

Shared Authority: The Key to Museum Education as Social Change

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For nearly two decades I have wound my way in and out of positions at museums, historic sites, non-profit social service agencies, and higher education, seeking and following opportunities to do social change work. In the process I have learned much about the ways in which each of these types of institutions and the people employed therein are able to effect change, promote social justice, and serve the public good. At the same time I have come to understand that each of these types of institutions is limited in this important work by mission, staffing, accreditation needs, funding, or by any one of a number of factors, including at times a lack of understanding of the skills, knowledge, and capacities of colleagues in a sector other than one's own. In my travels it has become clear to me that there is much complimentary work being done inside museums and out, and, as a result, immense potential for collaboration. Equally as important is the fact that a lack of collaboration across sectors hampers every institution's efforts at effecting social change.

But what does this have to do with museum education? Everything. Why? Because "*How to effect change in the world?*" and "*How to be relevant?*" are the questions increasingly at the center of museum (and museum education) discussions the world over. During the past five years, economic and social concerns everywhere have shined an ever brighter spotlight on both the long history and current understanding of the civic role(s) and public good of museums. The topic has been identified and discussed in this journal and others including the journal *Museums and Social Issues* as well as in recent books such as *The Social Work of Museums* and *Inspiring Action: Museums and Social Change*.¹ Scholars and practitioners have increasingly explored issues such as the ways in which museums can function as spaces for civic

events, the use of museum exhibits to raise questions and open up difficult public conversations, the perception of museums as cornerstones of a city or region's identity and cultural context, and the growth of programming and access programs to "serve" populations deemed under-served or at risk. In addition, funding agencies have begun to support and encourage creative partnerships and programming that would help make museums relevant and responsive to the diverse communities and concerns that surround them.

However, despite the general conversation in the scholarship and the increased support for museums as civic/social spaces, there remain many questions about *why* and *how* museum education initiatives (broadly defined) might address the most critical social needs or concerns of their communities. This issue of *JME* takes up these questions directly and works at providing some answers by way of employing the concept of "a shared authority" as a frame. The idea that permeates this volume is simple: sharing authority with both "the public" and/or colleagues at non-museum entities can be a powerful and accessible tool for museums of all stripes to effectively educate others about or engage in pressing social concerns and social change efforts.

"Shared authority" is a specific concept and one I evoke intentionally in this issue for two reasons. First, because it pushes beyond the idea of collaboration or partnership; and, second, because it is a concept that has, often under other names, been part of the training of many educators. To address the first point, it is important to recognize that in a museum setting "collaboration" or "partnership" can refer simply to a financial agreement or to a formal structure that gives a local school or community group certain access to the museum offerings. Shared authority, a concept articulated by Michael Frisch vis a vis oral history some 20 years ago, is employed here to make the case that, in collaborative museum work that aims to be responsive to social needs, all parties involved must be understood to be authorities on topics of value to the collaboration, and must be understood to have the power and position to fully co-create.² Operating from a position of shared authority requires that we consider ourselves first and foremost as both educators and learners. We must recognize that we always and already share authority, for we do not have all the answers — or even all the questions. And we need, perhaps more than anything, to be open to engaging in acts of translation in which we seek to understand fully another's voice and perspective and demystify the language that we and others use to talk about what we do.

I am reminded of these points regularly in my day job as a professor of American Studies teaching future educators and cultural workers. I return

often to the words of historian and social change promoter Karen Halttunen who, in speaking about those who desire to do “public cultural work” — from which much social change emerges — reminds us of the need to let go of positions of both actual and perceived privilege. Three of her powerful ideas I share here:

We [must] divest ourselves of the special authority sometimes granted to us ... We [must] take up “the daily care and feeding of ‘a common language and a common culture’” ... [And we must] enter democratic partnerships with other members of our communities.³

These ideas and the place of shared authority in the work of history museums — including its limitations and some critiques of it — have recently been taken up in 2011’s *Letting Go: Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, but shared authority as philosophy or strategy must not be limited to the purview historical education. In the following pages, practitioners and scholars work to expand this newly-emergent conversation to a much more diverse set of museum types and practices so as to showcase its power to transform and challenge much of what museums and museum educators do.

The second — and perhaps most critical — reason for using shared authority as a frame for this issue of *JME* is that shared authority is not a new concept to most educators. It emerges again and again in foundational texts in the field. For example, by foregrounding a dialogic approach and the concept of co-creating knowledge, Paulo Freire’s philosophy has for decades called on us to consider that we are stronger and better able to effect change by embracing potential co-creators who add their wisdom and experiences to our own and provide a new lens through which to consider our work and our goals.⁴ This approach marks the best museum education no matter the museum. Yet, as many in the field know, working from this philosophical position as a museum educator requires working in a way that is often at odds with the culture of museums. Museums are, by their nature, often presented as or thought to be places that hold and disseminate knowledge rather than facilitate co-creation. Collectively, the accounts and perspectives in this issue offer both permission for and guidance regarding how museum educators might be particularly positioned to lead museums in doing important social change work. After all, not only are museum educators trained to work in a dialogic fashion but it is through many educational efforts that museums are already connected with and already respond to the world at large.

This issue of *JME* offers us a dazzling array of voices and examples of museum educators and non-museum partners alike who have taken up the challenges of people like Frisch, Freire, and Haltunnen as a way to do their work in and with museums. Under the broad umbrella of shared authority, there are two, related, concerns that inform each article in some way:

1. The ways in which museums can/do engage in social change work via education initiatives/activities;
2. The ways in which social change and social change work being done outside the museum (by NGOs, community groups, social service agencies, members of the public etc.) can/does offer new opportunities for and to museum educators.

Key to both of these issues are questions of identity, power, collaboration, mission, and vision, which are themselves tackled in various ways here. Among other issues raised but not resolved in this volume are:

- How can authority be shared? How can we organize our work with other organizations or groups to leverage resources/align missions and resources so as to identify and develop meaningful collaborations?
- How do museums alter (or adapt) institutional culture/norms to pursue and sustain social change initiatives? How do social service organizations or other community partners do the same to engage with museums?
- What constitutes a social concern? A social issue? Does it have to relate to the most likely/local audience? What if a museum takes up a topic/social issues that impacts people/communities many, many miles away — is this educational initiative effective?

Collectively, these articles contribute to an ongoing redefinition of what it means to do “museum education” or be a “museum educator” as they ask: Who is educating whom? Where does education happen? What are the learning outcomes for this type of work?

As a whole, this volume suggests that sharing authority in many aspects of museum education work is the key to meeting museum goals, serving the public good, and tackling relevant or contested social issues. While each of the museum projects detailed in this issue is animated by a unique social issue or concern, and the examples are drawn from a diverse set of museum types, they are connected by an acknowledgement that shared authority is a means to successfully engage or respond to a social need — whether in one’s backyard or half a world away.

The first two articles take up these themes and frames of the volume in broad strokes, together making a bold case for both *why* museums should embrace a shared authority approach and *how* this might be done, while asking readers to consider the challenges, fears, and possibilities implicit in authentic, reciprocal engagement with non-museum partners to address social needs/concerns. Drawing on theoretical and philosophical frameworks as well as lived experience, Yaël Filipovic and Steve Long both ground and explore this volume's organizing theme while presenting terms and concepts that reemerge in the case studies that follow.

Writing from her position within the world of art museums, Filipovic makes a powerful plea — relevant, I believe, for all museums and cultural institutions — to operate within a framework that philosopher Jacques Rancière refers to as an “equality of intelligences” *where those who know something engage with those who know something else*.⁵ Filipovic's article weaves philosophy, cultural theory, and museum studies approaches to hone in on the ways in which language, funding structures, organizational identity, and fear of risk can create or reinforce power differentials and interfere with the pursuit of collaboration. Yet, while laying bare many of the barriers to collaborative work, Filipovic ultimately aims to showcase the immense potential for collaboration if undertaken in a way that is intentional, grants authority to many voices, and is sensitive to the inherent challenges.

Long, of the Children's Museum of the East End, echoes Filipovic's call for a new way of collaborating in an article that walks us through not only why new notions of collaboration are critical from a moral standpoint, but, while acknowledging the museum “costs” of engaging communities to address their needs, argues convincingly that these “costs” are far outweighed by benefits. He takes up four areas of potential concern for museums, and through a rich set of examples makes clear that this approach serves both the community's needs and the museum's “bottom line.” In his accounting these outcomes are symbiotic.

The four articles that follow offer case studies that showcase the many ways and places in which museum educators are working in this spirit. Each article implicitly or explicitly makes the claim that the notion of shared authority — at times with the general public, at times with colleagues at a non-museum partner — was critical to their ability to address challenging and/or contemporary social concerns.

In Fern Silverman and Bradford Bartley's account of a partnership between Temple University Occupational Therapy Program and The Franklin Institute,

“Who is Educating Whom? Two-way Learning in Museum/University Partnerships,” the authors remind us that museums are places where staff learn as well as visitors. Their focus is on the development of a partnership in which both partners were “educators” and “learners” at the same time. It was this willingness to recognize the authority of the “other” that transformed the knowledge and skills of both “sides” so that the museum could better serve the needs of its visitors, and the faculty and students from Temple could become more effective community practitioners. The article also discusses the value and use of conceptual models that assisted them in partnership building.

The Matilda Jocelyn Gage Center is the focus of the next article, “Productive Discomfort: Dialogue, Reproductive Choice and Social Justice Education at the Matilda Joslyn Gage Center.” In it, the authors offer a how-to guide for taking up the hotly contested issue of reproductive rights in a museum setting. Focusing on the development of a community-facing program “Who Chooses?” the article details the ways in which an explicit focus on “productive dialogue” in both the process of program development and the program goals has benefitted the museum in some unimagined ways, encouraging changes in exhibit design and producing a replicable model for other museums who wish to develop programming around reproductive rights concerns. At the heart of the project detailed here are the related ideas of dialogue as a public good and a commitment to make manifest the oft-cited goal that museums be safe spaces for the civic work of engaging pressing concerns.

The concept of a museum as a site to practice the skills of a democracy is taken up also in the article “Using Socio-Scientific Issues to Help Museum Visitors Participate in Democratic Dialogue and Increase Their Understandings of Current Science and Technology,” written by a team of educators, researchers and curators at the Museum of Science in Boston, MA. Fueled by a pair of goals — to educate the public about the impact of science and technology on their daily lives, and to use the museum experience to help develop the skills of democratic dialogue — the MOS team has developed an approach to science museum education that not only places socio-scientific topics at the center but relies upon the knowledge and experiences of visitors to co-create the exhibit experience and teach other visitors about the topics at hand. The act of democratic dialogue is both a goal and a means to an educational end in these programs in which participant authority and expertise is assumed.

Finally, in her thought-provoking essay, “A New Tradition: A Reflection on Collaboration and Contact Zones”, Amber Clifford-Napoleone, Curator at the McClure Archives and University Museum (which holds an important

collection of Middle Eastern material culture), recounts her decade-long educational collaboration with international students as a way to imagine the possibility of museums as “contact zone” in the twenty-first century. Wedding theories of anthropology, the ever-changing realities of Muslim/non-Muslim relations in the US, and misperceptions among Americans about cultures of the Middle East, Clifford-Napoleone reflects on the ways in which museums can move beyond creating collaborative “projects” and build/create true collaborations.

The richness of this collection of articles lies in the fact that it features examples and voices from many geographic locations, many museum types, as well as voices from within and outside of museums while simultaneously examining the link between museum education/educators and an immensely wide range of social issues and concerns. The power of shared authority to meet both institutional and social needs can, and is, being realized in all corners of the museum world and, as demonstrated here, museum educators and museum education programming is leading the way. Museum staff members are helping non-museum partners think through creative ways to use the museum’s educational potential in their work, while non-museum partners are helping educate museum staff about the needs, issues, and approaches that might improve a museum’s effectiveness and relevance. Authentic, reciprocal co-creation is what emerges from these pages; an approach that is helping museums develop and promote programs that are stronger and more effective than would have been the case if they had attempted to do social change work alone. As social change agents and transformative museum practitioners, the museums and individuals featured on the pages that follow have something to teach us all.

Notes

1. Recent related special issues of *JME* include spring 2010’s vol. 35, no. 1 focused on “Museum Education and Public Value,” fall 2012’s vol. 37, no. 3 exploring “Museum Education in Times of Radical Social Change.” See also forthcoming issues “The New New Urban History” and “City Museums and Urban Learning.” For examples of key individual articles related to the topic of this issue see E. H. Gurian, “Museum as Soup Kitchen,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 53 (2010): 71–85. In addition, in January 2012 *Curator* published a special issue on “Communities and Museums” and since 2006 the journal *Museums & Social Issues* has been devoted to considering the links between museums and topics of social concern. Note, however, that these last two journals are not focused on museum education per se. Recent books of note include Lois Silverman, *The Social Work of Museums* (New York: Routledge, 2010) and Carol Brown, Elizabeth Wood, and Gabriella Salgado, eds., *Inspiring Action: Museums and Social Change* (Edinburgh: Museums Etc, 2009).

2. Michael Frisch, *A Shared Authority: Essays on the Craft and Meaning of Oral and Public History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990). In a more recent 2011 essay Michael Frisch asked readers to recall that his 1990 text was carefully titled to highlight the article "A" which was to signal that in oral history/public history work shared authority is something that always "is"; authority is not something one person has and may (or may not) share. See "From *A Shared Authority* to the Digital Kitchen and Back," in *Letting Go? Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*, ed. Bill Adair et al. (Philadelphia, PA: The Pew Center for Arts & Heritage, 2011), 127. The implication of Frisch's finer point for the wider conversation in this issue is that museum educators, who rely upon a public with whom to work and interface, might do well to assume a shared authority as the standard place from which their work happens.
3. Karen Halttunen, "Groundwork: American Studies in Place," *American Quarterly* 58, no. 1 (March 2006), 12.
4. See Paulo Friere, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1970).
5. See Jacques Rancière, *The Ignorant Schoolmaster: Five Lessons in Intellectual Emancipation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991).

About the Author

Elizabeth Duclos-Orsello, Ph.D. is a publically-engaged, social-justice driven scholar who directs the American Studies program at Salem State University where she is Associate Professor of Interdisciplinary Studies, Faculty Fellow for Service-Learning, and Affiliated Faculty member with the Center for Economic Development and Sustainability. She holds a Ph.D. in American Studies from Boston University and bachelor's degrees in History and Sociology-Based Human Relations from Connecticut College. Her areas of expertise include theories of community, cultural geography, nineteenth and twentieth century social and cultural history, as well as immigrant and ethnic history and literature. She has taught undergraduate and graduate students at a number of institutions, including at the University of Luxembourg where she was a Fulbright Faculty fellow in 2010. She has worked as a consultant for and as a scholar/educator at numerous museums and historic sites in MA, WI, and MN including the Minnesota Historical Society, Historic New England, The Nichols House Museum, and the House of the Seven Gables. In these roles she has assisted museums in their efforts to engage pressing social questions and concerns. She has directed two Teaching American History grants, presented numerous workshops for K-12 educators, and taught theatre in an Upward Bound program. She began her career as a social worker in Kansas City, Missouri and has served on non-profit boards and worked and volunteered for nearly two decades with community organizations, social service non-profits, and neighborhood groups wherever she has lived. She is a founding and ongoing contributor of *The Public Humanist*, a humanities and public policy blog.