

Museum Studies: Teaching Breadth, Flexibility and Curiosity

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Abstract

Knowledge itself is changing, becoming more fluid and dynamic, as Zygmunt (Ziggy) Bauman notes, with knowledges rather than one authorized truth being recognized and promoted. Bauman, writing about “liquid modernity,” his term for the present condition of the world as contrasted with the earlier “solid modernity,” contends that this passage to a “liquid” state requires individuals to be flexible and adaptable, to be constantly willing and able to change tactics at short notice. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1929-1995) emphasizes the performative nature of learning in the space between the object or text, on the one hand, and the visitor or learner, on the other hand. The dialogical approach, encouraging the validity of many positions, results in the richness of multiple interpretations and meanings. Three skills key to the effective development of future museums, and especially crucial for the strength of visitor-centred museums are breadth, flexibility and curiosity. To teach such skills I suggest six steps: define, teach, show, model, assign and reward.

The challenge in teaching museum studies – in teaching any profession - is that we are trying to imagine the future and prepare graduates for such a future. One way frequently used to attempt to envisage the future is to study the past and present, to reexamine recent changes as potential indicators of future directions. This method is very good, as far as it goes. But not all change can be charted as linear and progressive. Sometimes change is sudden, momentous and unexpected. Often factors external to the profession come into play, twisting purposes and twirling outcomes in new ways. These games are not always appreciated, particularly by those who prefer the security of a pre-plotted path. The teacher of museum studies must consider these difficulties and, as well

as giving instruction in the fundamentals of collecting, exhibiting, interpreting and managing, should promote breadth, flexibility and curiosity.

An examination of museums over the past two decades would suggest that there are two primary thrusts currently in vogue. The first, the more traditional, is the collection-based approach. Museums that favour this direction feature exhibitions of their collection, usually as a permanent exhibition, built on a formal discipline-based organization, with minimal labels and interpretative materials, to invite appreciation of the object for its scientific, technical, social or aesthetic value. Many visitors, familiar with this style of presentation, are comfortable with it. The second thrust, based on new museology, is visitor-centred rather than object-centred, demanding active visitor input rather than passive accepted authority. Here a story, perhaps with a social message, is often central. The collection might play a role in building this story or theme, but might not. Context, questions and social transformation are usually vital. Since visitor engagement is prominent, visitors who expect a passive visit to a supposedly neutral exhibition find they are being asked to act and react in whole new ways.

The collection-based museums, perforce, are the ones that can boast of incredible, unique holdings. But even they, like the venerable old lady of US museums, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, are now often drifting toward a more nuanced and dialogic approach, such that the Met's sublime Temple of Dendur is complimented by an extensive wall of multidisciplinary explanations and context setting. A similar shift is evident at the de Young Museum in San Francisco. At the Louvre a fascinating multi-year study called Museum Lab is underway in conjunction with Tokyo Dai Nippon Printing. Here technological interpretative methods are being tested to determine visitor efficacy and interest. What is evident is that there is a convergence of museum types such that museums aspire to be places of discovery and experiment, where western knowledge is de-privileged and issues are discussed and debated from a multidisciplinary point of view. Knowledge itself is changing, becoming more fluid and dynamic, as Zygmunt (Ziggy) Bauman notes, with knowledges rather than one authorized truth being recognized and promoted. Recently Bauman has been writing about "liquid modernity," his term for the

present condition of the world as contrasted with the earlier “solid modernity.” This passage to a “liquid” state requires individuals to be flexible and adaptable, to be constantly willing and able to change tactics at short notice. In addition theories, such as those of the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1929-1995), emphasize the performative nature of learning in the space between the object or text, on the one hand, and the visitor or learner, on the other hand. The dialogical approach, encouraging the validity of many positions, results in the richness of multiple interpretations and meanings.

Society is now, one hopes, at the stage that we can not simply acknowledge difference, but also laud it. Difference comes in many guises: racial, religious, sexual, financial and on and on. We have undergone a radical change in the way we view difference over the last 150 years. In 1865 Matthew Arnold set the standard for critical expectations in his landmark essay “The Function of Criticism in the Present Time.” He declared “The rule may be summed up in one word – *disinterestedness*. And how is criticism to show disinterestedness? By keeping aloof from what is called ‘the practical view of things....’ ” Today most would propose that Arnold’s approach is not suitable, that more interest rather than less is the way to go. And more interest in difference means that we need to be more self-conscious, more open to and accepting of difference.

If this is the immediate past and the present in museums today, how should those teaching museum studies engender needed skills in their students? What are these needed skills? What knowledge is important? The potential list of needed knowledge and skills might seem inexhaustible and beyond the capabilities of normal humans. But presenting endless requirements is not encouraging or even necessary. We must not mirror the horse in *Animal Farm* who, when faced with problems, just worked harder. So smart selections have to be made.

The first thing is to consider museum studies to be additive rather than subtractive, in that the list of material and skills to be mastered seems to increase every year. Undoubtedly the acquisition of knowledge of museum basics in preservation and conservation, collection acquisition and management, exhibitions and interpretation, as

well as management, ethics, marketing and fundraising, are all crucial and should not be short changed. In fact, given the current shift in museums to an issues-based dialogical approach, exhibitions and interpretation, including interactive technological tools such as social networking, gaming consoles and use of iPads, should receive considerable attention.

The validity of candidates having a strong discipline base should be firmly acknowledged. Though more integrated and multi-disciplinary, museums will continue to have a focus, be that social, scientific, historical, ethnological or aesthetic. Furthermore, in depth training in a discipline promotes an understanding of methods, systems, philosophies and differences, sensitivities that the generalist might miss.

Another enduringly necessary area of study is communications. It can be argued that communications is a museum's main business. To this end the University of Toronto has recently put its program in museum studies into the Faculty of Information, along side the program in information, latterly known as library science. Certainly networking is crucial for museums, bridging objects, ideas and people. Another important aspect of museum communication is the ability to work with communities, especially in improving the relevance and quality of the visitor experience and creating a socially relevant institution. Of considerable significance, as well, is communication technology, its incredible power, imagined possibilities and constant development. Yet blind adulation of technology is misplaced. After all, ever since the laying of telegraph cables, technology has been asked to solve an impossible list of social and natural ills. Also not only technology itself, but its use is constantly changing: a recent study found that in Canada the use of Twitter and Facebook is down 30% from a year ago. Communications in all its guises is central to museums and museum studies.

More uncertain is our understanding of how to teach the skills needed in a visitor-centred, dynamic museum. Three skills key to the effective development of future museums, and especially crucial for the strength of visitor-centred museums are breadth, flexibility and curiosity. In fact, one could argue with considerable justification that these three skills are important in just about any twenty-first century activity. But their

ubiquitous nature does not mean they should not be taught as part of museum studies. Quite the contrary. Concerns surface given the number of important topics already on the program, the tendency might be to consider breadth, flexibility and curiosity, “soft” skills, the type of thing one could assume students would automatically acquire without formal training. This is not so. If these skills are important, are central to progress in museology, they must be taught.

How should such soft skills be taught? How can one teach characteristics, which we hope are often intuitive and naturally ingrained? At the risk of detailing what everyone knows, I suggest six steps: define, teach, show, model, assign and reward. Of course these six steps can and should be used in all teaching, whether the subject being taught is figure skating, or astrophysics or museum studies. Sometimes, however, we forget a step, or take it for granted. Recently, I asked students in my graduate course to write an essay analyzing a primary source. One student, who produced a detailed and cogent essay, consulted the primary source then put it aside and concentrated instead on secondary material. This student missed a vital step and, in so doing, got a poor mark on his paper.

The first step, define, is perhaps one that is often omitted because we assume students recognize the importance of such skills and have learned how to be flexible, dedicated and honest at home, or at school or just simply elsewhere. This assumption is dangerous. If we believe these skills are very important, we must clearly identify them, name them, and explain them. Steve Jobs, the CEO of Apple is quite brilliant at defining. For example for the iPod he crystallized his product as “One thousand songs in your pocket” or, for the iPad, “Better than the laptop, better than the smart phone.” As the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1926-1984) reminds us, naming is central to understanding.

Then we must actively teach these three skills, exploring for students why they are important and giving specific examples. The comparative method is often useful, enabling analysis of how specific museums or individuals exhibit breadth and creativity. Another useful system is the case study. Such studies, of course, need not be restricted to museums.

In fact, given the increasingly multidisciplinary character of museums, it is very helpful to go outside those institutions to draw inspiration and information from other professions or disciplines. One day, when considering this paper, I came upon three articles in my national newspaper, the *Globe and Mail*, which I found helpful. One article was on human resources, a second on Steve Jobs and the new book about him, *The Presentation Secrets of Steve Jobs*, and a third, from the sports page, on leadership.

A third important aspect to teaching needed skills is showing. Oddly, even in museum studies, we don't always take our students to museums, or to museum-like institutions such as parks and zoos. This is a pity. Many of us learn best by seeing, by examining first hand, rather than reading about it or being lectured on it. Within a museum, once students have been asked to identify which exhibitions or programs have been created imaginatively, with passionate and inclusive approaches, they will have a better grasp of what is being suggested.

But showing is not enough. The professor must also model the desired behaviours and attitudes. Like parents, aiming to bring up well-rounded citizens, it is not enough simply to say; we must also do. We must demonstrate how to be open, resourceful, questioning and community-minded by the way we teach. Experiments in training methods consistently demonstrate that behaviour modeling is associated with higher learning outcomes compared to other training approaches. Teaching by example is a powerful tool.

Perhaps the very best way of ensuring that students recognize the fundamental necessity of acquiring demonstrable skill in breadth, flexibility and curiosity is through assignments. When marks are at stake, students pay more attention and generally, the lesson is absorbed better and remembered longer. Most learning occurs when doing, when faced with real museological problems that demand solutions which test and reveal necessary skills. Possible exercises abound. For example, after visiting a collection-centred exhibition, students could be asked to present creative ways that that exhibition could be modified to become much more dialogic, with the teacher making it clear that students will

be graded on their breadth, flexibility and curiosity. Active research and experimentation is to be encouraged, assigned and rewarded.

The final way these behaviours can be taught and reinforced is for them to be rewarded. It is interesting to note that, in the field of animal behaviour, positive reinforcement training techniques are gaining favour, while the erstwhile system of dominance and punishment have been called into question. The most effective rewards are those that come constantly and in a variety of forms. Some in marks for a project well done. But some also throughout the length of the course when a student exhibits desired behaviour in verbal answers, teamwork and demonstrations. Under this tutelage often students who have exhibited narrow, doctrinaire positions, can come out with fascinating innovation and creative flexibility.

It is impossible to predict with Olympic precision just what museums will look like in ten, twenty or thirty years. What is predictable is that they will change and, probably, that change will be in the direction of an increased dialogic, visitor-centred thrust. However, any change will require staff to be ever more flexible and curious than today and to be able to work in a broader arena. It is our duty, as teachers of Museum Studies, to find methods of instructing our students so that they understand the importance of these three characteristics, and that they have then skills needed to practice them confidently and effectively.

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