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INTRODUCTION

Museum Education and Research-based Practice

During the final decades of the twentieth century, the emphasis which museums and galleries placed on their education programmes shifted from a quantitative exercise to a qualitative one. While in the 1980s there was an urgency about using educational visits to increase visitor numbers, the following decade saw an increasing interest in questions of intellectual and physical access. Governments and museum institutions alike, especially local authorities responsible for museum policies, began to recognise their potential as stimuli in the fields of formal and informal education. Research, under the aegis initially of powerful foundations such as the Getty Institute for art education in America, was demonstrating increasingly that museum education could change people. Case studies were mounting which showed that new issues were being raised through museum education, that it could be empowering for the learner, leading to revelatory moments of understanding. The 1990s saw an increasing professionalisation of the practices of education. After a shaky start, during which time new museum education posts looked vulnerable, there are now scarcely any museums, throughout the world, which do not provide educational programmes and 'interactive' resources associated with displays and events as a regular feature of their work.

While there is little problem now about posts being funded and the importance of museum education work being officially recognised, there is still tension about its broader cultural agendas and contexts. The politically driven debates about access, widening participation and social inclusion have impacted heavily on education departments and are hardly ever accompanied by training or research programmes on the educational efficacy of these policies. The 19th-century notion of the museum as educationally civilising, has only slightly shifted to it perceiving itself as socially and culturally cohesive and ideally also, inclusive. But what is happening now, is not so much a distinction between elite and commonplace, or disorder and enlightenment in the social fabric, as one between humdrum and transformative experience. What Bennett termed the 'culturally differentiating practices' of the museum (Bennett 1996, 99-105), policing the norms of public conduct, have shifted in their emphasis to the museum as provider of the extraordinary, of spectacle and sensation. This was also one of Tony Bennett's points, but this has had both an interesting and a worrying implication for education. In an age which recognises the power of the consumer, education is being used as part of the instrument, for 'audience development'. So, as well as helping to improve knowledge and deepen

understanding (both complex notions which will be unpacked extensively in the course of this book) there is an expectation that education will deliver popular entertainment. This has had the spiralling effect of increasing the pace of activity, and in the interests of widening audience participation, especially from families, it has imposed a pressure to deliver extensive play-centred diversions at the expense of sustained and perhaps more difficult work with longer-term goals.

The desire for spectacle in the museum is part of the tension, heightened in the field of education, which exists between popular expectations, institutional aims and the professional agenda of the practitioners working within it. At best this tension is symbiotic, in the sense that there is a shared sense of mission towards general cultural benefit. As Stephen Weil quoted recently in 'Making Museums Matter', what is important is that the museum perceives itself as making a difference in society, 'reaching a consensus on merit'. The intentions of a good museum are to be a force for good 'to make a positive difference'. The demands for accessibility are normative, the museum's benevolent improving influence is a citizen's inalienable right. (Weil 2002, 55-74). This feel-good aspiration is one with which most institutions would identify and can easily be seen as propitious for the development of worthwhile community-focussed education. Conversely, there is Bourdieu's much more jaundiced view that the charismatic ideology of the museum is entirely self-serving, offering a pretence at democratic access while all the time reinforcing notions of cultural exclusiveness. Museums and their publics operate in a system of mutually reinforcing values of cultural competence, concealed from the uninitiated but which: 'betray in the smallest details of their morphology and their organisation, their true function which is to strengthen the feeling of belonging in some and the feeling of exclusion in others'. In his terms education, such as it exists in the élite French museum, reinforces the system and any transformative experience is tainted by élite cultural values of obeisance to grandeur and recognition of some agreed, but invisible, standards of quality (Bourdieu 1993, 236). Both are in a sense very authoritarian points of view, and while Weil or Bourdieu might offer alternative theoretical positions, practical experience can lead to a very different perspectives. Among museum educators and researchers responsible for daily contact with objects and people in the museum, it is possible for views to be entirely differently nuanced and to be both more measured and more optimistic about the possibilities there for educational and social experiment and change.

The multiplication in museums and art galleries both of informal education opportunities and more structured education programmes bear out this mood of professional optimism and are characterised by diversity, innovation, and practical curiosity about the best way to develop learning. Normally, the ideas that emerge come not from broad institutional aspirations, but from individuals or small teams working to busy schedules, using their own imaginations.. Ideas tend to spread via formal or informal professional networks at regional meetings and conferences, such as those run regularly in the UK by Engage or the Group for Education in Museums, by the American Association of Museums in the United States, or internationally by ICOM. The emerging diversity is a matter for celebration and cuts across institutional, regional, national and cultural boundaries through a sense of shared interest and commitment. However, largely because of lack of time and resources, in

the rush for lively programming which is often imposed as a result of institutional pressure or expectations, a great deal of innovative practice goes unreported and many educational issues do not get adequately debated in the wider world. In any case, the informal sharing of experience is not enough for the systematic development of understanding about the educational processes that occur in museum and gallery settings. There is an international as well as local need for museum and gallery educators to investigate their work on a systematic research footing, to transmit their research across the art education community, and to build the whole community's practices on the most enlightened understanding possible.

The call for a more substantial and sustained approach to the development of 'research-based practice' is clear. For intrinsic professional reasons, practice that is well informed, carried out on the basis of evidence, is likely to be more satisfying and enduring, as well as effective in achieving its goals. For extrinsic reasons of accountability, marketing and such, it is also likely to be more plausible, justifiable and acceptable. But what does this concept imply for professionals who work in museums and galleries as educators? The educational community can gain from research done by researchers who are not necessarily themselves educational practitioners, or who are working in a contingent field characterised by a wide cultural perspective. Then, ideally, practice will be informed both by the substance and the methods of applied educational research. This concept usually implies a relationship in which educators need the skills of reading or listening to other people's research, judging its value and perhaps applying its lessons. But in addition to that, the practices of all educators working in the field of museums and galleries can be immediately, directly, and systematically researched using Action Research and other qualitative research methods to inform subsequent developments in practice, both at a personal and institutional level. In that case individual practice, and the experiences of those being educated, form a basis for personal and professional research the very purpose of which is to inform the practitioner, to bring about direct application of that research to that practice, in order to improve it. The urgency to develop the skills for conducting research is paramount, and those skills subsume the skills of reading others' substantive research and methodological reports. However, doing practice-based research is not enough in itself because as Stenhouse (1975) pointed out, research should be both systematic and public. Skills of recording, publishing, or otherwise communicating the understanding that derives from practice-based research are also important. Here, educators are not just the receivers of wisdom, they are its producers too, active in the wider community of art educators, contributing directly to society's professional and cultural knowledge base.

The idea that museum and gallery educators should be proficient in the use and conduct of applied educational research is at the heart of this book. It is becoming imperative that the experience of practice-based research methodologies developed in other educational arenas should be brought into the work of museum and gallery educators. There is a need and an opportunity to develop a research culture and to extend methodological expertise among gallery educators through the informed use of others' research and through their own research-based practice.

The growing debate about museum and gallery education shows that some key themes and issues stand out as being deemed worthy of close attention, both *in situ* as activities are devised by practitioners, and in a more generalised theoretical way among policy makers and researchers. Among the concerns, understanding of the needs and interests of different types of museum audiences is a theme of inquiry that has also blossomed since the last decades of the twentieth century. The reasons for this growth in interest are a close mix of intrinsic educational concerns (to do with engagement, motivation and sustaining involvement), extrinsic accountability (to do with increasing audience participation), and demographic trends (such as greater use of gallery visits by school groups). But there is also an underlying recognition that the idea of ‘types’ of audience collectivises individual visitors in a simplistic and unjustifiable manner. A growing awareness of the deeply personal and individual nature of aesthetic encounters has resulted in a search for understanding about their meaning, their value, and the processes involved in bringing them about. Not surprisingly perhaps, the 1990s saw that issue rise to prominence, as the characteristics of visitors’ experiences and the nature of their learning in museum and gallery settings became a focus for authors such as Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990), Falk and Dierking (1992), Hein (1998), Hooper-Greenhill (1991), Taylor (1986), Tickle (1996), and others. Authors in this volume, bringing together case studies from Britain, Canada, Eire, Finland, Greece, Italy, the Netherlands, Singapore, and the USA, have each participated in that growth period with their own contributions to the development of educational practice, and to our appreciation of the potentials of applied research methodology. Their new work published here as a collection brings the voices of researchers, practitioners and visitors together in a new way, that will hopefully lay a foundation for international co-operation in the future development and communication of research-based practice.

In the eternal quest for ‘best practice’, not only educationalists and researchers, but the professional organisations, trusts, research councils and funding bodies who have an interest in the field of museum education, have an increasing desire to reach an understanding of the nature of the affective and multi-sensory experiences of viewing material culture. This is coupled with a desire to know how best to promote positive and productive attitudes towards it, and how to effect learning from it. That has raised the stakes for practitioners in the field and encouraged them to develop curiosity about the most appropriate methods for intervention in relatively informal situations, and about the relationship between experience and learning. Many of the contributions to this book are concerned with planned interventions of various kinds, providing a richness from practice-based research that displays the ‘thinking behind the teaching’ as well as describing the activities and experiences of students, and providing evaluative evidence of events. The possibility for self-exploration and self-learning, illuminating the world of the visitor left in contemplation, without the intervention of another educator, provides an added dimension to the notion of researching practice, with the possibility of the ‘teacher as researcher’ (Stenhouse 1975) transformed into the *visitor as researcher*. The potential for a phenomenological view of research to become genuinely a source of our understanding has yet to be tapped. It is, as Crotty (1998, 84) put it, to recognise that “each of us must explore our own experience, not the experience of others, for no

one can take that step back to the things themselves on our behalf'. Of course, practice-based research might well, and often does, reveal educators exploring their experience of educating. In a similar way, students inquiring into their experience of learning bring multiple first-hand perspectives to their search for understanding.

How to generate and sustain partnerships between galleries and museums on the one side, and colleges, school teachers, other organised groups, or individuals, on the other, is gaining increasing attention. The ways in which different artistic interests, institutional agendas, and personal beliefs about teaching or learning come together have highlighted the processes of negotiation and accommodation between stakeholders in education generally and gallery education in particular. Those issues expose some of the nuances and subtleties that underlie the provision of experiences through joint ventures, and those nuances are drawn out in some of the chapters presented here.

Overlaying these mostly micro-level concerns about the immediate and interactive engagement of visitors there are some broader issues about the social / cultural role that museums play in their communities that have come to bear more notably in recent times. The origins and history of museums and galleries as a general world wide phenomenon, as well as the backgrounds to individual institutions, seem no longer sufficient grounds to which appeals can be made for defining their purpose and their aims. Like most other circumstances, those in which museum and gallery educators and their visitors find themselves, have shifted to some degree or other from continuity, certainty, and clarity, towards instability, new thinking, and ambiguity. That new macro-level condition plays its part among the sponsors, patrons, and policy makers associated with museums and galleries, as well as among educators (and researchers), in the wider world. It is not simply a threatening condition; it is also facilitating, creating space and opportunities for initiative to flourish, ideas to be tested, arguments to be advanced. That spirit of initiative, inquiry, and investment also characterises the contributions to this book.

The contributions are grouped into four sections, reflecting on fundamental topics underlying the educational role of museums and galleries. The sections are a) *Museums and Lifelong Learning*, discussing the continuously-increasing tendency of many museums to respond to the needs and interests of different types of public, aiming at widening access and social inclusion, and building long-term audiences and lifelong learning opportunities; b) *Museums and Formal Education*, focusing on educational provision for schools, which for the majority of museums and galleries is seen in the context of a mission towards the education of the current young /future adult visitors and the support of the teachers and the curriculum; c) *Museums and Personal Discovery*, emphasising the personal, individualised character of the museum experience and the richness of visitors' meaning-making processes; and d) *Museums in Society*, tackling issues related to the ever-growing presence of contemporary museums in the community, in terms not only of services and activities, but also of contribution to socially-relevant issues and consideration of community groups and their needs.

Within those four sections, the authors represent a range of perspectives, used to create in-depth reports of art education in museums and galleries. All the research stems directly from educational practice and policy in very particular contexts,

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