

What We Do Best

Making the Case for the Museum Learning in its Own Right

Ben Garcia

Abstract It is time to revisit the way we describe and advocate for the “learning power” of museums. Museum learning is unique, multi-faceted and inspires higher-order affective and cognitive development. Yet, when museums describe their educational impact to stakeholders, it is often described narrowly, using the measures of formal education rather than focusing on its capacity to model intrinsically-motivated, joyful, open-ended learning that supports self-knowledge and positive social behavior. Museum educators are not doing enough to make a case for the value of museum learning in its own right with political, civic, educational and even museum entities.

The role of museums in promoting positive social behavior and transforming lives through education has been a focus of museum professionals since at least the time of John Cotton Dana one hundred years ago.¹ Dana, John Dewey and other progressive educators of the early twentieth century viewed education as essential to the success of a democratic society.² In the 1960s and 1970s, education theorists like Paolo Freire and Loris Malaguzzi, following in the progressive education tradition, created pedagogies that involved awakening critical consciousness and providing opportunities for self-affirmation through a co-production model where both student and teacher create the educative experience.³ Though Freire and Malaguzzi were envisioning models for formal education when they developed their philosophies, museum educators, riding the wave of social change, became the advocates for co-intentionality and cultural democracy within the museum and, as Elliott Kai-Keo points out in his article in this issue, (pages 13–22), within the professional organizations. Museum edu-

cators also applied these ideas (and those of the earlier progressive educators) to the work of museum education resulting in pedagogies like Falk & Dierking's free-choice learning, or Housen and Yenawine's Visual Thinking Strategies. In the twenty-five years since Dobbs and Eisner wrote *The Uncertain Profession* and described museum education as a discipline that lacked intellectual heft and tradition,⁴ museum education has found a voice and language in the work of these educators and others whose writings have become canonical — Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, George Hein, and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, to name a very few.

Recent conferences and publications have explored the possibilities for the types of social and personal transformation that are possible in museums, and museum educators, when presenting models to their peers, often describe their successes in these terms. However, the museum education establishment remains largely silent about the intrinsically powerful qualities of museum learning when advocating on Capitol Hill, in city hall, or with school systems, choosing instead to focus on the role museums play in supporting classroom outcomes.⁵ Today, when so many formal educational institutions are faltering due to political and social divisiveness and a deflated economy, there has never been a more urgent need for museums to articulate their potential as learning environments that can support the well-being and intellectual empowerment of individuals and communities. Museum educators need to make a case for the core values of museum learning (that lie within a larger ecosystem of informal education) and for a paradigm that values informal and formal education as complementary and equally significant in lifelong learning.

Museum school programs are generally designed to support K-12 content standards, because many schools will visit only if they see a fit with their academic goals. Many of us (myself included) have designed school programs that do this, and have — in ways small and large — sold out our collections in the process. When we require a painting by Rembrandt or Bearden to serve an “Artist as Storyteller” agenda, or fit an Elsie Allen feather basket into a “California History, California Lives” box, we do those objects, their makers, our visitors, and our profession a disservice. The connection between written and painted narrative is one interesting aspect of that Rembrandt and the continuity of cultural practice in the face of genocide is, without question, important to understanding the value of Allen's work. However, those of us who work as educators in museums know that these objects have the power to illuminate so many of the dark regions of our minds and beings beyond those addressed in the classroom, and it is our responsibility to advocate for that power.

Given the stress of this protracted economic downturn on schools and museums, and the decisions that funders and other stakeholders need to make about the value of museum programs, an argument could be made that aligning museum education programs more closely with the standards of formal education is prudent and even helpful. Some might ask whether it would be divisive or opportunistic for museums to take this moment to affirm their own educational outcomes rather than work to support schools in achieving theirs. But the public education system in this country is broken according to even the most optimistic prognosticators.⁶ The well of formal education in the areas of constructivism, free-choice learning, and intrinsic motivation — for all the good work of progressive and alternative educators — has largely been poisoned. Prescribed curricula, employment practices that favor tenure over performance, standardized testing, and reduced funding are just some of the reasons for this. Elliott Eisner wrote ten years ago that the culture of schools is industrial, the values brittle, and the conception of what's important narrow. "We pay practically no attention to the idea that engagement in school can and should provide intrinsic satisfactions, and we exacerbate the importance of extrinsic rewards by creating policies that encourage children to become point collectors. Achievement," Eisner concluded, "has triumphed over inquiry."⁷ Ten years of "No Child Left Behind" has not addressed the problem Eisner raised a decade ago, rather, it has exacerbated it.

If museums accept that serving formal education means using its same empirical assessments and recreating its approach to teaching in museums — an approach that is tied to extrinsic motivation and therefore not at home in the museum environment where learning is intrinsically motivated⁸ — we ignore intrinsic motivation as a force for learning. Carol Scott wrote in 2002 that the application of a model that accounts for the value of museums through measuring performance against the kind of quantitative indicators used in formal education, "has generated considerable debate and discussion regarding the limited ability of short-term, quantitative indicators to adequately reflect both the complexity of the role that museums play in society and the long term contribution that they make to social value."⁹ A museum education department that justifies its programs using state content standards or argues that students become better scientists, or writers, or learn how to solve algorithms by visiting a museum, is then trapped in the narrowest definition of what the learning experience is about. We get trapped when we decide that we can abdicate our role in defining our own worth in the area of school audiences — often the lifeblood of an education

department. Now more than ever museums can (and must) articulate the value of an approach to learning that favors inquiry over achievement, intrinsic motivation over extrinsic, and free choice over prescription.

Dewey scholar Philip Jackson said to a group of art museum educators in August 2007 in Chicago, “We need a broad philosophical defense for what we do, not a narrow empirical defense.”¹⁰ He felt that learning in museums cannot be empirically justified and that trying to prove its worth in this way was a losing proposition. When museums attempt to change the essential nature of their environments to accommodate the narrow view of formal education, the message they send, to stakeholders within and outside the museum, is that museums as places of learning are somehow “less than”: less valid, less important for the health of a community, and less able to engender positive momentum in our society than institutions of formal learning.

In 1992, Falk and Dierking wrote that the distinction between formal and informal learning had become counterproductive; what had been a useful distinction in the 1970s no longer made sense. Learning processes and outcomes in the two arenas were more aligned, “learning is learning” they wrote.¹¹ A few years later, the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) published *True Needs True Partners*, a review, with case studies, of current museum and school partnerships. In the introduction, Richard W. Riley wrote “. . . one can only be thankful to be living in a time when museums and schools are rediscovering each other in ever new and more profound ways. By building local partnerships between schools and museums, you are strengthening two basic community institutions. . . .”¹² The IMLS’s director, Diane B. Frankel, who authored the publication noticed a new opportunity in school and museum partnerships and put the resources of the IMLS behind this opportunity:

True collaborative programs that involve partnerships blessed at the highest levels of both educational institutions are beginning to emerge everywhere. As museum educators respect school educators as equals, they have become more sensitive to developing programming that applies directly to what is happening in the classroom. As teachers watch students who have problems with traditional learning models come alive in museums, they find new ways to reach these students. As directors and board members view education as a core principle of a museum, they endorse and actively support the formation of long-term relationships with schools.¹³

Granted, the nature of the partnerships in the IMLS publication was still largely predicated upon the notion that museum's role would be that of supporter of classroom outcomes:

Schools have articulated real educational needs, and museums have proposed real solutions. If a museum has a collection or an exhibition that can make a concept in the curriculum more vivid, if a teacher can integrate what the museum has to offer into a curriculum package, the museum program becomes essential.¹⁴

However, things were moving in a direction where school and museum stakeholders and educational theorists were envisioning a distinct, mutually empowered, and co-intentional paradigm for formal and informal education. In the same publication Robert Sullivan wrote:

To start, museums should not attempt to duplicate the educational agenda of other institutions in their communities. They must take full advantage of their moral and social status and image, their collections, and their novel educational environment to develop their visitors' intellectual, emotional, esthetic, and moral character.¹⁵

In 2001, "No Child Left Behind" (NCLB) was instituted, restricting formal education's ability to grow, and narrowing the possibilities for classroom content. Over the following ten years, the chasm between educational outcomes in the classroom and the museum widened, and many of us bridged that gap by marketing our programs to meet the goals of the prescribed curricula that rose in the wake of NCLB. However while formal education's progress in this country was stunted by NCLB, the discipline of museum education continued to develop. Our profession has never been better prepared to make the case for museum learning on its own terms: to articulate the philosophical, academic, research-based, and practical rationale for the "what" and "why" of museum-based education. The twenty-five years since the publication of *The Uncertain Profession* have seen a blossoming of academic programs for the training of museum educators and a surge in the numbers of emerging professionals who arrive at museums with grounding in museum learning theory. Those 20-year veterans of museum education that Dobbs and Eisner were so hard-pressed to locate in 1987 now are a norm in the field. We have our intellectual touchstones, we have our data and our philosophies, and now is the time to address our strengths overtly.

That museums should serve school audiences is beyond question. Formal and informal educational environments — schools and museums — should serve as the yin and yang of learning in a healthy community: equally necessary for education of the whole person. A recent collaboration in St. Louis provides a compelling model and a reminder that many educators have not dropped the pursuit of the kind of “true partnerships” proposed in the 1996 IMLS publication.

CASE STUDY **Sharing Vision/Transforming Practice**

By Michael Murawski, Director of School Services, St. Louis Art Museum, and Ralph Cordova, Assistant Professor, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

- How might museums effectively partner with schools to catalyze a shift in what learning looks like in a museum for teachers and students?
- In what ways could such partnerships transform a museum from a place to consume what is already known into a creative space to explore, envision, and enact habits of mind for twenty-first century learning?

These questions sum up the focus of emerging work resulting from a recent collaboration between the Saint Louis Art Museum and the CoLab, an innovative community of National Writing Project sites, museums, and diverse private and public schools. Since 2009, this growing collaboration has focused on transforming both formal and informal learning settings into spaces that nurture an innovator and growth mindset. The partnership has brought together professionals from diverse educational landscapes to address the daunting educational challenges of the twenty-first century through a shared, co-expertise model grounded in ResponsiveDesign, the CoLab’s theory of action. The following case utilizes three essential practices of the ResponsiveDesign approach: Explore, envision, and enact. Together they provide a picture of this model in action at the Saint Louis Art Museum.

Explore

As members of the CoLab, four teacher-leaders from an area middle school recently wondered what insights and practices they could explore in partnership with their area’s public art museum. Rather than succumb to another pre-established professional development session on state standards, these teachers sought to team-up with their colleagues and respond to a question they had been asking themselves: How can we make the art museum a cultural landscape for in-school and out-of-school learning for our students? With support from their administration, a total of twelve seventh-grade teachers scheduled a day-long experience at the Saint Louis Art Museum where they could openly explore a broader vision of learning.

Envision

At the center of this professional learning experience at the museum were practices that focused on making thinking visible, scaffolding multidimensional interactions with works of art, and envisioning student learning experiences that each teacher would co-create with the



Teacher leads her class through thinking exercises in the museum.

Photo Credit: Mike Murawski

museum. After reflecting on the types of thinking at the core of their own subject areas, teachers spent two hours with a single artwork engaged in looking, questioning, moving, making sound, writing, and uncovering complexity. These activities paved the way for teachers to envision what learning could look like in the museum with their own students—and they left the museum with the task of prototyping an experience they could guide for their students during an upcoming museum visit.

Enact

After a few weeks of shared planning, the team of teachers returned to the Saint Louis Art Museum and brought their two-hundred seventh-graders. Each teacher led their class straight to the gallery they had preselected for the visit, and enacted a series of in-depth thinking exercises grounded in their students' needs as well as the artwork they had selected. That day the museum made a shift in what it had the potential to become: a location where authentic, learner-driven experiences have the potential to be developed and enacted by teachers and their students.

Through the ongoing partnership between the CoLab and the Saint Louis Art Museum, we have begun to build a shared groundwork upon which schools and museums can enable transformative learning experiences focused on creative participation, intellectual speculation, personal meaning, and exploring how we—as people in a fluid and mobile society—interact with and learn from cultural objects. These experiences are empowering teachers to chart their own pathways in unpredictable ways and inviting parallel exploration, risk-taking, and fresh discovery on the part of their students.

Now is the time for museum educators to make the case, as the St. Louis model demonstrates, with their colleagues in schools and universities for a mutually supportive educational paradigm. For 30 years, museum educators have worked, with great success, to secure a place at the table within the museum. The field is now facing a challenge that builds upon (and dwarfs) that success: How to secure a seat at the table of education policy-makers at the local, state and national level. Beverly Sheppard points out in her excellent 2010 article for this journal several telling examples of the omission of museums at the level of public policy: the 2009 Recovery and Reinvestment Act that originally excluded all museums from eligibility for funding (and ended up excluding zoos and aquaria) and the exclusion of museums from the coalition that developed the “Educate to Innovate” campaign in support of STEM-based education.¹⁶ Claudine Brown, the Assistant Secretary for Education and Access at the Smithsonian Institution related to the 2011 graduating class of Marlboro College that the Smithsonian has embraced STEAM, adding the arts to STEM’s original subject areas of science, technology, engineering, and math¹⁷ in an effort to retroactively incorporate that museum’s learning priorities into federal policy. Continuing to allow institutions of formal education to define or decide the museum’s usefulness will only end up turning museums into a version of Eisner’s point-collecting entities. The current downturn, academic and economic, provides great challenges and even greater opportunities to proceed differently. Now is the time for museums to fully embrace their educative potential, to become articulate about their public value, and to enter the national conversation about how children and adults learn.

Notes

1. John Cotton Dana, *The New Museum* (Woodstock: Elm Tree Press, 1917).
2. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1916).
3. Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1998).
4. Stephen M. Dobbs and Elliot W. Eisner, “The Uncertain Profession: Educators in American Art Museums,” *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 21.4 (1987): 77-86.
5. Institute of Museum and Library Services, *True Needs, True Partners: Museums and Schools Transforming Education* (Washington, DC: IMLS, 2002). Survey highlights.
6. Elliot Eisner, “What Can Education Learn From the Arts About the Practice of Education?” *The Encyclopedia of Informal Education*. (2002) Retrieved November, 2011 from www.infed.org/biblio/eisner_arts_and_the_practice_of_edu
7. Ibid.
8. M. Csikszentmihalyi and K. Hermanson, “Intrinsic Motivation in Museums: Why Does one Want to Learn?” in J. H. Falk and L. D. Dierking, eds., *Public Institutions For Personal Learning: Establishing a Research Agenda* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1995): 65-67.

9. Carol Scott, "Measuring Social Value," in R. Sandell, ed., *Museums, Society, Inequality* (New York: Routledge, 2002): 41-55.
10. Philip Jackson lecture, Chicago, IL, August 2007.
11. J. H. Falk and L. D. Dierking, *The Museum Experience* (Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 1992).
12. Institute of Museum and Library Services, *True Needs, True Partners: Museums and Schools Transforming Education* (Washington, DC: IMLS, 1996).
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid.
15. bid.
16. Beverly Sheppard, "Insistent Questions in Our Learning Age," *Journal of Museum Education* 35.3 (2010): 221.
17. Claudine Brown, (2010, May). *Commencement Remarks*. Speech presented at Marlboro College, Marlboro, VT.

About the Author

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