How do we define learning?

Let’s start by looking at how we define learning. Most research being done by Canadians on learning in museums proposes some working definition. For example, David Anderson, at the University of British Columbia, adopts a broad theoretical framework in which learning is regarded as “both a process and a product that encompasses several dimensions, including socio-cultural, cognitive, aesthetic, motivational, and collaborative aspects.” Yet museum workers find themselves grappling with the distinction between learning and education. When I recently asked Canadian museum email forums for examples of learning projects, the response suggested that many museum workers equate learning with formal educational offerings such as curriculum-based school programs, or professional development for staff and volunteers. Antoinette Duplessis, at Joseph Schneider Haus (in Kitchener Ontario), represents the view of many when she describes her own philosophy on museum learning:

My own personal view is that we can’t really know that people are ‘learning’ from us. We have no way of measuring learning in museums (unless we have repeat visitors and we interview them) and I wouldn’t really want to. That’s what schools do, and happily museums are very different from the school system. [When I was at the Waterloo Regional Children’s Museum] we provided curriculum-related school programs but we weren’t hung up on whether or not the children learned, and I really believe they had a better experience for it, as we didn’t come across as teachers trying to ‘teach’ the students.” What we tried to do . . . was create a spark for our visitors in our programming that hopefully would send the children and any visitors off with the desire to know more and hopefully they would follow up on this or . . . over time connections would be made for them and they would realize what they had ‘learned.’

At the national level, the Department of Canadian Heritage’s Discussion Guide: Towards a New Museum Policy (2005) does not mention learning at all, however (in broad policy language) it does refer to the importance of actively engaging a diverse range of Canadians. The Canadian Museum Association’s newly approved definition of museums describes functions of museums that resemble the outcomes of learning – “[museums] engage their visitors, foster deeper understanding and promote the enjoyment and sharing of authentic cultural and natural heritage” – but emphasizes that museums are “educational institutions” that “provide a physical forum for critical inquiry and investigation.” Researchers like Phaedra Livingstone argue that their work is frustrated by the lack of a systematic national approach. “How can we provide comprehensive answers without a cohesive central agenda?” asks Barbara Soren, an independent consultant.

What’s happening in other countries?

The grassroots situation in Canada stands in contrast to what is available in both the United Kingdom and the United States. In the U.K. the Museums, Libraries, and Archives Council’s campaign, Inspiring Learning for All, offers museum workers a clear definition of learning:

Learning is a process of active engagement with experience. It is what people do when they want to make sense of the world. It may involve the development or deepening of skills, knowledge, understanding, awareness, values, ideas and feelings, or an increase in the capacity to reflect. Effective learning leads to change, development and the desire to learn more.

Learning from Museums (Falk and Dierking, 2000), Learning in the Museum (Hein, 1998), A Common Wealth: Museums and Learning in the United Kingdom (Anderson, 1997), Learning Conversations in Museums (Leinhardt, Crowley and Knutson, 2002): A quick scan of any museum association’s online bookstore shows that learning is a hot topic and has been for several years, but what about our own museum experience in Canada? What’s happening in Canadian museums? Is anybody learning – and, most important – why does it matter?
The campaign’s ‘Generic Learning Outcomes’ (GLOs) build upon this definition (Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

A framework of “good practice processes,” supplemented by checklists of questions, sample actions and possible evidence of success, helps museums, libraries and archives achieve the GLOs (Figure 2).

**Figure 2**

Jene Rahm, at the Université de Montréal, studied meaning-making in a science centre through a detailed ethnographic analysis of an interaction among several youths and a curator at one exhibit. Rahm went beyond conversation to analyze gestures, manipulation of exhibits, groupings of people, and other interactions. In her results she emphasizes the unpredictability of learning, which is “very much at the heart of the matter if we perceive learning as a continuous process of becoming, rather than the mere accumulation of facts.”

Researchers and museum workers at UBC’s Centre for the Study of Historical Consciousness and the Muséum des sciences naturelles in Lyon (France) are working together to explore how studies in the field of historical consciousness can provide a framework to develop museum exhibits and programs that reflect a greater appreciation for the visitor’s understanding of, and relationship with, history.

The evaluation sought to identify learning outcomes in the areas of content, values, sense of empowerment and action. The YSF sought to honour the participants’ control of their own learning, and this was reflected in a more open-ended evaluation.

Roger Simon, of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto, looks at the possibility of “intervention and engagement in public history through a multi-faceted, collaborative approach” in the planning of a museum exhibition: The Community of the Living and the Dead: The Legacy of the Vilna Ghetto June 1941–September 1943. For Simon a museum is a “site of learning” to be used when trying to create a “convergence of ways of engaging the past.”

With the same focus on action outcomes, Glenn Sutter, at the Royal Saskatchewan Museum, studied the learning that took place at a Youth Forum on Sustainability (YSF). His goal was to “better understand the meanings participants make of their experiences... the findings of this research will help increase our ability to deeply engage youth...”

In Canada, Brenda Trofantenko, a Canadian working at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, explored learning through the conversations of Grade 5 students visiting the Glenbow Museum. She has concluded that students are capable of understanding how their learning is bound up in the historicity of museums and the contemporary challenges that museums face. When using it as a site for learning, students both accept and resist the authority of the museum. Their learning can be facilitated, says Trofantenko, by revealing how the world is re-presented, named, displayed, owned and protected within the museum context.

Nathalie Lemelin’s research with educators at the Musée d’art contemporain de Montréal built upon staff learning, resulting in not only professional development for the educators, but also a heightened sense of empowerment for museum educators. Her own research at three Ontario sites suggests that practical theories of learning underpin the ways in which staff and volunteers work with visitors. Interpreters and docents participating in the research believed that learning is not limited to information-based constructs, but includes domains such as the cognitive, affective, social, physiological, kinetic, aesthetic, behavioral, and many others.”

David Anderson, at UBC, is a co-researcher for Metacognition and Reflective Inquiry (MRI): Understanding Learning Across Contexts, a multiphase collaborative research project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. The project seeks to explain how students become aware of, and gain control of, their learning by employing appropriate strategies in novel problem-solving situations, both in and out of school, at various sites including amusement parks, nature parks, science centres and aquaria.

The campaign’s ‘Generic Learning Outcomes’ (GLOs) build upon this definition (Figure 1).
learning in museums is a pleasurable lifelong process. They provided acts of teaching that supported and strengthened the learners’ own attempts to learn, and remained ‘on call’ to teach at an intellectual level that raises a learner’s awareness of the intent of teaching, and why a subject is taught.

These same understandings are reflected in a recent study by Soren and Lemelin involving museum web developers. The researchers documented an increasing focus on “helping lifelong learners construct meaningful experiences as they browse museum websites.” They note that “Web developers are creating quality experiences by building a community of online and on-site users who cycle between virtual and physical museums.”

At the Art Gallery of Ontario, Austin Clarkson and Douglas Worts studied visitors’ creative response to artworks, with the intent of fostering visitor creativity. They found that facilitating imaginative engagement with an artwork resulted in meaningful and memorable aesthetic experiences for a broad range of visitors. As Clarkson and Worts note, “The [visitor response] cards further indicate that a shared definition of learning in Canada Moghaddam, Mohammad Reza. 2004. “Multiple Modes of Meaning-Making in a Science Centre.” Science Education 88: 223–87.


Learning takes many forms, including this hands-on approach for the visually impaired at the Musée national des beaux-arts du Québec.

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Are these adults learning? Visitors at the Musée national des beaux arts du Québec.

Further Reading


A shared definition of learning in Canada

Given this level of activity, do we need a shared definition of learning to guide Canadian research? On one hand, we may be better off with no single definition. Having a broader understanding may encourage new ways of looking at what we do, and may allow us to work in other ways that defy definition. On the other hand, without the discussion and consensus-building required to find a common definition of learning, we remain trapped by the implicit theories that underpin our individual work. As researchers and museum workers we are unable even to grapple with the essential differences between education and learning.

Museums as learning resources

If we look at education as something you do for someone else, and learning as something you do for yourself, then it is clear why our whole perspective must shift when we talk about museum learning rather than museum education. People make their own decisions about learning. Alan Thomas names three ‘domains’ among which people move in order to do that: the social domain, the learning domain, and the educational domain. He argues that people make individual and collective decisions about learning that are determined by time, culture, geography, accident, and other specific circumstances. However various these may be, their decisions have certain features in common.

Thomas maintains that a person’s life is conducted mainly in the social domain, where activities are devoted to the satisfaction of individual needs. In this domain, groups such as tribes, countries, or nations form to provide mutual physical and psychological security. The key role associated with the social domain is that of citizen, because theoretically that includes all other social, economic, and political roles.

A person enters the second, or learning, domain when a need is not met and a new behaviour is sought. Not surprisingly, the key role in this second domain is that of learner. Even though learning can only be accomplished by an individual, participation in groups can both stimulate learning, and help identify learning needs. Therefore, the secondary role is that of group member.

The third, or educational, domain is entered when a person has an educational need, which can be satisfied only by resorting to some part of an educational system. The dominant role in the educational domain is that of student. Accordingly, Thomas argues, the primary business of the educational domain is teaching.

The significant difference between student and learner lies in the student’s surrender to the teacher of the right to evaluate their learning (in the interest of public evaluation). Conversely, in the learning domain, the teacher and the program are the first to be evaluated and, if necessary, changed if the learner does not meet what they want to know. Thomas argues that art galleries, museums, parks, science centres, and so on belong in the learning domain, as ‘learning resources’ provided by a government to meet the learning needs of its population.

So what?

If we view museums as learning resources, then it is important to find out what people want and need to learn (their own outcomes) and then provide experiences that help them meet those goals. Clarkson and Worts point out that “public programming continues to be largely geared to institutional ‘outputs’ (exhibits, lectures, and so on) rather than visitor ‘outcomes.’ Until there is a switch to outcomes-based museum programming, with performance indicators linked to the quality of individual experiences and impacts on communities, there is little impetus for institutions to [use] viewer-centered, inner-directed approaches.” As Soren notes, performance indicators that demonstrate what people learn about objects and displays, or about themselves and others, or what they decide to do as a result of their visit, depend upon the use of qualitative measures that are “not typically considered valid, credible, and reliable as a way of measuring success.”

The climate for research on learning is no less challenging at the institutional level. As Cathy Blackbourn at the Ontario Museum Association says, “We’re learning things but our learning doesn’t seem to be translating into practice.” Doug Hoy, a former program evaluator at the Canada Science and Technology Museum and the Canadian Museum of Nature, explains, “it takes a lot of management confidence and board trust to do visitor studies and evaluation.” According to Hoy, research on learning must have support at the top and must be integral to the museum. Otherwise, researchers encounter organizational barriers, and learning ends up being “glorified down in the education department.” Is anyone learning in Canada’s museums? The answer seems to be yes; learning in museums does matter to visitors, staff and volunteers, but it will take the vision and support of institutions, professional associations, and governments at all levels to make it count.