

Research Informing the Practice of Museum Educators

Research Informing the Practice of Museum Educators

Diverse Audiences, Challenging Topics, and Reflective Praxis

Edited by

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DAVID ANDERSON, ALEX DE COSSON AND LISA MCINTOSH

FOREWORD

Research Informing the Practice of Museum Educators: Diverse Audiences, Challenging Topics, and Reflective Praxis

Museums are institutions of both education and learning in service of society, that is, they are sites where educational experiences are designed and facilitated, and also places where visitors learn in broad and diverse ways. As such, the role of public education in museums today is highly important, if not at the centre of museum activity (G. Hein, 2005, 2006). As museums contemplate the growing significance of their educational roles and mandate within a changing society, so too they are increasingly in need of information about the audiences they serve and their own professional practice as they strive to achieve their educational missions in service to the communities in which they are embedded. Accordingly, this edited book focuses on informing, broadening and enhancing the pedagogy of museum education and the practices of museum educators. The chapters in this book report independent research studies conducted by the authors who have explored and investigated a variety of issues affecting museum education practice, contextualized across a range of institutions, including art galleries, natural and social history museums, anthropology museums, science centres, and gardens. These studies address a cross-section of contemporary issues confronting the field of museum education including studies of diverse audience and their needs, the mediation of challenging topics, professional training, teaching and learning in informal settings, and reflective practice and praxis.

WHY RESEARCH MUSEUM EDUCATION AND MUSEUM PEDAGOGY?

Museums, unlike schools and universities, serve a very broad set of demographics that constitute the citizenry of communities in which they are embedded. Because most museums are public institutions, many claim a mandate or mission of educational service that is embracing of all peoples, and very often claim a non-exclusionary charter, embracing all ages (Kotlet & Kotler, 2000). Whether implicitly or explicitly stated, the audiences today's museums serve include a diverse range of groups such as families, children, students, teenagers, young adults, middle-aged explorers, and senior citizens. Each of these cultural demographic groupings has different and diverse sub-groups who hold different interests, levels of knowledge,

preferred modes of learning, visiting motivations, and needs as learners (Jensen, 1994). These differences raise significant and complex issues about how museum educators communicate, interpret, and ultimately educate visitors in effective ways, and challenges the adage that one kind of communicative or interpretive approach suits all. At the heart of the issue is the “pedagogy of the museum” – how the museum approaches the educational design of experiences for effective and diverse learning and, with that, the need to think critically about the pedagogical approaches required for the diverse audiences museums serve (Anderson, Piscitelli, Weier, Everett, & Tayler, 2002). Indeed, the museum does have control over the pedagogy it deploys through the way it designs the educational experience of its programs and exhibitions. Certainly, it is true that certain types of museums employ or are biased toward particular kinds of pedagogy. There is not a single pedagogical method that museums can employ for successfully facilitating visitors’ museum experiences and their learning. Different types of museums will strive for different balances (Kotler & Kotler, 2000). For instance, interactive science centres encourage active hands-on and social engagement, whereas art galleries typically encourage thoughtful, often solitary, reflexive engagement with their collections. A great deal has been learned over the last few decades about visitor learning and educational practice in museum settings that can meaningfully inform pedagogy regardless of museum type or their traditions of visitor engagement (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). Thinking critically about how museums serve a diverse citizenry, with a diversity of learning modes, interests, prior knowledge and visiting motivations, is challenging. Nonetheless, very important if they are to be effective in their educational missions and mandates, and hence reflection on the practices of museum educators is both vital and necessary.

Museum education often reflects its roots; teaching approaches that would look familiar in many school classrooms. While school groups are an important audience for museums and a museum’s relationship with schools is critical to supporting its mandate, the context, desired outcomes and relationships between learners and educators are substantially different in a museum. Are there other approaches that would better serve museums and the diversity of learners found in museums? This question is critical to the future of museum education and can best be explored through the integration of practice, theory and research.

For many museum educators the impact of research and theory on their daily practice may seem inconsequential. Research outcomes may be seen as predictable by practitioners and conversations about theoretical perspectives are largely limited, due perhaps to the realities of a busy work place, a lack of familiarity with different theoretical perspectives, limited opportunity to discuss theory, and/or a general acceptance of the dominant paradigm and therefore no apparent need to question it. Museum scholar and philosopher Hilde Hein (2007) describes the important role of theory in practice, with theory as “a stabilizer that advances investigation into new territories and sustains inquirers through moments of doubt. In the absence of theory anything goes; there are no rational grounds for either adopting or rejecting any position” (p. 30). It is imperative for museum professionals to examine more

deeply their practice through a theoretical and research lens in order to advance our understanding of teaching and learning in museums.

MUSING DIVERSE AUDIENCES, CHALLENGING TOPICS & REFLEXIVE PRAXIS

Diverse Audiences

Museums and museum educators frequently cluster and collectively identify visitors to their institutions by age and group identity of the visitors themselves – for example, young children, school groups, teenagers, family groups, and seniors. For many museum educators these demographics seem to be known qualities and familiar territory in terms of who they are, what they do, and their needs. Much is known about these groups from the literature over the past three or more decades of visitor studies research. Notwithstanding, museums and their educational practices are facing a dynamic landscape of changing social behaviours and norms which brings with it new challenges and for which new knowledge is needed to support the educational needs of audiences. For instance, from the literature over the past 30 years it is easy to find a plethora of studies about how families behave in museums. Yet family behaviour in museums is changing in many ways. For example, there have been changes in how traditional structures might be conceived; rapid changes in technology such as smartphones which bring with it behavioural changes in how families access information in museums; and changing family values about education and how it is accessed in society. As such, we know, but don't know, these audiences. Indeed, the same might be said of other visiting demographics that seem to be known qualities and familiar territory. Hence, while much is known, there is still much that is unknown. Thus, investigation of diverse demographics that come to museums is most worthwhile if we are to effectively mediate the museum curriculum for learning in diverse ways.

Challenging Topics

In addition to describing museums as places for enjoyable and social learning (Kelly, 2007), the rhetoric in contemporary museum literature suggests the purpose of museums includes objectives such as promoting life-long learning, moral development, and thoughtful debate in support of civic engagement (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Hooper-Greenfield, 2000; Gurian, 2006). Layered into these objectives is a need to re-conceptualize museums. Hilde Hein (2007) examines museums through a feminist theoretical lens and conceptualizes museums as open-ended and pluralist, receptive to new ideas and open to looking at old ideas in new ways. She suggests that museums embodying this perspective, “can, by shifting to a fresh vantage point, think of the world in some of the myriad ways that others have found, to unfold and fold it differently and help visitors and supporters to do the same” (p. 34). As museums become more inclusive and reflective of the diverse communities of which

we are a part, it will become a challenge for contemporary museums to help their learners (and staff) think about the world in different ways. This will create more opportunities for museum educators to have conversations about challenging topics with visitors.

Challenging topics in museums may reflect contemporary societal issues such as human rights, complex scientific questions such as genetically modified organisms, and even sometimes taboo subjects, like death, that affect us all. A topic becomes challenging for a number of reasons: ideas may include diverse moral and ethical perspectives; the conversation may be unexpected, taking an educator off guard and unprepared for the conversation; or the content might be contentious. Cameron (2005) frames contentious ideas as ideas that “engage an individual’s or group’s values, beliefs, ideologies or moral position and conflict with empiricist modes of knowledge” (p. 216). She sees that in addition to the more traditional roles of providing information and social experiences, museums are well positioned to provide experiences that foster debate, challenge thinking, and ultimately transform society.

How museum educators navigate these conversations about challenging topics is becoming an increasingly important part of their practice. It is imperative that practitioners and researchers come together to better understand the nuances of this part of a museum educator’s practice. Greater understanding of this will better support educators in developing the skills and knowledge to successfully facilitate these conversations as well as expand our understanding of teaching and learning in museums through reflective praxis.

Reflective Praxis

Museum educators are well served by being reflexive practitioners. Autobiographical and arts based research such as *autoethnography* (Irwin, 2013) or *autoethnography* (Ellis & Bocner, 2010) are areas of social science research that encourage self-reflexivity as a way to grow in self-understanding. As museum educators work with diverse audiences, such enhanced self-understanding can be of great benefit to them. Personal reflexive praxis, or the art of taking practice into theory and theory into practice in a continual hermeneutic circle (Gadamer, 1986), not only helps museum educators understand the why, the what, and the how of what they are doing in a much deeper way, but this knowledge also allows them to better serve their diverse clientele. Research that foregrounds the personal allows museum educators to have a greater understanding of the complex nature of their interpersonal roles in a museum setting. This is because a museum setting is often in a state of constant flux through changing exhibitions and changing contexts that museum educators continually interpret in relationship with the public.

Museum educators are the intermediaries, in-between the public and the curatorial and other management departments of a museum. By introducing concepts such as phenomenology into reflexive research, museum educators can delve *behind the*

scenes of the processes and practices of a museum, and by doing so ask meaningful questions about the museum educator's relationship with the complex workings of their institution. Furthermore, this uncovering, of the multiple layers of hidden or informal workings of an institution can create a deep and meaningful personal understanding that can be understood in terms of Bourriaud's, (2002) notion of *relational aesthetics* – “the types of relationships the artist creates between the artwork and visitors” (p. 54) that exist in spaces where museum educators live and work (Choi, 2013). For example, museum educators often act as a cushion between the hidden and unseen authority of the curatorial department and the public. By way of their relational connection with the visitors, museum educators help explain an exhibition. In doing so, they help create meaning for themselves and the clientele they serve, be it children, adults, teenagers, middle-aged or older patrons. Translating an exhibition of any kind to the public is always a dance of meaning-making, and whenever they do so, museum educators enact an ongoing hermeneutic circle of relational esthetics. Reflexive research by museum educators, which enhances personal understanding of themselves, can help render an institution more adaptable and thus open to the vagaries of an always changing public by allowing for a more flexible and open-ended interpretive structure that embraces the relational spaces that are present, but not always accessible, to the museum educators who work within them.

SCOPE OF THIS BOOK

Museum education as a field of study is relatively young in comparison to related disciplines such as museum studies, museology, and visitor studies. Indeed there are but a handful of universities in North America that provide graduate level programs with a focus on museum education. The contributing authors of this book were all graduates from the University of British Columbia's museum education program in Vancouver, Canada. These small independent studies represent the dissertation works from a variety of magistral degrees programs under the umbrella of museum education, including the *Master of Museum Education* (MMEd), *Master of Education (Focus on Museum Education)* (MEd), and *Master of Arts* (MA) programs. The studies embraced and applied appropriately a particular research methodology, including interpretive case study, phenomenography, phenomenology, ethnography and auto-ethnography, a/r/tography, and quantitative survey, each as a function of the research questions which drove the authors' independent investigations. As such, the studies are diverse by their audience focus, insitutional focus, methodology, and by the research problems and questions which drove the authors' studies.

The chapter contribution of the book coalesce within three sections: Section 1 – *Museum Educators and Diverse Audiences: Parents, Teenagers and Family Groups*; Section 2 – *Museum Educators' Practice: Challenging Topics and Unique Audiences*; and Section 3 – *Museum Educators' Praxis: Learning Through One's Own Reflexive Research*. Together these themes represent a set of topical issues

germane to informing, broadening and enhancing educational practices in diverse museum settings, and will be of considerable interest to the museum and non-formal education fields broadly. This book will be of value and interest to practising museum educators in all varieties of museum institutions; graduate students in museum studies and informal education programs; academics who share an interest in visitors studies, museum education, museum studies and museology; and teachers and community educators who wish to extend their professional practice beyond the bounds of the classroom.

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