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The Sensational Museum's Art of Multisensory Storytelling

https://doi.org/10.1515/iph-2025-0002
Published online July 2, 2025

Abstract: The Sensational Museum, a UK-based, multi-institution research project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), aims to challenge ableist biases in heritage sectors. The project explores how the potential of 'multisensory' can be leveraged to create inclusive, equitable experiences for both museum professionals and visitors. Led by the concepts of disability gain, equity, and inclusion, the project argues that no one sense should be necessary or sufficient to have rich and meaningful experiences with history and heritage. In this audio recording and descriptive transcript, Sophie Vohra and Charlotte Slark discuss their research for The Sensational Museum, and the value and impact of multisensory storytelling in their work. Using a drum from the Africa Museum as a reoccurring talking point, they expand on the complexities of shifting mindsets and practices to provide more inclusive, progressive and equitable multisensory encounters with museum collections. With insights from Canadian-based professional audio describer, J.J. Hunt, they explore how multisensory language can provide nuanced, rounded, and enhanced descriptions of museum collections and interactions with them. Moving to explore how multisensory storytelling can be embedded in interpretation and communication, Vince Dziekan shares how we can apply his 'body, mind, soul' framework to explore multidimensional ways to shape museum interpretation for visitors to meaningful connections with the collections. Overall, they demonstrate how multisensory storytelling can be applied to collections and communication and highlight the important role multisensory language and interpretation have in making museums more accessible, equitable and inclusive.

Keywords: access; disability gain; equity; multisensory; museums; storytelling

1 Vocal Descriptions

Sophie speaks in a clear and considered way, with a lyrical, soft and lower vocal tone… and occasionally some loud laughs! Putting on her more 'formal voice,' here she speaks with a 'non-typical' north-western accent, with dropped 'a's and stronger enunciation. She often wonders if her different code-switching voices that make up critical parts of her identity (Macclesfield, Yorkshire, academic/telephone, British Indian, Spanish) come through.

Charlotte speaks animatedly and talks faster when she's excited. She has a southern English accent, which a local person would identify as a somewhat polished combination of Slough and Staines upon Thames (think quite hard consonants!). It's the accent of someone from a working-class background who has spent a lot of time having to fit-in in middle class spaces.

J.J. has a resonant, friendly, smooth, and animated voice that accurately conveys how much he speaks with his hands. A voiceover agent once told him he had a great Neutral North American accent, and that he would be perfect for 'Trustworthy Uncle' roles. J.J. agreed with the assessment, though he found being labelled Neutral rather irksome.

Vince retains a Canadian accent, which has its roots in Eastern Canada (Quebec. more specifically), which also carries a West Coast inflection mixed with Australian tendencies (thanks to growing up in Vancouver and living in Melbourne for many years). When speaking, he often elaborates on what he is expressing by 'talking with his hands.' In this particular conversation he does so to provide added emphasis when describing certain concepts.

2 Notes on Transcript Style

– Punctuation is used to indicate the way the content was delivered, rather than necessarily being grammatically correct. Please try and read it with these pauses (or not as the case may be) in mind.

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- Words in square brackets and in italics, [***like this***], indicate delivery types (e.g. softly; animated), audible occurrences (e.g. laugh; sigh), and sound differences (e.g. quieter delivery) in the recording.[1]
- Ellipses (like… this) indicate a short break between sentences.
- Italicized words (*like this*) indicate emphasis placed more heavily on the words as they are delivered, and bold italicized words (***like this***), a strong emphasis.
- Quotation marks ("like this") mean we are suggesting this is something someone might have said (e.g. she said, "oh, that was weird," and I could see why).
- Whereas quotation marks ('like this') mean we are emphasizing it as a useful term (e.g. 'the fourth wall').

3 Transcript

The audio file of the recorded conversation is available as Supplementary Material.

Charlotte 00:00

[***Cheerily***] Hello! I'm Charlotte Slark.

Sophie 00:01

[***Softly with a smile***] And I'm Sophie Vohra.

Charlotte 00:03

We always start our podcast with a quick visual description, so Sophie, do you want to go first?

Sophie 00:08

[***slowly as she considers what to say***] I am a woman, in my, early thirties. I have olivey-brown skin, which at present is, quite pale, [***jokingly***] because, I… can't remember the last time I saw the sunlight in Britain, and I have just-below-the-ear-length, wavy, today, dark brown hair and brown eyes, and I've got some red, thick-rimmed, glasses on, today. Charlotte, how about you?

Charlotte 00:32

So I am a woman in my thirties, who has *incredibly* pale skin [***deadpan***] that remains the same color throughout the year. [***with the faintest trace of a laugh***] I have got curly, [***suddenly speeds up, excitedly***] highlighted hair that's up in a bun today and *incredibly* big glasses.

You're currently reading, the descriptive transcript of a conversation that took place between Sophie and myself about The Sensational Museum. [***slows down a little***] You might be listening [***elongated 'ooo'***] to, the recording, that we did, of that conversation, [***begins to speed up again***] or you *might* even be listening to a screen reading, of the descriptive transcript. [***Excitedly speeds up more***] This is all to say that there are lots of different ways that you can *engage* with The Sensational Museum output, and this is very much by design. The whole ethos of The Sensational Museum, is that no one sense is necessary or sufficient, and by that we mean, there *should* be no one way to engage in content in a way that is *meaningful* and *equitable*.

[***Slows down from her as she carefully considers her words***] The format of the descriptive transcripts came about as, a [***elongated as she considers what to say***] … alternative way to engage, with, the podcasts that we create for The Sensational Museum project. We wanted to make sure that there was a transcript available, but, in going along with the ethos of The Sensational Museum, we wanted that transcript to give a [***elongated, again, as she considers what to say***] … *equal*, *experience*, that you'd normally get from the podcast. So for us, it wasn't just important what was being said, but instead, *how* things were being said. So you will see descriptions, of, the way we laugh, the way we talk, [***speeds up***] at the beginning you'll see descriptions of our accents. [***slows down again***] You'll see descriptions of, our *pauses*, [***smiling with a slight laugh***] how I tend to speed up when I get, *excited*. These are all really important things and, are vital to the *experience*, of listening, and that just doesn't translate in a normal transcript. And that's fine. [***slows down a little***] But we want to make sure that those beautiful little things that communicate, [***excitedly speeds back up again***] so much more than words can, are still present in our transcriptions.

[***With a slightly slower, more even pace***] So today we're talking, about our, work with The Sensational Museum, but we're also talking about multisensory engagement… more broadly. We've got a couple of guests, that we're going to be speaking to later on, but first, we thought we'd give you, a bit of an introduction to what it is we do, and why it's important.

[***A slightly higher tone to her voice***] So Sophie, do you want to tell us a bit more about The Sensational Museum?

Sophie 02:27

[***Softer, slower, less animated delivery than Charlotte***] The Sensational Museum, is an AHRC-funded, multi-institution research project, that's [***elongated 's'***], designed to *challenge*, [***harshly enunciated words***] explicit *and* implicit ableist biases in the heritage sector. In doing so,

1 A useful resource for how to listen to and describe components of speech: Wendy LeBorgne, "Vocal Branding: How Your Voice Shapes Your Communication Image," TEDx Talk, Cincinnati, 2018, 12 min, 21 s, https://youtu.be/p_ylzGfHKOs?si=9ir9FYQw3Q140kqt.

we're questioning the *default* sensory communication of heritage outputs and, asking how museums can create more welcoming, inclusive, engaging and equitable spaces, that are *accessible* to *both* non-disabled and disabled visitors.

[***Harsher 's' sounds***] By reimagining this sector through this… *lens* of, multisensory ways of knowing, thinking and communicating, The Sensational Museum seeks alternative, equitable and… *progressive*, understandings of the sensory qualities of museums. So our work is *embedded* in the concept of, disability *gain*, which is the idea that, provisions, that, [***suddenly speeds up, assuredly***] are put in place for people with disabilities, actually benefit everyone.

Charlotte 03:30

[***'singsong' delivery***] The Sensational Museum is split into two strands. Sophie, can you tell us more about Strand A?

Sophie 03:35

[***With more gusto and conviction***] The Collections Strand, considers the journey of, a collections item coming into the museum, [***choppy delivery***] the process of it, becoming, [***elongated***] part of the collection, and, how it makes a digital [***elongated 'f'***] footprint, [***elongated***] in, [***searching for the right words***] management systems, and ultimately, [***elongated***] becomes, a new embedded *piece* in the growing picture, of, the organization's story.

Museum professionals [***elongated***] are… very used to providing *baseline* [***harsh 'f'***] functional information on their collections, but in *doing* so, they end up missing out a *broader* spectrum of sensory information that could provide greater insights, into their collections, and, what they have to offer. And beyond [***lazily misses out the end 't'***] that, [***elongated***] there's, a noticeable absence, of sensory interactions with the collections, many of which, ***[smiling with a slight laugh***] end up happening, during the, development of, [***briefly speeds up***] exhibitions, [***elongated***] and, public facing content, and in turn, doesn't get fed back into the system after there have been important co-creative sessions, for example, [***elongated***] or opportunities for learning and education.

Charlotte, could you tell us about your Strand?

Charlotte 04:45

[***Speedily, with conviction***] So where your work Sophie, focuses on the really important back-of-house element of collections in museums, mine focuses on how those collections are communicated to their audiences, but[*!*], both Strands very much go hand in hand. The better the information in the record, the easier it is to plan multisensory exhibitions, and the more multisensory research you *do* for exhibitions, the more great information you have for the records. So this is a cyclical process which constantly feeds into itself.

Sophie 05:09

[***Noticeably slower than Charlotte***] Could you talk us through, why, multisensory [***elongated***] is, so important in museums?

Charlotte 05:15

Museums are, at their heart, hubs for people to engage with the past. But people aren't going to engage with their history if it's not accessible to them. So in the West, there is very much a [***in a way that you can absolutely hear the implied air quotes***] 'traditional' way of engaging in museums. This is typically visual, and relies on audiences to read large amounts of text. This is *deeply* rooted in colonialism, but also, we know this isn't actually the most effective way to engage in museums. Research has shown that the average amount of time that a museum visitor spends in front of each object, is, 20 s.[2] So even if they're looking at objects, they're not necessarily *seeing* the object or artwork and its story. When multisensory approaches *are* used in museums, it's often as part of their accessibility offering, for example, audio [***elongated last syllable***] description or touch [***elongated last syllable***] tours. And these are often offered as separate provision, *exclusively* for disabled people, which enforces a false binary between abled and disabled audiences. At The Sensational Museum, we firmly believe that multisensory should be embedded within the core provision of museums, and shouldn't *just* be about communicating what something *looks* like. Instead, we're calling [***elongated***] for multisensory *storytelling* to be a vital part, of, multisensory in museums. So Sophie, how does multisensory storytelling feature in your Strand?

Sophie 06:25

It's been really interesting, to start to reconsider and, build up a new profile of the collections and interactions, *with them*, in a collections management database. As you said, we're often more *concerned* with what ends up in front of the public, but we often miss out on those interactions, [***elongated***] and, pieces of research, that really give us a nuanced *insight*, into the collections. And so what has [***elongated***] been, an important learning curve for the museum professionals working with us, *learning* to reassess their

2 Lisa F. Smith, Jeffrey K. Smitt, and Pablo L. Tinio. "Time spent viewing art and reading labels," Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts 11, no. 1 (2017): 77–85, https://doi.org/10.1037/aca0000049.

collections, in a multisensory way, is thinking about how you tell a story [***lazily misses out the 'd'***] *around* those collections beyond a very basic description, dimensions, [***elongated***] or, materials, it's made of, and instead, giving something that gives a *richness* to it, which has, multiple benefits, both within the museum, but also then, to how it's communicated *out*.

So, let's take for example… a sub-Saharan, African drum, that, Charlotte and I found, from, the Africa Museum, which is a *beautiful*, collection item. [***As she stares at the** webpage **and considers the absent information***] And yes, it has striking visual elements, and, it's important to know about the dimensions, but, there are so many other sensory components that even, just looking at the object record, are missing. So Charlotte, if you were [***elongated***] coming, to this collections database [***elongated***] and, discovered this drum, [***suddenly speeds up***] what information would actually be *useful* for you to be able to, [***slows down again***] think about its potential for exhibition and communication?

Charlotte 08:03

That's a great question, because, like you said, there's *so* much sensory potential, with this particular object. And traditionally, in an exhibition, it would be [***somewhat incredulously***] often presented in a glass case[***?***]. [***Speeds up***] And this is obviously not accessible to blind or partially blind museum visitors, but it's also not ideal for non-blind visitors either. So, if you're… putting it in a case, the obvious way of conveying that in a multisensory way, *is* to say what it looks like. [***Elongated***] So, [***speeds up***] the image on the record shows a [***reading from an object record***] "closed, single-skinned, barrel shaped drum. The membrane is attached via a complex plaited raffia net, on two parallel raffia stems that tighten the skin. The plaiting around the wooden sound box has regular patterns,"[3] and that's the description that you have there. And what does that, *tell you,* about, the drum, beyond what it looks like? [***Slowly***] Not a lot [***?***]. [***Speeds up***] I mean, does it accurately convey its history? No. And perhaps what it looks like isn't necessarily the best way for audiences to *engage* with its history and wider story of the exhibition. Maybe, the drum was used ceremonially, and, that's the story that's being told. Or maybe it was specifically for weddings or funerals, [***elongated***] or, just part of a band. I mean we don't know that[***!***], that's not the information that's on the object record and I am, [***slows a little***] not an expert, in, drums. But maybe the best way to tell that story, or whatever the story of this drum is, is with the sound that the drum *makes*, or the specific [***with a firm onomatopoeic "b" on beat***] beat that would be played on it, or with the *smell* of a wedding feast, for example. [***Elongated***] Maybe, it's about how it was produced, and what's important is the feel of the materials or the processes that went into creating that intricately plaited raffia net. Also, maybe we want to know what it *sounds* like; maybe we want to know what it ***feels*** like. Often, there will be materials in an object record, but, not [***slows down***] everybody knows what certain *skin*, feels like. Particularly certain skin that has been, tanned, [***elongated***] or, manufactured or *treated* in a certain way. So it's thinking, beyond, [***suddenly speeds up again***] those obvious things of what it looks like, getting away from that being the most *important* thing about an object, to being much more about, what the story it needs to tell is, and how, we can tell that in a way that is actually meaningful?

Sophie 10:01

So does this mean that we should be moving away from using visual in these museum settings?

Charlotte 10:09

[***Very fast***] In a way, no. [***Slight smile as she starts***] When we're talking about not relying on visual, we don't mean that there's no place for visual in museums. In the same [***elongated***] way, [***choppy***] that, by, advocating for multisensory, we don't mean another single sense *instead* of vision. What we're *really* pushing for is interpretation in museums, which gives audiences the opportunity to *choose* which sense they engage with. So where no one sense is *truly* necessary or sufficient. Museum audiences need to be, [***very fast***] given a choice [***normal 'fast' speed***] in how they're able to engage with the object, so if you're blind or partially blind, a sound of the drum alone, may be more accessible to you, [***speeds up***] but it's not necessarily enough to communicate the story of the drum still[***?***]. And, this is something that's come out of my research, often multisensory elements in museums are used to supplement a *core* visual, and usually more traditional, experience. So where sounds or scents *are* used, they are often *meaningless*[***?***] without a label or some sort of information, which, contextualizes what you're hearing or smelling, or at the very least, being able to see the object itself.

And, we know that labels are just, not accessible to people who are [***tone raises incrementally as she goes through each item on her list***], blind or partially blind, having a learning difficulty, having English as a second language, or coming from an area with educational deprivation, [***tone drops back down***] all these things can make labels

3 "Drums from sub-Saharan Africa. Online. Africa Museum," Africa Museum, accessed March 2, 2025, https://www.africamuseum.be/en/discover/focus_collections/display_object?objectid=31781.

inaccessible to you. But also, there is a large percentage of people, [***conspiratorially***] including, you and I, and we've talked about this at length elsewhere,[4] who simply don't, like reading, [***as if said slyly out the side of her mouth***] large amounts of texts on labels. [***Speeds up***] Again we're not saying to do away with labels altogether, [***speeds up even more until the end of the paragraph***] but give people an alternative way to engage with the important information that you have spent a long time researching and putting together. Basically similar to what we've done here. So you've, *got*, our, descriptive transcript, you've *got* the audio. Everything we do is accessible to screen readers. We want people to have the choice of how they engage there. So, you might be reading this, you might be listening, you might be doing combination of both. However you choose to engage with things. And it's giving people a choice.

Sophie 11:59

One of the things that the museum professionals we've worked with have found, [***with a smile***] the most *challenging*, is building up a new vocabulary, [***elongated***] and, language for talking about multisensory interactions, with their collections, be that from [***elongated***] merely, describing the sensory [***elongated***] properties, all the way through to more complex, personalized storytelling. And it's *here* that I think the sector needs [***with hopeful concern***] the most support, but also where there is [***elongated***] so much promise in the work of, audio describers who have spent, their careers thinking about and constructing narratives, that best convey something visual. And, not only *visual*, but the surrounding sensory understandings of [***animatedly delivered her short list***] space, sounds, interactions to, people who can't access that information in a traditional way. And so, I think it's *here* that it's useful for us to spend some time talking about the skills, of the audio describer, [***elongated***] and, the strategies they have in place to think about, how you describe heritage collections, *in* this multisensory way.

Charlotte 13:04

We're really lucky in The Sensational Museum, to [***elongated***] have, members of the team who are *also* working, [***elongated***] on, audio description. Both Alison [Eardley] and Hannah [Thompson] have been working on, the, *Workshop for Inclusive Co-created Audio Description*, or W-ICAD model.[5] However, we've also been really lucky, to talk to, lots of different people, across the world who have been working on, similar projects. [***With a big smile***] So now we'd love to bring [***elongated***] in, one of [***elongated***] our, incredible, audio description contacts, J.J. Hunt.

Sophie 13:30

[***Said with a smile***] Welcome, J.J. would you like to introduce yourself, who you [***elongated***] are [***elongated***] and, what you do?

J.J. 13:36

My name's J.J. Hunt. I am a middle-aged white guy of settler heritage. And because it's winter here in Toronto, Canada this is the "*shaggy season*" for me, so my [***elongated, deeper words***] grey hair and grey beard make for a very "cosy took in a warm" mane, so [***laughing slightly***] they are grown out long and thick right now. [***More animated***] And, I've been describing for [***takes a beat to remember how long***] 25 years now, I started working in TV and in movies. I've described live events, I describe in museums and gallery settings, I do walking [***elongated***] tours, [***elongated***] and I do podcasting, so most notably, the Talk Description to Me podcast with my very good friend and colleague, Christine Malec. The idea was to *describe* the visuals of the world around us, there were so many crazy things happening in the world, so many visuals that Christine who is a member of Toronto's blind community, *didn't* have access to and what we found was the, news media would talk about these things, and then they'd roll some B-roll video in the background, and they'd never actually, reference, what, was happening on the screen, so Christine and I started describing the world around us. It started with heavier news stories and big picture, political and social, visuals, and then it got into what about all the quirky things? What about dance? What about flags? And really, it's the visuals of all the things that fall through the cracks. We do deep dives on movie genres, [***elongated***] and we, talk about clothing. Anything that has a visual component that isn't going to be described, in a movie, or a TV show [***elongated***] or, in tombstone information [***laughing slightly***] in a museum or gallery, *that's* what we're looking to describe on the podcast.

Sophie 15:08

[***Slow and considered***] So what makes a *good* audio description?

J.J. 15:12

[***Quickly***] You start with the basics, right, a good description [***slows down***] has to be, accurate. It has [***elongated***] to, start with a big picture and then [***speeds up momentarily***] move into the details. I think a *lot* of descriptions that

4 See the "Disability Gain" episode of the Sensational Museum Podcast for a discussion of why Charlotte and Sophie do not like reading long museum panels and labels, and feel somewhat guilty about it.

5 "Home. Online. W-ICAD," Workshop for inclusive co-created audio description (W-ICAD), accessed March 10, 2025, https://w-icad.org/.

[***enunciated***] get written either by humans, or, by, professionals or, AI, they sometimes miss basic things [***slight laugh***]. A good description is [***rounded, elongated***] *evocative*, a good description has [***warmly***] *lush* language. A good description, matches its [***elongated***] tone to, either the thing being described [***elongated***] or, the environment that it's being described in. All of those things have to come together. And, honestly a good description is just a [***quickly***] tiny little story.

Charlotte 15:51

How crucial is multisensory to what you do?

J.J. 15:54

The multisensory element of it is key. [***Speeds up***] When I sit down to write a description the first thing I do is look at the language. That's going to be the primary tool in my toolbox. But sometimes I think we get [***highly enunciated***] *caught up in* the language choices, and strangely, we rely too heavily on the visuals especially in a museum, [***slows down***] and [***elongated***] gallery setting. Obviously a describer's, explicit, primary task is to fill in those visual gaps. But we have to remember that the audience we're speaking to isn't, normally taking in the world visually, in lots of cases. So, we need to be engaging we need to be, [***highly enunciated***] relating, [***choppier***] to, the people, that we are speaking to so [***smoother***] the description should move beyond just the words and it should engage all those other senses. So, we're going to try and make it multisensory. [***Speeds up slightly***] And so sometimes that's not explicit, description, sometimes, if you've got a touch object, so you're going to bring your description into the [***slows down***] touch object side of things, you're going to maybe use [***elongated 's'***] *scent*, you can use *taste*, you can use [***elongated 's'***] *sound*, but then even in the *language* choices for the description itself, if I'm doing a walking tour, for example, I'm going to make sure that I'm not only describing the visuals, but I'm *talking* about soundscape, temperature, all those things. Like, one of my very favorite and most [***elongated last syllable***] popular, walking tours is a Halloween ghost walk, [***choppier***] and, I, think it's popular because of the inherent [highly enunciated next two words] multisensory experience of being on that tour, and so, [***pauses briefly to reach for an example***] if we're describing a creepy old hospital. Instead of just saying that the old hospital has, [***speeds up***] linoleum floors and painted walls and fluorescent lights, we're going to use rich and evocative language and say, [***dramatically elongates his words with a deep, slightly raspy, monotone resonance and harsh, punctuated consonants***] the labyrinth of identical corridors is lined with [***elongated***] dull linoleum floors and walls layered thick with stained and peeling, sickly green paint, and that it's lit with flickering tubes of fluorescent light. [***back to a more conversational tone***] And then we're going to crank up the multisensory, and it's not just that those lights flicker, they flicker and hhuuumm, because I want that hhuuumm in there, so that my audience, is going to relate to it. If there's a *ghost* that's floating through that hallway [***speeds up***] instead of the ghost just floating through, maybe that ghost is going to [***slows down***] float through and bring with her [***in a more theatrical, enunciated storytelling voice***] an unearthly chill that sucks the warmth from the room. [***switching back to a more conversational tone***] So it's *not* just using, descriptive [***elongated***] language, it's about how you're speaking, what other senses you're bringing into it. [***Jollier with a smile***] *And then*, can you add a tactile element, a*nd then* can you do a tactile tour of that element? I like to think big picture with these things and think how many different ways, [***choppier***] can we come at a single object or description and [***plosive 'b'***] build out from it.

Sophie 18:29

So we've been using this, sub-Saharan drum, as an example. [***Elongated***] How, would you begin, to describe something like this?

J.J. 18:38

[***Animatedly***] One of the things that stands out for me the *shape* of the drum I'm going to want to make sure I'm describing accurately. I want to make sure I'm describing, [***Slows down slightly***] *textures,* there's some really interesting textures. It looks like there's a woven *base* and this round-bottom pot shape, and it looks like that woven texture, all around the barrel-shaped base, and then the *taut* leather. I'm going to want to talk about the *textures*, of this, as well as the *shape,* and the *size,* that's the other thing that's always hard to tell in an image. I also want to know what it *sounds* like, because there's a *lot* that happens when you've got an object that is *meant to be* ***held****, meant to be* ***played****, meant to make* ***sound.***

Charlotte 19:17

[***Carefully considers how to phrase this question***] So what would you suggest if we're in a position, which almost *always* happens, with museum collections where, musical instruments in particular can't be handled or played by the audience?

J.J. 19:28

So if you are in a position where, no audio can be made available, hopefully, the describer, if this is me, hopefully *I* will at least get to hear it so that I *can* describe it accurately.

And *then* what I'm going to want to try and do [***elongated***] is, come up with *words* that [***enunciates next few words***] convey the actual sound. Is it a [***in a deep, rumbling tone***] "dthung dthuuuungg"? Can I, make, create a word that will, [***speeds up***] depending on how this description is being delivered. Is this text to speech? How's the text to speech going to *read* the language that I use? I'm going to want to talk about the difference between [***slows down***] hitting it in the *middle* of the drum and the [***elongates word***] *side* of the drum, because those are different sounds. And then I'm going to look for, metaphors. I'm going to, not only try and come up with words that *imitate* the sound, but talk about how that sound feels. Does this drum have a sound that [***with a cupped open fingered hand on the center of his chest, talking a little deeper***] you hear in your chest? Or does it have one that [***gesturing spirit fingers above his head with both hands***] somehow seems to float above your head [***?***], is it a [***breathy***] high pitched[***?***], when you hit the side does it have a [***elongating the 'i'***] ring to it[***?***], because, there's all sorts of different ways, so I want to make sure I'm describing, as best I can, am I using language that imitates the sound? [***Elongated***] Am I, getting all of the sounds that it can make? Can I come up with a *metapho*r that makes people [***elongating the 'f'***] feel it?

Charlotte 20:41

So, what about people, we know that this is particularly the case for some autistic people for example, who, struggle with metaphors?[6]

J.J. 20:48

The concept of metaphor's not going to work? Okay, so now I'm going to lean into the literal, or maybe I'll get them to put a hand [***puts his hand on his chest***], if this is something they're comfortable with, put a hand on your chest, give your chest a little bit of a [***deep, rhythmically, quickly, while pressing his hand on his chest three times***] bump, bump, bump. *That's* the *feeling* I'm talking about so I'm going to try and turn it into a personal, physical experience. Because that's what I'm hearing from description users, *especially* in museum and gallery settings, is "I hear you telling me what it *looks* like, can you tell me how that *feels*, [***choppier***] to see it or touch it or play with it?" I think the key is, if it doesn't work one way, don't just try it again and again using the same kind of path, come up with a different path and see if you can find a way that's going to work, for, the end client standing in front of you.

Sophie 21:31

How would you bring storytelling into [***elongated***] your description, of this drum?

J.J. 21:36

If I'm doing, maybe a kids' [***elongated***] tour, and that drum is in a case, and they're not able to touch it, and I *don't* have a tactile replica, that *might* be the way I say, [excitedly speeds up] "Okay, everyone sit down and imagine yourself picking up this drum," [***slows down***] and that's *one* of the ways you could story-tell your way *through*, a description of this piece and have it be physical, tangible, more *engaging* to, [***speeds up***] that particular audience.

Sophie 22:00

What advice would you give to museum professionals who are starting out on this, multisensory, storytelling journey?

J.J. 22:09

[***Sincerely***] Start working with amazing community consultants. Because, often, we think, as, sighted museum professionals or, sighted accessibility folks, we've got answers, [***speeds up momentarily***] even if we're just starting out, we think "we'll find the answers ourselves," and the fact is, the resources that the community members have, the things that *they* are thinking about. [***Higher pitched***] *They*, *know* they have *ideas*, this is a group of people that is *only recently* been *re*-invited to these tables. So, come up with not just consultants, collaborators, get community members involved in all of these teams, [***higher pitch word***] *hopefully* your teams already have people with diverse experiences on them. If they don't [***in a tone that indicates that this should be obvious***] *hire* people who've got direct experience with, whatever it is you're working on. The more diverse your team, the [***elongated***] more, [***elongated***] ways your team has to *approach* the subject. The more ideas life experiences, the better and *richer* your end description is gonna be. I could give a checklist of things that you [***elongating the word***] *need to do*, if you're going to write good description. None of that will matter, if you go through the checklist first, and then say, [***speeds up***] "oh yeah, we forgot to consult." And then you find a consultant, and you say, [***imitating someone who is aggressively seeking validation***] "this is good, right?" That's not the way to consult. You need to collaborate. You need to have a rich and diverse team. That's the *starting* point.

Charlotte 23:30

[***Slower for Charlotte***] So, J.J. just gave us a really excellent insight into how, audio description can really *enhance* the experience of a, space, a place, an object, or, more

6 This was shared with the researchers during the co-creative workshops to design the Strand B toolkit. On the advice of an autistic co-creator, the language in the toolkit resources was reworked to ensure it was not disabling people who find metaphors inaccessible.

importantly, for us, a story. [***Chuckling slightly as she speaks***] But not everybody can have J.J. doing an incredible tour of their museum. Obviously audio description can be, recorded and listened to, on a device. But audio description is not the only way to tell a story, that isn't visual. We also need to be doing that in the galleries, with how we think about interpreting our objects. [***With more hints of slight laugher***] Obviously this is something we have a lot of thoughts about, but we thought it would be good idea to speak to somebody else about this too.

Sophie 24:06

[***Cheerily***] We invited Dr Vince Dziekan to provide some insights into how multisensory can be used, to allow the visitors to engage with museum objects [***elongated***] and interpretation from a number of different perspectives.

Charlotte 24:20

[***Bouncy, with a smile***] So Vince, do you want to introduce yourself, say who you are and what you do please.

Vince 24:25

I'm Vince. I'm a white man, predominantly black hair [***chuckling***], grey is increasingly creeping in. Wearing blue glasses and a black shirt. I'm an academic based at Monash University, in, Melbourne. [***elongated***] I'm in an Art, Design and Architecture faculty, so I work predominantly in a, practice-based faculty, and my research engages with museums and digital culture, and that's where, working with ideas around multisensory, considerations for museum interpretation fits [***elongated***] in [***elongated***] to, some of the things that I do.

Sophie 24:59

Can you tell us about how you've been using multisensory, in your practice?

Vince 25:04

[***Contemplatively recalling the scope of the project***] There was a three-year research project here in Australia that I was one of the chief investigators of. This was a very interdisciplinary project, working with colleagues from, our Inclusive Technologies Lab.[7] Who had previously [***elongated***] done, perhaps slightly more conventional work around the idea of digital technologies, *supporting* blind and low vision, interactions with art objects. And that tends to fall into a potentially quite, conservative approach[***?***], which is the idea that we can scan an object, we can produce a 3D model of it, we can therefore enable that to have some sort of [***elongated***] tactile, functionality. And that becomes the basis of creating some form of digital surrogate that obviously, as a copy, means that it can be handled, and the, physicality of a particular artefact can be intuited from that particular model. The thing that this project wanted to do was to broaden the understanding of that, to recognize that *that* starting point has to be socialized, and it has to be situated in more of a, [***choosing his word***] encounter. It has to *fit* into what an actual, museum or exhibition experience is. So the project was really about developing, inclusive, gallery experiences, for blind and low vision visitors.

Charlotte 26:25

So what does your research tell us about how we can think about, multisensory *interpretation*, on the museum floor?

Vince 27:16

We've developed a technique that we've just referred to as 'modalities of cultural interpretation,'[8] and we've come up with this *schematic* that can be used a bit like a game board, where, if you, imagine putting, the object, inside the middle of a triangle, and at each point of the triangle, we have, *three* different modalities, and in a way, you could almost twist the object, [***lyrically***] *hypothetically*, to actually *approach* it from, one of [***elongated***] those, angles. And, we've developed it to recognize that we can think about [***elongated***] the, experience of this item in three different ways, and we broadly define those as 'body,' 'mind' and 'soul.' The idea [***elongated***] being, that we can *approach* that object as, part of, *developing*, an interpretive strategy for it. The idea is can we challenge ourselves creatively, by actually coming at it from those different vantage points?

To give you an example, if this was an object, out of a museum collection, as part of the developmental process, before we move on [***elongated***] to, design, development, prototyping, and coming up with an actual interpretive, design to support this object or [***elongated***] to create an experience, inspired by it, the idea is to do this brainstorming activity. If we talk about the idea of 'body,' that's where, we're looking at design responses that are drawn most, directly on the physical, or materiality of that object, and associating that with *sensory*-based experiences. So, obviously touch, becomes one of those first, reference points. And I guess that's where, when I was thinking of this object

7 Matthew Butler et al., "Inclusive Gallery Experiences: Creating an Accessible Bendigo Art Gallery for Blind and Low Vision Visitors," Research project, Helen Macpherson Smith Trust and Monash University, Brisbane, 2022.

8 Butler et al., "Inclusive Gallery Experiences."

[the drum], it's interesting that, the most, *available* information, that's provided here with the metadata, is all basically trying to [***choppy next few words***] talk about, that, *physicality*, of this object. But in a way, that's also the [***elongated***] least, [***with a slight laugh behind the word***] *accessible* aspect of this object when it's, under display conditions, because it's, at arm's length, it's behind glass, and it's a "do not touch." So it's almost a bit of a paradox that the metadata, recorded about this object, is making all of those material, qualities, available, but, it's actually the least [***with a hint of ironic laughter in his voice***] accessible because it is not actually able to be interacted within that way.

If we, twist the diagram, to '*mind*,' and when we're talking about mind, we're talking about responses that might be [***elongated***] more, informative[***?***]. The history of this object, [***momentarily more lyrical***] where it comes from, but it also of course, brings out narrativity and storytelling. So, what would be the storytelling, opportunity of this object? And that would be where we might want to connect this [***elongated***] to, a particular cultural [***elongated***] tradition, the idea that this object is connected to, its, geographic location, it's connected to its cultural, heritage. And all of those aspects can of course be, brought forward, in, a variety of different ways. On a display level it might mean this object is contextualized, whether it's alongside [***elongated***] other objects, that might connect it to other examples from [***choppier***] that time and place, and that particular culture, so, there's those sorts of reinforcements at happen [***elongated***] through, narrativizing, the object and that's what we try to amplify with that vantage point of 'mind.'

The final twist, would be to approach the object with this idea of [***elongated 's'***] '*soul*.' And so we've used 'soul' as this way of recognizing that it might, at one level, connect to the idea that, we often associate, conventionally at least, an art experience as having some *emotional* tenor to it. That could be an aesthetic experience that *moves you*, or you might ***feel*** something, not in a physical manner, but you feel something, *emotionally*. Now, of course, depending on the artefact that we're talking about, that could actually be what the purpose of that [***chuckling***] actual artefact was. And again, when we perhaps talk about an object of *this* type, we might actually want to connect it to, [***elongated 'w'***] what would that drum, be used for in a more ritual context? And does that ritual context actually have some, world view to it. Is it about connecting to some particular religious tradition [***elongated***] or, some sort of metaphysical, [***louder word***] existential aspect? So, working with 'soul,' it could also mean, can we be more mindful, about, the engagement with this object? Might there be some *other, contemplative, quality* that we might want to, *exaggerate* or amplify. So, challenging us to look at this drum, in those three different ways, would allow us to think about, from a 'body' sense, what might that drum *feel like* in terms of me, *holding* it? *Playing* it? What would it *sound* like? What would the texture be? If we think about it from the 'mind' perspective, we think about, does it fit into some cultural context, and therefore, we might start to think more about the *performing* of this object[***?***] and what that storytelling, aspect is. And if we move across to the 'soul,' we might go, [***elongated 'w'***] what does that [***slows down a little as he considers what to say***] [***elongated 's'***] sound and action and performance actually make you feel? [***Back to regular, steady speed***] Does that start to provide access, to a visitor or an interactor, to think more along the lines of the emotional resonance that that object might have? Of course, we could look at other audience types to explore other aspects of what would be a relevant type of experience to increase that accessibility to a wider array of audiences.

Charlotte 32:04

[***Noticeably speedier delivery than Vince***] What is a good example of multisensory interpretation that *you've* experienced?

Vince 32:09

I like spaces and, exhibition experiences that take me somewhere. I'm thinking in, UK context, something like the John Soane Museum. [***Slower and drawn-out sentence***] When they hold the evening once a month, special occasion visits. [***Cheerfully reminiscing***] And, I just remembered lining up around the block, with people, it was like you were, lining up to go to see a band. [***Quiet excitement, as if recalling the slightly mischievous nature of the visit***] You went into the museum, after hours, it's dark, we all got some kind of torch or candle, that was meant to replicate what it would have been like to go into the museum and actually see these things under candlelight back when it was first established, [***back to cheerful tone***] and there were docents, there telling the story about this object, [***moving back to a regular, steady tone***] and at that level it becomes a really immersive, experience, and so, something like that that has that [***elongated***] strong, atmospheric quality. A very [***choosing the right word***] *embodied* experience? But also. I think the performativity of that is really important, and I think that's been something that really does play with ideas of, choreography and scenography and things like that, but when we think about creating experiences, even if it is focused by a particular artefact, how do we actually perform that? How do we create, all of those enveloping, elements that add context and add nuance and emphasis? So it's more nuanced in that way and, it becomes far less didactic, and becomes much more dimensional. It's important that we do that, that's the power of any of these types of artefacts, to not have a single meaning that we all walk away with imprinted on us, but rather, there's been, angles and

aspects that have connected with us. So I think enjoying the nuance and [***elongated***] the complexities, that are there, not trying to *strip* those down to something that is… singular, but something that is allowed to have multiple meanings, and not to reduce things, down because, if we think back to this drum, it certainly robs this object of so much of its resonance.

Sophie 34:05

Vince set out an *invaluable* framework [***elongated***] for, considering the layers [***elongated***] and, angles of storytelling we can *apply* to museum collections, and, importantly, ones that ask us to approach interpretation by accounting for the *potential* of *multi*dimensional, *multi*sensory visitor interactions. This is important, not only to provide a number of ways the public can find *meaning* in exhibition content, but, as we've spoken about, it gives everyone a *choice* as to *how* they engage with it.

Charlotte 34:41

Coupled with the incredible advice from J.J., who demonstrated how language is a powerful tool to provide multisensory, evocative and *inclusive* ways to describe, and engage, with collections and, very much driven by the concept of 'disability gain,' we can push beyond the colonial, didactic, hierarchical reams of text on a wall panel and allow visitors to make connections with museum collections in more meaningful, personalized and accessible ways.

Sophie 35:06

Dismantling ableist language and actions are, central aims of The Sensational Museum, and, by rethinking how we approach collections *and* their interpretation, we can move closer to a sector that is, both in the back of house spaces and on the museum floor, at its *core*, designed for and accessible to everyone.

I've been Sophie Vohra.

Charlotte 35:31

And I've been Charlotte Slark.

Sophie 35:32

[***Grateful, soft delivery, as if closing off with the last line of a children's story book***] And we hope you enjoyed listening to or reading The Sensational Museum's art of multisensory storytelling.

Research funding: This work was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (UKRI) (AH/X004643/1).

Supplementary Material: This article contains supplementary material (https://doi.org/10.1515/iph-2025-2002).

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