

The joy of touching.

Peer cultural education for the visually impaired

*Rodica Silvia Pop**

Abstract

Culture, like nature, uses the past to feed the future and to provide food for the soul. Society needs hard work and experience to maintain a vibrant culture. The success in establishing and implementing cultural policy has to begin with the reality and complexity of the national culture. It has to involve all of the social factors responsible in order to succeed. Museums, the most important cultural and educational institutions in today's world, can encourage individual participation of the visually impaired by making their collections accessible.

The visually impaired population has been totally neglected. This is a population group that nobody wants to invest in, even though they could become loyal visitors. We brought 100 young people to the museum from the High School for Visually Impaired from Cluj Napoca and 100 students from the Fine Arts High School Baia Mare and developed a peer education programme. The project helped the target group build self-confidence and develop their social identities. The project had an extraordinarily high impact on the target group, solving the need for new museum services for the visually impaired.

* Rodica Silvia Pop, Maramures County Museum of History and Archeology, Strada Monetariei Nr 1-3 Baia Mare (Romania), rodicapop_2005@yahoo.com.

The programme was successful in bridging the gap in our community between visually impaired and sighted people. The experiment allowed sighted youth to have a better understanding of the everyday situation of the visually impaired. The contact benefited the sighted participants, helping them feel more comfortable with the visually impaired. The project was a national experiment, applied for the first time as a museum cultural programme. The new museum services allowed youth with disabilities to have access to cultural heritage. This joy of touching was very moving because it offered equal chances to everyone, the sighted and the visually impaired.

Keywords: access, cultural heritage, peer education, museum education, visually impaired.

1. The conception and planning of the programme

Imagine what it's like to visit museums but not to be able to see any displayed objects or to understand the history without images to put to the stories. Sightseeing is difficult if you have no sight. These are the struggles of the blind and the visually-impaired. Museum educators must teach people that *accessible* means more than just ramps and handrails. They must make the museum facilities *accessible* to everyone, regardless of their particular type of disability. In Romania there are more than 80,000 blind people in need, eager to learn and to discover the world. We believe that *if we save a person, we save a world* (fig. 1).



Fig. 1 – *Visually impaired students in the museum.*

Maramures County Museum of History and Archaeology, one of the most important cultural institutions in Baia Mare, offers visitors a special cultural programme, *The joy of touching. Peer cultural education for the visually impaired*. Using methods as the tactile tour, the programme helps the visually impaired touch history (fig. 2-3).



Fig. 2 – *Please touch poster*



Fig. 3 – *The joy of touching*

Since 2010, the museum has played an active role in the city's life, promoting access to the Maramures cultural heritage, offering equal opportunities to all the visitors and being a centre for research, museology, conservation and learning. The whole cultural development of Baia Mare City is based on the medieval logo of the town *Mutuus amor civium civitatis optimum est fir-*

mamementum – Love between the citizens is the ultimate strength of the city. This attitude strengthens solidarity in the community and enhances social cohesion.

The programme objectives were:

- acquiring, in the long term, new cultural policies creating new museum services, changing mentalities and developing access to cultural heritage for blind and visually impaired people;
- acquiring a new loyal audience, in the medium term, from a vulnerable group of an active population;
- acquiring a strong social integration for the target group showing what tolerance and respect for each person mean;
- promoting peer education as a new non-formal type of education, in the short term.

It was a six-month programme, starting on the 15th of October, *The International White Cane Day*, continuing until the 15th of June.

Two groups of students were involved, visually impaired and sighted students. The museum organised cultural activities for these two groups, inside and outside the museum: tactile tours, mini concerts, gala, and county tours in Maramures.

There were three tactile tours in the museum, using the logo PLEASE TOUCH! The museum staff was trained to communicate with the visually-impaired people. In the museum gallery the audience was taught how to touch the objects displayed (fig. 4-5).



Fig. 4-5 – *Touching the sculptures.*

Museum programmes generally do not consider visually impaired people. Blind people are often reluctant to go to museums. The experiment was a challenge for visually impaired students. At the beginning of the tour, Braille catalogues of the exhibition were provided for the visually impaired. Additionally, the sighted students were given the opportunity to wear black masks to better understand the experience.

Peer cultural education using interactive methods created a respectful environment for everybody. This is a new form of education, helping change mentalities and increase self-confidence.

One of the blind students read from the catalogue and presented to the audience the history and the story of the objects displayed. Later the sighted students helped them touch all the objects that were described in the Braille text (fig. 6-7).



Fig. 6 - *One of the blind students reading.*



Fig. 7 – *Museum guiding with hands in hands together.*

In the evening they had dinner together in a restaurant and the students from the Fine Arts high school performed a concert (fig. 8-9). Musical instruments were described and introduced to the blind students before the concert began. JOY was the word that defined their attitude and feelings!



Fig. 8-9 – *Casandra Haosi and a mini concert for visually impaired people.*

2. Carrying out the programme

The visually impaired have always seen their universe through the joy of touching things. Through their hands, they feel the words, see the colours and shapes, and develop a mental image. Museums can encourage individual participation of the visually impaired, making museum collections accessible to all. Organising a tactile tour for the visually impaired is a viable solution.

For exhibits that are off-limits because the objects are too old or too fragile to be examined tactilely, replicas and copies of the old items were made. Stronger original items were protected with a very thin transparent plastic sheet. We worked together with our conservatory experts to find ways to protect the displayed objects while making them accessible to the visitors.

This process was done as a peer education process carried out by students under the guidance of museum experts. The programme and the catalogue were written both in black ink and Braille. Visually impaired students presented the Braille documents regarding the exhibition to their

peers before starting the tour. During the tactile tour, the sighted students provided explanations.

The project partners were:

- the High School for Visually Impaired from Cluj Napoca. Their students presented all the documents written in Braille to their peers;
- the High School for Fine Arts Baia Mare. The art classes made the replicas displayed in the tactile tour and the music classes offered the concerts for their peers;
- the Association of the Blind People of Maramures. They brought the grown up blind people to the museum;
- the Children for Children-Children for Peace Foundation. They brought to the museum the sighted young people from other schools from the city to join this experiment.

Three full-time staff and ten volunteers were involved in the activity. The direct beneficiaries of the programme were 150 visually impaired students and another 100 sighted people. The indirect beneficiaries were all the people visiting the museum, who now have access to this area.

The project benefited several groups. Sighted people who visited the museum were asked to wear black masks and experience the joy of touching the museum items, without seeing them (fig. 8-9). Using the tactile way for learning about the formal values of art history such as perspective, composition, and three-dimensional space can also be a revelation not only for blind people but for sighted visitors, too. They discovered that touch (a sense often neglected) provides a deeper understanding of museum culture.



Fig. 8-9 - Workshops with sighted young people wearing black masks.

For sighted museum-goers used to enjoying and appreciating museum culture visually, touching an object, examining a surface and understanding its form, bring a new perception of the world. This way of visiting an exhibition not only opens up the world to the blind, but opens up *the world of the blind* to all the visitors.

For the sight-impaired, museum education fosters self-confidence, manual dexterity, and pride in one's achievement. This helps blind people overcome the social integration, mobility, and employment barriers they face every day. Blind people develop tactile perception and interpretative refinement, discovering cognitive potential.

The project had an impact upon the entire community. The media presented every step of the programme and as a result, more and more people and companies joined the project as stakeholders. Two of the most important stakeholders were the Lions Club Rivulus Dominarum Baia Mare and the Hypermarket Cora, Baia Mare.

3. Evaluation and remedial process

During the implementation we had two kinds of evaluation:

1. an internal evaluation was done after every activity.
2. a final evaluation and financial report were done at the end.

The internal evaluation of the project was done by the project coordinator. She received written evaluations from the participants in which they expressed their gratitude for having this experience. They were happy and wondered if it would be possible to repeat the event. This is important for us both in terms of development of the project and in terms of future programmes. Having a new attitude in peoples' minds and a new category of public visiting the museum is the best achievement possible. Carrying out this activity we mastered the collecting of data and the practicality of the tools we used, with critical analysis and interpretation.

As a final evaluation we had the following results:

1. the tactile tour-exhibition for blind people;
2. a big poster: *Please touch* (versus *please don't touch* tags found in ordinary exhibitions;
3. 300 pieces of exhibition programme written in Braille;

4. exhibition tags and explanations written in Braille;
5. counselling and cultural dialogue workshops;
6. DVDs commemorating the event;
7. CD with pictures of the type of project implementation.

At least 500 disabled people from all over the country visited the museum. We had a national answer to this call and it was impressive. Not only the local people from Maramures County came to the event but also blind people from Covasna, Harghita, Satu Mare and Bistrita Nasaud. Some blind visitors travelled 500 kilometres just for this cultural event.

Accessibility for blind people depends not so much on the ability to cope with barriers in the physical environment as on the ability to find one's way in an unknown space. When access requirements are considered during initial planning, then blind people can freely share, enjoy, and participate in social and cultural life.

We also enjoyed an international response to this project. The Erste Foundation Award for Social Integration invited the "Joy of Touching Cultural Heritage" project to the Award Ceremony in Vienna, on 26-28 of June 2013, being selected as a finalist project from a group of 2000 applications, from thirteen Central and South Eastern Europe Countries.

Bringing people together, to explore and discover the joy of culture, bridged the gap that existed in our community between visually impaired and sighted people.

References

- Colta, E. R. (2004). *Simpoziioanele internaționale de antropologia minorităților de la Complexul muzeal Arad*, R. M. nr 1-2/2004 p. 148.
- Coltescu, G. (2005). *Vocabularul societății plurale*, Iași: Ed. Polirom.
- Hooper-Greenhill, E. (1991). *Museum and Gallery Education*, Leicester: Leicester University Press.
- Mircea, A. (1998). *Modalități de atragere a publicului din mediile industriale la cunoașterea muzeului*, RM, nr 3-4/ 1998 p. 34.
- Walters, D. (2008). *Attracting Zealots; responses to disability in museums collection and practice in the early 21st century*. Newcastle University.

Website

<http://www.ataccess.org/rresources/webaccess.html>

http://www.bbc.co.uk/accessibility/win/sub_root.shtml

www.integration.ro/?id=318

www.ne-mo.org