

Dialogue

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Introduction

The following piece derives from the collaboration of four SAWA Museum Academy participants working on the Glossary Project 2021. The project aims to define or redefine certain museum terms in the museum context. The term selected by our group is “Dialogue”.

We, that is Huda Bakhit Alteneiji (Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization - SMA), Khawla Aqeel Alawadhi (Sharjah Museums Authority), Fadhel Al Ali (Sharjah Calligraphy Museum - SMA) and Steffen Backhaus (Institut für Museumsforschung - SMB/PK), exchanged ideas about the term 'Dialogue' in the museum context as well as our personal perception. From this we developed the idea of formulating our entry to the SAWA Glossary Project as an exchange of letters - a form of dialogue that is slowly being forgotten.

Together we got into talks and collected ideas for the scenario of our story. Our goal was to incorporate real experiences from our work and share them with you in the form of personal heartfelt letters. In teams of two, we first wrote one letter hypothetically written by a young museum professional addressed to their friend who is more experienced in the field seeking advice and expressing their concerns and short experience in the museum.

We wish you much pleasure in reading and letting your thoughts wander. May you have your very own way of connecting to our stories and experience the power of dialogue with us.

Dear Dallas,

Have you ever been so engrossed by a conversation between individuals, where the language although unfamiliar to the topic and the sound patterns of letting the tip of tongue click against the top of teeth, the gentle and rough waves of words which been formed created a deep understanding for you, and therefore have felt like you are attracted to joining that conversation. If language is the basis of what we are doing then the way we speak, the conversation, the exchange of words between individuals is what we know as dialogue?

To reply to that question let me start by saying I never thought that working in the museum would give me this opportunity to learn about individuals and gaining a perspective to the worlds of others, the person you are talking to connects with you based on different views but the joy of that connection has formed something special in your heart. Changing the conversation from just answering the question into a two-hour dialogue where there are questions and answers from both sides and trying to adapt to the cultural barrier between two individuals is a fascinating process.

I remember one of these dialogues it was a year before the pandemic and I was just checking some Manuscripts in one of the Galleries, a group passed by me while I was checking the Manuscripts but one woman within the group stayed, a moment after I just closed the showcase that woman approached me and asked “it must be fascinating to hold in your hand a handwritten manuscript of the past, is it not ?” which I replied “ You know I never thought of it this way until you mention it” “what are you holding?” she then asked “Tafsir Al-Baydawi, it a Quranic interpretational work by a Muslim scholar called Al-Baydawi” we kept talking back and forth. She told me about the different manuscripts that she had seen and what she knew about them, in return I shared with her the different manuscripts we also had, but that were not in the Museum. We talked about those heritage items and other historical records. Somehow the dialogue between us kept going back and forth for two hours. I got to learn about the making of manuscripts, about bifolium (one sheet of folded sheet) and folio (half sheets). This is just one example of what I had experienced in what we call dialogue in museums.

Dialogue is unique when it occurs between people. I mean, even animals can have some kind of dialogue with one another, but humanity evolved what dialogue is. In my perspective, when a particular topic is being discussed, based on the resulting dialogue, a wide range of transformations would follow. Going through what kind of dialogue I had with different individuals, the point is not to inform people who we are conversing with but rather the exchange of information which takes place. It’s the same way when bees tell their companions where the

source of honey is, it is all about information exchange. However, the process is more potent when people are exchanging information. It's about the development of the traded information.

There was another dialogue that came to mind when a European woman visited the museum. She was very interested in reading all the details. When she was on tour she said "I was very curious about how Allah forgives all sins after doing the Hajj pilgrimage." so I told her this: "It was narrated that Abu Hurairah said: "The Messenger of Allah said: 'Whoever performs pilgrimage to this House, and does not Yarfuth (utter any obscenity or commit sin), will go back as (on the day) his mother bore him.'"(sahih)". She was so stunned and wanted to know another way to get rid of sin. So I told her that little things can do away with sin, like removing waste from the street. The steps you take to get to the mosque in one step give you remuneration step two cleanse a sin and back and forth. It was a little dialogue, but after almost a year when I saw her again she was wearing a scarf and she told me to call her by her Arabic name after our conversion. I think at that moment I recognized the importance of dialogue as a counterforce to the museum and the great role it transfers to our public and our visitors. Although the conversation started from religion, it was the main interest between us.

To me who has been working in the museum for less than you can understand that Dialogue is the verbal exchange of speech between two or more persons, and it is also known as "conversation". In Arabic there is what is called the art of dialogue, it is a necessary skill to overcome many of the issues that face us in life; as it can expand the social circle,

facilitate the start of various businesses, and advance in working life. For me the meaning of dialogue is more than a conversation, the idea of what dialogue is not formed until we connect through our conversation, for example, I can say the history of mine and then you mention your history but when we find a common ground a connection between our histories and discuss it fully then the dialogue happens. For we as individuals crave the sense of belonging and to have a better understanding of each other.

Working in Sharjah museum of Islamic Civilization has made me more aware of the Intercultural dialogue and the ability to connect with our visitors as I mention the two dialogue with the visitors have made me more open and respectful to the exchange or interaction between people with different cultural backgrounds or world views. Where the result of it is creating and developing a deeper understanding of diverse perspectives, you find yourself investing in increasing your involvement in sharing knowledge.

So, my dear friend, can you enlighten me? For you have been working in the field of museums for many years. Can you answer my questions, what is the difference between a conversation and a dialogue for you? Does having a dialogue with the visitors need to happen more often in museums or just informing and listening to people's opinions is the way to go? What is our role as a museum to encourage and spark such dialogues?

With sincerity,

Your friend Sara

Dear Sara,

I'm very happy to hear from you. During this difficult time, I sincerely hope that you and your loved ones are safe and well. Also, congratulations on your new job! May it be as stimulating and inspiring as you once hoped it would be.

My friend, I'm happy to hear that you are enjoying your new job at the Sharjah Museum of Islamic Civilization. The opportunity to meet and greet new people every day; people from different places, backgrounds, and beliefs, is very insightful.

I miss it. Can you believe it's been 8 years already since I left work? Although hectic, being the Curator of an Art Museum was like a dream come true for me. I remember how thrilled I was whenever we would receive a new shipment of collection. The joy and privilege I felt to be able to wander every single day in the colorful and rich museum galleries was indescribable. I remember the adrenaline rushing before every single opening, regardless of how "ready" I thought we were, and how excited I was to welcome artists, curators and guests from different places of the world.

I'm sure the way things are done has changed now; especially with the help of modern technology and the ease of communication nowadays. People's priorities have changed too, don't you think? Today, we are more and more concerned with optimizing ourselves. Young and old are looking for spiritual enrichment that we once gained through close personal interactions and social networks for us seem to be able to satisfy this hunger. In our new world only the fastest, bravest and most

creative will succeed, we are told. Holding on is mortal, reinventing oneself is the solution. That might be true for institutions but it is fatal for us as individuals. What at first looks like a vital and uncluttered attitude to life is being used to sell us things. Less and less do we buy a bare product. We buy the idea that comes with it. We buy the feeling and the hope of becoming a new person with a new possession.

What really has the power to make us a new person is an upright and honest dialogue with others and, above all, our own willingness to enter into such. Dialogue can lead us to see our lives in a different light and readjust our course. In our social media-driven world, however, it has become difficult to admit when we have taken the wrong course and when we have made mistakes. What does that do to us? To our way of relating, talking, listening and learning from each other?

The story you shared with me, my friend, is inspiring. I can only imagine the thrill you must feel to know that a simply genuine and unplanned exchange of thoughts between you and a complete stranger has totally changed her life. The power of words and dialogues I think is very underestimated.

So what is the difference between a dialogue and a conversation you ask?

Let me start with the term's origin. Originally, the word Dialogue comes from the Greek word Dialogos. *Legein* means word or speech, and *dia* means through. Hence, a dialogue is essentially a composition of spoken or written words flowing through, for the purpose of exchanging a conversation, idea or thought between two or more people.

Unlike the storyline of a discussion where people engage to try to convince, or stick to and stand by their argument and beliefs, and essentially try to win, a dialogue happens when people start a discussion not for the sole purpose of trying to prove a point, or win an argument, but for the purpose of developing and sharing ideas, stories, and emotions. In a dialogue, people are tolerant, they listen wisely, try to understand and learn, they do not interrupt or rush or get furious, their aim is to achieve mutual understanding. In a dialogue, the heart is also engaged alongside the mind. Simply, a dialogue is genuine, spontaneous, safe, mature, and sincere.

Sometimes, it's hard to know what we're actually looking for. It is easy to get lost in the maze of voices that claim to know it for us. Dialogue can be a way out. Instead of loudly pretending to be able to show us the whole path, it enables us to look for it ourselves and follow it step by step. Yet in a world in which we (have to) increasingly avoid personal or physical contact and retreat to digital connectivity, it is difficult to establish a dialogue. One possible answer lies in spatial communication, where interlocutors do not have to be present at the same time, which is also the basis of museum communication.

You asked about the role of museums in encouraging dialogue. Think about it, generally, what sparks a dialogue between people? Numerous things. One of which is culture. Culture is one thing that may derive a dialogue between persons, as two or more people may join to talk about art, places, food, religion or traditions; these are some of the

aspects that define culture. And a place that houses many aspects of culture within its walls is the museum.

I feel that as museums, we can set a countersign to the personal disconnectivity that we face through the extensive use of digital media. We can create spaces where we show how it is done and invite people to spark dialogue with the person next to them. Some have already described the value of museums as agents of change and praised their powers in terms of building resilience in our society. But museums can also strengthen the individual. Initiating change in the one who is looking for change. In the one who is willing to listen. Museums can show what is not shown in shiny posts on social media. They can say what no one wants to hear. They can question themselves, confess their own stumbling and finally bring back the culture of admitting mistakes and learning from it. Bring it back into the midst of us, where it has been so painfully missing.

My dear friend, I hope this was helpful, and I hope that you now have a slightly better and improved understanding of the power of dialogue and how museums can play a role in that.

Yes, you will learn a lot from the experiences of others, but you will learn most of it on your own throughout your journey. I would be eager to hear more about that in your next communication, or perhaps when I visit you soon in Sharjah.

Yours truly,

Dallas