the most expanded practices in the cultural sector: The season ticket system. In the specific case of the performing arts, there are several studies that point out the decline of this formula. For example, Kotler and Scheff (2004:27), from the USA, attribute this trend to the fact that people act more and more spontaneously when choosing between several choices of entertainment, as well as people can be afraid of engaging in advance for a whole year and for specific dates, or for a series of shows programmed in advance. From the Leisure Studies we understand, also, that the season tickets that offer fixed titles can instill the sensation of low level of perceived freedom that can finally affect the quality of the experience. No wonder we are detecting an increased proliferation of open-choice season tickets.

Another intrinsic feature of the leisure experience is its processual feature. How can we apply this idea to the development process of audiences? Fundamentally, searching for activities or resources that facilitate the preparation of the experience (previous phase) and its assimilation (later

phase). We can find a good example in La Monnaie theatre of Brussels. This organization has a program called “A Night at the Opera”, whose aim is to bring the opera closer to young people under 26 years of age. Thus, the experience does not only consist of offering cheaper tickets for the staging of the opera, but on the same day, the experience has different phases. In the first place, they welcome the group of young men and women who are given an original speech as introduction to the opera work, along with a little snack. Then, the group attends the staging and after that, they participate in a lecture with an artist of the production (usually a singer who has played a leading role) and a hot artist of the moment with whom the young people can identify themselves. In this case, the experience is temporally limited to just one day, but it is extraordinarily well prepared and it is more than probable that the participants will leave the theatre with an indelible memory of the experience.

Following with the reasoning, we will deal now with the issue of multidimensionality. In the case of culture, the predominant dimension is the creative, but not the only one. For example, when visiting a museum, the most important part of the experience is the exhibition and what it transmits, what we perceive, etc. But, the museum itself can also be important as the place where the exhibition takes place (environmental-ecological dimension) or the people with whom we share the experience and its community feature. The combination of different dimensions can broaden new horizons at the time of defining more complex new products oriented to new publics. In that sense, the Guggenheim museum has undertaken in Bilbao and New York an initiative called “Art after dark”, an event that consists of a night visit to the exhibition of the moment but in a festive atmosphere (music, bar, etc.). The museum is transformed and something magic occurs, in a way that space, party and creativity twine together creating a unique experience.

We can not finish this reflection without dealing with the issue of balance between the challenges set

up to the person that has the experience and her/his own skills. When challenges are too high a state of anxiety can occur, while the opposite case can lead to boredom. Training plays an essential role in this process, so that the publics we are addressing to would go gradually increasing their skills of perception and reach deeper and richer experiences.

The tools that organizations have to facilitate the preparation of a cultural leisure experience are several and very diverse. On the other hand, depending on the public segment some will be more suitable than others. Thus, for example, if we are addressing to children, the programs carried out in collaboration with educational centres can be very appropriate.

However, currently, and mainly thinking of adults, the Internet shows to be, more and more, a tool with great potential. In an emergent society as ours, time is a highly considered value that we try to gain at all times, doing, for example, several tasks at the same time, trying to obtain more intense emotions and transforming dead time in leisure time. The new mobile devices have contributed to it. It is more and more usual to find people in the underground or in a waiting room listening to music, checking the email or watching a film. Igarza (2009) refers to those short periods of time as "leisure's bubbles" and states that they occur anytime or anywhere, even at work. Taking that into account, digital audiovisual contents that are adapted to those short periods of time are, nowadays, very suitable for the preparation of a cultural leisure experience.

Conclusion

In these current times, when the cultural sector is suffering from cuts in public subsidies and tax raising, audience development acquires special relevance and needs new looks. From the Institute of Leisure Studies at the University of Deusto, we are convinced that the moment to go back to the essence, to the basis of cultural leisure experience, has come. It is here, going back to the beginning, where we resort to schools of thought that come from leisure theory and we wonder about the features of cultural leisure experience and about its involvement in the area of management.

An important conclusion is that the cultural leisure experience is part of a creative and re-creative process through which a transformation of the individual and a personal development are produced to a greater or lesser extent. In that process, the training, understood in the widest sense, is very important. That is why we think that organizations should help their publics, facilitating the preparation of the experience and its assimilation, always bearing in mind the issue of the difficult balance between the challenges and skills that we aforementioned.

Finally, we believe that it is necessary to promote training in leisure for cultural managers, in order to become this approach real. That would

enable culture to be comprehended as valuable leisure experience. Thus, programs aimed to facilitate richer and fuller leisure experiences for the public could be favored.

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