

DEVELOPING A LEARNING CULTURE IN MUSEUMS 2

'LEARNING ABOUT LEARNING'

Paper presented at "Musing on Learning" Seminar, Australian Museum, 20 April 1999, Carolyn MacLulich, Head, Education Division, Australian Museum

In Part 1, Tim Sullivan has given us a broad overview of how organisations can develop learning cultures, and I now want to focus on just one area: how museums can themselves learn about learning.

The term 'learning organisation' is now a common feature of museum management discourse and, by implication, raises the issue of how a museum itself learns about approaches to 'learning'. As 'learning in museums' becomes a major focus for many museums, clearly formulated and institutionally supported ideas about 'learning' should be an essential part of our role in interpreting natural and cultural diversity through exhibitions. While 'learning' has typically been regarded as the domain of museum educators in the past, it is a key issue for all museum staff involved in exhibition planning, development and implementation.

This paper will explore questions relating to how a multi-disciplinary institution learns about learning in order to create effective exhibitions and, related to this, what modes of discussion and interaction could assist an institution to do so. I will begin with some brief comments about museum learning and museum education, and then describe how one institution, the Australian Museum in Sydney, is internally addressing 'learning about learning' for exhibition development through its policies, processes and training.

It is a common claim that museums are places of learning; not **just** of learning but significantly so. However, it has been a challenge to foreground 'learning' and, with that, museum education in the broadest sense, within the many dimensions of museum work. As exhibitions shift from object-orientations to orientations which take account of messages and audiences, the prominence of 'learning' as an outcome and with that, the role of education, undergoes a fundamental change. This requires a change in some dominant museum practices including an acceptance of a much wider and more involving role for museum education in developing accessible messages, interpretive strategies and communication models - in fact, being at the centre of the museum's public role. This central role is clearly articulated in many museum mission statements where phrases such as 'increase understanding', 'promote enjoyment, understanding and awareness', 'encourage exploration and understanding', 'foster an informed awareness', 'propagate and increase knowledge', and 'be a catalyst for change' are common. All these rely on forms of communication and interpretation, thus placing the educative role of museums in a central position. Yet in the past little attention has been given to how this may be achieved through an integrated approach to exhibitions and programs

developed with reference to communication models, visitor studies and museum learning theory and practice.

A fuller appreciation of the institutional significance of learning has, however, been evident in the last decade. Its significance was indicated in the United States, for example, by the production of widely considered policy documents such as 'Excellence and Equity' (1992). 'Excellence and Equity' exemplified a major change in the way the museum industry thought about and formulated education and exhibition work at the core of the public role of museums. However, although providing a useful framework, it gave few indications as to how this desirable outcome could be achieved in practical ways that were productive for museum staff.

Most recently, a set of important works including 'The Museum Experience' (1995), 'Public Institutions for Personal Learning' (1995), 'Museums: Places of Learning' (1998), 'From Knowledge to Narrative' (1998), 'Learning and the museum' (1998) and the Visitor Behaviour Journal have raised awareness and discussion about museum learning to new levels of understanding. Roberts (1998) discussion, for example, in the recent 'From Knowledge to Narrative: educators and the changing museum' is a very interesting deconstruction of the development of one exhibition at Chicago Botanical Gardens. Roberts explores the positioning and input of museum education and the roles of the team participants in the exhibition's development, mapped against accounts of the changing nature of museum education in relation to epistemological changes in the museum industry.

Nevertheless, in general there has been little consideration as to how a whole museum, not just education departments within a museum, might learn about learning. Yet, if museums are genuinely able to construct environments which assist and encourage people to learn, the responsibility and support for this approach should be institution-wide. However, developing a learning culture in a museum is a complex and significant process. Two issues are particularly prominent in this process:

- the need for all museum staff involved in exhibition development and implementation to have a clear appreciation of issues about learning, and to develop shared informed views and
- the need to best use our understandings of learning to develop interpretive strategies for particular outcomes in exhibitions.

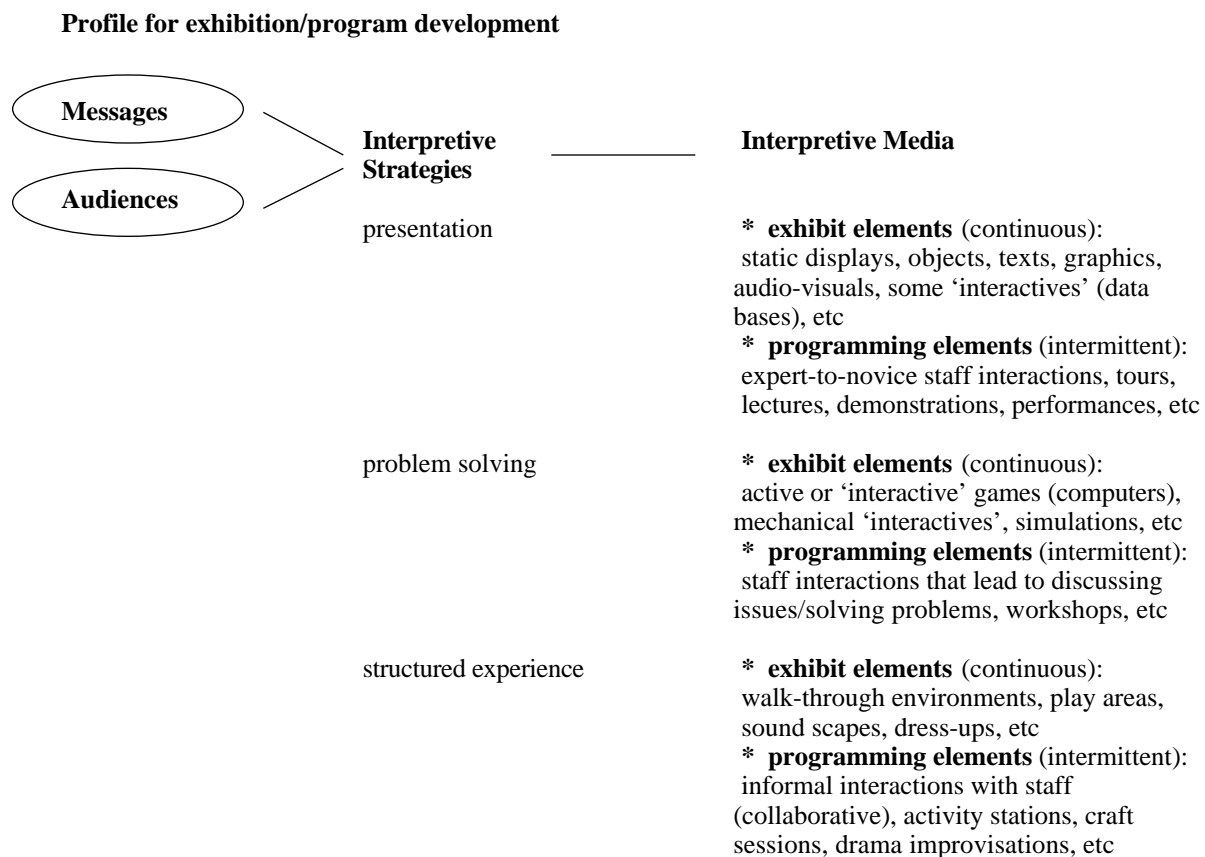
I will now move to ways in which these concerns have been addressed at the Australian Museum in Sydney. In the last several years, the institutional orientation towards valuing learning as an outcome has raised important issues about the nature of learning and how the Museum responded to these concerns. The Australian Museum approached this venture in two phases. The second phase is the focus of this paper, but before expanding on that phase it is necessary to give some background. The first phase occurred about four years ago when our internal assessments indicated the necessity for developing an approach to exhibition

development which allowed us to more clearly analyse, construct and evaluate the meaning making and learning opportunities we were create and offer our visitors. This required drawing on other discourses such as communication, linguistic and semiotic theory (eg. Hodge and D'Souza 1976, Hooper-Greenhill 1991) which, in the Australian context, have not been widely utilised in the area of museum education. A necessary element to developing our approach was a commitment to the transaction policy model (which places both the Museum's messages and the audiences interests and needs as primary considerations in exhibition development; based on Seagram, 1993). This approach informed an existing structure of collaborative project teams, in operation for many years, whereby staff from all areas work together as equal players in the planning and implementation of exhibitions and programs. Our approach was also based on the view that interpretation aims to go beyond conveying facts to contextualising information in ways that construct meaning and relations in an accessible form. In order for interpretive strategies to be effective, the bases of meaning exchange and learning that can take place in each exhibition must be explicitly considered. In the past the knowledge goals of museums have been emphasised, and expert-to-novice lines of communication have been common, however more collaborative interactions that value the social and personal goals of museum visitors are also required to provide access to learning experiences for a broad range of visitors.

While there is not space to outline all the changes that our new approach created, I will list a few here and then expand on one which is relevant to this discussion. Developments included the creation of an evaluation policy and Evaluation Unit; a Language/Editing Unit; a Multimedia Unit; a range of new interpretive programs such as the Theatre Unit; and the production of a set of Guidelines for use by project teams in exhibition and program development. As part of the Guidelines, I developed a profile for exhibition and program development which drew on an assessment of interpretive strategies most commonly used in museums. This profile is based on the transaction model of exhibition development (Seagram 1993) and places both the Museum's messages and the audiences needs and interests as central to the consideration of any exhibition or program. Once these two initial elements are defined and objectives for the exhibition or program are negotiated, it is then possible to explore what may be the most appropriate interpretive strategies to communicate the messages to the audiences. Only after these steps are completed is it possible to consider which media would be most effective; for example an exhibition of objects and texts; multimedia interactives; theatre performances; or a workshop series.

Initially three major interpretive strategies were identified: **presentation, problem solving and structured experiences**. It is important to note that these are by no means exhaustive, but have been useful in providing a framework for our approach. The most commonly used strategy in the past has been '**presentation**' which has been the basis for much exhibition design. This has included exhibit elements such as static displays, text panels, labels, objects, graphics, models, robotics, videos, some mechanical 'interactives'; and programming elements such as formal staff interactions, tours, lectures, and performances. This strategy involves the presentation of information to visitors in an expert-to-novice relationship, but

does not allow for visitors to have much involvement in the information exchange. With this strategy the museum provides all the messages for the visitors to passively 'absorb'.



C. MacLulich, Australian Museum, 1994, 1997

'Problem solving' strategies have also been used. These have included exhibit elements such as interactives, computer games, mechanical interactives, activity-based units, 'hands-in boxes', puppet play; and programming elements such as workshops, staff interactions which lead to discussing issues or solving problems. Problem solving strategies often involve the creation of a 'dialogue' between the visitor and the media, where the act of participation assists the communication of the message. Visitors involved in problem solving strategies have a series of choices and can manipulate the outcomes.

Another valuable strategy is that of a **'structured experience'**, where exhibit and programming elements provide collaborative opportunities with open-ended outcomes for

visitors, particularly young children. Often museums have set aside specific spaces in exhibitions for such experiences to occur.

The most important aspect in this profile for exhibition and program development is to provide a **range** of interpretive strategies to cater for diverse audiences. The range of interpretive strategies offered may not always be present within a single exhibition - it may be presented in a number of exhibitions or programs over a period of time. The assessment is based on an understanding of audience needs and interests in relation to the messages being conveyed and the social purpose of the messages. This approach to interpretation differs from other approaches, as it focuses on the meaning making and learning opportunities the Museum can create as a system of potential, rather than on physical or material outcomes of exhibits.

The approach and the Guidelines have been used by many recent project teams, and staff assessments and visitor evaluation studies (through our internal Evaluation Unit and through external market research consultants) have indicated that such a change in perspective has made differences to the way Australian Museum exhibitions are formed, to their content, to the role of education and learning in this process, and most importantly to visitor reactions to the exhibitions. It is also important to emphasise that our new approach was specifically designed to be evolutionary - it began some four years ago, was recently reviewed, and again will be reviewed after the results from the second phase are finalised.

Whereas the planning for the use of the interpretive strategies has been the responsibility of the Education Division representatives on project teams, the second phase of our work will broaden the responsibility for developing learning environments in exhibitions to include a much wider range of staff. The second phase developed out of an 'envisioning process' involving about 80 staff in the development of our new Corporate Strategic Plan for 1998-2001 which Tim has previously outlined. The new Plan focuses attention on developing shared views about learning across the Museum.

The first step identified was to review staff perceptions on learning in order to

1. gain information on what are current levels of understanding of key learning issues with staff involved in exhibition development and implementation
2. give an indication of what resources, training and information that staff developing exhibitions need or want in relation to learning issues in the future
3. give information which can be used to further refine the 'interpretive strategies' profile to increase its relevancy and ease of use for exhibition development
4. assist in developing research questions in visitor studies that the museum can further explore

In August this year, three focus groups were held with a range of about 30 staff involved in exhibition development and implementation over the past two years. Staff from

Exhibitions, Education, Science, Anthropology, Community Relations, Materials Conservation, Corporate Services and Administration departments were all included in this process. The methodology of focus groups was chosen to enable in-depth discussions and to encourage participation of individuals in a situation that allowed for open exchange of ideas and points of view. In order for a range of Museum staff to be involved in this project, an external Sydney-based company, Environmetrics, was contracted to facilitate the work of the focus groups and report on outcomes within a clearly defined brief. The discussions followed a common format, though participants were encouraged to introduce other aspects on the topic that they felt were relevant. The main points of discussion were: what information on museum learning staff had access to and found useful when they were developing and implementing exhibitions and programs; what else they would have liked to have known or had access to in relation to learning; how they related their understandings of learning to what actually occurred in the exhibition they worked on; and what information from visitors they would find useful in further refining their understandings of learning. Because the participants were broadly representative of staff working in exhibition and program development, it is likely that the findings of the research are an accurate reflection of staff views. (It is important to note that this is very much a 'work in progress' report, as the consultants summary reached us just last month.)

The process proved to be very positive, with most participants keen to contribute to the discussions. Overall, the consultant noted that 'the concept of 'learning' itself was rather a fuzzy one for many staff. While they are sure of some aspects of the topic, they are unsure of others. Like the traditional tale of the three wise men and the elephant, everyone knows something about 'learning', but the different understandings of staff members do not fully overlap to provide a unified base for professional practice.' (Savage, 1998, p8). However, it was noticeable that some people were considerably more knowledgeable and articulate about learning theory and practice, particularly the staff from the Education Division. Though there were some variations in the views expressed by focus group members, which I will take up in a moment, the consultant found it possible to group their responses into a number of areas. Firstly I will briefly outline the areas which dominated the focus groups discussions and then select a small number for further exploration.

The overall areas of discussion were:

1. General issues: concepts vs language; habits of thinking, usefulness of concepts
2. Active vs passive learning situations
3. Learning, processing and memory
4. Emotional aspect of learning
5. Impact of learning
6. Neutrality vs value-laden positions
7. Learning theories: expanding horizons or filling a vessel?

8. Learning styles
9. How much learning is enough? (measuring and assessing)
10. Diversity of audiences and approaches
11. Social learning

Out of these general discussion areas, a number of issues were identified which will prove to be very helpful in the next stage of our project. Firstly, it appeared that some staff had shared views about learning, but 'did not always have the shared language that would facilitate communication. At several points it was evident that some staff were discussing topics they had not addressed before [and while] they were exploring the topic in a very engaged way, at times [they were not able to] express ideas that were new to them.' (Savage, 1998, p 5). It became evident quite early on that a shared language was essential in discussing explanations of theory and examples of current practice in learning.

Secondly, it was also evident that many staff whose training and experience had been in specific disciplines which depend on specific discourses, such as science or marketing, have particular approaches to conceptualising ideas which may be different to approaches commonly used to conceptualise ideas about learning. For example, some staff approached the discussions about specific aspects of learning from a perspective of bi-polar choices or 'yes'/'no' orientations, while for other staff options about learning were arranged along a cline which specified possibilities. Some staff saw exhibitions as venues for self-expression while others hinted at the view that exhibitions were a validation of their institutional status. A view taken by some of participants was that everything is learning — to breathe is to learn. 'While this position can be defended quite effectively in argument, it is not a position which offers project teams very effective guidance in making decisions and choices about resource allocation between alternative interpretive strategies' (Savage, 1998, p5). These differing views are certainly not unfamiliar but, significantly, staff were able to express these views in a 'safe' environment where counter arguments by peers were encouraged, and through these discussions and arguments staff were able to more deeply appreciate the complexity of many of the issues associated with learning in museums. Nevertheless it is notable that, despite these important differences, project teams comprising people from different training and orientations, which have supported particular ways of viewing the world, have been required to develop fully operational, self contained, successful communication devices – exhibitions. A more conscious recognition of differing orientations may make it more effective for project teams to develop shared understandings of learning in the museum environment... and perhaps produce even more successful exhibitions.

Thirdly, and closely linked to this but still an issue in itself, was the different disciplinary orientations displayed to decision making. The consultant noted that the culture of debate was evident amongst these staff, but that often debate occurred for its own sake, and neither a conclusion nor a consensus was seen as a necessary result.

While there is not space to expand on many other areas raised by the focus groups, I will however highlight a few which are particularly interesting. It was noted that the discussions in each of the three-hour-long groups became quiet refined. When the topic of active/passive learning was addressed, for example, discussion developed from the simple view that visitors have to do something in order to be involved in active learning, onto more complex reasonings about all learning being regarded as active, because 'learning was located in the mind of the visitor. Learning was thought to take place through the interaction with the environment provided by the museum. 'Active learning' was seen in the end not to be just about physical activity, but people actively involved in the construction of meaning.

Across the focus groups there appeared to be a 'general view that learning brings about change in understanding or in behaviour. In some cases, staff saw this change as a necessary criterion for defining whether or not learning had taken place.' (Savage, 1998, p7). However some staff's understandings of how to create environments which can assist this change to occur were often vague. As a result, some staff were unsure of how to offer a range of interpretive strategies, did not have a broad repertoire to draw on, and recognised that it was easy to default to simple forms of communication such as text panels in response to constraints of resources or time.

Processes for measuring learning effectively were also discussed. The consultant noted some discomfort with this topic, which benefited from open discussion with a range of colleagues. Difficulties of conceptualising and measuring learning were mentioned and staff turned to what they knew of evaluation studies carried out at the Museum for particular exhibitions. While the qualitative nature of some of the visitor studies has been questioned by some staff, there was strong support in the focus groups for continued development of ways to measure or assess learning. Interestingly, staff from all areas recognised that they could not control the learning that takes place in exhibitions, they can only provide conditions that allow visitors to make use of the possibilities. However, 'without this sense of control, staff appeared reluctant to set themselves high goals regarding learning outcomes' (Savage 1998, p9).

As expected, much of the discussion used examples from the Museum's exhibitions. With staff involved in exhibition development as key players in these groups, this opportunity for reflection was very important and also allowed insights into the reasoning behind certain exhibition approaches. Several recent exhibitions were contrasted in their approach. The groups noted that for exhibitions considered to be less successful, using a range of measures including staff opinions, visitor surveys focusing on learning outcomes and satisfaction levels, visitor numbers and number of repeat visitors, that these exhibitions were developed in a linear fashion: the content issues were decided first, then the interpretive strategies and finally the production. In contrast, in those exhibitions that were considered to be more successful, the interpretive strategies were considered from the beginning along with content and production issues. This preliminary data will be

further explored because the results are sufficiently indicative to suggest an important feature of the planning strategy for effective exhibitions.

In addition, team members also reported aspects of their work which they viewed as having positive outcomes: that audience evaluation was used at different stages right from the beginning of the project; that the team had a culture of decision rather than a culture of consensus; that teams used the interpretive strategies as outlined in the guidelines which provided a valuable guiding framework for development at each stage.

It was noted by all the groups that, while 'the Guidelines for the production and management of [exhibitions and programs] had been very useful when new practices of management were put into place [about four years ago], they were less relevant now because many staff had first-hand experience of teamwork' (Savage, 1998, p11) and because the range of projects the Museum was now undertaking required exploration of different approaches. The consultant noted that 'project teams need to go beyond the formula in developing new projects and should feel free to step outside the Guidelines ... when required.' (Savage, 1998, p11)

The consultant also concluded that 'the possibility that project teams might function as rich learning environments [themselves] emerged in the course of this research. It may well be the case that the project teams which set out quite deliberately to learn something new in the course of the project are more successful in producing learning environments for the visitors to their exhibitions.' (Savage, 1998, p11). This also will be an aspect we will explore further.

Though many of the elements discussed in these focus groups are not unfamiliar to museum educators, the exciting new elements in this project were that the discussions were happening with a wide range of colleagues, and that they were happening as part of an institutionally endorsed exploration for better and better ways to creating learning environments.

This first stage of the project highlighted a number of practical recommendations to further support staffs' understanding and valuing of learning as a key role of the Museum. Recommendations included:

1. Refine a **useful set of concepts** regarding how learning takes place in museum settings, explore the practical implications of these concepts, and develop a **shared language** with which to discuss the museum's options.
2. Run '**professional practice**' **workshops** to communicate the core concepts and develop examples of their application in museum practice. The workshop delivery mechanism should reflect the learning principles that are the content.

3. Develop a coherent and accessible set of **support resources**, including explanations of theory and examples of current practice. The authority of this field of study should be evident.
4. Provide a **safe forum** for debating issues around learning theory and its practical application — a place where 'dangerous/unpopular' ideas can be explored safely and concerns of 'dumbing down' or the homogenisation of exhibitions can be discussed openly so that strategies can be put in place to reduce the risk of these eventualities.
5. Ensure that projects **begin with the focus on learning outcomes** (what do our audiences need and want to know AND what do we want them to know).
6. Put in place **channels** whereby new project teams can learn from experienced ones, formally and informally.
7. Ensure that team members, and particularly team chairs, have **effective team management skills**. It is likely that a project team that is, itself, a productive and active learning environment will produce exhibitions and programs which also have good learning outcomes.
8. **Update the Guidelines** to allow for more creativity and diversity of approach. The prescriptive aspect of the Guidelines could be complemented with examples of alternative working styles which have been demonstrated to be effective at the Museum. They could also include references to support materials, further readings or areas of expertise within the Museum.
9. Develop **meaningful measures** that can capture the quality and depth of learning experienced by visitors to the Museum. Continue to expand **the in-house evaluation and visitor research projects**. Ensure that this body of knowledge is accessible in a user-friendly way.

(from Savage, 1998, p 14-16)

I began this paper by suggesting that the creation of an informed, institution-wide commitment to learning, as part of an organisation's own learning orientation, is both a complex and necessary process. At the Australian Museum we have taken an initial step in this direction through the discussions of and recommendations from the staff focus groups. The next step, the implementation of many of the recommendations, is underway and is focused on three main areas: developing a training/induction/support package for new project teams to develop a shared understanding of museum learning issues; reworking the Guidelines for the production and management of exhibitions and programs; and developing a Museum Audience Research Centre, which we are launching this afternoon, whereby we can work with other institutions, museums and universities in

undertaking visitor studies into museum learning. We look forward to exploring these issues together with you.

[For information about the Australian Museum Audience Research Centre, contact Lynda Kelly lyndak@amsg.austmus.gov.au or Carolyn MacLulich carolynm@amsg.austmus.gov.au]

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