

Insistent Questions in Our Learning Age



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Abstract Changes in the content and structure of museum/school programs reveal serious questions about how museums are perceived as essential educational resources. In this article, the author examines this relationship as symptomatic of the continuing marginalization of museums in public policy and recognition and, ultimately, public support. She urges museum educators to assume some of the leadership for change.

The publication of a professional book is a momentous occasion. It is often accompanied by a fairly balanced mix of pride and relief and a sincere hope that it will be useful. There may be a few lingering questions about inevitable omissions or misplaced emphasis, but overall the book's completion is a satisfying time. At the 2010 Annual Meeting of the American Association of Museums, my co-editor Kim Fortney and I experienced all of those mixed feelings as we introduced our book, *An Alliance of Spirit: Museum and School Partnerships*.¹ Our audience included many of the book's contributing authors, something of a *who's who* in museum education. Together we had produced a book designed to be comprehensive and current. It followed the core strategy of its 1993 predecessor, *Building Museum and School Partnerships*,² by offering basic and practical advice, lots of tips and references, and strong case studies. The chapters define all kinds of partnership programs, from on-site to outreach to technology driven. There is even a chapter on "Paying for It".

The latter makes a cogent argument for considering the success and viability of museum education programs through the lens of mission and service. The chapter writers state, "In the broadest of terms, programs that successfully influence new understanding, interest, attitudes, behaviors or skills in the participants can be considered effective."³ Few would disagree

that museum education programs, including school partnerships, have demonstrated effectiveness in many ways. Unfortunately, even when such a program has made an acknowledged impact, it rarely leads to financial support. The same chapter includes the sobering thought that it is rare for a museum's school programs to be a profitable enterprise.

That last thought continues to plague me. I have found that even though I believe the new book reflects excellent thinking and will be highly useful, I am left with some disturbing questions. They aren't new questions, but somehow after putting together a second book on the topic, they have become more insistent. I also believe these questions have become more pressing in our current financial and educational crisis. They are questions that truly must be discussed even though the emerging conversation is likely to be difficult. To begin with, these questions raise critical issues about the eroding definition of museum and school programs as true partnerships. They also reflect deep concerns about the financial viability of many standard museum education programs, and, ultimately they reflect an ongoing lack of public recognition of the core role of museums as essential educational resources.

HERE ARE A FEW OF THESE INSISTENT QUESTIONS:

- Since museums have long been viable learning partners to schools, why are consistent, *systemic* relationships between the two so rare?
- Why are our programs guided by school-based curriculum standards rather than by the unique qualities of learning in informal settings?
- Why do museums appear to do the lion's share of the work in initiating, developing, marketing, and funding their school programs?
- Why do so few of our legislators have knowledge of the breadth and depth of museum/school programming?
- Why do museums have teacher advisory groups, while few (if any) schools have museum advisory groups?

When I was asked about my interest in contributing to this important *Journal of Museum Education* themed issue, I apologized in advance, saying that I was afraid my thoughts would sound something like a rant, that I might advocate rebellion and revolution and embarrass my profession. Despite my concerns, however, Cynthia Robinson was kind enough to take

that chance and invite me to share these thoughts for the conversation they might ignite. My inherent faith in the wisdom of museum education practitioners and in the importance of school programming convinces me that we must face these questions to reposition the value of our work moving forward.

A New York Times article that appeared on April 21, 2010,⁴ captured some of the current dilemmas that have led museums to a new, often discouraging, place in their efforts to bring their unique magic of encounter to school students. Writer Tamar Lewin gathered sobering statistics about school visits to museums in her article, *Museums Take Their Lessons to Schools*. She noted that school visits to the Boston Museum of Science have dropped about 30 percent since 2007. At the Portland Museum of Art in nearby Maine, they are down more than 40 percent, and the Newark Museum has seen a decline from over 100,000 students annually in 2005 to 84,000 this past year. The article summarized the core issues behind such widely-experienced declines: money, efficiency, time and the pervasive emphasis on specific learning standards for each grade and core subject disciplines. Though the article applauded the flexibility of museums for bringing museum-related experiences to the classroom, it also noted the loss of drama and encounter available only in the museum setting.

Across the country, idealistic and creative museum educators are engaged in seeking solutions. They, too, are energetically examining new ways to bring museum-based learning into the school curriculum, developing an array of formats to fit into present-day school realities. Classroom presentations, traveling trunks of hands-on materials, loan exhibits, and a variety of distance learning opportunities are filling in some of the gaps. Museums are also presenting an increasing number of teacher workshops to share scholarship and skills and to enlist teachers in planning their own use of museum resources. Unless these programs include museum visits, however, none will feature the kinds of learning moments that are the special fare of museum learning.

In an examination of cost effectiveness, the classroom program is a better bargain to the school. For the museum, the financial reward is minimal. It is highly unlikely to support travel, development and presentation—or the energy of “putting on a show.” The work persists largely through the dedication of museum educators. It also supports the talking points of museum administrators who can point to museum/school programs as examples of their institutions’ commitment to public service. One wonders, however, if

these goals are deeply recognized by the schools being served. At what level does the apparent disconnect in the value of these programs take place? What level of financial commitment would schools be willing to make to assure the availability of such programs?

In our book *Thriving in the Knowledge Age*,⁵ John Falk and I urged museums to develop new business models for succeeding in an information age. We argued that our learning age requires a more open-ended, individual-centered and collaborative operating structure. The industrial age business model with its emphasis on top-down hierarchy, mass-production (one size fits all) and mass marketing no longer fits today's society. Our world today is far more focused on individualization, team work and niche marketing, demanding a shift in operational practices. The new model requires that we identify and draw upon our prime assets to assert our unique role in a highly complex and competitive society.

Today's public schools, by contrast, remain stuck in an industrial age model, a problem only exacerbated by the increasing tyranny of standardized testing. Although much effort is given to concepts of school reform, many of the changes that have taken place have only served to reinforce the unresponsiveness of the system. Change is extraordinarily difficult, especially in an institution that evokes enormous political, economic, social and emotional conflicts. It is unlikely that the textbook-led, teacher-driven, and test-measured educational system will dramatically change anytime soon. Though web-based materials offer some fresh approaches, few are widely adopted. Thus, museums and schools may increasingly be out of synch. The choices facing museum educators are limited. In the present situation, museum educators are forced to be more like school educators in their practice, operating in more formal environments, adjusting their programs to address state and federal required standards, and being asked to demonstrate their effectiveness through the evaluation methodology of the school environment. In other words, museum educators must compromise the unique teaching gifts of the museum environment to continue to work with schools.

I would argue that such a choice places museums more in the position of a service provider than a partner—and a highly underpaid provider at that! I would further argue that it may be time to rethink our choices and assert our own strengths, standards and definitions of learning. There is also considerable evidence to suggest that the erosion of meaningful partnership among schools and museums is part of a much deeper and even more dis-

turbing disconnect—a generalized failure to articulate and build public awareness of the enormous power of museums as lifelong learning resources. The financial implications of this failure are profound.

The recent past has provided stunning examples of the marginalization and often, omission, of museums at the level of public policy. The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009⁶ originally excluded all museums from eligibility for funding. A massive advocacy effort overcame the all-inclusive provision, but zoos and aquariums were still denied access to funding. The House version of the Jobs for Main Street bill⁷, passed in December, 2009, continues that discrimination, still omitting them from funding. That museums of any kind are linked by our legislators with casinos and swimming pools and are deemed unworthy of eligibility for federal funding during an economic crisis is simply astounding. Zoos and aquariums are prime examples of extraordinary educators. Their commitment to raising public awareness of critical issues in conservation and environmental sustainability has been at the heart of both their institutional and their educational commitment. Yet, the language of federal legislation shows no recognition of their work.

Consider also that President Obama has identified STEM-based education as a national priority. In November 2009, the White House launched an “Educate to Innovate”⁸ campaign to improve the participation and performance of American students in science, technology, engineering and math. The initiative includes a coalition of federal government, corporations, foundations, non profits and science and engineering societies. What is missing? Science centers and science-based museums! Yet, these museums are superb educators that reach millions of young people with excellent learning opportunities. They are places that can teach through something akin to an apprenticeship, where activity and experience are central to learning. They are centers of scholarship, employing internationally known scientists and researchers. They offer a powerful complement to the more structured classroom approach, as well as the ability to address different learning styles and place science education in a highly meaningful context. Why are they not at the table of so important a national coalition?

In a similar situation, First Lady Michelle Obama has undertaken a primary leadership initiative to address the issues leading to childhood obesity.⁹ Imagine how her efforts could be immediately extended if she had enlisted the help of the Association of Children’s Museums and its many member institutions. These organizations are already deeply into their focus

on healthy living practices for children and their families. *Good to Grow*¹⁰ is a thoughtfully designed, national program within the children's museum community which has a major focus on the very issues that are the target of the First Lady's work. The ACM program has already produced highly useful toolkits and learning materials and could be a natural partner to Michelle Obama's initiative with the ability to reach out across the country. One can only assume that this widespread and excellent program remains little known to national leadership.

The readers of this article can most likely cite many other examples of the omission of museums from educational initiatives or from policymaking arenas. The above are particularly disturbing because they have occurred at the national level, amidst efforts that should be well advised and that have the potential for establishing new policies and providing significant discretionary funding. Although museums are recognized at the federal level through an independent agency, the Institute for Museum and Library Services, they do not appear to have a voice that is heard at the policy level. The financial consequences are significant. Funding is often limited until public policies recognize quality.

Museums are also not integrated into educational deliberations at the policy level. Unlike museums and libraries in the United Kingdom that are recognized as part of the national learning grid, American museums are rarely cited as important components of the learning community. They are not included in deliberations at the federal Department of Education, and clearly, the language used to describe their presence in American communities does not include demonstrable recognition of their unique educational power. Should it come as a surprise, therefore, that individual school districts are more likely to see museums as vendors of experiences for their students than as meaningful educational partners?

How should museum educators respond to this crisis? What are the viable options for connecting formal and informal learning communities? To begin with, museum educators cannot be alone in their efforts. They need the full support of their directors, boards, museum associations and other informal learning institutions. They need a common language to describe the value of informal learning experiences, and they need evidence of their educational impact. Immediate alternatives are limited, but the following questions might offer some starting points:

- Should museum educators continue to create new delivery formats to

meet the realities of today's school priorities? If so, how might this process become more of a partnership than a product?

- Do they focus their primary energies on out-of-school hours and public programs to share the “best of” learning experiences in the galleries? Do they build on their depth of teaching techniques to create fewer, but more intensive programs that may become better messengers of the learning value of museums?
- Do they exercise more united and forceful advocacy efforts? Working with evaluators, do they focus on providing more extensive and convincing evidence of their impact and package that information into stronger advocacy messages?
- And, as they wrestle with these questions, how do they position their concerns within the larger dilemmas facing museums today? What is the best forum for their debates, and, ultimately, who will stand with them as leaders in confronting these difficult issues?

These questions are urgent ones. Museums as a whole do not put forth a strong and widely shared advocacy message. If they cannot gather around the core principle of learning, where will they ever find common ground? Though strong and articulate voices have emerged in the past, many have often been lost in the passivity of the collective body. The fractured nature of museum associations has further diluted the advocacy message, and museum professionals, themselves, have stood silent when action has been needed. Museums could have been out in front as the knowledge age offered them great leadership opportunities. It is imperative that they not lose what might be a new opportunity today.

I am compelled to identify some possibilities for moving forward, a few of which may be forecast through some important new studies. Consider, for example, *Learning Science in Informal Environments*, recently published by the National Research Council of the National Academies.¹¹ Although the focus is on science-based education, the findings of this report, based on several years of significant research and evaluation studies, argue for the role of the “free choice” or informal learning experiences at the heart of lifelong learning. The report bears the imprimatur of the National Academies, giving its findings important credibility. The book establishes six learning frameworks that define the kind of learning that takes place in museums and argues effectively for embracing and expanding on such educational experiences. Museums of all disciplines have much to learn from this publication and can

easily adapt its findings into their own statements about the value of the experiences that take place in their galleries.

A study undertaken by the Center for Advancement of Informal Science Education (CAISE) through its Formal/Informal Inquiry Group,¹² also offers fodder for advocacy. The report notes that research has found that more than 70% of science-rich cultural institutions in the United States have programs specifically designed for school audiences. A study of museums of all types across the country, undertaken by IMLS in 2002¹³, placed that number as high as 88%. These are impressive numbers to support advocacy efforts.

The CAISE report is glowing about the impacts of the programs it studied. Yet it, too, concludes, “But despite scores of such examples, these collaborations have generally failed to institutionalize.” It cites familiar reasons: changes in funding and leadership; lack of assessment tools that adequately document their effects, and challenges to institutional priorities in both schools and museums. Even with these disturbing findings, the authors urge museums to move beyond these challenges. They do not encourage more collaborations, but more strategic and intentional collaborations that exploit the nexus of the two institutions. That nexus might include the expertise of museums in supporting the development of critical thinking skills, a growing “hot topic” in education today.

Observation skills, inquiry and analysis, creativity and problem-solving skills—all are identified as among the most critical skills sought in today’s job market and society as a whole. According to the American Management Association’s 2010 Critical Thinking Skills Survey,¹⁴ the new workplace requires employees to think critically, solve problems, innovate, collaborate and communicate more effectively at every level within an organization. Many business executives are urging an increased emphasis in schools on what they are calling the 3 R’s and the 4 C’s (communication skills, critical thinking, collaboration and creativity), believing that these are easier to develop in students than in experienced workers.

Through its recent publication, *Museums, Libraries and 21st Century Skills*,¹⁵ the Institute of Museum and Library Services, is also urging museums and libraries to strengthen emphasis on critical skills. The publication references the framework of skills offered by the Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21),¹⁶ which has already been adopted by 13 states and numerous organizations and associations, including the National Education Association and the American Association of School Libraries. This framework provides a

blending of skills, content knowledge, expertise and literacies as goals for 21st century education. It further cites “learning environments” — not exclusively schools — as necessary support systems.

Museums may need to be more explicit about their expertise in teaching and supporting such skills. They may need to be more forceful in encouraging greater recognition of the value and testing of such skills as part of student achievement. Consider what benefit might be gained if critical thinking skills became the specific curriculum content of museum programs. Programs like the following could replace the current emphasis on matching museum programs to the subject matter content of school curriculum.

- The museum offers programs specifically designed to identify, teach, practice and demonstrate students’ use of such skills. Such programs would cut across disciplines and use many types of objects to explore what it means to move from observation to analysis. The three-year research project, *Thinking Through Art*¹⁷, at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum provides an excellent resource for considering such a program.
- Museums and school partners co-develop a step-by-step critical thinking curriculum that spans grade levels, offering deeper understanding and demonstration opportunities at each grade level. Museum educators and teachers work together to evaluate evidence of learning at each site. The museum becomes the laboratory where students practice such skills, building on the content mastery achieved in the classroom.
- An even bolder concept would allow students to design their own program within the museum. Given a series of questions that require such skills as comparison and contrast, observation and analysis, students would choose their own examples from collections and exhibitions to illustrate their mastery of such skills. The class would constitute the forum for considering how well their choices demonstrated the concepts.

Although such different takes on museum programs do not provide solutions to issues of transportation and entrance fees, they do address some problems.

- They build on the strength of museum learning and provide an introduction to the kinds of skills that lead to the lifelong use of museums as learning resources.

- They provide new material for advocacy, allowing museums to solicit support based on the unique strengths of their learning environments.
- They emphasize the kinds of skills that will be of increasing importance in the real world of the 21st century providing more reason for increased support.
- They can be evaluated within the context of museum teaching goals, rather than through measurement systems that do not fit.

Such ideas are offered as stimulus to new conversations, as an invitation to be creative and imaginative in thinking about possibilities. Rather than assemble to engage in show and tell, museum educators might consider R&D as their focus for further meetings. Their greatest needs may well be to brainstorm and daydream together and give one another the courage to explore new ideas.

If museum educators are to be leaders in change, they will need many true partners to work toward greater educational effectiveness and recognition. They will need funders willing to take a chance with new ideas. They will need museum associations to be bold and imaginative in their advocacy efforts, not taking on issues one-by-one but being proactive and united in articulating the value of museums. They will also need public voices, community leaders willing to step outside of the trite and limited definitions of museums and eager to study the breadth of museum experiences. Museum leadership, as well, must support an internal willingness to learn and change. There are many people in the museum field who are boldly pioneering new ideas and fresh approaches. They deserve to be rewarded for the courage to break a lopsided public understanding of learning in the 21st century and establish new ground for collaborative excellence in education. Ultimately, the most insistent question is, Do we have the will and the fortitude to change?

Notes

1. Kim Fortney and Beverly Sheppard, eds. *An Alliance of Spirit: Museum and School Partnerships* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 2010).
2. Beverly Sheppard, ed. *Building Museum and School Partnerships* (Harrisburg, PA: Pennsylvania Federation of Museums and Historical Organizations, 1993).
3. Betsy Bowers, Jennifer Michaelree Squire, and Mary Jane Taylor, "Paying for It," in *An Alliance of Spirit: Museum and School Partnerships*, ed. Kim Fortney and Beverly Sheppard (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 2010).
4. Tamar Lewin, "Museums Take Their Lessons to the Schools," *The New York Times*, 22 April, 2010.

5. John H. Falk and Beverly K. Sheppard, *Thriving in the Knowledge Age: New Business Models for Museums and Other Cultural Institutions* (Lanham, Maryland: AltaMira Press, 2006).
6. <http://www.recovery.gov> (accessed, May 27, 2010).
7. <http://www.jobsformainstreet.gov> (accessed, May 27, 2010).
8. <http://www.whitehouse.gov/issues/education/educate-innovate> (accessed, May 13, 2010).
9. <http://www.letsmove.gov> (accessed, May 13, 2010).
10. <http://www.childrensmuseums.org> (accessed, May 13, 2010).
11. B. Lewenstein, A.W. Shouse, and M.A. Feder, eds. *Learning Science in Informal Environments: People, Places and Pursuits* (Washington DC: The National Academies Press, 2009).
12. <http://caise.insci.org/uploads/docs/MakingScienceMatter.pdf> (accessed, June 4, 2010).
13. *True Needs True Partners: Museums Serving Schools*. (Washington DC: Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2002).
14. <http://Amanet.org/news/AMA-2010-critical-skills-survey.aspx> (accessed May 6, 2010).
15. *Museums, Libraries and 21st Century Skills* (Washington, DC: Institute of Museum and Library Services, 2009).
16. <http://www.21stcenturyskills.org> (accessed, June 4, 2010).
17. <http://www.gardnermuseum/education/tta/tta.html> (accessed June 14, 2010).

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