

Adult Learning and Museums

Speaking notes by John Cross, Adult Learning Australia

In this presentation I would like to accomplish four things.

First, I wish to explore the complexity of facilitating learning for adults.

Second, I want to examine what museums are doing for adults in terms of their role as learning facilitators.

Thirdly, I will discuss how I think museums should be approaching the provision of adult learning.

Finally, I want to stimulate discussion among museum practitioners, academics and the general public about the provision of adult learning opportunities in museums and about how more opportunities might be provided in better ways.

The nub of my argument today is that museums have huge potential as places where all sorts of adult learning activities can occur. But to reach this potential museums are going have to change, especially with regards to their desire to control interpretation, their need to 'own' activity, and their fear of complexity.

Adults and Children are different

Adults and children are different and the differences have an impact on the provision of learning for adults. Although, as I shall discuss in a moment, the basic elements of the learning process are the same, too often the nature of adults is glossed over. Too often people assume that the provision of educational experiences for children is more important than providing educational experiences for adults. Too often it is assumed that adults can look after their own learning. It is also assumed that the learning opportunities developed for children can be given to adults without alteration.

Take a moment to think about the differences between adults and children.

For adults, learning and play are no longer primary activities. While learning and play are, for some adults, important activities, they must be squeezed in with careers, families, financial obligations, community activities and so on.

Well experienced in making choices, many adults develop a certain stubbornness with regards to their activities and attitudes. While children can certainly be stubborn, adults are better able to act upon their fears, negativity or restrictive views to the extent that they can choose not to participate in experiences that may threaten to challenge or change them. (Can adults refuse to learn? If we are to understand learning as a process during which the learner is transformed in some way, if we are to reject the idea that learning is

simple memory and recall work, then it can be argued that some adults *can* and *do* refuse to learn).

Adults have well developed sense of self or 'ego' which, when coupled with an ability to make decisions about themselves, can lead to avoidance of situations in which they do not feel valued. Many adults, for example, dislike being talked down to and so will avoid situations in which they feel their prior knowledge, expertise, skill level and capacity for independent thought is being overlooked. Other adults do not want to be seen as 'inferior' and read the learning situation as a place where gaps in their knowledge, experience or understanding might be shown up. Many adults view this as a bad thing.

While children have life experiences, adults have a much broader range of life experiences (eg sex, employment, home ownership, war etc...). They have, potentially, deep knowledge of at least one or two subject areas. Moreover, there is some evidence to suggest that adults are far more able to experience empathy, full self awareness, complex humour and other deep, even spiritual, thought. This capacity only occurs when the frontal lobes of the brain become connected to the rest of the brain in late adolescence. If this is true, then, regardless of life experiences, adults will be more able to experience a deeper emotional connection with a range of subject matter than children.

Life experiences, considerable practise in cognitive methods coupled with capacity for empathy and spirituality, means that adults are capable of participating in modes of learning that go far beyond the didactic provision of 'closed' information, of 'facts' and figures. To really tap into the potential, learning experiences for adults have to allow opportunities for deep thinking, for problem solving, for utilising upon prior knowledge and past experiences, and for sharing these processes with others.

The common learning process

While there are differences between adults and children, there are also commonalities when it comes to the learning process.

A key word to focus on here is the word, 'process'. Sometimes we talk about learning as if it is something that can be completed within a short period of time, finished with in a couple of hours and ticked off the list. Some museum educators talk about not having enough time to fit everything in the tour, which suggests they believe that learning has to take place in a single, finite, block of time. Learning is a lengthy process as it requires opportunities for adaptation and reflection. A single museum visit will never be a complete learning experience.

I see the learning process as occurring in three phases, although we should not assume hard and fast divisions between these phases nor a smooth forward 'progression'.

The learning process starts with some form of stimulation: a new idea, a new piece of information or a new skill. Something that captures the imagination.

Next comes a stage in which these new things are adapted and adopted, tried and tested. The learner becomes more familiar with the new information or tries out the new skills. Implications are examined and limits to usefulness are tested. Things are modified to fit with prior knowledge or future plans. Or else prior knowledge and future plans are modified (or rejected) so as to accommodate the new. In this phase, new ideas, information and skills become 'part' of the person.

In the final phase, the learning is put to use. I do not believe that we can claim learning to have occurred unless what has been learnt is used. This might be as simple as including a newly acquired information or observation in dinner conversation. More profoundly it might be modifying behaviour as a result of a new skill or understanding. The adage, 'use it or lose it' neatly applies, I think, to learning. A simple accumulation of 'facts' which are not used in the person's physical, emotional, social or intellectual life, is not, to my mind, 'learning'.

As can be seen, museums can play a part in each of these phases of the learning process. Museums can offer stimulation. They can also offer a place where ideas gleaned from elsewhere – the media, for example, or from friends – can be tested, confirmed or modified. Finally museums can offer a place for people to share (use) what they already know and understand with other people, often using the exhibits and programs as the catalyst for this process. Museums can also help revive old bits of understanding which were once strong and relevant but which have been pushed to the back of the mind as other priorities have come to the fore.

The learning process for some people occurs 'naturally', albeit after years of having their learning skills nurtured. For others, the process needs assistance, which is why teachers, tutors and facilitators exist. Whatever the scenario, the learning process will only take place if the learners can see some relevance between them and the 'new', and if the process is presented in a manner that is accessible.

Here I would like to call to mind Howard Gardner's notion of multiple intelligence. Basically this idea suggests that rather than the old idea that somebody was either intelligent or not intelligent, everybody is intelligent but in different areas of activity: logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, body-kinesthetic, linguistic, interpersonal and intra-personal.

People tend to use their strongest area of intelligence to access learning. So, for example, if you are 'spatial', you will prefer to learn things through visual material. If you are 'linguistic', you will prefer to get your learning through narrative. If you are 'kinesthetic' then you enjoy pulling things apart. If you are 'interpersonal' you probably prefer to talk as a way of learning, and if you are 'intra-personal', you will prefer time for contemplation and experimentation.

If, as an educator, you only present your material in one way, for example as text or as a lecture, then many people in your audience will not engage because they prefer to learn using different 'modes'.

I imagine that most teachers working in museums are familiar with this concept and apply it, in some form or another, to their work. But in museums adult learning is not only – or in many cases *even* - offered by trained teachers. In museums voluntary guides, guest lecturers, exhibition attendants, curators, and exhibition designers all create adult learning opportunities. How many of these people have a working knowledge of multiple intelligences and learning preferences?

We should not leave this consideration of the learning process without mention of cultural considerations. Culture is more than ethnicity, it is the 'club' to which we all belong and through belonging we define ourselves and frame our world. Culture draws on gender, sexuality, socio-economic status, political affiliations, age, work status and so on. Culture is expressed and confirmed through spoken language, behaviour, beliefs, relationships, attitudes, aspirations and actions.

While identity and a sense of belonging is essential to our wellbeing, the invisibility of cultures and cultural differences can create barriers between people and things and between people and other people. It is often easy to forget that what we see as obvious or true, others will not see in the same way. This does not mean that we are right, they are wrong. It does mean that in all communication – and communication is the heart of learning – constant checking of assumptions must occur.

Culture can create barriers. Consider, for example, the use of language in museums: it is a polite, formal language isn't it? It is not the language you hear spoken at the back of a public bus. It is not the language of pubs. But why shouldn't colloquial language be used in the museum? What relationship does 'politeness' have to 'learning'? More importantly, who feels excluded by the language and codes of behaviour that are dominant in museums?

A sophisticated understanding of culture – as well of learning preferences and of adult characteristics – is essential in order to provide better quality experiences to the adults who already go to museums. This understanding is even more important when it comes to removing the barriers that are keeping other adult audiences, significant segments of the community, away from the museums that they pay for through their taxes.

So where are we?

An adult who visits a museum will have cultural baggage. They will also come with likes and dislikes with regards to how they learn. Adults, like children, can be stubborn, egotistical, and need to feel valued. Adults have a tremendous wealth of first hand life experience and deep understanding of at least a couple of subject areas. While they may not always be able to articulate their learning preferences, cultural or emotional baggage. Adults, unlike children, are better able to remove themselves from, or avoid altogether, what they perceive to be unpleasant or irrelevant experiences. Moreover, they can tell their friends and family not to bother either.

Providing valuable learning opportunities for adults is enormously challenging, but it is a challenge that museums must face if they are to continue to claim to belong to a town, state or nation and if they are to access public funds. An better experience – one in which adults feel welcome, respected and stimulated - makes good market sense too because the better they feel about the museum the more often they are likely to use it.

Learning opportunities in museums

In a recent publication, *Knowledge Building: Fresh thinking about learners and their teacher* (ANTA 2002), there is a neat summary of the conditions in which adults learn best:

- The prior learning of the student is appreciated;
- The subject matter is relevant to their immediate needs;
- The learning environment encourages dialogue and interaction;
- Mistakes are seen as valuable opportunities to learn;
- The subject matter is presented using a range of approaches.

So, how well does the typical museum accommodate these basic, some might say rather obvious, principles?

For the typical visitor to a typical museum opportunities to participate in the learning process are offered by exhibits, exhibition design, text labels, tours, floor talks, lectures, catalogues, films, computers, informal conversations and contemplation.

The last two in this list are enormously important in the learning process, but, unlike the others in this list, these two activities are more often than not created spontaneously by the learners themselves, not the museums. However, just because the museum does not ‘control’ these learning activities, we must not discount their importance.

Nor should we discount the valuable contribution museums make simply by being places where people can take ‘time out’ from everyday life. In taking time out, people can contemplate and talk about things that the speed and requirements of everyday life prohibit. The subject of these conversations or contemplation may not always be directly related to the museum’s exhibits or intended learning programs, but this should not devalue them.

If we think back to the way adults learn and, in particular the notion of multiple intelligence and learning preferences, we can see that the typical museum is not offering the full range of learning activities to its adult audiences.

Most of the activities that adults undertake in museums are passive: looking, listening, reading, watching, walking along a predetermined path. Tours, floor talks and lectures offer opportunities for some interaction, but this is often in the form of the learner asking (polite) questions in a few minutes at the end of an activity if there is time. Even then it is expected that the audience member will direct questions to the ‘expert’, not fellow audience members.

Learner-driven learning is rarely encouraged among adults in museum settings. Rarely are adults in museums encouraged to create, dispute, perform, play, experiment or construct. Curiously, however, while museums do not encourage adults to do these things, many of these things form the mainstay of children's programming in museums.

By way of illustrating this curious difference in approach to adults and children in museum activities, let me turn to an example for the National Museum of Australia in Canberra. I do not wish to make any substantial observations about the Museum based upon this isolated example and present the example here simply as one of the first I came across when searching the net for examples.

In October 2002, the National Museum presented some activities with Jeanette Rowe, celebrated author and illustrator. Jeanette was used in both the children's and adults program activities providing us an opportunity to compare the approaches taken for the different audiences. While I did not participate in any of the events – and acknowledge that in the practice there may have been a greater diversity of approach – the language used to promote the activities is revealing of the attitude I am exploring here.

The adult activity was promoted thus:

'Visit writer and illustrator Jeanette Rose in her 'studio' where she will demonstrate how she illustrates her many books. Copies of Jeanette's books will be available for purchase in the Museum shop.'

The text for two children's activities with the same person included the following:

'Join children's book writer and illustrator as she reads from her books and provides hands-on opportunities for young children'.

'In this workshop you will learn how to create your own cartoon and how to develop a story using your character. Suitable for children aged 9 to 14'.

Compare the language used. First you will notice that the adults 'visit', while children 'join'. The former is transient and superficial, while the latter implies a more profound and lasting connection. Moreover, as Barrie Brennan (a participant in the 'Why Learn?' conference) pointed out, the word 'visit' implies all sorts of obligations to behave with politeness and with deference to the 'hosts'. Visitors allow their hosts to take control. While joining something also implies obligations, it suggests a greater capacity to steer the group collectively – being a part of, rather than being subservient to.

Now let's think about what the adults and children get to do in each activity. For the adults Jeanette will demonstrate something. This suggests that the adults will stand back (or sit), possibly with their hands in pocket, watching. By contrast, the children are explicitly promised opportunities for hands-on activity. Moreover, the children are allowed to create something and then are given an opportunity to use their own creations

in the creation of something else. Adults are promised no such depth of contribution or control.

The adults *do* get to do something active, they can shop. The coalition of adult learning programs and profit-making, while possibly justified by Business Managers on paper, has done little to help the development of quality learning experiences for adult museum goers.

As we can see from this, almost randomly selected, example, the learning experience offered by the museum to adults and to children is profoundly different. The differences, however, do not match the actual differences between adults and children. Moreover, they ignore the common ways in which everyone learns regardless of age. In most museums in Australia, children are offered learning activities that meet the full range of learning preferences. Adults are offered a limited selection of learning modes, most of which require them to be passive.

Another example confirms this point and again I do not use this example as a way of singling out a particular institution, rather, this example is another selected (almost) at random to illustrate an attitude that I believe is deeply embedded in Australia's museum sector.

The National Gallery of Australia promotes on its website a range of tours for children. These are 'Discover tours' (for primary school children), 'Discussion tours' tailored to classroom curricula and 'Drawing tours'. For adults there are hour-long tours of 'Australian art', 'International art' and 'Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander art'.

In the case of the tours developed for children, the tours are characterised by different sorts of activity. For adults the tours are differentiated only by the different subject matter and we must assume that the 'mode' for each tour is the same. The 'mode' in this case is one in which there is a focus on the tour guide delivering 'facts'. In this regard, the training program for the guides is revealing.

As outlined in a document on the web, 'trainee guides are selected by interview' and 'are required to commit themselves to the year-long education program'. The initial training program runs for 44-weeks and training sessions seem only to be offered during weekday working hours. This effectively excludes anyone in full time employment or full time education from becoming a guide at the Gallery. But I digress.

Training for the guides is delivered through a range of 'traditional' modes that serve to reinforce the idea that learning must be delivered by an expert standing in front of a passive audience. The typical training session includes an 'Art History slide lecture delivered by Education or curatorial staff or visiting lecturer'; 'Workshops in the gallery with small groups delivering talks to the whole group in front of works of art'; 'Trainee delivered slide tutorials on an important artist from the period' and 'An appropriate film'.

One hopes that the Volunteer Guide Training curriculum also offers opportunities for discussion about philosophy, spirituality, love, pop culture, politics, sex and death. One hopes too that there are opportunities for guides to create their own art works, to experiment with different art media, and to workshop other modes of learning facilitation such as use of theatre or debate. Opportunities to spend time with different demographics, one images, would also constitute an essential part of any well-rounded guide training.

Part of the guide's assessment at the National Gallery of Australia is for each Trainee to 'deliver two slide tutorials during the course and hand in approx. 75 cards on different artists and their work'. These cards are handed in so that the 'accuracy of information can be monitored'. It seems that there is no formal assessment of the guides' capacity for creativity, for experimentation, or for their capacity to stimulate and manage an active learning process among adults.

The approach taken by the National Gallery of Australia (and many other cultural institutions) towards their Volunteer Guides clearly suggests a belief that guides are expected to be the fount of all 'knowledge' and that knowledge consists of facts that can be squeezed on to a card and checked for accuracy. But is art simply about artist's biographies and the 'factual' details of their work? Where, in this approach, does 'higher order' thinking play a role? Where, in this approach, is there an opportunity for learners to steer their own learning, having a say on how they would like to engage with what is on display in the gallery, or with the gallery itself?

It is interesting to note that the document about the National Gallery guide training makes a special point with regards to the Children's tours: 'Many guides particularly enjoy taking primary schools on Discovery tours' and that 'Guides are trained to interact with the children and to ask them questions that link the artwork with their own experience'. There are no corresponding statements with regards to how enjoyable it is to guide adults, or how, Guides are trained to interact with adults in a way that stimulates an interactive learning experience.

Again the attitude towards the provision of learning experience for children and adults is different but, again, the difference is not based on any actual difference between these groups. Again the full potential of learning delivery is ignored when it comes to adults, whose mode of learning seems to be limited to a passively receiving 'facts', in sharp contrast to the children who are 'discovering', 'discussing' and 'drawing'.

I have no doubt that the National Gallery of Australia provides very good educational programs for its children, I just wish they would provide the same range of opportunities for adults.

So where are we now?

Adults and children are different but the basic principles of the learning process are the same.

Museums often present different learning experiences for adults and children but the differences do not match the actual differences between adults and children.

Museums seem to assume that all adults learn best as passive recipients. Some do, but many don't.

Museums seem to want to 'sell' adults complete packages of 'facts', to provide definite answers, and, in doing so seem to limit the potential for adults who enjoy higher order thinking, active conversation, experimentation and debate.

Where should we be?

I.A Richards said that a book is a machine to think with. Surely this is how we should consider museums, as catalysts and tools to facilitate learning.

This is my vision for the future:

- Museums are places that people 'use', not simply 'visit', and 'audiences' have become 'participants';
- People go to museums to talk, stroll, be shocked, debate, create, experiment, think, dream, confirm, revive old ideas and share their understanding with other people;
- Museums support the full potential of learning activity by focusing on removing obstacles (as opposed to spending energy on creating or owning definitive interpretations or officially sanctioned museum 'messages');
- The focus on 'Audience Development' has been replaced by a new buzzword, 'Participation'. Discussion about participation is all about ways of fostering more profound interaction between people and objects, and people and the institution, rather than simply increasing numbers of visitors (which will happen anyway as a natural consequence paying attention to removing barriers and creating quality experiences);
- Museums are no longer concerned with presenting an 'official' face, rather they are obsessed with accommodating a multiplicity of images and messages;
- Museums are viewed by society at large as one of many learning resources within a community, including the library, TV, the community college and the pub;
- Museums offer 'Discovery', 'Discussion' and 'Drawing' tours for adults. Or maybe they offer just one type of tour that includes all three activities;
- Museum tour leaders are trained facilitators drawn from all walks of life. Their job is to stimulate discussion and discovery among adult visitors. They do not know all the answers and spend a lot of their time asking open questions, such as 'which object would you save if there was a fire and why?'. Participants leave tours wanting more (not less);
- 'Text' panels also ask questions, such as 'was this object a good purchase?' or 'how is this object connected with modern life?'. Not only do the panels ask questions, but they present many different ways of approaching the same object (scientifically, aesthetically, culturally, politically, economically). Sometimes the text panels argue

among themselves presenting conflicting ‘facts’ or ‘interpretations’ if such conflicts exist;

- ‘Text’ panels also use diagrams, reference images, sounds, moving images, objects that people can handle (even pull apart) to assist in interpretation;
- Museums make explicit why they have approached contextualisation in a particular way(s) and make explicit the other approaches they might have taken. They let people know that all ways of considering an object have merit;
- Museums are used as a venue for a range of activities, some of which are not connected in any obvious way with the museum’s activities (although I would argue that some connection always exists);
- The phrases ‘multiple intelligence’, ‘learning preferences’, ‘adult learners’, ‘higher order thinking’, ‘cross-cultural communication’, and ‘let’s try something new’ are found together in all museum planning documents.

Food for thought

By way of conclusion I would like to present a short list of questions designed to stimulate discussion. You may like to ponder these yourself or else introduce them to family, friends or colleagues over food. The questions that follow are higher order questions, that is, there is no right or wrong answer. They are designed to stimulate a process that can initiate all sorts of investigations and learning adventures.

- Why do public museums operate differently from public libraries?
- Why do children get to have all the fun in Museums?
- Given that 46% of the Australian adult public have low levels of literacy, why is there so much text used in museums?
- How does the provision of ‘accurate facts’ ensure that learning will take place?
- What would happen if a museum presented many different – even conflicting – interpretations for the same object?
- Do thematic exhibitions enhance or limit the learning process?
- Why do public museums exist? What purpose do they serve? Who owns them?
- If it is true that we ‘learn from our mistakes’, how does the museum environment allow us to make mistakes in a constructive way?
- Must a museum convey a message? Has the museum ‘failed’ if visitors do not absorb the message or if they take away understanding about something else, possibly even something completely unrelated to the museum’s core purpose or message?
- What type of person is best served by current museum culture and what type of person is ‘turned off’ by it?
- As a member of the general public how can you influence museum practice?

An online forum – the Learning in Museums Network (LiMN) – has been set up by Adult Learning Australia to provide a place where museum practitioners, adult learning facilitators and members of the general community can raise and debate issues such as those explored in this paper. Participation in the forum is free, easy and welcome. Visit <http://www.ala.asn.au/limn>

For further exploration of Australian adults' attitudes to learning, see A National Marketing Strategy for VET: Meeting Client Needs, ANTA, June 2002 and National Evaluation of Adult Learners' Week Report – 2001 and 2002, NCVER, January 2003. Both documents are available from the relevant organisation's website.