

# An Alternative Education: Resistance, Positioning and Play During a School Visit to the Jersey War Tunnels

*By Alexandra Rive*

God save the Queen mixes with the sounds of planes and bombs dropping as I stand staring at the faces of those who were arrested, persecuted, deported, and interned by Nazi occupying forces in Jersey during the Second World War. With me in the tunnel chamber are an elderly English and a middle-aged French couple, who inspect the boards of names and faces seeking the match to the identity card handed to them at the ticket office. Suddenly the artificial soundscape is broken as clatters of footsteps and excited chatter is heard in the adjacent chamber. The couples turn to each other, and then to me, and knowingly roll their eyes crossing both language and age barriers in a universally understood 'here comes the kids!'

The Jersey War Tunnels (hence forth referred to as JWT) is a museum devoted to telling the story of the five-year occupation of Jersey. A subject that, to this day, is embedded in the everyday lives of islanders and draws many tourists to the Channel Islands each year. As a native islander, the way in which Jersey has turned this defining moment in its history into a feature of commercial and cultural revenue was something I wanted to explore for my Ethnographic Encounters project. The JWT was awarded cultural attraction of the year in 2018 and is one of the top tourist attractions, presenting the story of the occupation to thousands

of visitors each year, making it a crucial site in the construction of Jersey's identity. I had planned to conduct my research through interviews but changed my methodology to observation when I found that in the early season most visitors were French school groups, and my own lack of language skills left me unable to conduct effective conversation. Located just fourteen miles off the coast of France, Jersey is a popular destination for French school trips, bringing students over to improve their English and experience a little bit of Britain for anywhere from a day to a week. During their visits, students engage in water sports, navigate around the town, and immerse themselves into the island's cultural heritage through museum visits.

## **Why do we organise school trips to museums?**

Museums today value highly the role they can play in education due to the 'educational turn' taken at the end of the twentieth century, which saw a renegotiation of the purpose of museums (Hooper-Greenhill 2007: 5-6). Visits are often used to support curriculum learning, encourage enquiry and present information in ways that engage students outside of typical classroom settings. Academic research on children in museums typically falls into one of three categories; investigating educational value, the impact of in-class preparation on learning experiences, and exhibition elements that influence learning (Griffin 2004: 59).

Furthermore, the reasonings for school trips are not simply about educational content. Asides from supporting in-school learning, Nespor (2010) also sees school field trips as places where children learn to become integrated in public

spaces. Trips abroad are believed to broaden students' minds and develop an appreciation and understanding of other cultures. In a teacher's questionnaire, Hooper-Greenhill shows that teachers valued most their student's enjoyment and inspiration from a museum visit. In these cases, students were offered interactive workshops and learning sessions; the enthusiasm was high in responses from both teachers and students (Hooper-Greenhill 2007: 106). However, sometimes this supposed educational value and enjoyment seems to contrast with the witnessed experience of children in museums by their teachers, staff and other visitors.

Falk and Dierking (1997) argue that whilst critics of museums trips claim they are trivial experiences evidenced by children's chaotic behaviour and focus on the café and gift shop, these aspects account for only a small percentage of the later life recollections of these trips (1997: 217). They claim that the benefits in field trips lie in their long term rather than short term effects (1997: 211). This paper will argue that museums and school trips are important places of learning not just for their material content but for the skills they teach. Like Griffin (2004), the discussion that follows will place the students' experience at the centre by looking at the engagement of a group of French school children aged fourteen-sixteen within the Jersey War Tunnels through the categories of resistance, empathic positioning, and play as important outcomes of the experience.

### **Perceptions of resistance**

A lot of research has gone into the motivations of people visiting museums (Falk 2006; Zhou and Urhahne 2017) but not into the behaviour of those who did not have a choice in coming to

the museum. Whilst their behaviour is perceived by museum staff and other visitors as annoying and potentially disrespectful, it is not acknowledged that the school children have been forced into this space. Falk (2006) sees museum-goers as belonging to one of five identity-related entry motivations which bring them into the museum space, from hobbyist interests to personal exploration or even the desire to facilitate another's entry.

If you add to this Griffin's suggestion that school groups are often referred to as a 'single entity', there can be another category of 'the student' but one that is not afforded the same rights as adults to their own individual entrance narratives, motivations and participation determination which would facilitate student learning (Griffin 2004: 67). The behaviour witnessed amongst 'the student' such as hurrying through the museum, travelling against the flow of signage, and not keeping with the expected museum behaviour of hushed reverence, would not seem unusual in other situations where people are there without choice. Their presence is already unusual because, unlike many visitors, they have not come of their own motivations and so cannot be expected to behave in the same way as those exercising personal choice in being in that environment.

The French students encountered at the JWT can also be viewed as a neglected demographic in that the educational material provided on the website is aimed predominantly at local schools and younger age groups, with its 40-point downloadable questionnaire only available in English. A similar problem occurs in that only some of the information boards have been translated into French. Language barriers can be seen as a push factor encouraging the students to hurry

through the museum. Whilst many have not had specific motivation to come to the JWT that does not mean they will resist the space, unless there are other factors both metaphorically pushing and pulling them through the tunnels. Potential pull factors include the spaces emphasised by the critics—the café and gift shop. Arriving just before lunch time the students were likely hungry and eager to enjoy the sunshine on an unusually warm day in March, which stood in contrast to the cold temperatures in the tunnels. Furthermore, outside presented them with an opportunity to escape their teachers and experience some freedom from their constant supervision during the trip.

Unlike most general history museums, the JWT is set up as an experience designed to tell the true story of wartime Jersey and allow the visitor to gain an understanding of what life was really like. The nature of the tunnels and the desire to present a chronological narrative has led to the creation of a set route throughout, which cannot really be deviated from. There is only one exit at the end of the tunnel many system and signs instruct ‘no return beyond this point’, encouraging a one-way, chronological flow. In the interests of presenting an immersive experience, sections of half-finished tunnels are lit with shadowy projections of workers, dramatic lighting and sound effects mimicking rock fall which evoke active responses from visitors causing people to run from the room, clutch their partners hand tightly, or even let out a scream. These responses were witnessed amongst adults and children alike. Although a useful curation technique, this chronology creates pressure conformity to the structure, which can result in resistance from those who do not feel they subscribed to this specific experience of being pushed through the site.

Some of the school children ran against this prescribed flow or ignored certain rooms altogether. However, resistance to the modes of engagement expected by staff and common expectations of behaviour in museum spaces, does not mean that the visit was not of value to the students. Rather, they developed their own tactics of resistance to the order imposed upon them which enabled them to re-engage with the presented material but on their own terms.

### ‘C’est moi!’ Constructing identity as a means of connection



Figure 1: Identity cards

The JWT aims to tell “the hardship, the heartache and the heroism, in the words of the people who were there’ Individuals with a similar traumatic experience in their family history are more likely to develop deeper empathy (Cretan et. al 2018). Therefore, the site is particularly emotive for locals who may recognise the voices of their relatives or friends within the exhibits. For visitors to Jersey, this personal connection is not inherent and so needs to be constructed through empathetic positioning. Along with their ticket, an identity card is handed to each visitor (Figure 1).

These are printed copies of actual cards which were issued to all islanders in 1941 and feature one of 351 individuals

associated with resistance activities during the occupation. Their faces are found on long boards located in the final chamber of the tunnel. The decision to place this installation at the end creates a space for contemplation of what has been learnt throughout the visit, allowing it to be related to an individual with whom they now have a connection constructed through the possession of personal documents; this makes the history real. The French students had been presented with the identity cards on arrival by their teachers, which they kept on their persons. This suggests that the museum sees these physical documents as a crucial part of the total experience. The cards themselves also prove more accessible across language barriers; the format of identity is easily recognisable, and they are written in both English and German.

As they enter the final room the students stop as one member of the group exclaims excitedly to his friends. They whip out their identity cards and rush towards the boards. I step out of the way whilst they scramble to find the pictures that correspond to their cards.

But not all the pictures match—it's a game, they must look by name! One shouts something, perhaps figuring this out, then... 'C'est moi!'

'Me' had been the crucial word I heard in my conversations with visitors of all ages. The students find themselves first, then call their friends over to see. They whip out their phones and take pictures of the face on the board or turn the phone around to get a selfie against the wall. The information below each picture is in English; some translate words or discuss with their peers and then when photos have been taken and the information translated, read, and shared, they leave into the sunshine outside.

Having heard them enter the tunnels only 15 minutes earlier, this must have been the only spot the first group of students had stopped at, and they spent just over 10 minutes here looking at the photos. More filter through and there seems to be a continuous stream over the next 45 minutes.

Searching through the pictures requires attention and created a sense of investment on behalf of the students. Finding their individual resulted in excitement, followed by reflection. Whilst this room was also important to older visitors, they were less expressive in their excitement upon finding their person, but still called over their partners or silently read the captions while others took a picture. The identity cards are used to create a personal link to the past which is unique to the individual. This narration of history through an individual perspective, "stimulates emotional engagement, allowing people to identify with the thoughts and feelings of historical actors" (Savenije and de Bruijn 2017: 834). Cretan et. al, suggest that active empathy, done by placing one's self in another's position, is indicative of a deeper engagement with the site (2018: 646-647).

The students' desire to take photos of themselves with the pictures on the board, emphasises this close relational connection. Many pointed to certain features, such as hair colour or, in one case, a middle name, that they shared with the individuals on their cards. Whilst these similarities were accidental, the search for and acknowledgement of commonality shows the importance of the identity on the cards as related to the owner's sense of 'this is me.' Not only did these names and faces help to construct a direct connection of 'me' and position the students in the past and experience of the occupation, they also provided a resource

for interaction from which other personal relationships could be formed. Beyond making use of the provided identity cards, the students found additional ways to use the displays and position themselves in the narrative in ways the curators had not imagined.

### **Play as a means of mediation**

Alternative empathetic relationships in the JWT were formed through what I will characterise as play: the amusement of oneself by engaging in imaginative pretence. Borrowing from the concept of living history which is a popular form of narration within heritage sites in Jersey and beyond, the JWT makes use of models with video and audio recording for faces (Anderson 1982). These models are brought to life using motion detection to sense people approaching. Although pre-recorded, these displays create the sense of a conversation with the past in a way that does not reference the distance of time, therefore presenting the visitor with an opportunity to position themselves within the experience. In one room, four models of soldiers address the visitors in turn. One kneeling at child's height asks if he can buy the student an ice cream, suggesting they pick the strawberry on the hot sunny day (Figure 2). Underneath the question is posed: *"Would YOU ... let a German soldier buy you an ice cream? He's got children of his own and he misses them."*

As a child on my own school trip to the JWT, these models were a source of inspiration. We crowded around them and debated how to respond, until one of my classmates bent down and licked the plastic ice cream, signalling her moral response. Yes, she would! A second later our teacher shouted across the space,

*"Ashley, for Christ's sake don't lick the museum!"*

Ashley had used this action to engage with and address the question—although not exactly in the way museum staff, teachers, and other visitors had expected. Touch is often linked to animating the past, establishing the boundary between self and the other, which is not only essential to notions of the individual in rational thought, but also inaugurates emotion and desire (Candlin 2008: 286).

Whilst licking the ice cream might be an unusual variation of this, shaking the hand of another soldier in the room is a common practice, evidenced by the worn away paint. The soldier greets you with his arm stretched out inviting a response and the lack of signage commanding otherwise or retouching of the paint signals to the museum-goer that such an action is intended by the museum staff and is simply another way they ask for explicit engagement with the past.



*Figure 2: German Soldier*

This idea of play can also be seen where two female students, filtering through towards the end of the group, created their own way of interacting with the boards

of faces. Instead of seeking a connection with their assigned person through the identity card, they walked up and down the boards laughing and giggling. Each girl picking the male face she thought was the most attractive. Whilst initially strange considering the boards were to commemorate resistance workers, this interaction acted as a means of mediation, allowing them to focus their attention to an individual when the whole board would have been overwhelming. They then translated the information below the pictures, learning more about the story of their imagined beau and sharing them with each other.

In both cases, the students positioned themselves not as specific individuals but rather as themselves within a specific circumstance, such as being offered an ice-cream by an occupier or as the girlfriend of someone arrested for resistance activities. The witnessed responses of play could be perceived by critics as superficial, but in fact indicate a complex positioning of the subject which then allows for deeper engagement with moral questions or empathy.

In the case of the French school group studied during their visit to the JWT, the value of the experience should be viewed through the alternative skills learnt as opposed to curriculum-based learning which predominates museum educational research. Contrary to the supposed superficial engagement with the site, students are involved in a number of complex strategies that facilitate engagement through their own terms.

Resisting the structured timeline and framework of interaction offered by the museum, students seize opportunities to position themselves within the narrative and develop playful ways of constructing personal and deeply empathetic relationships

with the past beyond what the museum offers at first glance. Unlike the guided classroom session, school trips are one way in which children test out their own desires in learning environments; exercising choice and opportunities to explore are skills that in adulthood will lead to enjoyable, life-long learning. The ability to create empathy with people who speak a different language (English) and culture (the past) is a crucial skill that should take precedence over site-specific knowledge in our evaluations of the benefits of a museum education.

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