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Darlene E. Clover
University of Victoria

Kathy Sanford
University of Victoria

Fatma Dogus
University of Victoria

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Adult Education Philosophies in Museums, Galleries and Libraries in Canada and England: Preliminary Findings of a Cross-national Study

Darlene E. Clover, Kathy Sanford & Fatma Dogus
University of Victoria

Abstract: Using a cross-national interpretive approach that employed interviews, focus groups and observations we explored the adult education philosophies and activities of 22 educators in small, medium and large public museums, galleries and libraries in Canada and England. Findings show a plethora of activities and partnerships and tensions between the terms education and learning. Libraries in both countries generally take a more liberal approach to adult education whereas museums and galleries predominantly in England combine the critical and the creative.

Scholars make a case that libraries, galleries and museums are education and knowledge creation institutions that have the agency and ability to contribute towards combating contemporary social, cultural and ecological problems (Elmborg, 2010; Hooper-Greenfield, 1992; Janes, 2009; Lerner, 2009). Bell (2002, p.3) adds they are all “natural allies in developing and delivering public education and community service programmes” (p.3). Indeed, museums, galleries and libraries do share a similar historical trajectory and contemporary mandate for public education and social and cultural enhancement. Yet save for a few earlier documents by adult educators (e.g. Chabot, 1989) and UNESCO (e.g. UIE, 1997) arguing for more inter-connections between, or research on, museums, galleries and libraries, the first phase of our research showed a paucity of critical studies by adult educators and few linkages (Clover, Sanford and Jayme, 2010). Our current study aims to make visible, analyse and problematize their adult education work through historical, critical and feminist frameworks. This paper shares preliminary findings from the second phase of our study: the education and learning philosophies of educators in London and Birmingham, England and Victoria and Vancouver, Canada.

Trajectories of Museums, Galleries and Libraries

Many years ago men of wealth, royalty and religion began to accumulate collections of artworks, curiosities, holy books or other manuscripts purchased (or copied) from other parts of the world through authorised and un-authorised means (Lerner, 2009; Perry and Cunningham, 1999). These objets d’art were more about religion, excess, power and spectacle “than sources of guidance for people” (Lerner, 2009, p.93). However, as societies evolved, wars transformed and migration practices re-shaped, there was a movement away from collections as solely for personal pleasure and entertainment towards more erudite aims. More established, rational, ordered and enlightened spaces of arts and culture began to materialise, opening their doors to the upper classes. This was followed by efforts to encourage the intellectual improvement of the working classes so they would be of more value to the wealthy classes, and with the missionary zeal of uplifting the spirits of slum dwellers or augmenting morality through contact with art, religious texts and literature (Hooper-Greenfield, 1992; Jackson, 1974; Perry and Cunningham, 1999). There were still caveats however, as many distrusted “the poor who were traditionally believed to be incapable of becoming civilised” (Perry et al, 1999, p.239) and women who were often confined “into separate ladies’ rooms” (Lerner, 2009, p.133). Eventually, progressive arguments that arts and culture institutions *were* educational institutions that in democratic

societies needed to be supported by taxes prevailed. This ushered in national, regional and local lending libraries, modern art galleries, travelling books and exhibitions, women's resource centres, computers as well as exponential mandates (Brophy et al, 2007; Crooke, 2007). There were of course degrees of difference in the trajectories of museums and galleries and libraries but we found they were more subtle than striking.

Theoretical Lenses

A contemporary driving force today is information literacy, the democratisation of knowledge and the belief that "information should be available to all who might want it" (Lerner, 2009, p.181). Wilson (2010) argues the acquisition and mobilisation of knowledge – "knowledge power" - empowers people by enabling them to muster the requisite tools to function in today's complex information and technology saturated world, and underpins any ability to think critically. 'Knowledge power' is "*civilizing*" (emphasis his) and enables people to "know something about everything...and tackle the most difficult problems" (p.4). For adult education, the acquisition of knowledge is a means of empowerment, a means by which people gain control over their own lives and participate more actively and confidently in society (Cevero & Wilson, 2001; English and Irving, 2008). Indeed, knowledge is now understood as a commodity libraries and museums offer. Not only are they tasked with luminosity, however, but also relativity. Ours is a troubled world of racism, sexism, growing gaps between the rich and the poor, persistent class inequities, and environmental deterioration to name but a few. Concepts of social inclusion, cohesion, as well as participation and neighbourhood regeneration have been forced into the lexicon of arts and cultural institutions and demands that they engage in the struggle for justice and change.

However, agendas of knowledge – digitalisation, virtualisation, innovation and immediacy – and social change pose significant challenges for service delivery in arts and cultural. Libraries are critiqued for their antiquated book and librarian-centred models (Adams, 2005). Museums and galleries are noted for their agenda-free privileged existence and underlying assumptions and control of what counts as knowledge (Hooper-Greenfield, 1992; Janes, 2009). Others question their established orders, perceptions of reality and top-down education and knowledge dissemination practices (e.g. Clover & Sanford, 2010). Von Osten (2007) disputes an educational turn that displaces real questions of knowledge with mere "cognitive capitalism" (p.12). Crowie (2010) highlights the link between the influx of technologies and the primacy of individual learning. While many scholars applaud movements away from didactic pedagogical processes they are cautious of post-modern and unabated support for self-directed learning that privileges *any* interpretations and rejects collective learning (Lahav, 2003). Other scholars lament the lack of training of curators and librarians to respond critically to a troubled world (Crowie, 2010; Hooper-Greenfield, 2002; Janes, 2009). Yet Bernstein suggests we beware of the development of short-term, empty, continuous pedagogic opportunities of 'trainability' aimed solely at learning to cope with government (i.e. market) needs and trends.

Methodology and Methods

We chose a cross-national, interpretive design because it allowed us to gather and analyse in-depth data, apply theory and draw comparisons of similarity and difference in an ever-more globalising and inter-dependent world (Harris, 2007; Merriam, 2002). We used individual interviews, focus groups and some observations to explore how educators in museums, galleries

and libraries in Vancouver and Victoria in Canada and Birmingham and London in England experienced articulated a philosophy of adult education and made links between complex contemporary social needs and their own work. The sites were public large, medium and small institutions. Due to their growing importance in adult education we chose to focus on arts institutions. We therefore excluded science museums, university libraries (not publicly accessible) and issue-oriented institutions (e.g. slavery museums and women's resource centres) from this phase. The twenty-two educators who took part in our study had work experience ranging from one to over 25 years. Interviews were transcribed and then perused for common themes and anomalies across institutions and countries -- we can only present a taste of what emerged in this paper.

Preliminary Findings

From their lists and descriptions, libraries, galleries and museums engage in a veritable plethora of educational activities. In one museum, "We offer courses that run over several weeks...study days - a whole day of talks by experts - lectures or debates and practical workshops. We also have film screenings, performances and we teach popular theatre methods" (Rhonda). Libraries offer everything from on-line video tutorials to interactive Canadian citizenship tests, from income tax services to how to start a small business and employment seeking skills to training in Excel, Photoshop, or digital cameras. Additionally, there are science cafes, author readings, community-based workshops, and philosophers' cafés. In England, most ESL or ESOL classes are offered through museums and galleries whereas in Canada, if they exist, they are done through libraries. What this means is that in England these courses are more arts-based while in Canada, they are more text-based yet both aim towards citizenship ideals. While some felt the explosion in activities "has in fact brought many more people into the library" others suggested otherwise: "I worry about being everything to all people. This lists of what we are expected to do as educators, the courses and skills we are expected to provide is ludicrously extensive. Where does it stop? Where is the funding, the bodies to support it? We need to take some hard decisions and not just be tossed about by government mandate."

In museums and galleries, the background education of all but one participant was art history or archaeology. In libraries, while more now have a library science background, most had no degrees but had workplace training through their unions. Only two of the study participants had adult education degrees and only six answered affirmatively to viewing themselves as 'educators.' Therefore, not surprisingly, there were a number of tensions and complexities around ideas of education and learning.

To begin, when we first asked 'what is your education philosophy', many began immediately to speak of children and schools. This may not have been a problem had we not been speaking to those tasked with adult education or community learning! They clearly equated discussions of education with formal schooling. The majority of study participants shied away from the term education altogether, choosing instead to use the term 'learning' because:

When you look at education, there is a curriculum, somebody sets an expectation and desirable outcome, and there is kind of level or standards or criteria. It is a much more formal process and probably overseen by another body or a group...There has been a movement away from education to learning because education is more formal and top-down whereas if we are looking at learning it is self-motivated, self-driven, there is no kind of *particular standard* (Geoff).

Edith added, "Education is something that *happens to you*, learning is something that happens inside you." When asked how they understood 'adult education', some problematically noted it was "basically anything you learn after you are a child" (Kindra). But others disagreed. Leila believed her work was education: "Our whole mission is to do with *education* - getting people from the estates to open their eyes to what they have and put forward their own opinions and views and get involved in a project and feel confident in their views." Carole argued, "I don't think education is a dirty word. I also don't see the term as one-way traffic or pedantic. I am out of step with a lot of people on this."

There were also conflicting ideas about the 'purpose' of adult education. The librarian educators by and large had a more liberal view of adult education, focussing on customer independence and self-determination in the learning process. They saw themselves as facilitators assisting the self-directed processes of the public: "people becoming more independent, doing a lot of research by themselves" (Barbara). They most often saw themselves as facilitators and even brokers "in the learning economy" (Steve). When we asked one educator whose museum was connected to a library about working on projects together her response was: "There is a problem with this. Many of them have been here for more than 25 years and they are a bit old-fashioned. Their general answer when I talk about a project is to do a book promotion or organise a baby bounce" (Carla). Although Carla mentions the books and scholars draw attention to book-centredness in libraries we found books were the last thing educators listed when highlighting their educational work. Some library educators did host "arts events and exhibitions" as a means to improve "quality of life" for communities that would otherwise not have access to the arts (Paula).

Almost exclusively, in museums and galleries the objet d'art were at the centre of learning: "We have made a conscious effort not to have events that just concentrate on social aspects. By that I mean no evening that just has a bar and band that is disconnected from the objects or exhibitions in the museum (Rhonda). The arts were seen as a means "to develop skills, to understand the world, to increase confidence. Sometimes, their educational purpose was to get people "to be able to socialise with others and just get... outside [your] postal code."

Many talked of their work as people "gaining a sense of ownership over these public institutions" (Laura). Other educators dared to test the boundaries of the 'object/expert' orientation of the museum:

We were looking at the long history and relationship between London and Chinese Community... We focussed on identity, barriers and stereotypes... We made a Phoenix... and it is now part of the collection... It was a shock to have piece of work like this put into the gallery. It took them [the curators] out of the equation. They were no longer the experts. (Lorna)

There were of course many standard arts talks for the upper and erudite classes but numerous activities focussed on issues such as gay and lesbian histories, the suffragettes and women's rights or challenging 'othering' through the South Pacific series by Gauguin. Cheryl defined this work as: "where the poetic and political come together", their aim was to "disrupt or give a different lens." There is also a critical self-reflective aspect: "Our founding mission was to bring great art to the people of east London. Of course, this begs the questions of what this means, what are we bring, to whom and perhaps, most importantly, do they want it brought?"

The numerous educational activities called for a variety of partnerships and all the institutions talked of relationships to community organisations, health and women's groups, arts organisations and artists, colleges, government agencies and universities. All participants expressed a desire for partners to have equal voice in projects, autonomy and even and control so

they could “get where we enjoy each others' opinions.” Geoff argued, “Community development work has always been a piece of what librarians do in public libraries. We are out in the community talking to people, finding out what they need, trying to get them into libraries, trying to explain to them what libraries can offer and what is available for free. We particularly work with communities that are at the lower income levels, because they are people that can really take advantage of the library.” Problematically, and paralleling the findings of the first phase of research noted in the beginning of this paper, no museum or gallery educators could identify any partnerships or projects with libraries and vice versa – no natural allies here!

Discussion and Conclusions

The myriad activities and partnerships described above illuminate institutions that know their communities, are attempting to address multiple problems and provide diverse skills. As Janes (2009) argues, something worth doing “is worth doing poorly until you do it well” (p.17). There is evidence, however, of a practice of questioning their work through discussion, debate and dialogue in order to get it right. And indeed, good learning is grounded in self-critical and reflective thought, an essential survival skill for organisations. Problematically, however, too many activities can result in mission drift, an aimlessness that is ultimately incoherent and unsustainable. Moreover, we can never underestimate the control of government – and libraries are totally government funded in Canada and England and museums mostly - and the flotsam and jetsam of mandates that problematically ebb and flow, leaving confusion in their wake.

Imel and Duckett (2008) suggest libraries were once progressive institutions linked to community groups that are now too over-professionalised. Elmborg (2010) argues libraries often maintain a steadfast belief in the transfer of information and only the ‘right knowledge.’ Keeping in mind our small sample size, generally speaking libraries do have a more liberal idea of adult education and learning. Although they do many other things, they are much more oriented towards providing individuals with technological skills and job preparedness. Adult educators caution against moves that tend to individualise learning and encourage “citizens to become more self-sufficient consumers or customers” rather than critically engaged agents of change (Martin, 2003, p. 568). There are other concerns. Lerner contends that “libraries have always existed on the margins of society” and although they came to be seen as essential to well being, they still play a subordinate role (p.182). Further, the majority of workers in libraries are women so their feminisation is a factor, given that any profession (e.g. teaching) taken over by women slips markedly in social and government estimation. We also wonder if training programmes – either by unions or adult education institutions -- for librarians include much by way of a critical social analysis or if they are more technology and individual learner demand and market skills-oriented. While some educators in our study seemed to be suggesting the latter, albeit none critically, this question can only be answered through further study.

Despite accusations that museums and galleries are elitist, rationalist institutions that elect “to remain remote from the demands and disorder of daily life” (Janes, 2009, p.3), they do seem, particularly in England, to be using their collections more to challenge stereotypes of sexism, racism, and classism and to broaden the boundaries of their institutions. But there was an acknowledgement of the ghettoisation of education and community development in these institutions. While the upper echelons of management are predominantly male, the educators and community development workers we interviewed – and all admitted this was the same across the board -- were women and one gay male. There is also a problematic separation between education and community development and outreach in museums and galleries, sometimes only

ideologically but at others, physically -- with curators at one end of a building and educators at the other. Symptomatic of the dialectic of education and learning, this division narrows views of education, prioritises educational activities within the institution and denies community activities the right to be called educational. It is our hope that by raising this issue with educators through our research, we can strengthen reflection and connections.

As alluded to above and given the focus of libraries, learners can enter a library and never read a novel or engage with any other arts activities. Museums and galleries, on the other hand, focus on their collections. Although there are interactive technology-focussed activities on museum and gallery floors, unlike libraries they are not the central focus of the educational work where rooms or banks of computers are often found. Indeed, collective activities such as talks and seminars as well as popular theatre, video and photography prevail. Is this because museums and galleries are visual arts-oriented? Is it because they have a different funding structure, relying not solely on government but on private donors as well? One might assume this latter would have – since corporations and those with wealth are most often very conservative – a more taming influence on their activities than it ‘seems’ to be having. As can be seen by our preliminary findings, this phenomenon is perplexing and we do not yet have the answers.

The majority of the educators are undertaking their without adult education degrees and therefore not surprising they could not articulate a philosophy nor identify as adult educators. The tensions between learning and education were also cause for concern. Roberts (1997) suggests the term ‘education’ is too restrictive and misleading and there has been a conscious shift toward language such as ‘learning’ (learner over teacher), ‘experience’ (open-endedness and self-direction) and ‘meaning-making’ (interpretation). We argue that while learner-centredness, self-directed learning and multiple interpretations are important we query the implications of losing education in the sea of information, ‘trainability’ and skills acquisition (Bernstein, 2000). What of the collective, social and ‘intentional’ dimension of education? We must also question ‘participation’ in light of cultural appropriation and assimilation into the dominant culture. We believe that further investigation into the educational work of these public institutions will reveal many more challenging questions as we explore their collective historical wisdom and visions for the future.

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