

# How Do Museums Fit into our Notions of Adult Education?

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## Recommended Citation

Grenier, Robin S. (2007). "How Do Museums Fit into our Notions of Adult Education?," *Adult Education Research Conference*.  
<http://newprairiepress.org/aerc/2007/roundtables/7>

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# How Do Museums Fit into our Notions of Adult Education?

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**Abstract:** In order to offer successful learning opportunities for adults throughout their lives it is important to explore the role of museums in adult education and learning. The goal of this roundtable is to address the long held notion that museums are valid places of adult learning and call attention to its diminished presence in adult education research and discourse.

## Renewing Our Commitment to Museums

Museums have long held a place within the field of adult education as a non-formal context for providing adult education opportunities to visitors. As early as the 1920's references to museums are found in adult education literature, including proceedings of the American Association for Adult Education in 1928 and the 1936 handbook. These examples typify the long-standing significance those in adult education have placed on museums as sources of learning, but in recent years the study of museums as a non-formal learning context has waned. The lack of interest in these institutions is reflected in the most recent handbook (Wilson & Hayes, 2000), where a chapter on museums is not included and a search of *Adult Education Quarterly* (AEQ) revealed only one article (see Taylor, 2006) with museums in the abstract. Why is it that those in the field of adult education express their commitment to lifelong learning and participatory processes, yet seemingly ignore cultural institutions such as museums as a valuable and essential partner in this endeavor?

As museums increasingly define themselves as dynamic agents of cultural dissemination, the need for a better understanding and commitment to adult education and learning is critical. Those within the field of adult education have an opportunity to expand the range of learning processes for adult visitors by partnering with museums to provide an alternative approach to the relationship between the public and museum exhibitions. Adult learning theory has the potential to transform museum experiences into organized learning opportunities that occur in relation to socio-cultural surroundings and stimulate visitors' curiosity and active and reflexive learning.

## Museums as Places of Adult Learning

Although the educational role of museums is often difficult to encompass into a single idea, groups such as the American Association of Museums' Task Force on Museum Education (*Excellence and equity: Education and the public dimension of museums*, 1991) offer a broad definition of museums as: "fostering the ability to live productively in a pluralistic society and to contribute to the resolution of the challenges we face as global citizens" (p. 6). More specifically, museums according to Hooper-Greenhill (1994) can be incredibly successful in increasing motivation to learn, facilitating discovery and development of new passions, and making mundane facts meaningful and relevant. While these definitions and those of others (see Chadwick & Stannett, 2000; Falk & Dierking, 1997) support ideas foundational to adult learning, museums are underrepresented in existing adult education literature. This lack of research is not only disconcerting, it is unfounded given that non-formal education permeates our society (Taylor, 2006) and adult participation in museum programs is reaching unprecedented levels due

in part to the increased health, wealth, education, and mobility of baby-boomers (Sachatello-Sawyer et al., 2002).

While some museums cling to traditional notions of museums as merely conservators, the majority have come to understand their role in supporting visitors through the learning process. Museums are stimulating and offer a place where ideas originating from the media or peers can be tested, confirmed or modified. Museums also help visitors reformulate old pieces of understanding that have lost relevance or meaning. By provide forums for people to share and use what they already know and understand with others, museums can utilize exhibits and programs as catalyst for dialogue and learning. Such environments encourage active participation and exploration (Falk & Dierking, 2000) and energize visitors through the sharing of conversations, social interaction, and critical reflection, all of which are fundamental to our notions of adult education. Finally, museums challenge visitors to face cultural and social disparities by bringing marginalized voices from history to the forefront often through alternatives to traditional museum didactics such as personal narratives, and oral storytelling (Trofanenko, 2006). As Trofanenko (2006) points out, museums serve as a place where cultural production and knowledge-creation can, and should be questioned.

Adults involved in museum programs often are seeking out lifelong learning opportunities (Sachatello-Sawyer et al., 2002) and look for ways to bring together their personal interests, professional expertise, and social consciousness. With this increasing emphasis in museums on learning throughout one's life (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994; Sachatello-Sawyer et al., 2002) and a shift in traditional museum roles, greater demands have been placed on these cultural institutions. Collaboration between adult education scholars and museums can build reciprocity resulting in an ability to shape and broaden the social and cultural perspectives of adults within a changing society. In order to establish a dialogue with cultural institutions and meet the needs of all learners those within adult education must legitimize the non-formal contexts in adult education discourse and specifically, the role of museums in adult education.

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