

Post-COVID Library: Educating Children to Media and Information Literacy through UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme

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Abstract:

The COVID-19 pandemic has severely disrupted children's education in schools, and reflects the urgent demands of children and their educators for diverse learning channels and materials. Memory institutions such as libraries, archives and museums, as repositories of reliable sources of information and knowledge service provider, have a responsibility to contribute to the cultural and media literacy education of children. Therefore, memory institutions should explore innovative ways to safeguard and utilize documentary collections in media and information literacy education for people and especially children, and share and promote good practices. These efforts will also inspire younger generations to participate in the preservation and transmission of historical records.

Keywords: *Documentary heritage, Media and information literacy, Global citizenship education, UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme.*

Children living in the digital age exchange news and knowledge with the external world at an unprecedented speed and volume. In a global context where disinformation circulates swiftly, and where information overload of even legitimate news can be challenging, the lack of literacy among youth in analysing information can lead to social polarization and conflict.

A statement issued jointly by UNICEF and UNESCO indicates that education for millions of children was still disrupted after 18 months since the COVID-19 outbreak started. As of July 2021, primary and secondary schools were closed in 19 countries, affecting over 156 million students (UNESCO, 2021b). The latest survey conducted in January 2022 shows that although the outbreak of the Omicron variant has not caused a serious impact on the re-

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opening of schools, more than 50% of teachers stated that students had not progressed to the levels expected (UNESCO, 2022). The consequences for children will be reflected in their academic achievement and societal engagement, as well as their physical and mental health.

Now more than ever, there is a need for educational resources that can help lead educators and learners towards the right sources of information, some of which can be found within the local community in libraries, museums, a place of worship, and even in one's own home.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has drastically reduced the attendance and maintenance funds of archives, libraries and museums, these organizations have remained highly trusted organizations. According to IMPACTS Experience (2017), which conducts the largest continuous survey of perceptions and behaviours concerning cultural organizations in the United States, more than 77.5% of respondents believed that museums are highly credible sources of information. These credibility perceptions for museums remained stable and increased during 2020, when most people were only able to engage with them online (IMPACTS Experience, 2020).

This exciting news encourages archives, libraries and museums to not only serve as repositories of reliable documentary records, but also provide collections and services to their audience, especially children in low-resource settings who do not have access to adequate learning tools, and the youngest children who are at key developmental stages.

What role should memory institutions play in children's education? Memory institutions are repositories of a country's documentary heritage, which refers to the recordings of information in a documentary form, such as written manuscript, photograph and artwork, audio-visual material and electronic document. UNESCO (2021a) considers that libraries, archives and museums are content providers that help build media and information literacy, which is an essential aid for children's history education, intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding. The knowledge children learn from documentary collections and historical stories helps reduce their learning loss and mental distress, and train to be more socially connected and ethically responsible global citizens.

Global Citizenship Education (GCED) among children can be a key factor in bridging local or international divide in how it explores global connections and challenges. One study following the application of GCED in the classroom in a region of historical and political conflict (Northern Ireland) conducted in 2012 revealed that pupils felt as "inhabitants of a global eco-system, for which they felt responsible and were willing to protect through individual behaviour and active engagement", and were "concerned about global inequality, and motivated actively to improve living conditions of others around the world" (Niens & Reilly, 2012, p. 114). Insofar as GCED addresses peace and human rights, intercultural understanding, respect for diversity and inclusivity, the polarizing effects of COVID-19 in terms of information and media literacy result in the role of GCED being more important than ever.

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Another key aspect to be considered by educators within library and archive institutions are the benefits of heritage education, which can contribute towards the safeguarding of heritage, including documentary. The link between heritage education and the safeguarding of heritage can most accurately be summarized through the following words by Freeman Tilden, written as early as 1967: “Through interpretation, understanding; through understanding, appreciation; through appreciation, protection” (Tilden, 1967, p. 38). Past youth programmes integrating heritage education using a place-based approach and involving youths documenting their local history themselves and learning how to preserve these records through archival methods have revealed positive outcomes, such as community-based heritage documentation subsequently used to produce educational materials and an exhibition (MacDowell & Kozma, 2007, p. 269). As repositories of documentary heritage, libraries can be used as community spaces that link children with their local community and the wider world using their materials and by engaging children in documenting their heritage through creative activities. In so doing, documenting and safeguarding documentary heritage can become a familiar practice among children, and help create a raised awareness on the value of documentary heritage altogether.

Understanding the value that GCED and heritage contribute towards education among children, and in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, UNESCO published the children’s book *Let’s Explore the Memory of the World*, an educational resource to promote universal access to the world’s invaluable cultural and documentary heritage. This book was produced under UNESCO’s Memory of the World Programme, which was created in 1992 with the aim to preserve archives and documents from aging, damage and loss. The Memory of the World International Register collects documentary heritage which has been recommended by the International Advisory Committee, and endorsed by the Director-General of UNESCO, as corresponding to the selection criteria regarding world significance and outstanding universal value (UNESCO Memory of the World Programme).

The book *Let’s Explore the Memory of the World* targets initially the primary school level. Following the written and illustrated descriptions as well as carefully compiled information and photographs, the book aims to take readers on a journey to learn about prominent documentary heritage collections from all over the world and UNESCO’s Memory of the World Programme. This includes a visually rich sequence of collections from the Asia-Pacific region and featuring some of the Memory of the World’s most popular international inscriptions. The three main characters depicted in the narrative make interesting discoveries and gradually collect their stories as part of their exploration, driven by their quest for wisdom, knowledge and peace.

Beyond this, the book highlights important themes embedded in documentary heritage such as languages, religions, geography, gender equality, mutual understanding and

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human rights among other issues. The last section includes creative exercises to encourage young readers in collecting and archiving documentary heritage, and explain the selection, preservation and access processes to safeguard their memories and create their stories.

To further discuss on how documentary heritage can be used as a uniquely effective educational resource for enhancing media and information literacy among youth, UNESCO organized a webinar in October 2021 with experts from 31 countries with teaching, archive management, and collection custodian backgrounds. The webinar proposed three key areas on promoting the educational and cultural values of documentary heritage, and calling for cooperation among the Member States, memory institutions and citizens.

Firstly, participants agreed that the COVID-19 pandemic highlights the universal value of the documentation of historical records, and the important role that memory institutions can play in responding to public health crises. In this connection, Kwibae Kim, Chair of Memory of the World Committee for Asia and the Pacific (MOWCAP), stated that documentary heritage serves to record accumulated experiences in a way to better understand environmental challenges or the social resolution of past conflicts for the benefit of future generations (UNESCO, 2021c).

In 2017, the Records of the Smallpox Eradication Programme of the World Health Organization was inscribed in the Memory of the World International Register. The records provide documentary record of the decisions and actions taken for the eradication of smallpox, a disease that had afflicted humanity for millennia. Visual materials and context are compiled from the scientific, socio-economic, political and cultural aspects, helping all responsible parties to determine the best course of action to prevent the spread of new diseases.

Libraries, archives and museums are repositories of various forms of memory and reliable sources of information. These institutions should be encouraged to collect and expand access to data and materials on health emergencies for researchers, policymakers, scientists and media professionals, and to provide their consultation and expertise when necessary. In particular, when disinformation and speculations about the pandemic are widely spread and the credibility of local governments and news media is questioned, cultural organizations need to take on the role of clarifying facts, popularizing science knowledge, pacifying the public and mobilizing community actions.

Secondly, public education is embedded in the mission of memory institutions. Documentary heritage should be promoted as an innovative tool for media and information literacy education, which develops critical thinking competencies and can contribute towards global citizenship and heritage education.

Documentary heritage can serve to complement the teaching of various subjects, among them history, arts, social studies, literacy, and indigenous communities. Author and illustrator of the book *Let's Explore the Memory of the World* Sali Sasaki suggests the book “to be an

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exploration of cultures, places and peoples”, and to “raise curiosity about the world” among not only young readers, but also across generations (UNESCO, 2021c). This book has been translated into Korean and Mongolian, and disseminated as learning material to the National Commission of Member States, custodians of documentary heritage, as well as the network of UNESCO Associated Schools in Asia and the Pacific. In addition, UNESCO has developed an e-course on how to incorporate Memory of the World in classrooms for teachers, which serves as an effective instrument in reaching school audiences and meeting the objectives of the Programme.

Beyond UNESCO’s activities, Jocelyn T. Guadelupe, Assistant Professor in Music Education, University of the Philippines, introduced how the Jose Maceda Collection of musical recordings at the university has been incorporated in local school curricula, and is currently being taught in an attempt to revive the nearly lost indigenous tradition of sounding the bamboo drum in times of imminent disaster. In France and the United Kingdom, Professor at the University of Saint Etienne Martin Porter uses various creative mediums, such as art, mime, theatre, and even a murder mystery game, to discuss universal human values and raise awareness among young learners of cultural challenges faced throughout history (UNESCO, 2021c).

Innovative initiatives for integrating documentary heritage into school curriculum and pedagogies continue to be offered but relatively scattered, so it is crucial to provide initiatives and platforms for educators and researchers around the world to share and scale-up these good practices.

Thirdly, the preservation and creation of documentary collections require public participation, especially active engagement with the younger generation. To achieve this goal, an important step for memory institutions is to explore their services and approaches to the audience in the digital environment.

During the uncertain time of limited attendance, many memory institutions have shown their resilience by organizing free online exhibitions, conducting online live discussions and interviews with archive management specialists, and effectively engaging citizens on social media. In response to the digital learning opportunities during school closures, they created education-based platforms and resources that are open to access online by children and their parents and teachers. These contents contribute to children's literacy education and to their appreciation of culture and diversity, thereby promoting peaceful coexistence.

Memory institutions should recognize that educational efforts should reach beyond learning about history and culture. Libraries, archives and museums are intended to raise public awareness of the significance of documentary heritage and its preservation, and to encourage more people to participate in recording and transmitting valuable documentary materials for future generations.

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Open access and content innovation require technical support and knowledge sharing. These can be strengthened through collaboration among memory institutions, UNESCO Memory of the World's network of national and regional committees, associations and research institutes on archives and libraries, and academia and media partners.

Document repositories from all over the world are suffering, to varying degrees, from conservative funding and shortage of skilled human resources in the current crisis. However, archives, government agencies, educational networks and international organizations in different countries may have successful local experiences in addressing these challenges. The institutional dialogues will facilitate the sharing of cost-effective methods and tools for safeguarding and accessing documentary heritage. Cross-sectoral and transnational networks should be established to enable collaborative actions on a larger scale.

“Understanding the past”, said Fackson Banda, Chief of Documentary Heritage Unit at UNESCO, holds the key to “facing the future with greater confidence” (UNESCO, 2021c). In the post-pandemic era, innovative approaches to preserving and accessing documentary heritage, involvement of documentary heritage in citizenship education and institutional collaboration are essential to effectively promote the sustainable development of memory institutions.

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