Forum

The Role of Museums in Society: Education and Social Action

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The museum community has long debated whether museums are primarily educational or aesthetic institutions. I propose two interrelated propositions. First, the *raison d'être* of the museum is education broadly defined. It's possible to have collections of objects, even collections carefully classified, organized and preserved, that are not primarily educational—the world includes many fine private collections and archives—but as soon as these are open to the public, the museum becomes an educational institution.

Second, I argue that there are moral, social, and political consequences to accepting the view that museums are educational by nature. If we conceptualize museum education as more than particular tasks assigned to specific personnel, then we must acknowledge our worldview of the role of education in society as relevant to all museum functions. We must accept the responsibilities inherent in the kind of education we value and in our convictions about the purpose of education—and therefore the purpose of museums.

I believe that the significance of the educative task in museums is greater than can be circumscribed by any list of specific tasks. Museum education is at the center of museum activities. Museums are primarily educational institutions; what makes them public institutions for the preservation of culture is their educational work.

A PUBLIC PURPOSE

Museums represent a major public social investment by most modern societies. Their origins are symptomatic of the conditions that gave rise to nation states more than 200 years ago. Their influence on society, although often not fully recognized, is powerful. In times of war, the importance of museums for a culture becomes clear, as evidenced during the recent struggles in the Balkans, in which museums were targeted for destruction by opposing sides. In the current Iraq war, the failure to protect museums from looting has had debilitating consequences beyond the loss of precious artifacts.

The common perception of museums—the response I get whenever I discuss my interest in museums in a social gathering—is that "museum" refers to a major art gallery or a major national museum. Seldom do people have any conception of the breadth of the museum community. The impact of this enormous sector on the public is also often underestimated. In some countries, there are museums for every 400–500 inhabitants, and up to 50 percent of the population visits a museum at least once a year. In the United States, the American Association of Museums Web site claims that annual museum attendance is close to a billion visits a year. The AAM estimates the number of "infinitely diverse" museums in the 15,000–16,000 range, and notes that the draw of museums is greater than the annual attendance at professional sports events. ICOM has put forward an official definition of museums that is surprisingly inclusive, listing "service to society" and other functions. A recent journal article includes an even looser definition: "…any institution, built, or interpreted environment that may have an educational role, whether education is part of its mission statement or not" (Rennie and Johnson 2004). Examining

the role of museums in society as a major cultural force is not only important to us as museum professionals, it is justified by their powerful influence in society.

THE SCOPE OF MUSEUM EDUCATION

Despite the common conception that museum education consists primarily of an educator leading a group of children through the museum, the current reality is much broader. Since museum education emerged as a profession in the past 50 years, with its own training programs, professional organizations and defined roles in the museum, the tasks of museum educators have expanded dramatically. A recent survey of art museum educators (Wetterlund and Sayre 2003) provided evidence for more than 45 different kinds of tasks, ranging from the usual classes and tours to organizing community festivals, developing partnerships with universities and city agencies, and video-conferencing. This multitude of responsibilities is summarized into categories of museum educational work (condensed from Wetterlund and Sayre 2003), as follows:

- Programs for exhibition visitors during open hours
- Programs outside visiting hours or special settings
- Various modalities: dance, theater, music, movement, and so on
- Educational development: materials, resources
- Outreach activities: classrooms, community centers, and so on
- Other museum activities: exhibition design, accessibility
- Research
- External partnerships
- Web site related (including all of the above)

INSIGHTS FROM HISTORY

The debate between the educational and the aesthetic functions of museums has precedents. Zeller, in an excellent historical essay on museum education in the United States, illustrated this controversy by reference to two influential, late-nineteenth-century museum administrators, George Brown Goode (1851–1896) and Benjamin Ives Gilman (1852–1933). Goode championed the museum as an educational institution. He stated that "an efficient museum…may be described as a collection of instructive labels, each illustrated by a well selected specimen." In opposition, Gilman argued for the primacy of the aesthetic role of a museum: "A museum of art is primarily an institution of culture and only secondarily a seat of learning. Enjoyment is the chief aim of museums of art, instruction a secondary aim" (Zeller 1989).

While these sharply contrasting statements illustrate opposing attitudes, they do not adequately describe the positions of either man. Although Gilman may have been the champion of the aesthetic museum, he also made major efforts to improve the educational role of his own institution, the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, through novel practices that have influenced the whole profession. He is well known for his introduction of docents into the gallery, arguing that funds should be shifted from hiring more guards to adding staff who could talk intelligently to visitors about the paintings. He advocated opening the museum to "Sunday visitors," that is, working-class visitors, and urged that

extensive large print labels—placards including the kind of information that educators usually propose and curators frequently reject—be installed in the galleries to accommodate the needs of the general public.

In contrast, Goode expressed doubts about a class of visitors—namely, school children—who would seem to be at the center of attention for an educational museum.

> I should not organize the museum primarily for the use of the people in their larval or school-going stage of existence. The public school teacher, with the illustrated textbook, diagrams, and other appliances, has in these days a professional outfit which is usually quite sufficient to enable him to teach his pupils. School days last, at the most, only from four to 15 years, and they end with the majority of mankind, before the minds have reached the stage of growth favorable for the reception and assimilation of the best and most useful thought (Goode 1888/1991, 307).

In short, any attempt to classify some museums as educational and others as not is an oversimplification of the history of museums. Museums are always educational.

CONSTRUCTIVISM IN THEORY

If we consider how people learn and how meaning is constructed, there are essentially four educational possibilities, all of which can be applied to museums: Traditional Lecture and Text (leading to the Systematic Museum), Discovery Learning (the Discovery Museum), Stimulus-Response (the Orderly Museum) and Constructivism (the Constructivist Museum.) I have argued at length that the most powerful and appropriate educational theory and practice for museums is Constructivism (Hein 1998; see also Hein n. d.). In this discussion I want to put forward a bolder—and I believe stronger—description of the Constructivist position and its consequences than I have expressed previously.

As an educational theory, Constructivism represents the view that learning is an active process in which we as learners make meaning—construct concepts—of the phenomena we encounter. In order to convert sensory input (what we see, hear, feel, and so on) into meaning, we rely on our previous experiences and on our previous meaning making. Thus, everything that we bring with us to any new situation—our culture, language, family background, companions on the visit—influences how we interpret our experience. Similarly, the environment in which we have these experiences will influence our understanding. Hence the significance of design, broadly conceived, in museums.

The second major tenet of Constructivism is that the meaning we make—the interpretation of our experience—has validity even if it does not match the accepted "truth" as presented by any particular culture or profession. This second dimension of Constructivism is more controversial; it challenges the notion of absolute truth and requires acknowledging that different people (or different cultural groups) view the world in ways not necessarily compatible with our own, or with prevailing views of a particular society.

Support for a Constructivist approach to museum education—and education in general—comes from the last 100 years of research on human development and how people learn. The pioneering work of such notable figures as Piaget and Vygotsky (and

many others) has demonstrated that learning involves far more than adding incremental bits of knowledge to a passive mind. It requires active meaning making and interpretation by the learner. We now recognize that meaning making, both personal and social, is a major component of education. Summaries of learning—such as a recent U.S. National Academy of Science study analyzing new developments in the science of learning (Bransford, Brown and Cocking 1999)—recognize that learning constitutes the "construction of knowledge."

A second theoretical development of the past century that supports the Constructivist view comes from a range of social theory that is loosely described as "postmodernist." If the mind constructs knowledge based on its previous experience—personal, social and contextual—then what criteria can be used to distinguish between correct and incorrect knowledge? Modern interpretations of this long-standing philosophical puzzle are consistent with broader twentieth-century intellectual movements. Postmodernists question whether there are unique, "correct" interpretations of literature and other arts, history, or even a single basis for belief in scientific "laws" as truths. Such challenges to absolute epistemological positions go back to Kant in the eighteenth century and were clearly enunciated by John Dewey and others.

CONSTRUCTIVISM AND MUSEUM EDUCATION

The history of museum education illustrates a long association with Constructivist principles in action. While the term "Constructivism" has only been applied to education for the past two decades, its central ideas—both the recognition of how learning takes place (process) and the importance of valuing learners' meaning-making (product)—are fundamental ideas of progressive education and have been a major force in shaping museum education. John Cotton Dana, Ann Gallup Billings, Arthur Parker, and other U.S. museum education pioneers, consciously modeled their efforts on progressive education practices. British museum educators were similarly influenced.

> In Britain,… [m]useum educators have been influenced by Dewey, Plowden, play and child centered progressive educational methods, which we have adapted very well to the museum environment (Hooper-Greenhill 1999, xii).

The historical association between progressive education and museum education goes beyond Anglo-American museums. A similar connection existed for the famous progressive school reform movement in Austria between the two world wars.

Practices that are totally or essentially constructive and progressive dominate the current museum education literature. The emphasis on meaning-making, narratives, and contextual models for learning, as well as a respect for alternative viewpoints, all match progressive education approaches. Recent visitor studies research also recognizes the importance of personal meaning making and emphasizes compatible methodologies

MORAL AND POLITICAL ISSUES

Embracing a progressive view of education brings with it additional responsibilities. Not only do educational progressives emphasize active learning and recognize personal

meaning making, they view education as a socio-political activity with a goal of improving society. The great American philosopher and educator John Dewey most clearly articulated the relationship between education and society. His educational philosophy stemmed from his faith that progressive education was the way to achieve a more equitable and democratic society—a position he spelled out in detail in *Democracy and Education* (Dewey 1916/1944). Dewey recognized that education is a fundamental human experience, a required cultural activity in every kind of society. The title of the first chapter of *Democracy and Education* is "Education as a Necessity of Life" and the first subheading is "Renewal of Life by Transmission." But in a later chapter, "Education as Conservative and Progressive," he distinguishes the different kinds of education needed for conservative (static) and progressive societies.

> Education of the immature… [can be] a sort of catching up of the child with the aptitudes and resources of the adult group. In static societies, societies which make the maintenance of established custom the measure of value, this conception applies in the main. But not in progressive communities. They endeavor to shape the experiences of the young so that instead of reproducing current habits, better habits shall be formed, and thus the future adult society be an improvement on their own (Dewey 1916, 78–79).

In other words, what's "progressive" about the education that Dewey advocates (and that we call Constructivist) is that it is appropriate for a *progressive society*, one that is making progress towards a democratic ideal. Such a society needs a cognizant, thinking citizenry, people who have been educated to inquire and question.

THE SOCIAL ROLE OF MUSEUMS

In his discussion of different museum philosophies, Zeller includes a third category, "The Museum as Social Institution." The social museum also had a powerful champion in the early twentieth century, John Cotton Dana (1856–1929), founder of the Newark Museum. Dana was interested in progressive education and in expanding museum functions to include intense work in the community.

If museum educators accept the responsibility of following a progressive (Constructivist) direction, I believe that they need to acknowledge and emphasize the social component of the progressive agenda, the "social action philosophy" so clearly elucidated by Dewey for schools and by Dana for museums. Educational work needs to be assessed for its potential contribution to empowering citizens to make informed decisions in a democratic society.

SOCIAL ACTION AND MUSEUMS

A few examples of the myriad ways that museums have supported this broader conception of their educational mission demonstrate two major directions in which museums can fulfill their educational mission.

Exhibition content and purpose—The concept that exhibitions are intended not only to inform (educate) but also to influence behavior is hardly new. Here are a few examples: A common effort of almost all zoos, aquariums and natural history museums around the world is to raise public awareness, knowledge and active support for conservation of the flora and fauna of the earth. An implication of social action was also present in a 1989 exhibition at the National Museum of American History, *A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans and the U.S. Constitution,* which asked visitors whether World War II internment camps for Japanese were constitutional. Additionally, *A Question of Truth* at the Ontario Science Center, now touring worldwide, explores how cultural beliefs influence science. An overtly progressive educational perspective would suggest that in every instance the museum would be able to articulate how its controversial exhibitions are intended to support progress towards a more inclusive, democratic society.

Changing museum practices—Another type of social action is exemplified by increasing awareness of the need to reconsider practices, as illustrated by the recent initiative of the American Association of Museums (2002) urging museums to re-examine relationships with communities and become more inclusive and collaborative and to share authority with community members outside the museum. In Stewards of the Sacred (Sullivan and Edwards 2004)—the product of a three-year study of museums' responsibility towards "sacred objects, sacred knowledge and sacred practices"—numerous authors emphasize that museums need to change their traditional stance of ownership and curatorial authority to one of "stewardship" and to an acceptance of the validity of sacred values in various cultures.

Social action through process and content—Progressive educators recognized long ago that not only the content of education, but also the process—how schooling is organized—reflects and influences cultural values. In fact, the two are seldom totally independent of each other. Similarly, museum practices, as well as the content of exhibitions and programs, frequently have a combined impact. An excellent example comes from the work of African-American artist Fred Wilson, whose powerful exhibitions probe issues of racism and simultaneously challenge museum practices. The exhibitions illustrate the shocking race-related contrasts in our society. For example, a display of slave shackles in an exhibition case together with fine metal work from the same time period emphasizes that both kinds of artifacts were produced by one society—in fact, produced by the same workers. Wilson's excavations in the storerooms of museums—he calls it "mining the museum"—bring to light what has been hidden as well as what has been openly featured. They reveal how the museum itself is part of the society that engages in racial discrimination; what it chooses to collect and display is also open to examination. One of Wilson's exhibition methods is to give Western art works anthropological labels ("pigment on canvas, a craft popular in some Western countries") and vice versa, describing objects from anthropological collections as works of art.

Another museum exhibition that combines novel content with social action is *Dialogues in the Dark*, the work of Andreas Heinecke and his colleagues. In this exhibition, the general public visits a totally dark space with guidance by staff members who are blind. It combines an intense personal experience, including a social role-

reversal—sighted people are less competent in this situation than the "disadvantaged" guides who are blind—with an opportunity for training and employment for persons who are blind and therefore usually considered disadvantaged. The total experience supplies a strong program of social action as well as a challenge to museums. Similar challenges can arise when museums begin to address accessibility and social inclusion.

CONCLUSION

Museums are fundamentally and necessarily educational institutions, and an appropriate educational role in museums includes social action. This is the true significance of the progressive tradition in education, long a part of museum practice and history. There are many means for museums to express this social, progressive component of education. Museums can support growth and development for all individuals—democracy and human rights for all—in myriad ways. It is the responsibility of the museum community to acknowledge this task and exploit its opportunities.

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