

Approaching Mixed Cultural Visits

Scenarios of use from COVID 19 and beyond

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Abstract

Mixed museum visits are expected to remain and even to increase in the world after the pandemic. Not only to stop the spreading of a disease but also to support visits of people previously excluded, like people in remote geographical areas or people with moving difficulties, different forms of combining online and onsite visits are already explored by researchers. The present work considers the Contextual Model of Museum Learning in order to describe possible scenarios of use for mixed cultural visits.

Keywords

Mixed, hybrid cultural visits, museum, contextual model

1. From COVID 19 and beyond

The COVID 19 pandemic affected most aspects of human life from the beginnings of 2020. Inevitably, museums and cultural institutions were also affected and many had to stop their operation and close their doors to the public. Physical visits were largely prevented and many people around the globe had to stay in their home in an attempt to control the spreading of the disease.

Museums responded to the new conditions by using different approaches to engage their visitors even from afar. For example, collections quickly went online, museums offered virtual tours in their premises and in some cases, they came up with imaginative social media campaigns, like the one from the Getty that asked people to recreate works of art in their home [1, 2]. In particular, social media became a quick and effective way to engage people with museums and cultural content [3]. Many museums almost doubled their online presence and became very active on their websites and on their social media accounts [4]. The changes were so fast and significant that many were left wondering what the future of museums will be [5] and if we are moving towards museums without walls [6].

However, the pandemic also allowed us to envision new forms of engagement with cultural content and to consider possibilities for future forms of cultural visits. In fact, researchers around the world explored the idea of hybrid museum visits and suggested different solutions. The numbers of these works seem to have significantly increased from 2020 onwards as a response to the new conditions the pandemic created. The de-prioritization of physicality and materiality became the new requirement for cultural visits [7]. Thus, the pandemic not only allowed us to define hybrid visits (as a mode of visitation that emerges both online and

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onsite) [8] but also to study the field in depth with studies that started collecting data for the effectiveness of hybrid museum visits [9].

Specifically, works focused on the different forms of technology that could support hybrid visits, leading to a paradigm shift and a new museology. From virtual reality to games, researchers were looking for ultimate solutions to support online and onsite visitors [10, 11]. However, the way the terms are used seem to be mixed up. The terms are used interchangeably and there does not seem to be clear understanding when terms like hybrid, mixed, or online visit are used. For example, in museum literature the term hybrid seems to refer to the blending of physical and digital experience [12], whereas in the education literature it refers to a group of people some of which attend online and some onsite [13].

The present work focuses on new forms of visits that have emerged during the pandemic and are expected to continue in the post pandemic era, also attempting to clarify and classify these new forms, using the very influential contextual model by Falk and Dierking [14, 15] and creating scenarios of use. Mixed and alternative forms of visit are expected to continue and expand not only to protect people from the spreading of a pandemic but to also support cultural visits from groups that were previously excluded, like geographically isolated populations, people with moving difficulties, elderly, etc.

2. The contextual model for museum visits

The work of Falk and Dierking [14, 15] has been used widely to describe the processes taking place during a cultural visit. The model provides a clear framework for understanding the learning processes in a museum visit and has been tested over the years for its validity [16]. The model has three main components. The personal component describes learning as a personal experience shaped by personal motives, emotions, interests, prior knowledge, etc. The socio-cultural component emphasizes the importance of social and cultural elements. For example, customary ways of behaving, code, assumptions, cultural and social expectations all influence what and how people learn during a cultural experience. The physical component stresses the importance of the physical-environmental setting. However, these components also need a fourth dimension to be better understood and this is time. Cultural experiences and museum learning need time. Learning and cultural experiences are dynamic phenomena, always changing. The time element is thus crucial in allowing people to make meaning from cultural experiences (Figure 1).

3. Mixed scenarios for the personal context

Regarding the personal context of learning, the field of cultural heritage can use knowledge from the field of education where there has been substantial research to support different modes of learning and engagement of learners with technology over the years. For example, in education there are distinct types of learning mode, like distance, online, hybrid, blended and mixed learning that incorporate technology.

In **distance** learning learners participate mostly asynchronously and at their own time they can access learning material. They can contact instructors both synchronously and

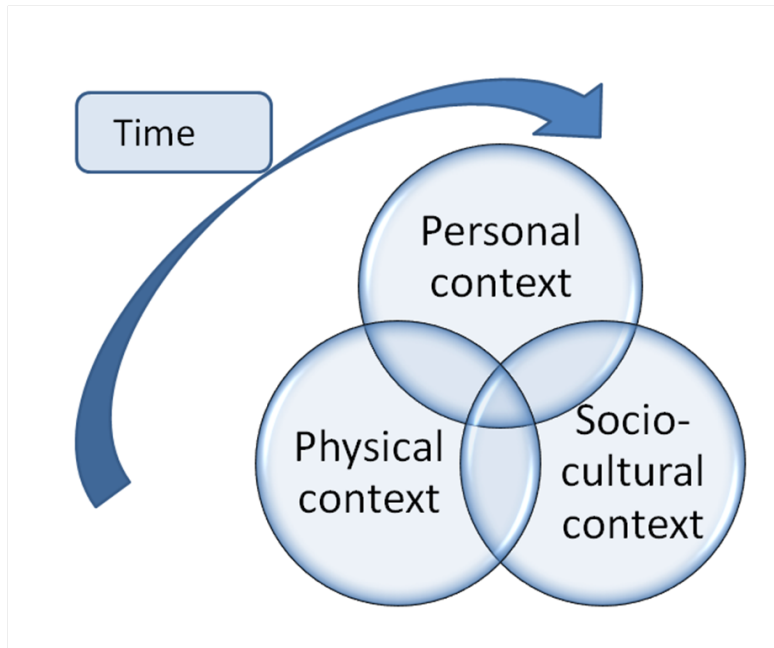


Figure 1: Contextual Model of Learning (Falk and Dierking [14, 15])

asynchronously [17]. During the pandemic many museums seem to follow the distance access paradigm, where they provided cultural content online and the public could access this from home. Thus, many museums allowed free access to digitized artifacts and online collections and tours. Communication between the museums and the public was often asynchronous, often via email and it did not seem to be a priority (especially synchronous communication, e.g. over a chat).

Online learning allows students and instructors to participate and communicate synchronously from different locations. Not many museums seem to support such activities. However, there are a few that use channels like YouTube to connect live with their audience, like the Corning museum of Glass¹. For example, in a hypothetical scenario, museums could provide live online access to preservation and other works taking place in their premises, while people could watch from home and discuss over a platform with museum personnel.

In **hybrid** learning the instructor, together with some students is present in the class whereas other students participate online [13]. Now, let us imagine a scenario where some people are present in the museum and others follow their visit from home, like grandparents, people with moving difficulties, etc. This could be easily done over the cameras of the visitors' mobile phones. However, questions remain about the quality of the experience for the remote visitors. Over the last two years there are research attempts to bridge the physical space of the museum with the online one and allow remote visitors active roles (e.g., [10, 11]). The cultural sector has also experimented with forms of cultural experiences, like a theatre performance where some actors are present in the theatre and others perform online from a prison. Despite the technical

¹<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KUcLVVAnoec>

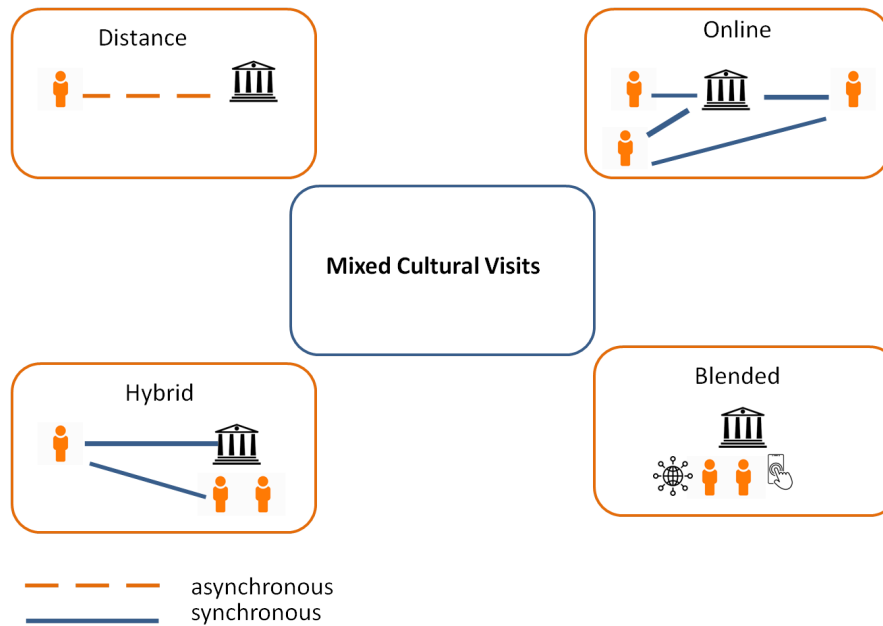


Figure 2: Types of mixed cultural visits

difficulties, the outcome was at least impressive, breaking barriers for cultural participation. Museums could consider further scenarios where online and onsite visitors are actively engaging with cultural content.

In **blended** learning all students are physically present in the class but they also use technology to access the learning content [18]. Blended visit practices are used in many museums around the world, since different types of technologies are used to provide additional cultural content. From mobile museum guides [19], to augmented [20] and virtual reality [21], games [22] and the Internet of Things [23], museums employ different types of technology to engage their visitors with their content and enhance the quality of their experience.

Finally, **mixed** learning is an umbrella term that can describe different ways online and onsite instruction can be mixed together [24] forming a continuum from minimum to maximum use of technology (figure 2). Figure 2 wishes to summarize the different types of mixed visits and it is not an exhaustive visualization of the field. Therefore, more combinations could come up when technology and cultural visits are mixed together. In the museum reality, we could thus talk about mixed modes of visits where technology could assist in different degrees and levels people to visit either online or onsite.

4. Mixed scenarios for the socio-cultural context

In regards to cultural experiences, considering what we missed the most during the pandemic, was probably the social aspect of the visits. Whether people visit alone or in groups, in museums and cultural spaces, the presence of others marks strong sociality elements that shape

the experience. Without them, the experience feels incomplete. From the beginning of the pandemic, there were concerns about the ways technology could (not) support the sociality of the cultural experiences and support people experiencing cultural content solely online [25]. Museums became increasingly aware of the lack of social exchanges in the experiences they offered online and many used social media to compensate. Certain social media campaigns were highly creative and had a large impact on social media. The Getty Museum Challenge ², as already mentioned, asked people to recreate works of art and post their photos on social media. There were other influential efforts, like a famous DJ who was invited at the archaeological site of ancient Messene, while people used the YouTube channel to discuss and have fun together in a big online party ³. Aspects of humor were also used in social media campaigns. For example, famous people and historical events were presented as Playmobil figures to entertain the public and increase their interaction with the museum's social media ⁴.

The social aspects of visits and the ways they could be blended with technology are now investigated by researchers [26], although the popularity of such approaches is not yet very high, probably because of the design challenges one needs to face when a group of people has to be simultaneously supported. Nevertheless, there are current efforts that attempt to create symbiotic environments for museum staff like human guides, visitors and technologies [27].

5. Mixed scenarios for the physical context

The physicality of the experience is central in the cultural experiences. It makes a huge difference whether people are physically present or in different locations. The importance of the physical aspects of the visit has been well acknowledged and there are many studies that show how technologies can be adapted to provide content that is location specific [28].

During lockdown, a new trend appeared which was that of following a person walking in a certain physical location through your device. People could pay a fee, to watch a person walking through an archaeological site (e.g. famous online walks of Petra in Jordan or Pompeii in Italy) or a city. The need to go beyond informative material and have a strong sense of the physical space was obvious. Some museums responded to the need for physical content and provided 3D online tours for the public. However, their efficiency in providing a sufficient cultural experience is still questioned [29] and different elements are studied to understand why some 3D tours are better than others [30]. As VR systems improve and become more affordable for home use, museums might invest in virtual tours to support physical context requirements for mixed visits.

The potential of mixed visits to support the physicality of the cultural experience is significant since mixed visits can help people that cannot physically attend to have a connection with the cultural space. For example, Pisoni [31] used a system that allowed elderly at a care home to connect with their friends and family at the museum and co-experience the museum space. In addition, De Carolis et al. [32] explored the ways social robots can be used in tourist and

²<https://twitter.com/gettymuseum/status/1242845952974544896?lang=en>

³<https://www.onassis.org/news/charlotte-de-witte-at-ancient-messene>

⁴<https://www.nhmuseum.gr/ektheseis/periodikes/item/17376-to-21-allios-i-elliniki-epanastasi-me-figoyres-kai-dioramata-playmobil-sto-mouseio-plinthokeramopoiias-n-s-tsalapata-ston-voilo>

cultural experiences. Following their example, social robots could provide an opportunity for remote visitors to explore the cultural space by tele-controlling their movement.

6. Mixed scenarios over time

The importance of supporting a cultural experience before, during and after it happens, is well recognized in the literature. Time as an important element in the Contextual Model and different museum technologies seem to consider this, designing experiences to support the need for an experience that has duration in time [33]. The temporal aspects of a mixed visit are very important (the duration of support as well as the synchronous or asynchronous experience) and they seem to determine the level of engagement and the quality of the overall experience [25]. Especially during the pandemic when museums were physically closed, aspects of online synchronous and asynchronous experiences were evaluated and their qualitative aspects were emphasized [34].

7. The contextual model of mixed visits

Based on the above, the contextual model is thus modified to accommodate the need for mixed visits (figure 3). The clarified use of the terms distance, online, hybrid and blended allows a better conceptualization and makes easy to understand the different visit modalities. Any plans museums might have for supporting mixed visit should also consider issues of physicality, sociality and temporality of the experience. When mixed museum experiences are designed, it is important to consider all the elements of the model, in order to plan for a more complete visitor experience. Modality, physicality, sociality and temporality of mixed visits are all essential elements in a museum experience that allows a smooth blending of technologies and cultural experiences.

The present work attempted to organize the field of mixed cultural visits and our future work will focus on testing the different scenarios formed when different combinations of the categories are tried. We will for example test different modalities of mixed visits with different combinations regarding space, social interactions and time and will study their effects on the quality of the cultural experience.

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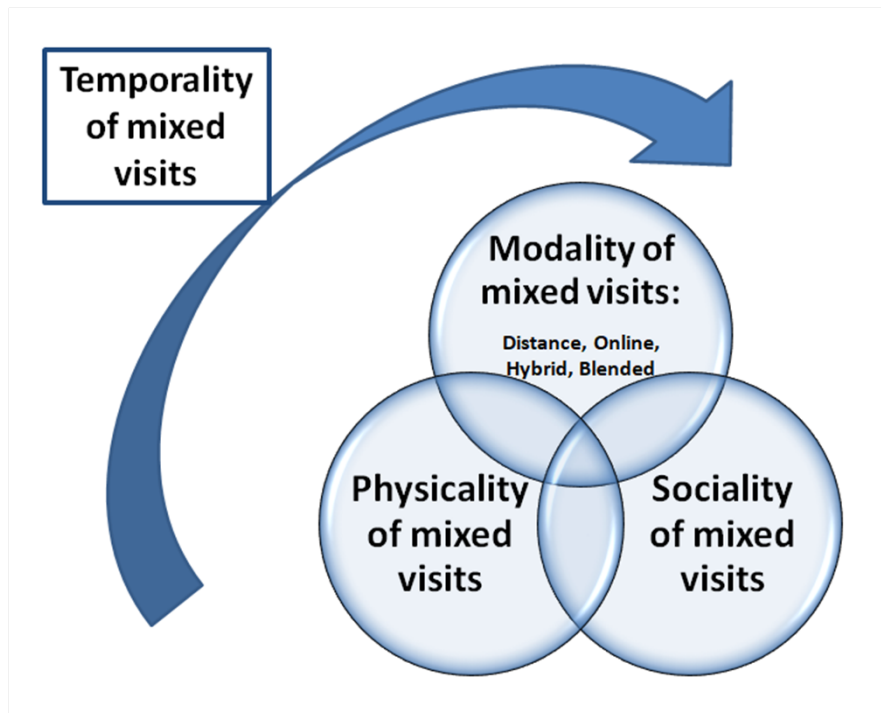


Figure 3: Contextual model of mixed visits

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