



A Cultural Learning Plan for Museums

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Purpose of this paper

To define goals for Museum Learning and propose an approach to support museums in achieving these goals to drive New Renaissance and inform future partners and funders

The Issue

Although the role of learning in Museums has gathered in importance over the last 20 years and the emphasis has moved from holding collections to sharing what collections have to offer with the public in creative and innovative ways, (see the recent BBC Radio 4 programme 'History of the World in 100 Objects'), there is still a lack of understanding of the wider benefits and importance of learning in generating museum audiences amongst small and medium sized museums. Learning in museums tends to have a lack of profile and be pigeon-holed rather than the museum being seen as life-long learning organisations which forms part of the community. It is interesting to note that few Board level positions are held by learning practitioners.

The future of museums lies in developing their learning expertise and developing new audiences and links with local communities through the skills of learning practitioners. Collections will bring in resources and audiences if they are creatively interpreted. Museums still need to be more creative and audience focused in the way they interpret their collections. Small and medium sized museums need to connect with their local communities and understand their potential audiences better

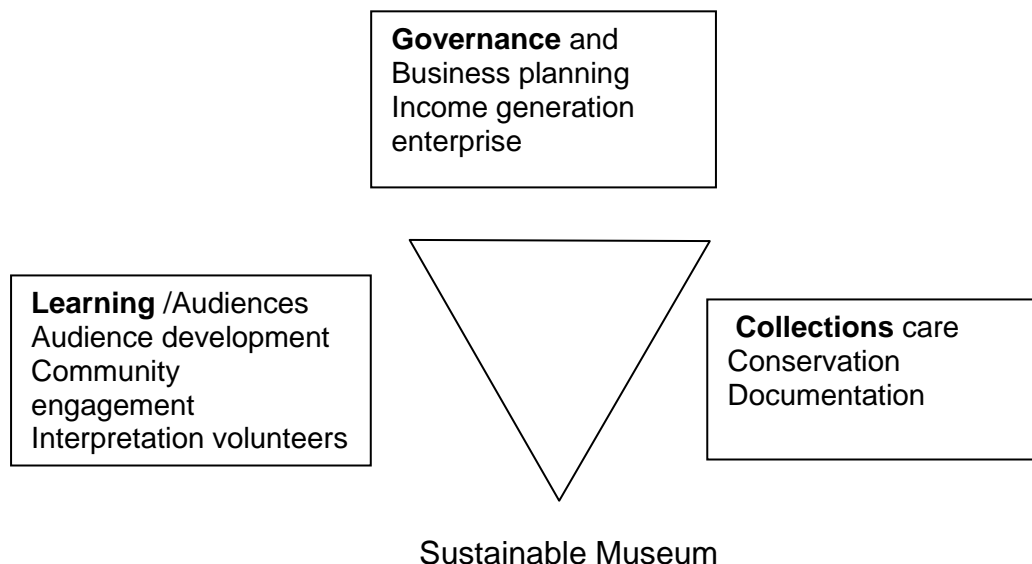


Diagram to show the areas of work which contribute to a sustainable museum

Based on experience gained supporting museums in the South East and the SE regional survey we have found there are three broad areas where museums need support.

1. Governance and Business planning

Ensuring a museum's sustainability starts with making sure the governance is in order, that the trustees are effective and, for charities, that the organisation has a constitution. The business plan of the organisation must be sound with income balancing expenditure so that the museum is sustainable.

2. Collections

Collections are the core of the museum. They need to be catalogued, curated and conserved and displayed in suitable conditions.

3. Learning

It is learning which generates the audiences for the museum – visitors, supporters, volunteers, researchers - this where learning is crucial in helping understand the different audiences, interpreting the collections in a creative and inspiring way and running activities and events so that the visitors will keep coming back and tell their friends.

Learning is one of the three key parts of museum activity. It drives the audiences and keeps them coming.

Successful museums have a strong customer focus and entrepreneurial culture both of these attributes are driven by the creativity of learning professionals.

Why do Learning?

A museum with a collection but no opportunities for learning gives no reason to visit. At its simplest a museum should be interpreting its collection for a range of visitors with something to inspire all ages, children as well as adults. Learning also contributes to:

- Encouraging new audiences
- Increasing access and participation
- Involving and empowering people in local communities
- Developing active citizens
- Forming partnerships with cultural organisations
- Increasing visitor satisfaction
- Communicating the importance and value of collections
- Understanding the purpose of museums
- A strong customer focus
- Creating inspirational interpretation
- Staff and visitor development
- Building transferable skills and progression into work
- Enjoyment and inspiration by all



Participants in the Mental Health and Heritage Project working in clay at Watts Gallery

Types of learning – see Appendix 2 for a continuum of learning

The approach that is needed

Museums need to be equipped to attract new audiences, maintain and grow their existing audiences, to contribute to being a part of their local community and to use the potential of learning to do this. Museums need to build support through networks and partnerships and to think and act in an entrepreneurial way. Museums need to develop the skills to seek funding from new sources such as local commissioning and to learn to speak the language of other providers. A key workforce development need for museums is in leadership and organisational change.

Learning support to museums

To support small and medium sized museums in all these areas a professional advice and support service is needed, coupled with access to training and one-to-one consultancy. A professional service would unlock other support such as museums setting up their own Learning Adviser network. The new Accreditation Standard should recognise the importance of learning to the core purpose of a museum. The skills of those providing advice needs to be strongly people/learning and interpretation focused. With this support in place museums will be able to realise the vision.

The Vision

A modern adaptable and sustainable museum service, promoting excellence in learning, widening access to collections and where users are at the centre of all the museum's activities.

Work in museum learning funded by Renaissance has delivered a wider understanding of the role of museum learning as well as transformation in learning services. In 2009/10 Hub museums across the country received 1,000,623 visits from schoolchildren and in the south east 94 museums received over 409,500 visits from schoolchildren. It has shown the value of present activity and where future development could take place. A strategy to support the development of priorities in museums and drive future work in the changing environment is now needed.

Strategy*

1. For the museum to be a learning organisation with education central to its purpose. The following need to happen:

- The museum strategic plan to encompass learning and include in accreditation targets
- The museum to be accessible to the widest possible audience with exhibitions appealing to a wide variety of senses
- Education to be part of the job description of all staff including front of house and curators
- New technologies to be used effectively to enhance access and learning
- Visitor learning to be supported at every stage of life through informal learning, formal learning and training
- Audiences to be enabled to take control of their learning agenda through, for instance, community curated exhibitions
- Development of programmes to be informed by evaluation and research
- The museum to be promoted as a centre of learning, inspiration and enjoyment

2. Develop the skills of museum learning in other sectors of education

3. Form creative learning partnerships through collaboration with other cultural organisations and bring new perspectives to the learning opportunities in museums

4. Commit the resources that are required for growth

5. Make museums part of the lifeblood of society

* Based on 'A Common Wealth' (D. Anderson, 1997)

Appendix 1

Context

We are in a rapidly changing external environment with many factors affecting museums and their work.

Economic

The recession has caused reduced income for museums through reduced visitor numbers and income from secondary spend. The reduction in funds to local authorities and the major budget cuts in the Comprehensive Spending Review will have a 'knock on' effect particularly on Local Authority Museum Services. The loss of major funding streams such as strategic commissioning funds and the possible reduction in school visits in the future with smaller class sizes will also reduce income. Museums will need to find other sources of income either through entrepreneurial activity or through fundraising. The move

to local commissioning by authorities opens up the possibility for museums to provide services for local authorities e.g. reminiscence using objects in care homes.

Costs to museums are increasing such as energy costs and goods and materials. Museums will need to get better at controlling their costs by, for instance, reducing heat consumption through investing in insulation. Meanwhile, the HLF have an increase in funds, although this is matched by an increase in applications for the funds.

Sociological

Museums and the voluntary sector are not sure what is meant by the 'Big Society' and what the implications of it are. However, they do know that the government is expecting there to be a rise in interest in volunteering and for some people there will be compulsory volunteering. Museums need to be equipped to manage volunteers effectively to cover the activities they need fulfilled and deliver benefit to the volunteer. It is possible that more Social Enterprises will form as a result of intelligent commissioning; museums could take advantage of the possibilities to provide services to Councils such as in training in basic skills and opening up spaces for community use.

Museums could benefit from the ageing population, as retired people look for interesting activities, by running social activities based on their collections and developing partnerships with relevant groups and agencies to tailor services to users needs. Museums could continue to play a role in supporting the well-being of older people through positive activities and social meeting spaces. Increased unemployment provides the possibility for museums to help up-skill people for the workforce through training and personal development activities, as the East Sussex Archaeology and Museums Partnership volunteering projects with young people out of employment and training has shown. The introduction of personal budgets for people with social care needs enables them to book visits to museums and other leisure activities. Museums need to be open to this and equipped to welcome people with complex needs.

Technological

An increased ICT awareness and use amongst the population opens up the possibilities of external access to collections and information. More people are using the web to plan visits indicating that all museums should have engaging and informative websites to attract people. Use of social media is on the increase and can be used effectively for marketing of museums. Digitization of museum collections offers the database from which interpretation of objects and on-line exhibitions can be made. Virtual tours and interesting photographs can be used to attract new audiences.

Political

The closure of MLA and transfer of Renaissance to ACE has created a climate of uncertainty and there is a real threat that learning and community engagement support to regional museums will be undermined in the hand over. Lack of information about new funding streams is limiting development of initiatives by museums. There is potential for a great knowledge loss as people

change jobs. The launch of the new Accreditation Scheme by MLA could increase the importance of learning by strengthening its place within accreditation. The launch of the Cultural Alliance has shown the strength of support across cultural organisations for the importance of an entitlement of access to culture for all and particularly for school children.

The 'Skills for Sustainable Growth' white paper launched by BIS government department shows the expansion of adult apprenticeships, by 2014-15 there will be 200,000 adults starting apprenticeships, and museums could offer apprenticeships through partnership with employers, building on the Creative Apprentices programme.

The education white paper has axed the new Primary Curriculum with an alternative curriculum to be phased in from Sept 2012. This means that museums will have to continue to be responsive to the needs of schools and engage with schools directly. Also engage with the local authorities to identify local priorities and the role museums can take in delivering priorities. With the changes being brought into education by the new Coalition government and the pressures of the recession, museums need a clear set of priorities on which to base their targets and outcomes for learning.

National Indicator N10 'visits to museums' has been dropped so museums will have to work with local authorities on evaluation measures to respond to their needs.

References

The most recent strategy for learning in museums is 'A Common Wealth', D. Anderson, 1997. Since then papers have been written on a number of different areas of museum learning e.g.

- 'Families, Learning and Culture', Inspiring Families through Museums, Archives and Libraries
- 'Inspiring Learning For All Toolkit; an improvement framework for museums libraries and archives' MLA, 2008.
www.inspiringlearningforall.org.uk
- 'How Museums, libraries and archives contribute to lifelong learning'. Inquiry into the future for Lifelong Learning (sector paper10).Natasha Innocent, 2009
- 'Get It: The power of cultural learning', Feedback and recommendations from a public consultation by the Cultural Learning Consortium, 2010.

Appendix 2

Continuum of learning - simple to complex

On-line Learning

- On-line information available about museum location, opening, events
- Photographs of objects and collections on-line
- Digitisation of collection on-line
- Interpretation of collection e.g. exhibitions on-line
- Worksheets for school visits downloadable
- Before and after visit resources for schools on-line
- Range of resources for education groups available
- Downloadable tours etc available
- Museum uses social media e.g. blogs, twitter

Formal and Informal Learning

- Collections displayed with labels
- Collections interpreted to a range of audiences
- Range of interpretation available e.g. guidebooks, guided tours, audio guides
- Small range of events for a limited audience e.g. adult guided tours
- Wide range of events to suit a wider audience
- Interpretation available or self guided school parties
- Bespoke schools programme covering a range of curriculum topics using the collection
- Hands-on workshops for schools
- Adult and family learning courses
- Museum puts policies in place and gains Learning outside the classroom quality mark
- Audience research takes place
- Evaluation, research and development takes place
- Communities take part in interpretation
- Youth involvement panel in operation
- Outreach to schools and communities
- Partnerships developed with local providers e.g. Councils, NHS Trusts
- Access for All