

## A critical exploration of a museum<sup>1</sup>

(using the example of the British Museum)

The following suggestions use a museum visit for developing awareness of the concept of mediation. Mediation involves not merely viewing the object but rather taking into account all the peripheral information which contributes to conveying the overall message about that object. For example the Rosetta Stone is placed in a cabinet of its own with a large space around it and a long explanatory text next to it. Mediation in a museum takes place on different levels and each of these can be evaluated separately in respect of what they communicate:

- *The organisation of the rooms* (the layout of the rooms, the assignment of certain themes in relation to the size of the room)
- *The way in which the objects itself are presented* (how they are arranged, how the lighting is placed in relation to the objects and the room)
- *The kinds of written documentation and signs / labels used for objects* (object descriptions, what actual information is given, what design is chosen to display the information)
- *How additional audiovisual material is used to support the mediation of the objects* (background images, sound extracts, video films or the combination of any of these)

Another key place to explore would be the museum's gift shop.

In the case of the British Museum one suggestion was to examine the representation of national identity which can be done through a comparison of 'Britain' or 'England' and one other country of your choice. How are the two nations represented? The emphasis in your exploration should be on discovering the ways in which precise forms of mediation are structured. If you have digital cameras you will be able to photograph most things (but usually flash is not allowed). If children were asked to undertake this investigation they could be given specific research tasks.

Enjoying the objects in the museum is not forbidden! The emphasis in our looking and questioning should be on the ways in which identity is represented. In our example the aim should be to produce enough data to make an analysis of the museum's presentation of specific forms of national identity through history.

---

<sup>1</sup> Based on the original version from Robert Ferguson.