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Museum Meanings

Series editors

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The museum has been constructed as a symbol of Western society since the Renaissance. This symbol is both complex and multi-layered, acting as a sign for domination and liberation, learning and leisure. As sites for exposition, through their collections, displays and buildings, museums mediate many of society's basic values. But these meditations are subject to contestation, and the museum can also be seen as a site for cultural politics. In post-colonial societies, museums have changed radically, reinventing themselves under pressure from many forces, which include new roles and functions for museums, economic rationalism and moves towards greater democratic access.

Museum Meanings analyses and explores the relationship between museums and their publics. 'Museums' are understood very broadly, including art galleries, historic sites and historic houses. 'Relationships with publics' is also understood very broadly, incorporating interactions with artefacts, exhibitions and architecture, which may be analysed from a range of theoretical perspectives. These include material culture studies, mass communication and media studies, learning theories and cultural studies. The analysis of the relationship of the museum to its publics shifts the emphasis from the museum as text, to studies grounded in the relationship of bodies and sites, identities and communities.

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Museums and Education

Purpose, Pedagogy, Performance

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill

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Conceptualising learning in cultural organisations

In trying to 'measure' or understand the outcomes and impact of learning, it is necessary to work on the basis of a theory of learning. In the previous chapter, the concept of 'generic' outcomes was introduced, but in order to recognise those outcomes, clarity is needed about what counts as learning. Different ways of recognising 'learning' entail different kinds of outcomes.

This chapter outlines the theory which underpinned the approach to measuring learning that was based on the concept of 'generic learning outcomes'. It encompasses ideas drawn from learning theory, museum studies and cultural studies. In theorising learning in museums, a cultural theory of learning is needed.

Learning: a problematic concept

Over the past few years the theory and practice of education has changed profoundly. This has been usefully summarised as the change from teacher centred to student centred; face-to-face to distance; education to learning; the few to the many; single discipline knowledge to integrated knowledge; knowledge as truth to knowledge as relative; and rote learning to reflective learning.¹ As Claxton points out, cultures differ widely in how learning is understood, and the way in which learning is conceptualised affects the way in which success and failure can be evaluated.²

At the start of the development of a method of 'measuring learning', it was essential that 'learning' was defined and the definition agreed by Resource/MLA. This definition also had to be recognisable, relevant and appropriate to the staff of museums, libraries and archives such that they could use it to underpin their own research and evaluation. It was also vital that this definition took account of relevant educational theory, and acknowledged internal research on learning being carried out by cultural organisations. A key objective of the first phase of LIRP (the Learning Impact Research Project) was concerned with the development of an understanding of learning that could be agreed and accepted by all stakeholders.

Resource/MLA had already adopted the definition of learning developed by the Campaign for Learning for the Inspiring Learning for All initiative.³

Learning is a process of active engagement with experience. It is what people do when they want to make sense of the world. It may involve increase in or deepening of skills, knowledge, understanding, values, feelings, attitudes and the capacity to reflect. Effective learning leads to change, development and the desire to learn more.

This seemed a useful and sympathetic definition, but it was essential to put it to one side at the start of the project while the way in which learning in cultural organisations was fully considered. 'Learning' is a slippery concept, with different meanings according to its context of use. Holmes refers to 'learning' as a 'contaminated' concept, as its meanings in one context can leach into its use in another, confusing communication.⁴ But a way of dealing with this had to be resolved in order to move forward. The research team was also determined that the complexity of learning processes and outcomes would not be sacrificed or ignored in order to produce a mechanistic way of 'measuring learning'.

There are significant challenges in defining the outcomes of learning in museums, archives and libraries. Within formal educational systems, learning outcomes are established for each programme of study. Individuals engaged in these programmes are measured at the end of the period against set standards (A levels, GCSEs, etc). All involved in the system (teachers, students, examiners) understand and work to a common system. In the case of non-accredited learning such as evening classes, learning outcomes are agreed by teacher and student at the start of the class, and these may be re-visited at the end of the period for teacher and student joint assessment of the individual student's learning.

Most visitors to museums, and users of archives and libraries, on the other hand, have their own agendas for learning (some of which are very unfocused and undeveloped) and they are not required to disclose these in advance. It is inappropriate for cultural organisations such as museums, archives and libraries to measure their users against external standards. However, visitors and users themselves make their own judgements about the success or otherwise of their visit (whether on-site or on-line). They are well able to articulate whether they feel they have found out what they were looking for, have moved forward in their understanding of something, have been inspired or have simply had an enjoyable time. Users know and can discuss the outcomes of their use of cultural organisations, and frequently (though not always) these outcomes can be seen as learning outcomes.

The research to develop an agreed way of understanding learning reviewed existing work on learning as a generic process, and on learning in museums, archives and libraries. Clearly, there is a great deal of research into learning, but most of this is focused on learning in formal educational institutions with very little in Britain written by educationalists who are working in relation to cultural organisations. The educational and cultural fields are largely separate in this respect. The review carried out for the LIRP research team identified a considerable lack of work on understanding learning in libraries and archives.⁵ And, in respect of museums, the vast bulk of the research into learning was known to have been produced in America and has been based in science museums.⁶ The

approach taken by LIRP to 'learning' was constructed on the basis of relevant contemporary learning theorists, theorising of learning in museums, and the conceptual framework that informed *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*.⁷ The way in which learning was understood, therefore, was drawn more from the museum domain than from the other two domains, but museum learning research was carefully considered for a more general application across all three cultural arenas. This approach was subject to scrutiny by practitioners and policy makers in each of the three domains in the UK.

One of the issues involved in talking about learning in museums is that the discourse itself is under-developed. The concepts that describe the specific characteristics of cultural learning have not been developed and so the words which would be used to discuss these characteristics have not been identified, shared and used to bring a discursive field into being. While rapid movement can be seen at the present time, the lack of research in Britain and Europe has, until very recently, led to a lack of concepts and a paucity of terms to use. This can be illustrated by analysing a rather strange concept, that of 'edutainment'.

Edutainment

As Hein says, it is not easy to understand learning in museums.⁸ Partly this is because the amount of time spent in museums is often quite short, takes place in groups and happens infrequently. The results for museum users of these often fragmentary experiences are not easy to pin down and it has sometimes proved difficult for museum staff to find the words to describe the characteristics of learning in a museum environment. One expression that has sometimes been used to discuss the character of museum-based learning and that implies a distinction between education in museums and education in places such as schools and colleges is 'edutainment'. This is a clumsy word. It is a word that has not had a very long life within the museum world. It is no longer used in the UK and has all but disappeared from the current literature on museums and education.⁹ But it is still being used in some parts of the world.¹⁰ It is worth spending a little while unpacking this expression as it can help to reveal some of the assumptions still held about education and learning. 'Edutainment' brings together 'education' and 'entertainment', and by implication, positions these as two opposing activities. This is necessary when 'education' is perceived as something different from what happens in museums. 'Edutainment' as an expression is an attempt to find words to conceptualise the characteristics of the learning experience within museums. The assumptions that it appears to embody are revealing (Table 3.1).

The term implies that education is rarely enjoyable, concerned only with serious intellectual matters, and carried out in formal self-contained circumstances. However, ideas about learning and teaching have changed in recent years, and one effect has been to bring the polar opposites encapsulated in the expression 'edutainment' much closer together. The main focus has been a considerable development in the way in which 'learning' is understood. The bringing together