



Childhood Learning in Museums

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ABSTRACT

Museums today are in the midst of a major transformation. Informed by theories of museum learning advanced by John Falk, Lynn Dierking and others, and driven by both external forces and internal pressures, museums are embracing their roles as informal learning institutions as never before. In recognition of research on museum learning, they have moved to a “shared authority” model based on dialogue, participation and co-curation.

This general museological trend has enhanced and improved children’s learning in museums. Until recently research was lacking on what, if anything, children actually learned on a museum visit. Much has been done to show that they do indeed learn in museums if the right pedagogies and the right conditions are in place. Moreover, because all types of museums are adopting a more democratic, “shared authority” approach, all types of museums now have the potential to become more effective learning sites for children, even typically adult-oriented museums like art galleries. These pedagogies have proven effective in not only teaching content or subject-matter related knowledge, but also critical thinking and engagement skills that are the foundation of solid citizenship.

INTRODUCTION

Museums are becoming more effective learning sites for children. Although only certain types of museums have traditionally focused on children – children’s museums and science centres most specifically – today *all* museum types are discovering their potential to contribute to children’s development thanks to some very recent trends in museology and museum pedagogy. In practical terms, museums are not only working to improve children’s learning outcomes in terms of their experiences as museum visitors, but they are also fulfilling a vital social responsibility by teaching children what might be called soft power skills – critical thinking, contextual thinking and in effect, better citizenship.

NATURE OF LEARNING IN MUSEUMS

Let’s state right up front that museums are learning institutions and museum learning is informal, voluntary and affective.ⁱ This is not a new idea, but what is new is that museums are finally embracing it and many are working to transform themselves by placing learning at the heart of their missions, which means re-orientation of all their functions toward achieving this goal. They are becoming fully 21st century learning institutions and the traditional tension within museums between their public education functions and collecting and conservation functions is being resolved in favour of the former. There are many reasons for the transformation, ranging from the increasing pressure on museums to justify their public subsidies to the growing cost of collecting to the need to engage more deeply with underserved audiences, but it is also (at least in part) due to a clearer understanding of how people actually learn in museums.

The scholarship on museum learning is relatively new. It was only in 1992 when John Falk and Lynn Dierking’s *The Museum Experience* was published as one of the first thorough studies of how people actually learn in museums.ⁱⁱ This was a groundbreaking exploration of how museum visitors bring their

own experiences and life expectations to museums and how, as a result, they shape their own learning experiences while inside. Following up in 2000 with *Learning From Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning*, they further explored this theme, showing that learning is “a never-ending integration and interaction” of the personal, sociocultural and physical contexts that we all carry – so in informal learning environments like museums, this means that learning is very idiosyncratic and difficult to predict, because each person will bring his or her own contexts to bear on the experience.ⁱⁱⁱ In museums visitors create their own narratives and these are heavily influenced by personal experience. This is Falk and Dierking’s “contextual model of learning” and in museology it has been very influential.^{iv}

This better understanding of how people learn in museums has led them to become much more democratic. The focus is now on knowledge sharing and co-generation of knowledge – users are seen as co-producers of knowledge. There is a framework created by those with expert knowledge (curators, for example) but didactic, behaviourist approaches where knowledge transmission is authoritative have long been superseded and museums are becoming more participatory places – places where visitors can “create, share and connect with one another around content,” according to museologist Nina Simon.^v There is a Danish scholar named Ida Braendholdt Lundgaard that I like to quote who says that museums are places where “knowledge is up for negotiation and new experience and knowledge may emerge.”^{vi} This is the “shared authority” model which welcomes the input of visitors and museum learners in contributing to interpretation.

So museum learning is becoming democratized, didactic approaches have lost favour, and museums are looking at ways to enhance learning by providing audiences with the tools to become active museum *users*, not passive museum *visitors*, based on the theories of museum learning and the practice of knowledge sharing I’ve described above – for example, dialogic learning, which in a museum means giving visitors a chance to discuss what they’re experiencing. In informal learning institutions like museums, learning is most effective when it is active learning; those who will learn best will do so when actively engaged with the material, when they make it their own. I’ll paraphrase another scholar here (M. Elaine Davis): if we passively accept others’ interpretations of knowledge, that becomes knowledge that is borrowed rather than owned and that kind of learning is less effective. To own knowledge means having taken an active part in creating it.^{vii}

The idea of shared authority is a postmodernist idea and “the postmodernist museum” is actually a term advanced by one of the leading museum scholars (Prof. Eilean Hooper Greenhill at the University of Leicester). I want to stress that there is still a role for scholars and museum experts who need to set the framework for engagement with the content, but the key is providing opportunities for active engagement in approaching that content if the museum is to be effective as an informal learning site. So museum staff and museum planners seek to create conditions where learners are able to contribute to knowledge generation within the framework provided by experts, to allow for different ways of approaching content, and to enable visitors to construct their own meanings.

MUSEUMS AND CHILDHOOD LEARNING

Museums are different from formal and other informal learning environments in part because they have rich collections and sensory-rich environments, and these can encourage the type of interactions that support early growth and development including self-expression, language development, curiosity, observation skills and self-confidence. The key is to use the resources of the museum in ways that cater to their natural curiosity and enthusiasm for exploration and discovery.

Because museums are building in many more opportunities for discovery, for co-curation, for reflection and reaction and visitor input – and given that, the argument I want to make is that this new general museological approach is a natural fit for children’s learning styles and has opened up the possibility that all kinds of museums can be effective learning sites for children, to complement their formal learning, to assist with their cognitive and emotional and social development and also to enhance their creative thinking skills. This is a major opportunity and a new one, because apart from children’s museums, early childhood learning has *not* been a major focus for museums in general. We know this because in 2012 a survey of 170 Smithsonian-affiliated museums in the US showed that only 22 had programs that were strongly geared towards children.^{viii} Half of these were in science centres (where one would expect) and only 3 in art museums and 2 in history museums. There are many reasons as to why this might be the case and one of those reasons might have been that we really didn’t know until relatively recently what, if anything, children learned in traditional museums. Only in the past 5 to 10 years have studies emerged that show that it is the case and so museums are just now responding, and there are major museum-based institutions such as the Smithsonian Institution Early Enrichment Center that are working at the intersection of museum learning and best practices in early childhood education^{ix}.

We know that children learn best in museums in several ways:

- Investigating
- Communicating – talking about things
- Representing (creative expression)
- Recalling

In children’s museums, the idea is that children learn through play. This is undoubtedly true, but the research has shown that children’s learning in museums is much more effective if facilitated by an adult. This happens more often in “traditional” museum environments. Where spaces are not obviously child- focused discovery centres or hands-on art making areas, adults tend to interact more directly with the child and provide more guidance. In some cases, the adult approaches the exhibition as a co-learner with the child. The research actually suggests that object-heavy history museums or art museums are at least as effective learning sites for children than science centres or even children’s museums, both of which typically have no objects and, crucially, where adult intervention is less common.

In such traditional museums, children respond well if they are able to touch and interact with the object, and when they can talk about it. They benefit very much if the experience are correlated with the presence of concepts with which they already have some familiarity – in other words, they make a personal connection to the object – and learning is more successful when there are the types of objects

that provide that accessible connection (can be artworks as well as old toys or dinosaurs). Giving them the opportunity to represent what they've seen, perhaps by drawing it, fulfills the representation need, and follow-up on a visit either by teachers or parents reinforces the learning by allowing them to exercise powers of recall.

If we take the most adult-focused type of museum there is – the art museum – we can see how it can be applied in a museum type that is not typically known as a great place for children's learning. Since lectures by staff in front of artworks that no one can touch will not work for kids, they are facilitating hands-on interaction with, for example, reproductions that children can manipulate (say, in a sorting game)– it allows them to investigate. Staff will encourage children to discuss the artworks: to talk about the artists themselves, or how the artwork was made.^x Direct contact with museum-based scientists, archaeologists, historians and similar professions enhances the effect – in dialogue, children become “colleagues” and in conversation with such professionals begin to pursue their own enquiries. Representation in art museums is perhaps the easiest thing of all to do there, as kids are natural artists, and allowing them to make their own interpretation of classic works of art can be used as a window into further discussion about the artists' motivations and techniques amongst other things.

So all types of museums – not just those that are stereotyped as “kids' museums” – can contribute to the social, cognitive and emotional development of young children, provided proper guidance and facilitation is present. And, because of the general trend toward implementing pedagogies museum-wide that fit well with children's learning styles, museums are discovering their potential to contribute to children's learning in new and more comprehensive ways.

MUSEUMS, CHILDREN AND “SOFT POWER”

So what kind of skills are being learned? The most important is not the “what” (for example, “what is an anthropod” or “*Starry Night* is a Van Gough” but rather the “how”. And in focusing on the “how”, museums are in effect providing children with “soft power” skills. “Soft power” is an idea advanced by the political scientist Joseph Nye around 1990, and Nye was talking about political influence. Soft power is the ability to influence behavior using persuasion, attraction or agenda-setting. Whereas the resources of “hard power” are tangible (force and finance) soft power resources are intangible. They are ideas, knowledge, values and culture – how to think critically, how to have contextual intelligence, how to engage as citizens.^{xi} Museums as learning institutions are therefore intersecting with an emerging role as civil society institutions with a social responsibility. For children, the learning that happens there is as much about soft power skills as, say, meeting school curriculum requirements.

Let's take an example. One of the case studies in our new book is of an organization called Cool Culture in New York City and for much of the following I'll credit one of our book's contributors, Candice Anderson, the Executive Director of Cool Culture, who graciously agreed to contribute. Her organization works in support of underserved children who, as is well known, enter school far less prepared than their middle-income counterparts.^{xii} But what we also know is that museums are in an excellent position to engage families as partners in their children's education and to assist in ensuring young children are better prepared for school, and Cool Culture's mission is to use museums for that purpose.

Cool Culture connects families, New York City's system of early education and museums to help prepare underserved children for formal learning. They provide 50,000 families each year with free, unlimited access to about 90 museums in the New York area. The families they serve are very diverse and the majority are below the federal poverty line. Last year, Cool Culture parents and children walked through the doors of partner museums more than 185,000 times. The result has been that about 80% of participating children have demonstrated an increase in vocabulary and critical thinking, and more than 50% of parents report an increased comfort in museums and enhanced understanding of how to support their children's learning through the arts.^{xiii} What Cool Culture and its museum partners are doing, in effect, is giving children the kinds of "how to" skills and experiences that not only make them better prepared for school, but which also prepare them for active citizenship and reduce the effects of alienation and social exclusion.

A second example of how effective museums can be in this regard comes from a study by the University of Arkansas on field trips at the Crystal Bridges Museum of Art. This study examined the impact of its learning programs on school field trip students in terms of the impact of the Museum's learning programs from the perspective of not only knowledge about art, but also critical thinking, historical empathy, student tolerance, and a desire to become cultural consumers. The report shows effect is greatest on rural, high poverty and minority students – again showing the potential for museum learning to fight against the problem of social exclusion.^{xiv}

What is very interesting as well is that such pedagogies are also moving into the formal learning sector, and collaboration between museums and schools are becoming stronger and deeper. I watched a YouTube webinar recently and the presenter, Dr. Sarah Elaine Eaton, noted that teachers are becoming the "guide on the side" as opposed to a "sage on the stage", which is to say that they are becoming facilitators of a type of learning that is more collaborative in nature, and this is similar to the shared authority model being adopted by museums.^{xv} This suggests that pedagogy in the formal and informal learning sectors is coming closer together, and it also suggests that schools are also becoming centres of transmitting critical and creative thinking skills as well as the traditional "3 Rs". I should note that this is largely a Western phenomenon, and in some countries museums and schools still practice quite different pedagogies. But the confluence in pedagogies represents a huge opportunity for museums and schools to improve and deepen their partnerships in children's learning and, if we can picture the relationship as a Venn diagram, to find common ground around teaching of the critical thinking and soft power skills.

The example of the Learning Museum initiative at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Denmark is one of the best in the world at illustrating this confluence and again I'm indebted to my colleague Tine Seligmann in Denmark for also contributing to our book. Tine describes Learning Museum as a Danish national development and collaboration project involving 30 museums of various kinds (cultural history, science and art museums) and 13 teacher training colleges. The goal of the project has been to encourage and develop future teachers' use of museums as learning spaces while further professionalizing and strengthening museums' teaching of young schoolchildren. The collaborative process is the heart of the initiative: museum staff and schoolteachers into the other's world via an

intensive program of museum staff-student teacher on-site collaboration, both at the museum and at the teacher's college.^{xvi} The theory, which has been borne out in practice, is that great learning programs will emerge and teachers will gain renewed appreciation for museums and what they can bring to the table, provided that the process of integrating the two professional cultures is successful.^{xvii}

We are at the beginning of these trends and they have yet to take hold throughout the museum world. But the trends are unmistakable. Museums are, more than ever, adopting a more democratic, "shared authority" approach, and with these approaches all types of museums now have the potential to become more effective learning sites for children, even typically adult-oriented museums like art galleries. And these trends are also facilitating closer museum-school partnerships, as schools have also adopted some of the participatory and democratic learning pedagogies that are in use in the informal learning sector. But the most important conclusion is that museums, as learning institutions, are also civil society institutions with a social responsibility, and the kind of learning they do best can give children the skills to think creatively and critically, to engage fruitfully in dialogue with others, and to become better prepared for citizenship. In transmitting such skills, museums have the potential to ameliorate problems such as social exclusion and alienation, and to give all children a sense that they have a stake in society.

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 - iv Falk and Dierking, *The Museum Experience Revisited*, p. 26.
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 - vi Ida Braendholt Lundgaard, "Learning Museums and Active Citizenship" in *Museums: Social Learning Spaces and Knowledge Producing Processes* (Copenhagen: Danish Agency for Culture, 2013), p. 11.
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