

# Case study museum learning education essay



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This report investigates a number of aspects relating to the development of museum learning. To begin with, the changing role of museums is going to be looked at paying reference to their history and new pedagogical ideas. Secondly, the issue of museum funding is going to be discussed in relation to the Generic Learning Outcomes and the National Curriculum. Museums provide the opportunity for greater social inclusion; this is going to be examined with reference to examples of good practice by the museums themselves, in addition to how schools use museums. Finally, museums provide a number of benefits to teachers and children which can be demonstrated by relevant research.

## **The Changing Role of Museums**

Museums have a very long history springing from what may be an innate human desire to collect and interpret and having discernible origins in large collections built up by individuals and groups before the modern era. The word museum has classical origins. In its Greek form, mouseion, it meant “seat of the Muses” and designated a philosophical institution or a place of contemplation. Use of the Latin derivation, museum, appears to have been restricted in Roman times mainly to places of philosophical discussion. By the 17th century ‘museum’ was being used in Europe to describe collections of curiosities; the idea of an institution called a museum to preserve and display a collection to the public was established in the 18th century. (Lewis, 20-)

Museums as we now know them belong to a very particular historical era, appearing first in 18th century Europe. Public museums participated in what Fisher (1991) refers to as ‘democratisation of treasure’ which saw public

museums make private treasure and colonial loot available to a mass audience. The democratisation of treasure not only transferred the treasures, but also the leisure practices of the wealthy to the middle classes and eventually the working class too. (Henning, 2006)

More recently, new ideas about culture and society and new policy initiatives have challenged museums into rethinking their purposes, to account for their performance and to redesign their pedagogies. Museums have been subject to countless calls to modernise and new ways of thinking about media audiences have confirmed the dynamic character of the relationship between museums and their audiences, and the interpretation of collections is high on the priorities of most museums. (Henning, 2006) ' The role of museums is no longer limited to the conservation of objects, they also have to share and continuously reinterpret them.' (Price, 2002)

The creative re-imagining and reworking of the identity of the museum is one characteristic of the post-museum. One of the key dimensions of the rising post-museum is a more refined understanding of the multifaceted relationships between communication, culture and learning and identity that will support a new approach to museum audiences. A second basic element is the promotion of a more egalitarian and just society which is linked to an acceptance of the idea that culture works to represent, reproduce and constitute self-identities. (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007)

Hooper-Greenhill (1994) states that:

" In the past decade enormous changes have taken place in museums and galleries across the world. The thrust of the shift is clear - museums are

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changing from being static storehouses for artefacts into active learning environments for people”

The new buzz words in museum learning are ‘ interactive’ and ‘ hands-on’.

As museums have restructured themselves for current times, their educational purposes have become a major priority and their educational provision has increased. Since 1997, Government policies have indicated that education should have a central role in museums (DCMS, 2000).

Education and learning has been prioritised in museums, however, the words ‘ learning’ and ‘ education’ are understood by individuals in very different ways. (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007)

In Britain, there has been a key swing from the expression ‘ museum education’ to the phrase ‘ museum learning’ and this symbolizes a major theoretical change in the way the educational functions of museums are being understood. The use of the word ‘ learning’ specifies an enhanced focus on the learning processes and outcomes of users, and a move away from thinking about the museum and its educational delivery. (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007)

## **Funding and Education**

With the arrival of the National Curriculum more museums were drawn into the partnership with education. However, learning is a continual process which often goes unnoticed. Education is central to the role of museums today and they risk losing Government funding if they do not make provision for educational use. Hooper-Greenhill (2007) states that:

“ At the beginning of the 21st century, cultural organisations have to fight hard for survival in a political environment shaped by economic rationalism. An instrumental approach to culture demands evidence of value for public funds, sponsorship and the provision of resources.”

National funding programmes require museums to have a closer relationship with schools and communities, as well as developing a partnership between local and regional museums. However, Government funding comes with increased responsibility of providing evidence of value for money by meeting required objectives. (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007) Generic Learning Outcomes (GLOs) were introduced as broad categories that could be used to evaluate museums and their activities and for support purposes when competing for funding. The GLOs are split into five outcomes; Knowledge and Understanding, Skills, Attitudes and Values, Enjoyment, Inspiration and creativity and Activity, Behaviour and Progression. (MLA, 2008)

Knowledge and understanding includes learning facts or information and developing an understanding. Well-known information may take on a new relevance or be understood in a new way during a museum, archive or library visit. Knowledge can be attained through listening, talking, reading, looking and trying things out in a practical way. (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007)

Here is an example of how this GLO can be supported:

‘ I liked going down the mine because in the Victorian times they had to work a long way down and they had a mashin [machine] that was 7 times louder than a drill (Beamish)’ (MLA, 2008)

Skills refer to knowing how to do something and the outcomes result from the experience of doing something. Skills can be roughly divided into cognitive/intellectual, social, emotional and physical dimensions. Using the imagination can also be seen as a skill, particularly when linked to empathy and creativity. (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007) Here is an example of how this GLO can be supported:

“ I have learnt to look at the artefacts and reflect on why they are there and their importance (Imperial War Museum)” (MLA, 2008)

Attitudes and values are an integral part of learning in both formal and informal environments. As new information is learned, attitudes to that information are developed. Visits to museums can result in a change in attitudes and the values that people hold. Hooper-Greenhill (2007) states that

‘ With young learners, where attitudes can change frequently and values are still to be firmly established, there are considerable opportunities to influence their development. It is highly possible that the effects on values and attitudes will not be apparent in the short term; and they may be forming without the learner’s conscious awareness.’

Here is an example of how this GLO can be supported:

Today I met an amazing woman...a mother of eight. We stood and looked at Susan Hiller and Suzanne Lacy’s work and when she left I listened. The way this woman had talked so openly about her life, about her pain, was echoed on the words in the Suzanne Lacy performance - my faith has been restored

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in the gallery as a resting place, a site of discussion and dialogue – a place of learning (Leeds Art Gallery). (MLA, 2008)

Enjoyment, inspiration and creativity are really important in the learning process. When learning is enjoyable, it is easier, and may sometimes take people by surprise. Visiting museums can result in creative and innovative ways of thinking and doing. ‘ These are open-ended learning environments, where learners can control the pace, direction and focus of their own learning and can remain open to new insights, connections and relationships.’ (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007) Where exploration and experimentation can be offered, creativity, inspiration and enjoyment may result. (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007) An example of how this GLO works in practice:

“ Almost without exception the children thoroughly enjoyed the day – one particularly hard to please pupil claiming it was the best trip he had ever been on! It inspired some excellent recounts of the day prompting some to write more than ever achieved in class (St John’s Museum Warwick)” (MLA, 2008)

Activity and behaviour refers to actions – what people do. The things that people do, their actions and activities, are the result of their learning.

Activity and behaviour as learning outcomes encompass the way people balance and manage their lives. Progression can be seen as a result of action that has achieved a change. (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007) An example of this GLO in practice:

It's probably one of the most memorable weeks of the children's school life. They have learned a lot about their own skills and capabilities. I have learned a lot about their capabilities. This workshop brought out talents which we don't always see in the classroom. The emphasis on English, maths and science means that we don't always give enough time to areas of the children's characters (Prescot Museum, Knowsley Borough). (MLA, 2008)

The National Curriculum has clear, defined learning objectives. These make it relatively easy for museum staff to link exhibitions and gear resources towards the curriculum outcomes. A study carried out by the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) date? found that 94% of primary and 87% of secondary school visits were directly linked to the curriculum and suggest that a curriculum link must be present to justify a visit. 51% of these visits were said to be linked to history, however, an interdisciplinary approach with cross-curricula aims is becoming more and more important.

## **Social Inclusion**

One of the biggest challenges that museums need to address in their community is social inclusion and the government has lead a nationwide drive to confront this issue. Many people working in museums and galleries believe in the principle of social inclusion. However, effective and sustainable action needs leadership, resources and commitment. The current infrastructure tends to discourage or hold back those governing body members and professionals who are eager to see change. (Resource, 2001)

The Government has embodied its principles on social inclusion into two policy documents: Libraries, Museums, Galleries and Archives for All: Co-



operating across the Sectors to Tackle Social Exclusion (DCMS, 2001) and The Learning Power of Museums – A Vision for Museum Education (DCMS, 2000). It believes that the current provision to address social exclusion and education is not consistent and as a result they have identified a number of key goals that are vital to the ethos of all museums; this is regardless of their location, size or origin. The main objective is that ‘ social inclusion should be mainstreamed as a policy priority for all libraries, museums, galleries and archives’. Other objectives include aiming for the widest possible access to collections and knowledge, and outreach / audience development, with outreach activities being seen as ‘ an integral part of the role’ of museums and galleries. The policy objectives also refer to museums and galleries acting as ‘ agents of social change’, through partnerships and projects focusing on socially excluded people. (DCMS, 2001: 8) Although many museums and galleries have engaged with the social inclusion agenda, hardly any have actually mainstreamed social inclusion as a policy priority. (Resource, 2001)

One example of how museums tackle social exclusion is happening in Tyne and Wear. Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums (2007) believe that everyone should have access to their exhibitions, collections and programmes. ‘ Museums are a great resource for any community group and the possibilities to work with us are endless.’ This cluster of museums has an outreach team who aim to work with a variety of groups in order to ‘ bring museums to life for different audiences – whether in the museums or outside at a venue to suit the group.’ Past projects with the outreach teams have worked with looked-

after young people, culturally diverse communities and disability support groups to name but a few.

Another example of how museums help to overcome issues of social exclusion is directly linked to school use. Research carried out by the Renaissance in the Region Study (2005) (RR2) has found that the schools in areas of greatest deprivation made up the greatest percentage of museum users. These visits were of great benefit to the children as they were a new experience which was novel and exciting. The children from these schools were much less likely to visit a museum out of school time and would find these visits more beneficial than children from more well off backgrounds.

This research also states that the number of special schools using museums was only 12%. However, 'Museums are a fantastic learning opportunity for children with SEN as they are full of objects' (Swift, 2009) The Museum of London began by providing outreach programmes in schools for children with SEN, but they proved so popular and beneficial to the children that they extended their services to include visits to the museum. When these sessions are evaluated by the teachers using GLO questionnaires they score very highly. (Swift, 2009)

## **Value of Museums to Teachers and Children**

Findings from studies carried out by DCMS/DfES and RCMG (2007) found that teachers use museums for a variety of reasons. Firstly, learning outside of the classroom provides a totally different learning experience for the children which results in the knowledge gained by handling artefacts etc. much more likely to be retained. When asked about the importance of the GLOs,

enjoyment was the highest rated by both primary (81%) and Secondary (68%) teachers. The research also found that teachers believe that museums inspire enjoyment and further learning in all children, including those classed as lower ability.

The same research also investigates the child's view of museums. It was found that the content in the museums made a huge impact because it was unlike what they would normally experience in their everyday lives; the most memorable experiences tended to be large scale, old, hands-on, using the medium of story and theatre based experiences. 91-95% of primary and 86% of secondary children expressed how much they had enjoyed their visit to a museum.

## **Conclusion**

The role of a museum has changed dramatically over time.