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Straddling discourses of transformation and status quo: the contradictions inherent in a museum youth panel addressing socio-ecological crises

Sophie Perry

Centre for Food Policy, City St. George's University, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper explores museum educator practice in relation to the exploration of socio-ecological issues through a museum facilitated youth panel. Using data from ethnographic program observations, pre- and post- program interviews with two educators who co-led the panel, the paper adopts a poststructural analysis in order to interpret the educators' plans for the program, alongside their reflections on enacting it. The analysis highlights the multiple discourses that are implicated in the educators' work, which both align with and challenge institutional status quo in relation to youth and their engagement with socio-ecological issues. As such, this paper raises important questions as to how museum-based, and non-formal education more widely, might best support transformation towards sustainable futures.

KEYWORDS

Non-formal education; transformative learning; socio-ecological crises; youth panel; poststructuralism; ethnographic; interviews

Introduction

Museums and their engagement programs have an important role to play in addressing the multiple socio-ecological crises that face societies today. Indeed, education at large is held aloft as "crucial" (UNESCO, 2023, 1st sentence) – a "key tool for tackling climate change" (DfE, 2021, p. 34), but formal education within the UK has been argued to reinforce, rather than remedy, dominant priorities such as neoliberalism (Ball & Collet-Sabé, 2022; Glackin & King, 2020), which are conducive to social injustice alongside climate and ecological breakdown (Hursh et al., 2015; Riedy, 2020; Stevenson, 2007). In contrast, non-formal education, which can take place across a range of institutions including museums (Eshach, 2007) is argued to offer "an alternative or complement to the limitations of formal education" (Batlle, 2019, p. 417). Further, Berg and colleagues (2021) suggest that out-of-school science learning, for example through natural history museums, has the potential to foster the competencies which are required to grapple with the socio-ecological dimensions of the climate crisis.

This research engages with this potential valuable contribution of museums by examining an advisory youth panel at a science and nature museum, in order to consider how

CONTACT Sophie Perry sophie.perry@citystgeorges.ac.uk

museum educators conceptualize and experience their engagement with young people around social and environmental issues. I present interview excerpts with the program educators and ethnographic program reflections, and interpret these with the benefit of a poststructuralist analytical lens (Barrett, 2005; Foucault, 1970). The data presented demonstrates that this program, and the educators who plan and enact it, can be characterized as presenting multiple competing discourses – some of which prioritize young people's engagement with socio-ecological issues, while others prioritize instrumental, short-term institutional outcomes.

The case presented highlights that educators who set out to challenge hierarchical relationships between, for example, museums and young people on the one hand, or people and nature on the other, can face unavoidable struggles in their realization of such aims. A poststructural understanding of these educators sees them as navigating multiple contradicting discourses, resulting in a program and practice that are also contradictory. I argue that these issues are not unique to this program, setting, or educators, but instead reflect the very real tensions of working for change in a cultural sector dominated by long held, arguably unjust, traditions. As such, I go on to suggest how this case study might offer direction for future research in response to a pressing need for scholarship and practice that reimagines the role of museums and education in response to socio-ecological crises (McGimpsey et al., 2023; McKenzie, 2020).

Socio-ecological crises, intergenerational injustice and the role of museums

I refer not to a singular climate crisis but rather to multiple socio-ecological cris*es*. The term "socio-ecological" acknowledges the inextricable links between cultural, political and social systems, and the natural world of which these systems are a part. This term challenges predominant narratives that separate humans from nature (Washington et al., 2021) and misleadingly encourage the possibility of insulating social wellbeing from planetary health. Meanwhile, I opt to use crisis in the plural to highlight our contemporary reality of multiple, concurrent crises that disrupt any sense of local or global equilibrium (Lawrence et al., 2024). These socio-ecological crises are happening now, and they comprise political instability and division, the pursuit of wars and land grabbing, food and energy crises, and the unsustainable and unjust use of so-called natural resources for profit, all whilst carbon emissions continue to rise, setting us up for catastrophic levels of global heating and food system collapse. As Lawrence and colleagues (2024, p. 4) set out, the entanglement of such crises "produce emergent harms that are different from, and usually greater than, the sum of the harms they would produce separately."

Young people are a broad and heterogenous group, comprised of infants, children and young adults, all of whom will inherit these worsening impacts of social injustice, climate change, and ecological breakdown, yet will have contributed far less to their creation than previous generations for whom the threats are more minimal (Han & Ahn, 2020; Sanson & Burke, 2020; Thew et al., 2020). What's more, young people have comparatively less power than their older counterparts with which to effect change in relation to these socio-ecological issues (Rousell & Cutter-Mackenzie-Knowles, 2020; Thew et al., 2020). In light of their limited influence but heightened exposure to socio-ecological risk, young people can be understood as marginalized (Bowman, 2020). The case study explored within

this research is based in the UK—a country which, due to its relative wealth and geography, faces less climate and ecological risk than, for example, nations in the Global South, or indeed poorer neighboring European countries. Yet, despite their relative position of privilege in comparison to peers in other countries, young people in the UK nevertheless experience intergenerational climate injustice. This injustice is not solely accounted for by the unequal distribution of climate risk between generations. Rather, Nancy Fraser's work argues that unjust distribution comes about due to a lack of *recognition* of group difference as well as societal structures that preclude equity of *participation* between different groups (Fraser, 2007; Schlosberg, 2004; Thew et al., 2020). In this way, both participation and recognition are crucial in addressing and reducing the inequality of environmental risk currently facing young people. Thus, to address intergenerational climate and environmental injustice, we must consider whether young people's unique position(s) of heightened risk are *recognised* and whether structures exist that enable them to *participate* meaningfully in public debate and action on such socio-ecological issues.

Museums and their practices offer unique opportunities to act alongside youth towards justice in relation to socio-ecological issues. Modest (2014) sets out that museums are increasingly in dialogue with their audiences, as practice has moved beyond the previous conceptualization of museums as a source of knowledge that audiences passively receive, and towards a recognition that museums and their curatorial staff can act to facilitate and "support … community members who decide on content, text, and other aspects of the exhibition" (Modest, 2014, p. 100). As they create spaces for community engagement, Morse and Munro (2018) describe the importance of the care that museums and their staff can offer to diverse audiences, through their programs and activity. In light of the role of the museum as a community-oriented space, institutions that explore issues of social justice, nature and planetary health have the potential to work *with* young people to address socio-ecological injustice, not only by recognizing the injustices facing youth in risk distribution, but also by forging pathways for youth to participate in change.

Indeed, museums have already begun to act in response to this public need to address climate and linked social issues. During the 2019 global climate strikes, the Museum für Naturkunde in Berlin worked alongside the youth movement *Fridays for Future* to design a programme, resulting in the museum opening its doors for free on strike days and hosting young activists to discuss the movement and their demands with visitors (Museum für Naturkunde, 2025). In the UK, McKenzie describes the development of a novel institution, Climate Museum UK, an eco-activist, participatory museum that does not have a permanent venue but seeks to support "participants to develop their own skills to engage creatively with others around the planetary emergency" (McKenzie, 2020, p. 680). In relation to the role of museums as a force for change, Fraser's definition of justice instructs us that we must consider first whether museums recognize young people's unique position in relation to climate and ecological breakdown, and second, whether museums develop ways in which youth can meaningfully participate in addressing and transforming socio-ecological realities.

Discourse, education and change

When considering the role of non-formal education in relation to socio-ecological issues, Schindel Dimick (2015, p. 397) sets out that "education that supports youth to develop as

environmental citizens must recognize and challenge dominant discourses." Discourses, understood in a Foucauldian sense, are "a shared way of apprehending the world," which "rest on assumptions, judgements and contentions" (Dryzek, 1997, p. 8). Dominant discourses create a shared understanding of what is "normal" and, in this way, become a form of "common sense" that shrink other possibilities of thinking and being (Hatzisavvidou, 2020). But as a collection of understandings, practices, and norms which simultaneously reify and communicate power, discourses are not neutral. Rather, the predominant discourses that operate within the bounds of modern society foster a commitment to economic growth above environmental care. Hursh and colleagues (2015) isolate the social ideology at the root of this prioritization of (economic) growth as neoliberalism, described by Schindel Dimick (2015, p. 390) as "such a pervasive and dominant way of thinking about our political and economic practices that it not only influences but also limits our commonsense understandings of the world and how we live in it." Neoliberalism is operationalized in many ways and thus goes beyond the bounds of a purely economic system. Its key premise, that prosperity emerges as a result of deregulation and competition, has leached into our very societal fabric and affects how we work, how our educational institutions run, how we prioritize time, who is important, and who is not. In a world where neoliberalism is our guiding star, education becomes a means to a very particular end - it serves not to support the development of critical citizens invested in a sustainable future, but rather to generate a collection of competing individuals concerned with their own earning potential, who will (in one form or another) become workers for profit-making businesses, regardless of whether these industries are remotely environmentally or socially considerate (Biesta, 2009; Pimlott-Wilson, 2017). In this context, it is clear that challenging dominant discourses, such as those of neoliberalism, is central to fostering a just future, as Schindel Dimick (2015) sets out.

Dominant discourses are understood in this research as powerful and hegemonic, contributing to a "logic of domination" (Warren, 1998), which Orr characterizes as being made up of "oppositional and mutually exclusive binarisms … that serve to organize … social patterns of domination" (Orr, 2002, p. 479). Such binaries and hierarchies can function to relegate nature in relation to human beings through anthropocentric discourses, which further a dichotomy of "humankind versus nature, [and] resonate with the presuppositions of … Cartesian dualism" (Aikenhead & Ogawa, 2007, p. 549). But these same dominant values also result in hierarchies imposed within and between different peoples. Gonzalez (2021, p. 114) describes that dominant value systems "privilege core (North) over periphery (South) [and] men over women." Binary logics are also critiqued as positioning western scientific knowledge (and those that hold it) above all other ways of knowing and being, and to foster the "traditional power relations of adultism" (Malafaia, 2022, p. 424) by establishing hierarchies that limit young people's power in and contribute to societal inertia. In contrast, counterhegemonic discourses challenge the taken-for-granted ideologies of neoliberalism, anthropocentrism, adultism and others beside these.

In line with Schindel Dimick (2015), I understand the role of non-formal education through museums to be to challenge culpable dominant discourses by supporting learners to explore and engage with alternative counterhegemonic discourses that subvert the hierarchies described above. Such learning has the potential to realise transformative change by calling into question the sanity of many discourses that go, by and large,

unquestioned. In this way, museum education programs could lead to a "deep, structural shift" (Calleja, 2014, p. 118), which involves "critically examining, and if necessary, changing […] beliefs, values and assumptions" (Sterling, 2010, p. 23). For example, an education that supports such learning might shed doubt on the assumption that successful young people will go on to work in highly paid jobs, and question why this is seen as a natural, logical, and even neutral notion. In this way, dominant discourses which apportion utmost importance to, for example, economic concerns rather than ecological ones, might be deconstructed and reshaped.

In what follows, I describe the case of a museum education program which set out to reshape its relationship with young people and the way it addresses socio-ecological issues through an advisory youth panel. I go on to describe its context, before considering the multiple discourses acting on, and being enacted by, the educators as they conceptualize the program aims, processes, outcomes and reflect upon their enaction of the youth panel. The resulting data highlights the complexity of non-formal educators' work as they seek to realize change through their programs. As such, questions are raised that seek to understand how museum educators navigate multiple competing discourses conducive to transformation *and* to the maintenance of the status quo.

Research approach and methods

Introduction to the program

The non-formal education program at the focus of this study was an initiative hosted by a UK-based metropolitan science and nature museum, named The Outside Museum.[1] The program was funded by a project grant and co-led by two educators, Fran and Ant. In light of the increasing dominance of the climate crisis in public consciousness, Ant expressed during interviews a growing understanding on the part of museum staff that there is a need to take a "deliberate, active, more environmental stance." Part of this stance, as Fran described, entails making sure that "young people's voices are being heard at the museum." This case study program, which took the form of an online advisory youth panel, was described as a result of this novel focus.

The program aimed to engage a panel of young people across the UK through fortnightly online meetings over a period of six months, with the intention for them to help "steer the museum into its new direction" of taking a stance on climate change, which Ant set out during interview. Through partner museums and youth organizations across the country, young people aged between 16 and 23 from across the UK were invited to join the panel, which focussed on: the museum's relationship with young people; the museum's approach to communicating the socio-ecological crises; and the use of digital media to engage young people with the environment. While 12 young people were initially recruited, the panel saw continued engagement from 9 of these young people over the project duration.

Research approach, consent processes, and data collection

The research into this program benefitted from the use of an ethnographic approach, as I became a participant-observer member of the youth panel program for its 6-month

duration. The research was granted ethical clearance at Medium Risk from the E&B Research Ethics Panel at King's College London (LRS DP 20/21:22078). In order to obtain participant consent, contact was made with a gatekeeper at the museum, who introduced the relevant program educators. The researcher and educators met online a number of times to discuss the project before informed consent was sought for interviews and observations from the educators. Educators then circulated participant information sheets and consent forms to panellists, with those who were willing to contribute returning completed consent forms via email prior to the observation of the program commencing.

Observations of the program were supported by semi-structured interviews that took place with educators prior to and following the program in order to explore their plans and experiences. Pre-program interviews were conducted between one month and one week prior to the first panel meeting, while post-program interviews took place up to a month following the final session. All interviews were conducted online and followed a semi-structured format. The focus of pre-program interviews was to explore educators' plans and aims for the program. The post-program interviews invited reflections on how those plans played out in practice, and how the educators experienced facilitating the program.

Analytical approach

The data collected comprised of field observation notes and interview transcripts, which were initially compiled in NVivo. The following steps of data interpretation took place recursively, as I went back and forth, "zigzagging between data and theory" (Thew et al., 2020, p. 10). During analysis, it was evident that multiple discourses were implicated within educators' considerations for and reflections on the program, which led to the adoption of a poststructural approach to data analysis. Poststructuralism affords that individuals are simultaneously acted on and enact multiple discourses (Zink & Burrows, 2006), and thus considers an individual not as a "core, essential self" (Barrett, 2005, p. 83), but rather constructed as they fashion themselves according to the discourses available. Individuals can be exposed to multiple distinct, competing discourses, resulting in seemingly contradictory subjects who respond concurrently to the multiple clashing discourses acting upon them (Davies, 1999; Zink & Burrows, 2006). Thus, interpreting the interview transcripts through a poststructuralist lens enabled a consideration of the words spoken, and situations constructed, not as rooted within the actors themselves but rather as precipitated in part by broader discourses exerting pressure (Zink & Burrows, 2006) on Fran and Ant as environmental educators.

Findings

Ambivalent program aims: for youth and for the museum?

During pre-program interviews, I invited Fran and Ant, who co-designed and co-led the youth panel, to reflect on the purpose and aims of the program they were yet to deliver. Both educators reflected on the need to engage with young people in relation to the climate crisis.

> The program is basically a way to make sure that young people's voices are being heard at the museum. The people who walk into the museum are usually not within that age bracket,

> right? There'll be more families, and then there'll be … white men over the age of 50. That's one thing that the museum has decided that they want to change is to get that demographic that usually doesn't engage to engage with the museum. Because as a museum, we *need* to respond to the climate crisis. And therefore, we *need* young people to be invested and interested in what we have to say. This is part of a bigger journey, to have young people consistently involved with the museum. – Fran, pre-program interview, excerpt 1.

> So, the point is that it is a dual beneficial relationship where we're working with 12 young people so that we can really add something – you know we can … we can develop relationships with them – in depth relationships – which just wouldn't normally happen in one-off sessions … The whole point is that as a museum, we need to understand that audience [young people] more … and there's no better gatekeeper than that audience itself. And again, I think what's really cool is that idea of co-creation of ideas and content and programming and stuff like that. – Ant, pre-program interview, excerpt 2

Fran's concerns for the need to foster space and time for young people within the museum which has typically been used by families and older generations plays a role both in recognizing youth and their unique position in relation to socio-ecological issues and in creating a potential pathway to foster their participation in public discourse about such issues. In this sense, the intention Fran describes arguably responds to recognitional and participatory understandings of justice (Fraser, 2007; Schlosberg, 2004). Her emphasis on ensuring that "young people's voices are being heard at the museum" also indicates some intention to deconstruct museum/audience and adult/youth binaries, whereby "the answers" are seen to lie typically with/in the former rather than the latter (Modest, 2014).

Yet, in framing young people as a "demographic that usually doesn't engage," Fran is overlooking the ways in which young people (such as those who are recruited to the youth panel) *are* engaging in socio-ecological issues and mobilizing in direct and indirect actions which often fall outside of the bounds of a museum visit (Tafon & Saunders, 2025). This deficit framing of youth risks reinforcing dominant narratives that fail to recognize the ways that young people are already active. Finally, Fran asserts that young people need to be interested in what the *museum* has to say, raising the question of what takes priority within the panel – hearing young people's voices or encouraging young people to listen and learn from the museum? While these are not mutually exclusive aims, Lynch and Alberti (2010) argue that "radical trust" is required if such collaborative methods are to meaningfully challenge, rather than lapse back into, hierarchical relationships such as those between museums and young people.

Above, Ant describes an aim to develop a deep reciprocal relationship with young people throughout the course of the panel, pointing to the potential of the program to foster co-creation between the museum and this audience. As with Fran's concerns for youth voice, this intention highlights the counterhegemonic nature of the educators' hopes for their program – to bring young people into the museum in order to influence its practices in relation to communicating and programming around socio-ecological crises. Yet, he also refers to the needs of the museum to understand young people as an audience, with the panel acting as a way in which this aim can be achieved.

To make sense of these excerpts, in which Fran and Ant discuss aims that are both counterhegemonic (they create space for young people to influence broader climate and environmental narratives) and more conducive to current hegemony (they frame youth as a disengaged group) I turn to Dawson and colleagues' (2024) paper *Inclusion for STEM,*

the institution, or minoritized youth? Exploring how educators navigate the discourses that shape social justice in informal science learning practices. In this work, the authors explore social justice programs that engage minoritised youth across informal science learning institutions. Through interviews with educators, observations, and educator reflection portfolios, the authors identify three potential discourses that underpin the purpose and practice of such programs – inclusion for STEM, for the institution, and for minoritised youth. Of key interest in relation to my findings are the differences between the two discourses inclusion for the institution and for minoritized youth. The former saw educators concerned with increasing provision for young visitors *as a way of increasing audience numbers overall*, potentially in service of linked institutional benefits such as reputation and funding. In contrast, the discourse of inclusion for minoritized youth was characterized by "supporting minoritized young people and their communities" for their own sake, rather than towards any particular end (Dawson et al., 2024, p. 807). In practice, Dawson and colleagues saw these multiple discourses co-exist within programs as educators enacted, negotiated and co-opted the multiple value systems that underpinned their work.

In a similar way, I argue that Fran and Ant's reflections on the purpose of their program straddle two discourses: one which sees the program as *for youth involvement in socio-ecological issues*; and another which operationalizes the program as *for the museum and its reputation*. While the former addresses current injustices facing young people by prioritizing their involvement and engagement, the latter risks reinforcing a dominant discourse whereby the program acts to gather insights about young people in service of growing a larger audience to consume museum content.

Contradictory program process: assumptions outcompeting youth autonomy

Program educators were also invited to share how they envisioned the fortnightly panel meetings unfolding. In response to an interview prompt which asked what they had planned for the program in advance, Ant described that digital content creation was a key theme of the panel, while both educators emphasized a pedagogical approach that would respond to the panellists' needs and interests.

> The panel is all about digital content creation, like basically creating stories about nature in their towns … So, I'm super interested to see what the young people get inspired by, what natural stories are local to them and interest them, and how they go about kind of telling those stories and creating content. And for me, as a facilitator, to work out what stories they want to tell, and then, how can I help them make that a reality? – Ant, pre-program interview, excerpt 3

> I'm particularly excited to meet these young people that we've been preparing for, and then just find out what they're like, because the program is going to change based on who they are, how engaged they are, and what kinds of topics they're interested in. Yeah, we'll cater the program based on that. – Fran, pre-program interview, excerpt 4

Fran's stipulation that the program will adapt based on participants' wants and needs, and Ant's understanding that their personal interests should guide their content creation both speak to a concern for participants' own agency. They recognize that as educators, part of their work will be to create space to listen and respond to participants' interests. These intentions of the program could be interpreted in relation to what Wals and colleagues' (2008) describe as an emancipatory approach to education, described in contrast to

instrumental learning. Instrumental learning focuses on achieving predetermined behavioral change, with learners regarded as "mainly passive 'receivers'" (Wals et al., 2008, p. 56), while an emancipatory approach is described as engaging participants actively in dialogue, establishing shared meanings and foci, with the absence of specific pre-determined outcomes (Wals et al., 2008). With the underpinning discourse here arguably related to concerns about young people and their agency, we can isolate these concerns as *for youth involvement in socio-ecological issues*.

Yet, whilst planning for learners to influence the program and the activity within it, the educators have predetermined a central task in the form of digital content creation. While Ant sets out that learners will be creating content based on their own personal interests, this still rests on the assumption that learners *will* create digital content. Thus, while arguing that they will look towards young people to steer the program, these educators have already made decisions about the focus and process of the panel. Once again, we see the educators drawing from two distinct discourses as they plan this program – one which looks to learners to guide and influence, arguably a counterhegemonic approach that affords responsibility to young people, and another in which the interests of young people are assumed without their consultation in service of an institutional priority. In the following sections, we begin to understand how and why social media content production began to dominate, outcompeting opportunities for the panellists to shape the program, and even exerting pressure on the educators themselves.

Dominant program outcomes: aligning with established norms of reputation and career progression

The envisioned outcomes of the program were shared by Fran and Ant in response to a question which asked what success would be at the end of the process. A focus apparent from both educators was that of increasing learners' employability, along with the museum's own priorities related to understanding youth audiences and translating this understanding into social media strategies and posts.

> We have objectives in terms of like, we want the young people to come away understanding how this experience is going to benefit them applying for jobs and things like that. There are also objectives that *we* have – we need to come away successfully, having created some content and understanding certain questions about how young people engage with nature, or engage with digital content, or engage with an institution like ours. –Ant, pre-program interview, excerpt 5

> I think, what I'd measure as successful is that these 12 young people, by the end of the panel say that they've enjoyed their time, and they feel like they've learned something new in relation to their career aspirations, or their knowledge in terms of professional settings, skills, know-how. And the other side of the spectrum is that the museum gets new insights related to what young people want. And then also the social media content that we want to produce and to kind of push forward in terms of museum outputs … – Fran, pre-program interview, excerpt 6

Discourses *for the museum and its reputation* are evident in both of these responses, with Fran and Ant concerned with the museum's objectives which are: creating digital content that Fran explains are intended to be shared on the museum's social media pages; and understanding young people as an audience such that the museum can find out what

might support them to engage with the institution and its content related to nature and climate. Both of these, I argue, tally with Dawson and colleagues' description of inclusion (of young people) for the institution. Their work describes this discourse as a "key goal and measure" to "get more people to the site (whether the site was digital or physical, and whether direct entry fees were involved or not)," with an emphasis that these are "not just the current people that we are seeing, the quite wealthy, middle class, White people" (Dawson et al., 2024, p. 805). For Fran and Ant, this means expanding from families and the older generations (as Fran explained in excerpt 1) to young people, who the museum seeks to better understand (which Ant explains in excerpt 2 and 5, and Fran describes in excerpt 6).

Alongside this concern for the museum is a shared commitment to ensure that the panellists leave with increased employability, career aspirations or professional skills. While this could be positioned as being a concern with young people and their prosperity at its heart, it also corresponds to the dominant positioning of education as a means to develop learners' potential as workers within a neoliberal system, potentially serving profit-making industries more so than young people themselves (Ball & Collet-Sabé, 2022; Biesta, 2022). In focussing on participants' CVs and career prospects, as opposed to, say, their ability to critique and make sense of unsustainable systems, this communicated aim of the program arguably falls short of an intended outcome that is *for youth involvement in socio-ecological issues*. Instead, perhaps it is fueled by a concern that youth are able to be successful within the current dominant paradigm, rather than considering whether and how that paradigm might be destabilized.

Educator reflections: feeling trapped by competing discourses

As the program ran, I observed each of the sessions alongside the educators and panellists. My observation notes detail that the aim of producing digital content was introduced to panellists through "a brief which was presented in meeting 2 of 12 and set out that individuals or pairs should produce a video and/or images about nature, climate or societal issues for one of the museum's social media channels." In practice, the panellists had varying levels of interest in social media and digital content production, and as such, delivering on this brief required a lot of effort from the museum educators and young people alike. In this way, as the program was enacted, the two underpinning discourses: *for youth involvement in socio-ecological issues* and *for the museum and its reputation* came into competition with one another, as young people's own ideas and interests as to how they might engage with socio-ecological issues failed to map onto the ways that this engagement had been foreseen and planned. Ant described why this was the case below, while Fran reflects on what this meant for one of the intended outcomes of the panel.

> We naively assumed that the young people would come with more technical knowledge and skills in the digital content creation side of things, and we didn't really filter for that in the recruitment process – Ant, post-program interview, excerpt 7.

> I still am not entirely sure what the outcome of this panel is, especially that we aren't sure entirely what we're going to *do* with the digital content that was created … I think … there was value in going through the process of creating this content in terms of storytelling, in

> terms of connecting with nature … but the content itself, as it is, isn't very usable on our social media channels, and I don't know if it can be, or if our panellists will be interested in editing them further. Fran, post-program interview, excerpt 8

Ant's reflection, that there had been an assumption on behalf of the educators as to what young people are interested in and how they will want to engage, was at the root of this mismatched program, and led to a situation whereby the digital content that was produced could not be used in the way the museum intended, as Fran described. During her post-program interview, Fran returned to the question of the purpose of the panel, as she reflected on whether or not the program corresponded to the aims she had intended for it.

> I mean, the way that it was structured ended up being less *advisory*, and more youth *engagement* with the museum, if that makes sense. And I think that is one thing that we should reflect about is like, what was the purpose of this? And what kind of activities and workshops and educational elements can we offer to young people so that they continue being engaged with the museum? And I think what I *really* missed, for a lot of different reasons, was having more discussion, and hearing more from young people about their experiences and facilitating more dialogue. Rather than the way in which the meetings were structured, there was barely enough time, and we had this goal to meet. I think it took away from what could have been in terms of dialogue and actually thinking about your connection to nature and telling these stories. When I think about the panel now, I think, how could young people have spent more time telling us what they want to see, rather than … trying to push for an outcome where it's not entirely clear what the purpose was? You know, and I think that's where we got stuck … – Fran, post-program interview, excerpt 8

Fran's reflections highlight an awareness of the competition between two aims: producing digital content on the one hand (referred to in the excerpt as "this goal" and "an outcome") and actually engaging with and hearing from young people on the other. The former, I argue is underpinned by the discourse *for the museum and its reputation*, while the latter relates to concerns for *youth involvement in socio-ecological issues*. Fran describes having been "stuck," between these two competing discourses. Her reflection tells us that adhering to a pre-imposed idea of the program and its outcomes rather than adjusting these plans in relation to young people's concerns prevented both aims for the museum and for the young people being met – since the program did not respond to the panellists' needs and the resulting social media content did not (quite) align with the museum's needs either. When asked how she felt about the process of the panel, and the balancing act of getting to know the learners and responding to their interests *whilst* delivering on the program outcomes, Fran described feeling frustrated.

> Honestly, in my experience, it was extremely frustrating. Once I got to know the panellists, I felt like there was so much that we could have done … We tried … there was never enough time for proper discussion and proper dialogue. Once we got past the early hurdles to engagement, it was too late to go back to the deeper dialogues, because now we had this, like, task that was *looming* in front of us. And we needed to just start responding to that and creating the social media content. Fran, Educator, post-program interview, excerpt 9

Building on her response, I suggest that the pressures resulting from enacting and adhering to two competing discourses can result in educators' feeling trapped, or stuck, as program plans constructed in accordance with dominant museum-focussed discourses become constraints that limit the ability to respond meaningfully to emancipatory intentions built on counterhegemonic youth-led discourses.

Balancing contradictions

This paper is concerned with the role that museums and similar learning institutions play in addressing and transforming socio-ecological crises, building from scholars who describe a key component of this as challenging, destabilizing and reshaping dominant discourses. Yet, the data presented demonstrates that acting to challenge dominant discourses, whilst existing firmly within the status quo of an institution such as a museum, is a challenging task. It is a process in which competition between discourses is arguably unavoidable, and thus research which engages with the messy processes of educating for change is vital in building understanding of how such competing discourses can, and are, navigated in service of transformation.

A critique of this program could focus on the educators' assumptions about young people and how they engage with the world around them, but such a critique would situate blame with Fran and Ant specifically, and do little to help us understand how the context and its accepted norms limited the ability of the educators and their program to support youth in the face of socio-ecological crises. Indeed, these findings – that educators who attempted to design and realize a program that brings about institutional (and broader) change frequently navigated and enacted contradictions - are not unique. They correspond with multiple studies that explore counterhegemonic or transformative museum education and non-formal education more widely.

Westwater (2021) argues that co-creative participatory museum programs often set out to deconstruct museum-audience hierarchies but nevertheless struggle to disrupt dominant relationships, with well-meaning projects quickly turning into limited opportunities that, because of institutional timelines, budgets, or processes, do not meet their emancipatory intentions. In a similar way, Baldridge (2020) argues that youth work sites also have a "paradoxical nature as potential spaces of liberation as well as sites of containment that reify deficit perspectives" (p. 618) and suggests that such inconsistencies result from pressure exerted by the surrounding dominant macro-political structures. Modest's (2014) reflection on co-curating with teenagers at The Horniman Museum describes a project that intended to devolve museum power to youth but was held back by assumptions about young people, their interests, and their abilities, for instance "they are all interested in technology and new media" (Modest, 2014, p. 106) which maps particularly well to the focus of social media at The Outside Museum's panel. Dawson et al. (2024, p. 809) argue that the educators in their study were skilled in navigating multiple discourses as and when they needed to, as they "reflected on, worked around, and sought to adapt the discourses that shaped their work." While those educators were arguably adept at operationalizing dominant discourses in order to foster emancipatory practice, this is no easy task, and some of the pitfalls that exist for educators who have little choice but to juggle competing discourses when developing new programs are evident in this research.

As such, it is important to consider Fran and Ant not as outliers to be criticized, but rather as educators who model some of the difficult experiences that many practitioners face as they try to realize transformative change through their work in and with institutions. Poststructuralism has been particularly helpful in building an understanding of the program in this regard, since it enables the isolation of multiple discourses which educators are simultaneously enacting and responding to. Rather than criticizing educators for their multiplicity, a poststructural understanding affords the unavoidability of this and enables a consideration

of the relative power associated with discourses acting on, and being enacted by, the educators. For instance, discourses associated with upholding dominant hierarchical systems, such as those *for the museum and its reputation* wield more power than those in service of change, such as discourses *for youth involvement in socio-ecological issues.* By their very nature as part of the current status quo, dominant discourses can act to constrain and limit the ability of alternative discourses to be fully explored and realized (Barrett, 2005).

This paper has argued for the importance of museums in the face of current socio-ecological crises. They are potential sites for transformative change, whereby dominant discourses, such as those that exclude young people from climate and environmental issues, might be deconstructed and renegotiated. Yet, as the example from The Outside Museum and further literature has shown, programs with aims to realize change often become sites of contradiction and incongruity as educators' practices are constrained by discourses which act in service of incumbent institutional norms. Thus, I argue we should adopt a curiosity of understanding towards educators who seek (and struggle to) realize change. What, for example, might support educators, such as Fran and Ant, to retain more of their emancipatory priorities in spite of instrumental norms andinstitutional pressures? Further research which seeks to answer this question by engaging with the contradictions that are inherent in transformative non-formal education programmesis needed. Such work has the potential to support the realization of museum practice which plays a role in crucial socio-ecological transformation.

Note

1. The name of the institution and educators in this article have been pseudonymised.

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Notes on contributor

Dr. ***Sophie Perry*** is a Research Fellow at the Centre for Food Policy at City St. George's University of London and Hourly Paid Lecturer at King's College London. Her work explores socio-ecological systems through a critical sociological lens.

ORCID

Sophie Perry http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3465-1966

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