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Bridging the Theory-Practice Divide

BY MELINDA M. MAYER

Today's art museum educators face a challenge that is unprecedented in the field. Where not too long ago little was known regarding how people learn in the museum, now multiple theories have emerged (Falk & Dierking 1992, 2000; Hein 1998; Roberts, 1997; Yenawine, 1988). New theories breed new practices. The dilemma for art museum educators is to select the theory and craft the practice that will promote meaningful learning experiences for visitors, who can be anyone from children to senior citizens.

This predicament of aligning theory and practice points to the maturation of the field of art museum education, which was criticized in the 1980s for its lack of grounding in educational theory (Eisner & Dobbs, 1986). Now, the contemporary art museum educator has access to various theories of learning as well as emerging teaching strategies. Although K-12 art educators experienced shifts in notions of learning during the last decades of the 20th century, the focus in this article is art museum education.

The challenge for K-12 art educators and art museum educators is different due to the more structured character of school learning and the narrower range of ages. On what basis, therefore, should art museum educators decide the theoretical foundation of their teaching? Once having made that choice, what are the difficulties involved in translating that theory into good practice? Before taking up these questions, some context regarding teaching in the art museum is needed.

in Contemporary Art Museum Education

Prior to developing knowledge regarding how people learn in museums, art museum educators focused their attention more on what and how they should teach than on the learning processes of museum visitors. The content of art museum teaching seemed obvious—the collection. Providing educational programs that elucidated and illuminated the works of art in the collections was the basis of teaching (*Excellence and Equity*, 1992). Art museum educators were expected to pass along the art historical information provided to them by the museum's researchers, the curators. The discipline of art history, therefore, played a determining role in the content of educational experiences in the art museum. To figure out how to teach, art museum educators looked to sources beyond art history.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, art museum educators increasingly explored such fields as communication theory and educational psychology in order to create effective, interactive teaching techniques. Whether developing questioning strategies designed to stimulate higher order thinking skills or differentiating gallery teaching for the multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983) of art museum visitors, these educators strove to teach not only about their collections, but also in ways that made the experience of the museum personally meaningful to visitors. Museum education programs provided background information on the artist and work, introduced cultural contexts, defined useful vocabulary, cultivated the looking skills of visitors, facilitated interpretation, and enabled visitors to make connections between their lives and the artworks (Yenawine, 1988). While art museum educators focused their practice on what to teach and how to teach, researchers attempted to identify how people learn in museums.¹ As was the case in art education at large, throughout the late 1980s and into the 1990s the results of research appeared in the burgeoning literature of museum education. Here, then, is an overview of current theories and strategies of museum learning.

Constructivism

A theory of learning that is gaining influence among museum educators is constructivism. Writers and researchers in many areas of education draw upon the work of such educational psychologists as John Dewey, Jean Piaget, and Lev Vygotsky in formulating constructivism. The most thorough presentation of a constructivist theory for museums is George Hein's *Learning in the Museum* (1998). Hein writes that visitors construct knowledge by making connections between their lives and the objects they encounter in museums. Moreover, the meanings visitors derive from their experience in the museum, which can be stimulated by all aspects of the museum, not just the art, are determined not by the aims of exhibition designers, but by the goals the visitors hold. Even in the most overtly didactic exhibition, the knowledge visitors walk away with is personally, not curatorially, generated. Hein advocates that both educators and exhibition designers develop practices that facilitate this normal learning process.

Two essential features are requisite to constructivist learning. First, the participant must be actively engaged in the learning process. Second, what is learned must be confirmed not through external criteria of the discipline, such as art history, but through the visitor's own sense-making mechanism. Relevance is in the life of the beholder.

Constructivist museum pedagogy provides visitors with many different interactive learning opportunities through which visitors could make meaningful connections between objects and their own lives. Experiences that invited speculation, experimentation and coming to conclusions also would be provided. Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), the approach to teaching with works of art initiated by Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine is an example of a constructivist method of learning in the art museum.

Fostering Aesthetic Development

Housen's (1987) interest in the nature of learning in art museums dates back to the 1970s. Through extensive research on aesthetic learning she developed a stage theory regarding aesthetic development. Housen and Yenawine used this theory to create Visual Thinking Strategies. Through guided questioning, VTS develops the museum visitors' visual literacy—the ability to interpret relationships, content and meaning in works of art (Yenawine, 2003). The goal of teaching through VTS is to enable visitors to build their own understandings of artworks. Housen and Yenawine believe that most art museum visitors, young or old, are beginning viewers—Stage I (Accountive) and Stage II (Constructive). Supporting what these viewers naturally do when interpreting images plus enabling them to grow should be the objective of the art museum educator in selecting and sequencing artworks, employing the appropriate questions, and facilitating observation-based reflection. As with constructivism, learners are active as they consider multiple points of view and use evidence to confirm observations. As does Hein (1998), Housen and Yenawine use the writings of cognitive psychologist Lev Vygotsky concerning the social dimension of learning to inform VTS.

What is learned must be confirmed not through external criteria of the discipline, such as art history, but through the visitor's own sense-making mechanism.

While Housen's and Yenawine's research on VTS is ongoing, their recent studies (Housen, 2002) provide evidence of transfer—students used their increasing visual literacy in other disciplines. VTS curriculum is applied primarily in schools, yet art museum educators appear to be adopting it more broadly than they did when VTS first was introduced to the field in the 1990s.

The Contextual Model of Learning

The contribution of John Falk and Lynn Dierking (1992, 2000) to the discourse on museum learning is twofold. First, they expanded our understanding of the context of learning in the museum beyond the object through creating the Contextual Model of Learning (CML). Second, having articulated this model, Falk and Dierking are among the first researchers to propose that visitors engage in free-choice learning when in the museum environment.

The CML grew out of the research and museum evaluation studies conducted by Falk, Dierking, and their associates since the 1980s. CML frames visitor learning as occurring through the overlapping and interacting contexts of the personal, sociocultural and physical. Museum visitors bring with them their own personal context of experience. Additionally, while museums present cultural content and are experienced within cultural frameworks, many museum visitors experience the museum with friends, family, or a group. This combination of cultural and social experience within the museum constitutes the sociocultural context. The physical context of the museum can include everything from the building and its galleries to the parking lot, gift shop, restaurant, and bathrooms. These three contexts provide the matrix through which visitors learn in the museum and should be taken into account in educational programming.

Falk and Dierking are key figures in defining and theorizing free-choice learning for museum educators. Like reading a newspaper or surfing the Internet, the learning that visitors acquire in the museum is directed through their

Three simultaneously occurring dialogues—those with partners, within the privacy of one's own thoughts, and with the works of art themselves—stimulate learning while looking at artworks.

own choices, motivations, and interests. In some respects free-choice learning supplants the notion of informal learning, which once characterized museum education and distinguished it from the formal learning of schools.

Constructivism and free-choice learning are quite compatible. One way museum educators sometimes distinguish the two is by noting that a museum educator might have established objectives in constructivist teaching that visitors pursue through their own means, whereas the goals and objectives of free-choice learning are completely determined by the visitors.

Literary Theory

Somewhat parallel in effect, yet more recent and untried than constructivism, is the influence of literary theory on museum education. With the influx of literary theory into the field comes another set of choices for educators to make in crafting practice. In *From Knowledge to Narrative* (1997), Lisa Roberts presents a thoroughly researched and clear statement of this approach for museum education.

The long-held notion that the purpose of museums is to reveal historical information through the display of objects is turned on its head in Roberts's book. She points out that the knowledge imparted in the museum always was a story, an "official" story. Roberts contends, however, that learning occurs when visitors create their own narratives based

on what they see. Interpretation is shaped as much by the life experience visitors bring to viewing objects as by the works themselves, not unlike constructivist theory. Wolfgang Iser's work in reader response theory, a branch of literary theory that claims the reader rather than the author determines meaning, played a significant role in Roberts's view of museum learning. Drawing upon literary theory also brings Roberts work into correspondence with the new art histories (Moxey, 1991; Bal & Bryson, 1994).

In the closing chapter of *From Knowledge to Narrative*, Roberts (1997) challenges educators to consider the implications of this narrative approach. What are the consequences to teaching in the museum? What do visitors need to help them construct meaningful narratives? Although she does not suggest specific teaching techniques, Roberts invites museum professionals to consider the use of practices that make apparent the museum's role in presenting the narratives they put forward. Moreover, she suggests that the simple recognition that these institutional narratives are not complete could open teaching practice to the fuller participation of the museum visitor.

Emerging Approaches

Some recent approaches to learning in the museum also draw upon literary theory. McKay and Monteverde (2003) present the notion of dialogic looking as an alternative to the facilitated educational experiences offered to museum visitors. While it would appear that dialogic looking is more of a strategy than a theory of learning, it is based on Bakhtin's theory of heteroglossia or many-voicedness, which comes out of sociolinguistics. When applied to viewing works of art in museums, classrooms or daily life, dialogic looking is a three-fold approach to meaning-making. In this approach, three simultaneously occurring dialogues—those with partners, within the privacy of one's own thoughts, and with the works of art themselves—stimulate learning while looking at artworks.

Like Roberts, Reese (2003) and Garoian (2001) propose a narrative approach to learning in the museum. They write of viewers creating meaning as they “perform” the museum. Five contexts are performed in an intertextual dialogue when visitors construct narratives in art museum exhibitions. Visitors perform (1) perception, (2) autobiography, (3) museum culture, (4) the institution, and (5) interdisciplinarity. Visitors are empowered to both create their own meanings and reflect critically upon those being presented to them in exhibitions through this pedagogy.

In addition to the theories of learning identified above, museum educators are defining adult learning as distinct from child learning (Sachatello-Sawyer et al., 2002). Like their colleagues in the schools, art museum educators also want to develop teaching strategies that are responsive to diverse audiences in terms of culture, ethnicity, gender, age, and disability. With this plethora of theories and strategies to choose from, knowing how to teach in the museum is not an easy task.

Visitors come to the museum by choice and stay for the length of time they choose. Yet, the bridge traversing the theory-practice divide also may be visitor choice.

Calling the Question

How should art museum educators decide upon what basis to craft their teaching practice? In reflecting on the choices, some common factors emerge that could guide educators. The researchers and educators who developed the theories and strategies presented above drew from constructivist and literary theory. Both of these areas assert the centrality of the person in the learning process. Museum learning should not be discipline-centered, but viewer-centered. Furthermore, the visitor should be an active participant in meaning-making.

The use of constructivism by K-12 generalist and art specialist teachers as well as the influence of the new art histories on curators could also be factors in guiding practice. When giving tours to school groups, art museum educators could align their methods with teachers through constructivism. Alternatively, “new” art historians write about the multiple narratives that viewers create when looking at artworks. An art museum educator who devises teaching methods that foster multiple narratives brings structural consistency to interpretation and teaching within the institution. The importance of conversation in meaning making is important in the theories or strategies put forward by Housen and Yenawine, Roberts, and McKay and Monteverde. By favoring conversation among visitors in museums rather than with experts, these educators recognize that meaningful learning occurs when visitors’ interpretations build on the comments and conversations of a social group, as Vygotsky asserted.

Although Falk and Dierking draw upon Vygotsky’s work when they discuss the sociocultural context, it is noteworthy that free-choice learning is theorized based on small peer or family groupings, rather than on large organized tours such as school field trips. Falk and Dierking’s years of visitor study in museums of all kinds revealed that most visitors come to museums in small groups. This habit indicates that free-choice learning strategies would be a good choice for walk-in

visitors. McKay and Monteverde’s dialogic looking also appears suitable in these circumstances.

Falk and Dierking (2000) as well as Roberts (1997) remind us that visitors go to museums for many reasons, but entertainment and enjoyment is a primary motivating factor. They represent visits to museums as a leisure activity. Furthermore, these researchers assert that although visitors want the museum experience to be memorable, they also want it to be enjoyable. It would behoove museum educators, therefore, to consider how the theories they subscribe to and the methods they devise offer visitors a pleasurable experience while they learn. Although most of the theories and strategies presented here are complex, they put the museum visitor right in the middle of meaning making. Such theories promise enticing educational experiences that make it possible for visitors to produce their own insights and discoveries about themselves, life, and art.

Bridging Theory and Practice

What are the difficulties involved in translating theory into good practice once the choice of learning theories has been made? While it would seem that the relationship of theory and practice in art museum education should be inseparable—theory informing practice and practice reforming theory—they can become quite distant from each other. When educators embrace new theoretical positions, it can be extremely challenging to reconceptualize comfortable and oft-practiced teaching methods, redefine concepts, and interrogate one’s long held beliefs and values regarding what is important to teach. Layering a new set of goals and objectives on old methods does not transform teaching or learning. As a result, a widening chasm can emerge between theory and practice and the promise of exciting new learning opportunities for visitors can be lost. Negotiating this divide can be both perplexing and deceptive.

To further complicate the museum educators' challenge is the way visitors come to the museum. Unlike the structured regularity of learning in schools, art museum education occurs only occasionally. Even a class field trip to an art museum generally occurs only once a year (Falk & Dierking, 2000). As Falk and Dierking remind us through the name of the approach they embrace, museum learning is largely a matter of free choice. Visitors come to the museum by choice and stay for the length of time they choose. Yet, the bridge traversing the theory-practice divide also may be visitor choice. Good theory should lead to museum education practices that enable visitors to make illuminating and personally meaningful choices when interpreting works of art.

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END NOTE

¹Researchers of museum learning come from all parts of the museum world—science centers, history museums, children's museums, zoos, botanic gardens, art museums, etc.

