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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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The characteristics and significance of learning in museums

The last four chapters have presented the findings of the three linked RCMG studies. Very strong evidence of pupils learning in museums has been reported. It is clear that museum workshops can provide excellent conditions for successful learning. But what are the characteristics and significance of learning in museums? And how can learning in museums contribute to government schooling policies?

At the end of the last chapter, four tentative conclusions about learning in museums were identified on the basis of the evidence of the RCMG research. These were that the conceptually distinct learning outcomes are integrated rather than distinct in practice; that learning occurs through mind and body working together; that museum experiences both demand and generate learning; and that museums can impact powerfully on identity. This chapter explores these issues more deeply. It goes on to suggest how the particular power of learning in museums can be used to promote creativity, build personalised learning and help with enabling all children to be successful.

The power of museum learning

For the school pupils, learning using museum collections was exciting. The materiality of collections combined with imaginative and often very unusual activities produce an immediacy of engagement that pupils and their teachers found compelling and intriguing. As one teacher in the RCMG research said:

Children are engaging in a direct relationship with the subject.¹

The headteacher from the second case study in RR2: 2005 described the impact of a visit to a Tudor house on her pupils and herself:

I think it brings history alive, they can actually feel what it would be like because they've seen the clothes. It's not just a dry subject . . . it's picturing it, isn't it . . . If they can visualise it, it makes it more real, it does for me.²

Much of the evidence has concerned active learning where pupils were engaged in workshops. Learning theorists are convinced that settings which enable active physical engagement, where the tasks and activities are carefully selected, designed

and paced to match the capacities and interests of the participants provide excellent, if not optimum, conditions for learning.³ Immersion in experience is an unconscious and natural way to learn.⁴ Claxton describes how this is the first way in which babies come to find out about the world;⁵ during the early years, learning through immersion lays the foundation for the development of other ways of learning.⁶ But these multiple modes of learning, underpinned by learning through experience, are used throughout life. Experience-based learning is vital in kick-starting learning skills, and this can happen at any stage.

One example shows the richness of a museum workshop, the multiple levels on which one child has responded, and the way in which she combined her experiences to make sense on her own terms. Achese, aged 9, gave a very complete written account of her response to a visit to Leeds City Art Gallery as part of the RR2: 2005 research. She described how she was amazed by the Henry Moore statue, which she thought must have been very hard to make. She wanted more information about how long it took the artist to make it. She was impressed by the realism of one of the paintings she saw, which enabled her to use her imagination and inspired her to want to make her own paintings. She described how she enjoyed doing a large-scale drawing, which she describes as 'fun'. At the end of her museum visit there are multiple interlinked outcomes. Achese has enjoyed herself and produced a large drawing; she has observed some artwork which has led to a need for more facts and the inspiration to make something creative herself; she has used her imagination and developed an intention to do something later on, and she has written a coherent account of it all.⁷ The rich workshop, with varied and carefully paced activities, has clearly been a highly productive learning experience for this bright and articulate 9-year-old (see Figure 10.1).

The museum-based learning which was discussed in Chapters 7 to 9 was almost entirely concerned with physical immersion in carefully designed experiences where exploration of objects and sites stimulated bodily engagement. Pupils touched things, explored houses and gardens, climbed the stairs, rode the tram, drew and built things. During this immersion, they used their senses and their bodies as resources for learning, naturally and unconsciously relating what they experienced to their own physical being. One child thought: 'The python was dangerous as it could wrap round my body.' Another felt the tram was 'high' compared with his size. A third was encouraged and modified his view of himself as a learner once he grasped how to use his hands to make the corn dollies. Physical, bodily engagement was the key in many different ways to enjoyment and the subsequent retention of facts, development of skills and enhancement of self-esteem.

The embodied character of learning in museums is one key to its power. As we discussed in Chapter 6, the conscious processes of verbal experience, which involve speaking, reading, listening, are not enough to engender true learning; the feeling processes, which are largely unconscious, must also be engaged and the way to do this is through bodily action.⁸ The research data shows the power of active bodily engagement to generate enjoyment, knowledge, understanding and enhanced self-confidence. One of the teachers in one of the research focus groups pointed out how pupils were able to ask better questions, 'more genuine and more real', when they were able to draw on the museum experience for

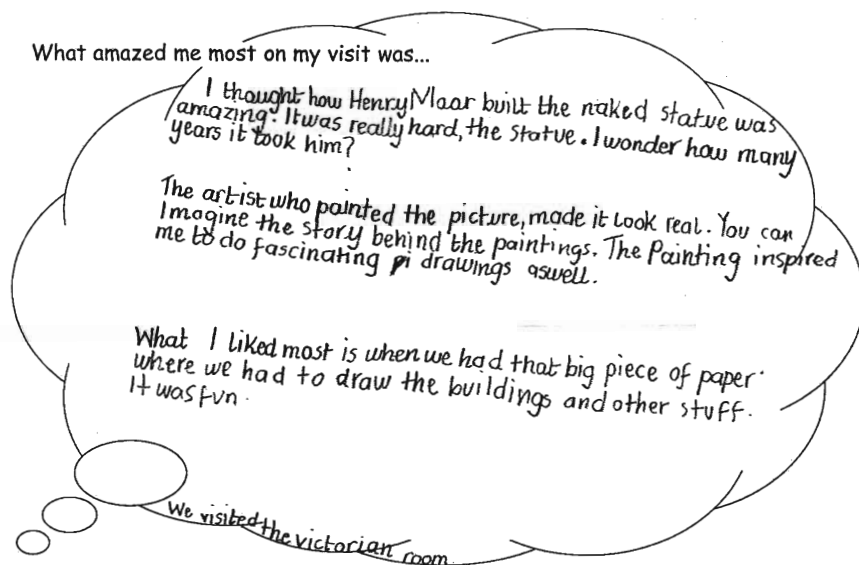


Figure 10.1 Achese has a multi-dimensional experience in the art gallery

information.⁹ The embodied character of learning in museums which results from immersion in physical experiences is essential to the development of knowledge and understanding. This is as true of the sciences as of the arts and humanities.

While embodied immersion is the earliest mode of learning to develop, Claxton points out how the ability to learn through experience remains essential throughout life and in some instances intuition and experiment may provide more effective learning strategies than rational thought.¹⁰ However, there is a well-established and still widely held view, which can be found in the work of Piaget, that active learning, learning through experience or through play, is only appropriate for very young children and that as young people mature they should move from learning in a concrete way to learning which involves abstract analytical and symbolic thinking rather than physical doing. Contemporary learning theorists point out that this view is mistaken, and that rather than leaving behind experience-based intuitive exploration and response, this remains one among many strategies for learning.¹¹ The importance and value of embodied and immersive experiences for young learners is well demonstrated by the research data, but this mode of learning is equally as important for learners of all ages.

The use of differentiated modes of attention in learning was introduced in Chapter 6. Using the metaphor of the spotlight and floodlight, Claxton described how the floodlight mode of attention is not tightly focused, but remains open and receptive, able to detect patterns and connections. As the default mode of the brain, this form of attention is essential for coping with unfamiliar environments and also for creativity and the generation of new ideas.¹² The research data shows

how immersion in unusual bodily activities in unfamiliar spaces required students to adopt a receptive and open attention in order to navigate and make sense of the events as they occurred. As minds were opened, new ideas could be admitted and absorbed.

The RCMG studies found a great deal of evidence of this open-minded receptiveness, and evidence of how unselectivity enabled pupils to become aware of new ideas that might broaden their perceptions and/or change their opinions. Pupils wrote: 'I never knew', 'I will have to reconsider'. This seemed particularly evident in art galleries, where pupils' preconceptions about art were pleasurably challenged ('art involves more things than I knew about before and is more fun than I thought'). As the body was immersed and activities were undertaken, so the mind and the emotions were engaged. Feelings were stimulated, the mind opened up to new ideas, the imagination freed up, and the self became entirely engrossed in the experience. Barriers to learning came down and new ideas were generated.

Beyond the boredom of not enough to do and the anxiety of too much that is too hard, pupils often seemed, from what they wrote or drew afterwards, to enter what Csikszentmihalyi calls 'a state of flow' during their museum visits. 'Flow' describes a specific quality of experience that involves total immersion in an activity, such that action is spontaneous, the self can be freely and fully expressed, and a process of learning about the self, its capacities, and its relationship to the external world ensues. During the museum workshops we saw that, carried along by the flow of events and the flow of their own spontaneous responses, pupils increased their efforts, tried harder, were tolerant where they did not understand at once, and reached levels of achievement that surprised and pleased themselves and their teachers. Often, in a state of flow, learning can come as a surprise – the discovery of who one is and what one can actually do.¹³ Creative inspiration strikes when the mind is playfully relaxed.¹⁴

Csikszentmihalyi has written at length about the relationship between 'flow' and intrinsic motivation.¹⁵ He states that when complex information is presented in a way that is enjoyable it becomes intrinsically rewarding and this then motivates further learning. Learning is intrinsically motivated when it is spontaneous and when attention is paid simply because things are found to be interesting and important. Learners who are intrinsically motivated have higher achievement scores and higher levels of creativity.¹⁶ Perhaps the strongest evidence in all studies was that of the spontaneous enjoyment that pupils experienced in museums. Pupils continually wrote that 'it was fun', 'I enjoyed it'. Edwards and Knight, discussing the teaching of young children, point out that learning should be enjoyable and that children should get a sense of achievement when they master something.¹⁷ This seems to me to be of wider relevance, an important insight into the relationship between learning and fun. And as Edwards and Knight also point out, it takes skilled educators to engender those feelings of fun and being in control. In the carefully planned museum workshops, pupils felt excited but not threatened; they were relaxed and confident.

In the museum workshops, pupils found ways to learn that were not always open to them at school, and this was especially noticeable with those who found

learning hard. Teachers continually described how museums, in contrast to the classroom, enabled all their pupils to 'shine'. Shy children lacking in confidence became more open and self-confident:

The children changed from not being able to look you in the eye to being able to do radio interviews.¹⁸

Although there was not much opportunity in the RCMG studies to explore post-museum assessment, where this was examined, improved assessment scores were found.¹⁹ However, the second *Renaissance* study, RR2: 2005, also found that when pupils' and teachers' opinions about the extent and range of the pupils' learning outcomes were cross-tabulated, the pupils were consistently more optimistic about their learning than the teachers.²⁰ It could be that teachers are not maximising the learning potential of their museum visits.

The children and young people responded to their museum experiences with what one educational theorist has called 'the wild energy' of their thinking²¹ partly because the experience was a new one. For a good number of the pupils in all the research studies, the visit to a museum with their schools was the first time they had been inside any museum and even the building must have been in stark contrast to their normal surroundings. For example, in the MGEP1 research one teacher who took her class to Cartwright Hall in Bradford said:

(It) was a good experience I should like to repeat every year. Too many of our children have never been to a gallery before. The building and the artworks excited them.²²

It is also possible that the self-confidence and motivation that pupils' found in museums was because they were being successful in a new environment, with unfamiliar adults:

If anyone visited the site, any pupil could explain what they were doing. They were confident in their own ability in a new way because they were being seen off site and because of the praise.²³

For many years, educational theorists have given warning about the ways in which teachers' perceptions of their pupils' abilities can shape those abilities.²⁴ Labelling a pupil a 'slow learner', for example, and making this label known to the pupil has a strong propensity to produce a learner who lacks confidence in their own abilities. It is possible that one of the reasons that some children 'shine' more brightly in museums than teachers normally expect is because museum educators do not know the children as the teachers do and so do not have the same preconceptions. However, this was not probed by the RCMG research and it remains a question for further work. It is certainly also highly probable that pupils who 'shine' unexpectedly in museums are reaping the benefit of being able to use a range of learning styles and resources that are not always available in the classroom. There was much evidence of teachers' thinking along those lines:

Especially for the poor readers, objects broaden the range of resources available to them. Objects seem to be more memorable. They reinforce memory.²⁵

The museum workshops opened up new worlds to the pupils, worlds where they could be inspired and taken beyond their everyday experience. They became aware, often for the first time, of the tremendous scope of culture, the fascination of cultural artefacts and the power and diversity of art:

Art is 3D stuff; art is fun things too. I used to see art as just painting pictures. I didn't think it was big sculpture, fun things.²⁶

They also began to be aware of some of the ways in which they might make their own relationships with the things that they saw.

The integrated domains of learning

The analysis of teachers' and pupils' views of the outcomes of learning in museums shows how the five Generic Learning Outcomes operate together, in an integrated manner. The pleasure felt in hearing the story of Boudicca enabled recall of the details of her family and her chariot. The teenagers who became angry in the workhouse remembered the details of the lives of the inmates because their emotions had been aroused. Information about the role of the Museum of London in saving Roman coins amazed one young pupil. The enjoyment felt in making flower (flour) led another to develop plans for later on. The improvement of drawing skills led to enjoyment for another. The GLOs are conceptually distinct, but combine together in practice; learning in museums is multi-dimensional.

Many contemporary educational theorists describe how emotions are inevitably bound up in learning. Csikszentmihalyi proposes that the learning experiences involve the whole person, including the intellectual, sensory and emotional faculties.²⁷ Claxton states that learning is intrinsically emotional, with feelings being integral to learning.²⁸ Sotto points out that tacit learning is so powerful because the feelings are engaged.²⁹ And Drummond and Pollock, discussing the assessment of children's learning, firmly assert the importance of including the emotional domain.³⁰

The RCMG research found many references to the feelings and emotions, especially during the second *Renaissance* study, RR2: 2005. Teachers talked about an emotional and a personal connection as being central to learning:

It's about emotions, if emotions are triggered it helps you to learn whether it's negative or positive.

Emotional response is the catalyst because it is real.³¹

Some teachers were of the view that being able to use the emotions makes learning more enjoyable, even where the subject matter was difficult:

But very often it's not a positive experience; what makes it enjoyable is the making contact and having feelings about things ... doing about WWII is like that ... learning about the horror is not fun.³²

Emotions are personal; they are our way of claiming something as our own. An involvement without emotion is distant, unengaged, essentially *uninvolved*. The

stimulation of feelings indicates acceptance and engagement in a situation; it means that participation has occurred, and it is because we feel that we think we know, whether what we think we know is right or wrong. Being able to use the emotions activates other strategies for learning.

Museum-based learning pulls together the past, present and future. In order to interpret new experiences in the present, learners must use their existing learning skills and their existing knowledge. These are the tools that enable them to appropriate and make their own their museum experience. As they do so, they lay down experiences and tacit knowledge that may be called upon in the future.

Some teachers talked about how museum experiences provide latent learning, learning that could be activated in the future. Because much museum-based learning happens at the tacit and unconscious level, it remains latent. Felt-knowledge, tacit knowledge, which is laid down during active experiences, produces knowledge which is encoded in a non-verbal way, laid down in a compacted manner; it requires effort to bring tacit knowledge out of this non-verbal state so that it can be used. This raises issues for museums when trying to provide evidence of museum-based learning. As the museum education officer in the third RR2: 2005 case study pointed out, if the participating pupils were to be able to challenge their own and others' preconceived attitudes in relation to contemporary issues as they had in relation to nineteenth-century issues: 'We would need to rely on the school to pick up and reinforce some of the things . . . outside the day.'³³ Museums are dependent on teachers to maximise their pupils' learning, and if pupils' are not encouraged and helped to verbalise or otherwise represent their experiences (through drawings or role-play, for example) much potential learning may be lost.

Contemporary learning theory shows how facts and information only make sense to learners when they can be seen as part of a pattern that already has some familiarity and resonance.³⁴ Learning is not a simple process of calmly adding one logical fact to another in an unemotional manner; while some learning may be like this and some learners may feel comfortable learning in this manner, much of the time learning is a much more hit or miss affair, one that requires emotional commitment, resilience and desire. In some ways, it is a process of *bricolage* – a picking up of bits and pieces to produce something that seems to suit for the moment. If a hole appears in the edifice, it can be patched, or another bit built on. If it keeps on working, it will not be changed.

Learning is basically a process grounded in desire. If there is no desire to learn, learning will not happen. The stimulation of interest and the desire to learn is one of the most important things that museum workshops can offer the learning process. Brains work best when the intellect combines with intuition and imagination and when it can make patterns based on experience.³⁵ And in teaching, fantasy and the imagination, which play such a large part in children's lives, are important factors to be considered in addition to intellectual abilities.³⁶

The museum workshops provided genuine and convincing contexts for learning. When skills are needed for immediate use to make something, when knowledge is necessary to make sense of what is in front of your eyes, and when emotions

result in empathy with others, the context demands that learning takes place. This means that cognition and rationality must be understood as contextual rather than as single independent elements. The acquisition of facts and information and the increase in knowledge and understanding that the research data illustrates occurred as part of multi-faceted, multi-dimensional learning events. For the pupil visiting Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, information about the Pre-Raphaelite painters was bound up with attitudes to them and personal judgements about which were the best. Taking part in debates where different points of view were articulated and discussed led to increased understanding in geography. Empathising with the plight of unmarried mothers in nineteenth-century Norfolk enabled teenage girls to grasp historical issues. In these examples, the body and the mind work together, and feelings and emotions assist the intellect in developing understanding.

Where information is simply presented as true without any debate and without alternative perspectives, the motivation to delve deeper and learn more is stunted; there does not seem to be any point, and there is nothing to discuss or evaluate.³⁷ Opportunities to take decisions, make judgements and practise skills and ideas in a supportive environment are vital for progression and development.³⁸ And as Fay points out: 'Knowing consists not in experience itself, but in grasping the sense of that experience.'³⁹

One of the main reasons that the young people were able to articulate and develop their views was because they were able to relate their workshop experiences to

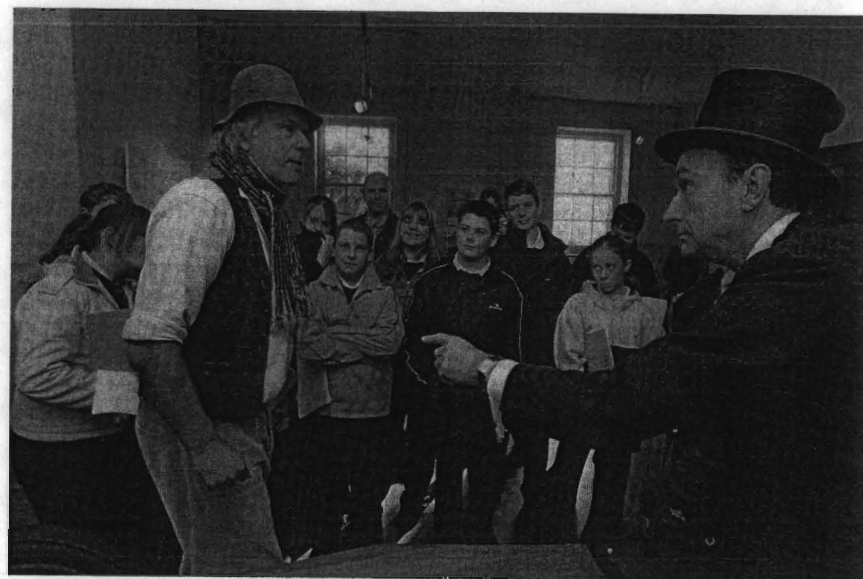


Plate 10.1 Older students found it motivating to have the opportunity to debate whether the workhouse was really so bad at Gressenhall, Norfolk

their own lives. The best learning occurs when learners can relate new experiences and information to what they already know. Museum workshops typically involve a range of diverse events and activities which can be interpreted in many different ways. It is the kaleidoscopic character of the experience, the overlapping and unpredictable combinations of facts, emotions and images that means that different pupils can use them in different ways that are relevant to themselves. There are many different ways of making sense of multiple sensory inputs; the elements of the experience can fall together, combine and overlap to produce an infinite number and range of interpretations.

Learning within the museum workshops was therefore highly personalised; the multi-dimensional events which operated across different domains of learning were open to individual interpretation. Unpredictable links and connections were made. For example, an education officer from a county archive office who participated in the MGEP1 research reported that:

The power of the objects was really significant: for example, from an ID (card) one child found that an Asian family had lived in his house during the war. The sense of cultural connection was significant for this Asian child.⁴⁰

The three linked RCMG studies revealed many examples of the personalised character of learning. Pupils wrote and drew about how they were inspired to be creative, to make something, or to become something (an archaeologist or an artist, for example). Being immersed in new experiences, secure with their familiar teachers and peers, relaxed and enjoying themselves, the children and young people were able to project themselves into the events in which they participated and interpret them in ways that were meaningful to themselves. Facts and information fell into patterns of significance and became significant because of the feelings they inspired or the activities they stimulated. The identity-related qualities of the writing and drawing of the pupils remind us that children and young people in formal education are at a stage of becoming and that museums are therefore feeding into what they might make of themselves. The processes of self-actualisation are one form of what Giddens calls 'life-politics'.⁴¹ He also points out that personal meaninglessness, the feeling that life has nothing to offer, is a fundamental problem in contemporary times. Museum workshops, on the evidence of the research discussed in this book, appear to be able to engage children and young people and thereby enable them to find personal meaning in some aspects of the past or present. This raises important moral issues about the social responsibilities of museums.

Learning and identity

One of the most significant characteristics of learning in museums is its power to shape identities. Edwards and Knight view self-concept and self-esteem as elements of identity, and describe identity as 'an organising principle for action'.⁴² The discussion above has proposed that learning in museums is embodied and immersive, demanding the use of an open-minded, receptive attention and

involving experience, emotions and intuition as well as and perhaps more than analytical thought and the intellect. Through experience, feelings become engaged and response is direct, apprehending the experience and the related knowledge in an immediate and sensory way. This can be deeply formative. Tacit learning shapes subjectivities:

Experiential learning is the process of creating and transforming experience into knowledge, skills, attitudes, values, emotions, beliefs and senses. It is the process through which individuals become themselves.⁴³

There has been a great deal written about identity and culture in recent times and it has become one of the most popular fields for cultural research,⁴⁴ but there has been much less written about learning, identity and culture and this is one area that needs development as soon as possible. Some post-modern educational theorists have suggested that museums provide experiences and spaces for the shaping of new identities⁴⁵ and the RCMG research provides considerable support for this assertion.

Identity gives a stable core to the individuality of a person. At one level, it is about belonging, about being able to feel at home and to recognise that home as your place. Being able to make connections to local knowledge may be very important for the reinforcement of individual identity. Following a school visit to the Museum of London, a 15-year-old pupil wrote:

Getting to know about the regeneration and of the history of the dockland where I live. I also liked the fact that you get a break and while you out you discover something I didn't no. And know how the people that lived in docklands feel makes me realise what life used to be like. I also liked the information given.⁴⁶

From this statement, it seems that this young person has found that his/her everyday knowledge of their local area has been validated through being given a historical and peopled context. The deepening of a sense of place and belonging provides a powerful personal reinforcement. The writer has appreciated both the information that has been gained, which has produced a sense of being situated in a community, and has also been pleased with the opportunity to learn in a different and more relaxing way from school, through 'a break'.

Many of the statements made by the pupils in the three linked RCMG studies showed how they appropriated meaning from their museum experiences. Cultural theorists have been concerned with theorising the links between meaning and identity. Hall tells us that being able to construct meaning is central to identity, as it gives us our sense of who we are and where we belong,⁴⁷ and Weedon states that identity is central to the desire to be a knowing subject, in control of meaning.⁴⁸ Identity, meaning and self-determination are key issues in the production of a powerful sense of an active self. A person is active when what she says and does stems from her own beliefs and convictions; she is reactive when she acts or chooses what to do on the basis of what others want her to say and do. In being active, actions are generated from within; in being reactive, actions are a response to something outside you. Only by being active is one self-determining rather than passive, an independent agent.⁴⁹

There was some evidence in the three linked RCMG studies of museum experiences provoking pupils to become more of themselves, more active and self-determining. Handling slave goods and participating in workshops about slavery made one young woman determined to work harder because she linked the subject matter of the workshop directly to her own sense of self. She became prepared to invest more of herself in her school work, 'try a little bit harder' and 'think more openly'. She became more resilient, more determined and more resourceful in her approach to learning. There were a considerable number of comments from the pupils in the three RCMG studies about how being introduced to Black history and culture was significant and important. Where a sense of belonging and empowerment has been aroused because workshop content links directly to specific lives and cultures, questions are raised about what happens when these links are not made. These are questions of ethics, which link to issues of social inclusion.

Claxton discusses the need for resilience and resourcefulness in learning and these tie into the relationship between learning and identity. Successful learning increases resilience which leads to an enhanced capacity to take things forward when the going gets tough. Resilient learners are able to resist difficulties and maintain momentum. Resourceful learners are confident, able to shift from one method of making sense to another.⁵⁰ Resilient and resourceful learners have strong and active self-images. Participating in experiences that involved challenging and potentially frightening information may have helped pupils become more resilient. Learning about children during World War Two, experiencing a bomb shelter, or imagining children at the time of the explosion of the atom bomb at Hiroshima could have made pupils anxious or afraid, but this did not seem to have happened. Learning about potentially frightening events was possible within a context where pupils were among known friends and peers and accompanied by familiar teachers, who could be relied upon to keep the group safe. This combination of danger and safety, which involved new and challenging things within contexts where pupils felt secure, was powerful and likely to have increased resilience.

Experiences that engaged the emotions and the imagination, made children and young people feel special and demanded total immersion and trust, were instantly memorable and made an impact on pupils' ideas of who they were, what they could do and who they might become. As one child said after a project at the V&A during MGEP1: 'I felt proud. I didn't think I could produce that kind of work. I think I could do more – better than I thought before.'⁵¹

The RCMG finding that museum education can impact on identity is supported by an evaluation carried out by NFER of the Image and Identity scheme at the V&A that was part of the DCMS/DfES *Strategic Commissioning Museum Education Programme*. One conclusion from this study is that:

It would appear that the opportunity offered by galleries as the location of cultural resources and expertise, led not only to an enhanced understanding of both cultural difference and individual identity, but also to an understanding of the relationship between the two . . . the rich

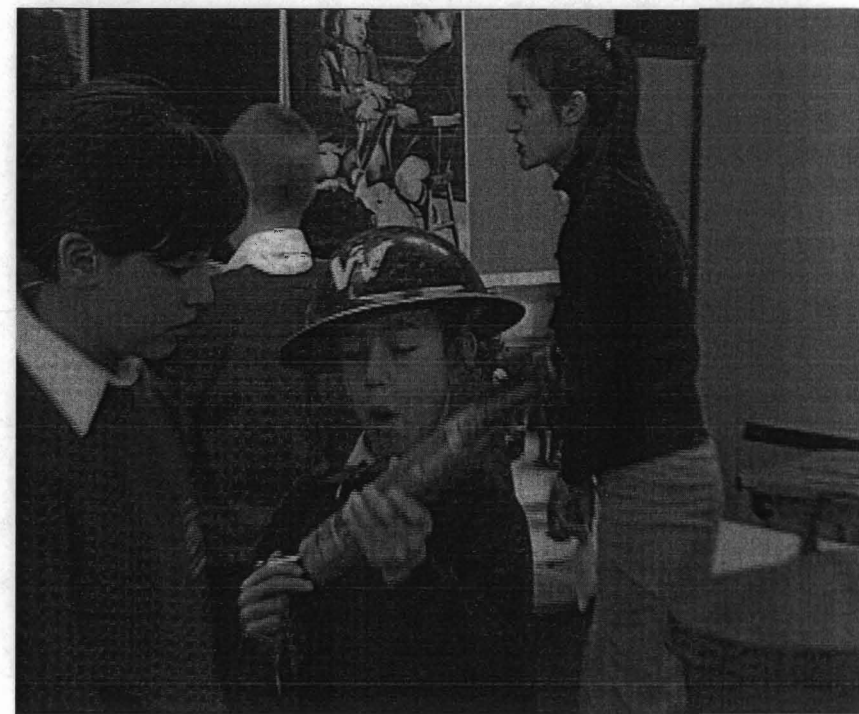


Plate 10.2 Exposure to potentially alarming objects, information and experience felt safe within a known group of peers

cultural resource embodied in the participants themselves and the extent to which this was acknowledged and explored in the projects, combined with the rich cultural resources contributed by the galleries, generated a potent learning experience, often within very limited time frames.⁵²

Becoming visible (to government) through performance

The outcomes of learning in museums that have been identified as a result of the RCMG studies have resulted from a particular approach to museum pedagogy involving interactive workshops, many of which were designed to be innovative, and all of which were devised in a climate of special funding and a prioritisation of education as a response to a particular political situation in England at the beginning of the twenty-first century. These workshops were designed by skilled and experienced experts so that all children could succeed. This success was necessary for the sake of the pupils themselves, many of whom were not ordinarily successful learners, as, because of government policies of social inclusion, much

of the educational work targeted those in deprived locations, or who had Special Educational Needs. However, perhaps a greater priority that drove the museum workshops was the demonstration that learning in museums could itself be successful. The period during which the research discussed in this book was undertaken (2000 to 2006) was seen by many in museums in England, and especially those involved in the educational role of museums, as one of extraordinary opportunity, where failure was not an option. In addition, those museums in the phase 1 hubs were charged (at the time of RR1: 2003) with demonstrating how regional museums could develop, given the resources, and thus they saw themselves as flag-bearers for regional museums as a whole. Future funding for all hub museums depended on their success, thus the stakes were high. And in the national and independent museums, the additional funding from DCMS/DfES enabled the education departments to raise their internal profiles in a number of important ways.

For all these reasons, the circumstances within which the outcomes of museum-based learning were measured were highly charged and somewhat unusual. The evaluations focused very largely on school pupils (with only a small amount of community involvement); involved schools and teachers from across England, where approximately one-third of schools were located in deprived wards and/or were special schools; and the teaching approach concentrated mainly on high-quality, resource-intensive workshops. The bulk of these teachers (85 per cent RR1: 2003; 86 per cent RR2: 2005) used museums and other cultural organisations on a regular basis. The research therefore presents a picture of school pupils in active learning situations, where most teachers were familiar with the use of museums to complement their classroom-based work and where the museums were working at high velocity to increase the use and quality of their provision for schools. Careful research into the needs of teachers preceded the design of programmes.

The research discussed in this book used the concept of Generic Learning Outcomes as a framework for the generation, analysis and interpretation of evidence of learning, and this approach was fully set out in Chapters 2–4. This concept has worked as an effective research tool, producing reliable evidence of learning in museums. Through asking questions about each of the learning outcomes, the GLOs framed the production of statistical data on pupils' and teachers' perceptions of the value of museums in teaching and learning, and through being used as analytical categories for analysing teachers' and pupils' conversations, they were also successfully used to generate portrayals of experiences. The GLOs can be seen as one example of the positive power of performativity. While many dislike the continuous demand of accountability, being able to offer up museum-based learning to systematic measurement and study has enabled museums to become visible and systematically knowable.⁵³ We now have a method of representing the educational value of museums using a range of different forms of evidence, and can talk knowledgeably and in detail about learning in museums. This method was developed in conjunction with museum, library and archive practitioners and has been offered, through the MLA Inspiring Learning for All website,⁵⁴ as an appropriate and useful approach. Given the general lack of experi-

ence in carrying out research in museums and other cultural sites, this has been rapidly adopted as one way to structure evaluation of learning from culture.⁵⁵

The evidence of performance that has been gathered using the GLOs enables museums to place themselves in a position for scrutiny. This is particularly important at a time when government policies continue to demand that museums develop their educational capacity, particularly for schools. During the period of the research, education policies and strategies have been developing rapidly. While rapid introduction may be combined with rapid disappearance, it is worth taking a little time to consider the ways in which museums can contribute to government strategies. At the present time in England, government is open to arguments about how museums promote creativity, how museums can help build personalised learning and how museums can help with enabling all children to be successful.⁵⁶

Creativity is high on the agenda of educational policy makers and schools, but considerable development is still needed for creativity to be embedded into classroom teaching and learning. Museums, however, are already seen by teachers and by pupils as places where creativity can flourish, where new ideas are generated and where experiences can be inspirational. Some schools are incorporating teaching for creativity into classroom work, and a small minority have policy statements on the encouragement of creativity and have developed a collective understanding of this complex concept. However, there are also a considerable number of schools where teachers do not know how to develop creativity in their pupils, are uncertain about the meaning of the term, and do not know how to adapt their teaching.⁵⁷ Many teachers assume that creativity is inherently connected with art and design, and do not understand that creativity is a generic quality.

Museums are already valued by some schools for their expertise in promoting creativity.⁵⁸ Much museum-based teaching is itself highly creative, using a range of skills and strategies that harnesses the enquiry and enthusiasm of pupils. In addition, however, the planning and development of museum-based workshops are designed to promote creative responses in participants. The research studies discussed in this book show how highly both teachers and pupils value and are using museums for their capacity to stimulate creativity. The work that children do in museums is imaginative and purposeful, setting the scene for innovation and valuable outcomes. While some schools are already using museums as external partners to promote creativity, this research suggests several ways in which this could be extended.

In many schools, cross-curricular opportunities are used to stimulate creativity⁵⁹ and some of the most creative work observed by HMI was interdisciplinary.⁶⁰ As the second *Renaissance* study, RR2: 2005, showed, the use of museums for cross-curricular work has increased rapidly but was mainly being promoted by primary teachers working on historical themes. Museums have a much wider cross-curricular potential than this and there is some evidence that teachers understand this.⁶¹ Museum displays are thematic and cross-curricular and objects are inherently interdisciplinary; using museum displays and collections, children can make connections and see relationships, reflect critically, and understand how their ideas and feelings have changed during the museum visit. Museums and

galleries are already synonymous in the minds of many teachers with creativity; teachers use museums because of their potential to stimulate the imagination, to raise questions in children's minds, and to engage pupils of all ages in critical reflection and emotional responses. This view of museums could be used to develop in teachers' minds a more complex understanding of what creativity can mean and how it can be promoted.

Museums could also enable teachers to broaden their range of teaching styles and develop further their disposition and pedagogy for creativity. Museum educators routinely use a range of teaching styles during one school visit, and experienced museum educators use objects, buildings, sites, materials and specialised individuals such as actors, artists or curators as part of their teaching repertoire. In addition, museum educators are highly skilled at teaching for multiple personalised outcomes through adopting an open-ended, enquiry-based and activity-led approach. Demonstrations and team-teaching could be used to enable teachers to explore some of these creative teaching methods.

The second characteristic of museum learning that can be closely related to government agendas at the present time is its openness to personalisation. One of the major aims of education in England today is to enable each individual child to develop their full potential. The focus on the individual is marked:

Learning is at the heart of this Government's agenda because it is the key to a rich life for individuals and prosperity for the nation.⁶²

The individual focus underpins a great deal of government policy for schooling and for the care of children and young people outside school. One of the key policy documents is the Green Paper *Every Child Matters* which states:

Our aim is to ensure that every child has the chance to fulfil their potential by reducing levels of educational failure, ill health, substance misuse, teenage pregnancy, abuse and neglect, crime and anti-social behaviour among children and young people.⁶³

Personalised learning focuses on the drive to tailor learning to the needs, interests and aptitudes of individual learners. It is a key issue in current debates about educational strategies⁶⁴ and the research discussed in this book suggests that museums should be part of this conversation. While museums have already developed strong and effective partnerships with schools, the character of museum-based learning could be further considered within the contexts of personalised learning.

All the research studies contain strong evidence that museums capture the enthusiasm of pupils of all ages and abilities, regardless of their social or cultural backgrounds. In part, this enthusiasm stems from being able to make an individual emotional investment in a museum experience which results in a personalised response to a collective event. Personalised responses lead to the development of individualised relevance – ideas, objects, relationships, events become meaningful. Through this, pupils can flourish as resilient individuals.

One of the key findings of this research study is the very high level of enjoyment and inspiration that pupils of all ages experience in museums and the most

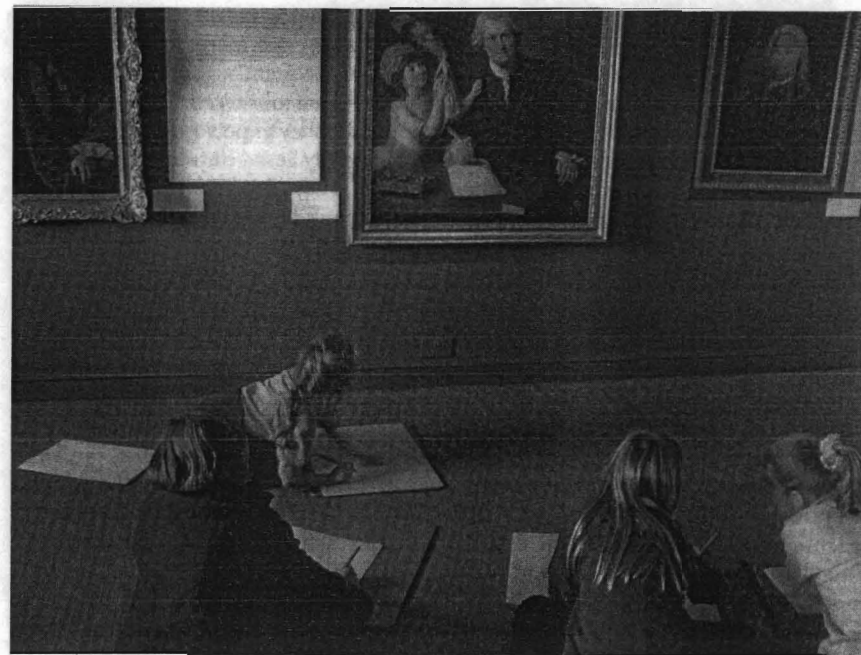


Plate 10.3 The girls have chosen a portrait to work with at Beningborough Hall, North Yorkshire, where they can recognise someone like themselves

important outcome for teachers, and the one they most expect to find in their pupils is enjoyment. Teachers appreciate the generative qualities of museums – how museum experiences generate learning through enjoyment and curiosity. In many museums, the atmosphere induces behaviour for learning and progression. Diverse learning styles can be used in museums, and this is a major strength of a museum visit. The varied learning styles to be found in museum and gallery settings for learning frequently arise through physical activity, and can include object handling, analysis of visual displays, drawing, drama, group discussion, questioning, listening, team-work and problem-solving. Through choosing from the diverse range of learning styles which are on offer during most museum workshops or visits, pupils can respond in ways that confirm their individual learning strategies, some of which are not always validated in classroom situations. This is particularly effective in the case of those who are not strong in conventional academic skills.

The research has found evidence of personal responses which take the form of active making of meaning and taking ownership of learning; the use of prior knowledge to make events meaningful and significant in an individual way; making links with family circumstances; use of preferred learning styles; individual aesthetic response to specific objects or buildings; building of confidence in individual

capacity to understand and perform better; stronger relationships between individual pupils and their peers as the result of shared experience. Pupils are aware of the potential of museums for learning, and are frequently confident that they have indeed learnt something. They have also been observed expecting their learning to be manifested in assessed work for which they expect to, and sometimes do, achieve higher grades. Teachers are consistently less confident about their pupils' learning, and this research shows that even where teachers are not confident that their pupils have learnt, those pupils remain confident. The learning potential of museums could be further exploited, especially in relation to the development of strategies to personalise learning.

The third significant contribution of museums to government policies is the role museums can play in relation to government philosophy of enabling all children to fulfil their educational potential through being healthy, staying safe, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution and economic well-being.⁶⁵ The research discussed in this book shows that museums can enable the vast majority of children to succeed at learning. The tangibility of the experience and the opportunity to access information and feelings through the senses, combined with the possibility of individual emotional engagement makes the museum a powerful teaching tool, especially for those who find more academic approaches difficult. Pupils are able to deploy a broad range of learning styles, and respond to open-ended events in diverse ways. While this makes learning exciting and enjoyable for all pupils, it is an essential pathway to progression for those who find learning a challenge.

Government proposes that organisations must find ways to broaden opportunities for all children to reach their individual potential and museums can be very effective at this, particularly with older pupils. While pupils at KS2 and below are frequently spontaneously enthusiastic, older pupils find this more difficult. However, the research found many instances of older pupils talking about how they found museums cool and interesting, rather to their surprise, and how they would need to change their views about museums. Sometimes older pupils reported their emotional responses to their experiences in museums, again, to their own amazement. The *Key Stage 3 National Strategy*⁶⁶ suggests a climate for learning that contains two elements which are important for effective learning. These are the use of diverse learning styles and the acknowledgement of pupils' prior knowledge as a basis from which to build. While museum educators cannot be aware of the prior knowledge that each pupil brings to the museum experience, learning in museums is sufficiently open-ended and interdisciplinary for all young people to use what they already know to make sense of their experience at the museum.

The research demonstrates clearly that museums are significant players in working towards social inclusion, at least for their younger users. The museums in these studies are working with high numbers of schools located in deprived areas, and high numbers of special schools. According to the analysis of schools in relation to the deprivation indices, the 69 museums in the RR2: 2005 study were working with schools located across the social spectrum, but disproportionately more of the schools using museums than would be expected are located in the most

deprived areas. Of school visits to museums, 32 per cent are located in the 20 per cent most deprived areas (SOAs) in England. Considering the actual schools visiting museums in relation to the percentages of pupils eligible for free school meals, museums are working with schools with pupils from all social backgrounds, but 38 per cent of these visits are made by schools where more than 25 per cent of the pupils are eligible for free school meals and therefore are perceived by government as at risk.

The use of objects and of learning in a rich and tangible environment, while providing enjoyable, effective and stimulating pathways to learning for all children, has long been acknowledged as especially valuable for pupils with special needs and for those who find learning difficult. The RR2: 2005 research has found that special schools are very much over-represented as museum users in relation to their distribution in England. Where special schools make up 5 per cent of all schools in England, they made up 12 per cent of the schools using the 69 museums in September and October 2005. There is a long-standing and successful relationship between special schools and museums, which this research confirms. Many special schools use museums frequently, and it may in some ways be easier for them to do so because they work with smaller groups of pupils, have easier access to transport than other schools, and have more flexible timetables.

Conclusions

This chapter has reviewed the evidence from the RCMG research and from this discussion some ideas are starting to emerge that begin to explain the power of learning in museums. The five Generic Learning Outcomes were conceptualised as distinct categories for the purposes of analysing the outcomes of learning, using the broad approach to understanding learning that was discussed in Chapter 6. But the five outcome categories, it is now clear, also reveal the dimensions along which learning processes, as well as learning outcomes, may be mapped. They thus provide evidence for the characteristics of museum-based learning. As rich and deep evidence of museum learning outcomes has accumulated through several evaluation research studies, the characteristics of learning in museums have become clearly visible.⁶⁷ At one level, the characteristics that have emerged from the data do not come as a surprise, as they have been described and explored in practice for many years. The value of the GLO-based research is that it provides consistent and unequivocal evidence for the existence of these characteristics.

From the evidence we can describe learning in museums, at its best, as immersive, embodied, holistic and pleasurable which together lead to learners adopting an open-minded and receptive outlook. Museums can induce a condition of 'readiness to learn'.

Learning is a serious activity that needs to be fun.⁶⁸ In museums, learning seemed to nearly always be fun. 'Serious play'⁶⁹ is an idea that is emerging in post-modern pedagogies and it perhaps has value as a way of explaining learning for both adults and children in museums. In performative, participatory learning, students are described as enjoying the activity through taking part, rather than consuming

content through learning facts.⁷⁰ Learning happens through the activity and the involvement it demands; through experience which becomes personally meaningful when structured to be relevant and enjoyable for the learner.

As the research has shown, learning in museums can affect the ways in which learners see themselves. Different contexts, environments, situations and relationships bring out different elements of the self because they encourage and enable the articulation of different facets of identity.⁷¹ The research suggests that museums are places where self-concepts can be changed, where self-esteem can be increased, and where, potentially, a stronger sense of self can be engendered.

We may now be able to talk about learning in museums as something that occurs through the experience of 'serious play' which both provokes a further readiness to learn and, where that learning is successful, can lead to a more positive self-image for learners. If this is the case, museums can be seen as powerful and significant sites for learning in post-modernity.

The final chapter considers the research findings within the context of museum culture as a whole.