

# MOBARTECH, AN INFORMAL EDUCATION PROJECT FOR BRINGING PEOPLE CLOSER TO CULTURAL HERITAGE

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## Abstract

In this paper, I present a multidisciplinary research project entitled Mobartech, which was sponsored by the Lombardy Region as part of a broader initiative co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The overall aim of this project was to develop an innovative method of engaging the general public in the study, conservation, and consumption of cultural heritage. It was jointly conducted by several partners, including four departments of the University of Milan Bicocca (UNIMIB). One of the project's concrete objectives was to set up a mobile van (a mini-laboratory) with the dual mission of conducting scientific research and disseminating cultural knowledge, while visiting small museums and works of art at different locations across the region. In the initial pilot phase of the project, three case studies were conducted, involving: 1) an individual painting, *The Fourth Estate* by Pellizza da Volpedo (1901); 2) frescoes from the Giotto period at the Palazzo dell'Arcivescovado in Milan; 3) the UNESCO world heritage site of Mantua and Sabbioneta. UNIMIB's Department of Human Sciences and Education was present at the UNESCO site with the role of raising locals' and tourists' awareness of the cultural/historical links between the two cities and enhancing their cultural knowledge about these towns. Specifically, we offered an informal education path that involved members of the public in acts of consumption, participation, and interpretation. The project phases included: initial familiarization with the local area by administering questionnaires; interviews with key informants (architects, restorers, guides, ceramists, photographers, ...); targeted observations; discovery and exploration of the site with a variety of audiences; and finally, the design of a guided discovery kit for the two cities. Participants in the project included groups of middle and high school students, including some on educational work placements, who worked with the researchers to devise a kit for enhancing visitors' consumption of the heritage site. First, a pilot version of the kit was developed and tested. It was then modified based on the pilot test outcomes. Being involved in the development of the kit helped the students to think critically about the cities where they lived and to select the most meaningful information about these sites to be communicated to others, whether fellow citizens or tourists. A key feature of the kit design phase was the balance offered between hands-on and digitally supported activities.

Keywords: education, cultural heritage, informal education, research.

## 1 INTRODUCTION: NON-FORMAL/INFORMAL EDUCATION AND HERITAGE

The key concept underpinning this paper is that direct personal/collective contact with cultural heritage, along with active participation and the interpretative perspective that we inevitably bring to bear on experience as human beings, are crucial to fostering interest in and commitment to protecting cultural and natural assets, with immediate cultural, professional and health/wellness benefits as documented in the international literature [1, 2, 3]. I specifically examine the MOBARTECH project which is sponsored by the Lombardy Region as part of a broader initiative financed by the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF). The overall aim of this project is to develop an innovative method of engaging the general public - and not only a restricted group of specialists, as unfortunately is often the case - in the study, conservation, and consumption of cultural heritage. Three case studies have been conducted to date, involving: 1) an individual painting, *The Fourth Estate* by Pellizza da Volpedo (1901); 2) frescoes from the Giotto period at the Palazzo dell'Arcivescovado in Milan; 3) the UNESCO world heritage site of Mantua and Sabbioneta.

These cultural heritage assets [4], which at first sight appear to be very different from one another, were studied in depth from multiple perspectives. In parallel, the researchers focused on devising the most effective possible means of communicating the new knowledge that was coming to light. From the restoration of works of art, to analysis of the materials used to create them, historical reconstruction, and observation of target audiences, a large body of research data was systematically built up. The project team set out to devise an effective method of disseminating this information to the wider public outside the research community. We believed that finding an appropriate channel of communication was crucial to engaging people's interest in these heritage assets and in our research, but also in the

role of heritage in their own lives and life stories. We further focused on the educational potential of cultural and natural heritage assets, which has been pointed up by numerous studies over the past several decades [5, 6].

In this paper, I particularly concentrate on the relationship between cultural heritage and education in our contemporary era. In investigating the bases for this relationship, a first key step is to examine the concept of education itself.

First, we may distinguish between three different types of education: formal, non-formal, and informal. Formal education is that provided by schools - from kindergartens through universities - and the education system more generally, over a set time span. It is characterized by intentionality and a high degree of regulation determining the grouping of learners according to set criteria, fixed programs and time scales, ongoing assessment, and the certification of learning outcomes [7]. In contrast, informal education is based on individual choice and spontaneity. Notably, Sergio Tramma has defined it as follows: "Informal education can thus be marked by "naturalness", "spontaneity", "ingenuity", "chance", but also by a degree of intentionality which, while falling short of reflectiveness on oneself, one's aims, and "teaching methods", tends to stimulate both diffuse and focused learning. [...] informal education is potentially present in all places of experience [...] concerns all age groups and all individual and collective life conditions and can even include highly formalized and identifiable learning experiences" [8, p.37]. EU policy documents, and the *Youth in Action* project in particular, emphasize the importance of taking steps to foster non-formal and informal learning, in the young, with a view - amongst other aims - to positively impacting on their development throughout all subsequent life stages. "Non-formal learning refers to the learning which takes place outside formal educational curriculum. Non-formal learning activities involve people on a voluntary basis and are carefully planned, to foster the participants' personal, social, and professional development. Informal learning refers to the learning in daily life activities, in work, family, leisure, etc. It is mainly learning by doing. In the youth sector, informal learning takes place in youth and leisure initiatives, in peer group and voluntary activities etc. Non-formal and informal learning enable young people to acquire essential competences and contribute to their personal development, social inclusion and active citizenship, thereby improving their employment prospects. Learning activities within the youth field provide significant added value for young people as well as for the economy and society at large such as capacity-building of organisations, benefits for communities, systems and institutions. Non-formal and informal learning activities within the Youth in Action Programme are complementary to the formal education and training system. They have a participative and learner-centred approach, are carried out on a voluntary basis and are therefore closely linked to young people's needs, aspirations and interests. By providing an additional source of learning and a route into formal education and training, such activities are particularly relevant to young people with fewer opportunities" [9, p.6]. Scholars in Italy and internationally [10, 11] have defined informal education as an indispensable component of human development that continues across the entire lifespan, albeit in different forms. Compulsory schooling during childhood/adolescence, and voluntary more personalized educational programmes going forward, are clearly of great value and wield a strong influence on individuals. Nonetheless, these are by no means the only places where knowledge and learning are acquired. Lifelong education, enriched by encounters with other people, stories, and culture in its different forms, therefore plays a crucial role in getting people to engage with heritage assets. Residents and tourists in rural areas, towns and large cities should be provided with opportunities to experience alternative ways of interacting with the places they live or are visiting [12]. More specifically, heritage education, in the broadest sense, and awareness of cultural assets is best fostered by directly involving audiences, as previously documented in the Italian and international literature [13, 14]. In some cases, this will take the form of learning and discovery; in other cases, it will entail getting audiences to draw on their own capabilities and talents in engaging with a cultural heritage site; and in still others, it will mean asking visitors and consumers of heritage assets to become volunteers, guides, and interpreters. Theoretical discourses best serve as an initial guide to more hands-on engagement, which is more likely to modify established behaviour patterns, fostering a more genuine sharing of culture and a greater propensity on the part of audiences to take personal responsibility for conserving heritage assets. When cultural heritage is formally presented and taught in a way that emphasizes the distance between the custodians of the asset and specialist knowledge, on the one hand, and the asset's consumers, on the other, it is all too likely that the asset in question will not be perceived as shared heritage or part of the common good.

## 2 THE MOBARTECH CASE STUDY

In this section, I focus in detail on the MOBARTECH case study conducted at the UNESCO World Heritage site of Mantua and Sabbioneta. This site is an example of the kind of gap that can exist between theoretical definitions and everyday perceptions: the two cities are formally labelled as a single heritage site, but the connection between them is not evident to either locals or tourists. As stated above, the MOBARTECH project is sponsored by the Lombardy region under the auspices of a broader programme co-financed by the European Regional Development Fund. "The main aim of MOBARTECH is to create actions of industrial research, experimental development and innovation of processes and organizations. However, it also aims to study and produce scientific results of research while encouraging the creation of new creative processes to enhance cultural heritage. For this reason, the project has involved the study and experimentation on the UNESCO site of Mantua and Sabbioneta to develop local cultural heritage through educational and participatory practices that will involve local communities and in particular local schools. The main focus is to stimulate a process of belonging in the community to the UNESCO heritage of the two cities that however are still perceived as separated as resulted by preliminary findings" [15, p.8570].

### 2.1 Looking, observing, drawing, speaking, discussing, interpreting

The title of this section is a list of actions, because - as argued by the sociologist and anthropologist David Le Breton - we learn about the world by directly acting upon it: "With respect to the world, the human person is never an eye, an ear, a hand, or a nose, but a gaze, an act of listening, a touch, a tasting or smelling; in sum, an activity. At every instant, [the human person] makes the sensory world in which he/she is immersed into a world of meaning in which the environment is the pre-text. Perception is not the impression of an object on a passive sense organ, but a learning activity blended with the evidence or the outcome of reflection" [16, p.5]. The MOBARTECH project as implemented in Mantua and Sabbioneta began with the administration of a questionnaire to a hundred respondents (locals and tourists) on their perceptions of the two cities and their ideas about how they could be improved. The data from the survey informed a series of interviews with key informants (guides, volunteers, policy makers, practitioners, teachers, ordinary citizens) designed to elicit the aspects of the two heritage sites viewed as most meaningful in relation to the interviewees' own life stories. In parallel, we worked with secondary school students on educational work placements or field trips, offering them pathways of consumption, discovery, and inquiry into these heritage assets. We invited the students to work with other members of the local community with a view to gathering additional voices. Meanwhile, the researchers together with interested community members undertook secondary research in local archives and libraries. While these activities were still ongoing, we began to design a kit for guiding visitors' exploration of the two cities and enhancing their appreciation of the two sites. The kit was based on simple observation, discovery, drawing and writing activities. It took the form of a small shoulder bag containing a range of materials, such as photographs, maps [17], drawings [18, 19], written texts, videos to be downloaded, etc., that were easy for visitors and locals to use. First, an initial prototype of the kit was produced based on our discussions with all the project participants. Next, we pilot tested it and subsequently appropriately modified it to come up with the final version. All project phases were carefully documented. A key defining characteristic of the project was the fact that the researchers constantly maintained direct contact with the local community, including at the street level [20, 21], implying that they spent a considerable amount of time on the ground in the two cities, providing them with opportunity to get to know the heritage site first hand.

## 3 CONCLUSIONS

This project confirms the importance of: directly involving the general public in heritage appreciation initiatives; sharing information, content, and knowledge; gathering the accounts and opinions of key informants, actively involving the consumers of heritage in the co-construction of cultural knowledge. Returning now to the concept of informal education introduced in the first section of the paper, it is thanks to voluntary and personalized participation in cultural projects - a form of participation that brings the public into direct contact with cultural sources, the personal stories of others, artistic materials, and alternative perspectives - that a new relationship with cultural heritage may be developed: a process will be triggered whereby formerly passive consumers begin to actively engage with and promote cultural assets. To quote Hans Georg Gadamer: "The work pulls us, so to speak, into a dialogue. Hence, there is nothing concealed about the structure of the dialogue if we take the trouble to adequately describe the outward facing of one another that is given between a figurative or literary work of art and its interpreter. This facing one another is in truth a play of alternating and reciprocal participation. As in all

dialogue, the other is still a listener that is encountered, but in such a way that their horizon of expectations and listening ends up capturing and retaining my intention of meaning, to the extent of modifying it. In analysing the structure of the dialogue, we witness the emergence of a shared language, in which the speakers are transformed and identify with something shared.” [22, p.150-151] It is in this sense that an alternative approach on the part of researchers and scholars, one that promotes direct contact with cultural heritage, may offer a means of fostering the quality of dialogue referred to by Gadamer, giving rise to an authentic process of direct participation and encouraging the members of the wider community to take personal responsibility for the common good.

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