

LEICESTER READERS IN MUSEUM STUDIES

*The*  
**EDUCATIONAL ROLE**  
*of the*  
**MUSEUM**

SECOND EDITION



*Edited by*

**EILEAN HOOPER-GREENHILL**



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# *The Educational Role of the Museum*

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***Leicester Readers in Museum Studies***

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**The Educational Role of the Museum: Second Edition**  
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# *The Educational Role of the Museum*

Second edition

Edited by  
Eilean Hooper-Greenhill

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# *Preface*

Producing a second edition of this Reader has given me the opportunity to revise it thoroughly. The first edition has been well used, by those taking museum, heritage studies, leisure management and tourism courses, and by my own students in the Department of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester. Although the book has been useful to a broad range of readers, the primary audience remains those who are or intend to become museum professionals. Thus although some contextual cultural issues are addressed in some of the chapters, the main focus is on more narrowly defined professional matters. The educational role of the museum is again defined at its broadest, to include museum and gallery teaching, communication with museum and gallery visitors, and audience research.

The revision of the first edition has been rigorous, to reflect both developments in my own thinking and teaching, and developments within the academic field. The criterion for selection for this edition has been to retain those chapters that remain of contemporary interest, and of current use in teaching, and to drop those that are now out of date, such as the exhibition case-studies and the chapter on visitor patterns. One or two chapters have had to be dropped because of excessive copyright costs.

More than one third of the chapters are new. Some of them introduce issues of concern at the present time, such as constructivism, its context within postmodernism, and its application within museum and gallery exhibitions. Some are concerned with more sophisticated analyses than were available at the time of the first edition, especially within the area of audience research. Some of the new chapters are papers of my own. Museum education and communication are dynamic and rapidly developing fields, which present their own challenges to those of us who teach within them! My own ideas are undergoing some revitalization following an introduction to postcolonialism on an extended visit to Australia and New Zealand, and a subsequent turn to hermeneutics as a way of accounting for difference in processes of meaning construction. I am working on a book that develops this, which will be published by Routledge in due course.

Since 1994 the museum field has settled more firmly into patterns that emphasize the importance of successful relationships with audiences, and consequently the educational role of the museum has become even more significant. In addition to this, that role has changed. First, it has grown out of all recognition, and second, it has moved more firmly from the transmission of information to the enabling of the construction of personal relevance. Although these trends were becoming evident when I compiled the first edition, today they have become among the most compelling of issues within museums.

In 1998 we understand more clearly that education within the museum and gallery field is rarely about conveying factual information. This can be done elsewhere in a more

competent way. A museum is not a book, or an encyclopaedia, although it has been compared with both; a museum is a complex cultural organization, which is made up of a site that is frequently spectacular, a body of people with rare and fascinating expertise, a collection of objects that in its totality is unique, and a range of values that are currently under intense scrutiny from within the institution, from the academy and from government. All of these elements are susceptible to study, and therefore present learning opportunities. The level of learning can range from early childhood education to postgraduate research.

Learning in museums is inevitably cross-disciplinary and can expose social and disciplinary classification systems. It is of value to a broad range of audiences, and can be of relevance within the spheres of formal learning, self-directed learning and family learning.

While the buildings, the sites and the analysis of museums as cultural organizations have great educational potential, much teaching and learning in museums and galleries focuses on the collections. Learning from objects can be uniquely holistic. It can encompass skills development (including those of literacy and numeracy); increase knowledge and awareness; offer experiences that illuminate personal relevance and that ground abstract concepts; and enable social learning.

Museums and galleries are particularly interesting in relation to large-scale cultural movements, and this has a direct bearing on their educational intentions. During the nineteenth century, and for much of the twentieth, education was mainly understood as the delivery of information to learners whose task was to absorb as much as possible. Knowledge was understood as objective, external to the knower, and transferable. In the museum, this led to authoritative, didactic displays, frequently arranged to illustrate conventional epistemological hierarchies and classifications. Today, we are coming to grips with learning theories that tell us that people are active in constructing their own particular interpretation of their educational experiences, according to their existing knowledge, skills, background and personal motivation. From this perspective, knowledge is relative, it will be subjectively reviewed and used, and learning is therefore unpredictable. The responsibility for learning falls more squarely on the learner, but the responsibility for the teacher is to prepare appropriate learning environments, to act as expert mentor, to help develop learning skills and to provide opportunities for testing and modifying individual meanings and interpretations.

Although the constructivist approach has been challenged, and the notion of personal learning does need to be tempered with an awareness of the constraints and possibilities that structure the communities of interpretation to which learners belong, these views have gained credibility in museums. As a result, museums and galleries are rapidly inventing new display methods that will encompass this shift in approach to education. Many of these new methods are indebted to teaching and learning approaches already very well established by museum educators, such as handling, questioning, offering alternative points of view, personalizing objects and references and using complementary images and sounds.

These broad shifts in learning theory and practice can be readily related to the cultural move from modernism, with its monolithic metanarratives (particularly evident in museum displays), to postmodernism with its more fragmented and diverse approach. The challenges and contests of the postcolonialism world are enacted daily in museums, especially those with ethnographic collections.

Thus, the educational role of the museum is becoming susceptible to analysis in new ways. As museums become more audience-driven, so they are changing to become more

reflexive and self-aware. They are also, in some ways, becoming more unified, with a clearer view of how audiences and collections interrelate, and how patterns of collection use inform patterns of collection care and acquisition. The museum's educational role is becoming more integrated into its core identity, although this varies enormously from institution to institution and from country to country. However, there is no turning back: museums now depend on their audiences, and need to develop ever more sophisticated ways of understanding and providing for visitors' needs and desires.

Since 1994 a small number of important books have been published on the subject of the educational role of museums. Each in its own way responds to the changes outlined above.

George Hein's important monograph *Learning in the Museum* (1998) is an in-depth analysis of how visitors learn in museums, and how we can study this learning process. It covers both educational theory and visitor studies, putting both of these into detailed historical and theoretical contexts. Hein points out the challenges of researching and understanding learning, both in museums and elsewhere. He shows how different work-views held by researchers influence understandings of the nature of knowledge and the nature of learning. While he offers a thorough review of these from which to critique the learning and visitor studies he cites, he declares his own preference for a constructivist view of learning in museums, and a naturalistic approach to studying museums and visitors.

*From Knowledge to Narrative: Educators and the Changing Museum* by Lisa Roberts (1997) is in many ways a parallel volume. Although the approach taken is quite different, the basic mapping of the shifts in the educational role of the museum reviews the same landscapes and draws more or less the same conclusions about the major changes in museum education. Roberts uses the development of an exhibition on Linnaeus at the Chicago Botanic Garden as the central motif in a comprehensive discussion of the history and philosophy of museum education in America. The book seeks to show that the involvement of museum educators as forceful presences on exhibition teams has raised questions about the core values of museums, as museum education has been recast as less about facts and information and more about the enabling of personal meaning through narratives and experience.

However, museum educators in America (or some at least) appear to have some difficulty abandoning, or even reviewing, an educational function that prioritizes the didactic delivery of facts. In Britain, we take a different approach. Museum educators have been influenced by Dewey, Plowden, play and child-centred progressive educational methods, which have adapted very well into the museum environment. Our 'elders' Molly Harrison, Renee Marcouse and Barbara Winstanley showed us how to use workshops, drama, handling and practical creative sessions, in contrast to the information-based gallery tour. These methods adapt easily to the emphasis today on reinventing exhibitions as environments for creative learning.

A third book focuses directly on the educational role for exhibitions. *Developing Museum Exhibitions for Life-long Learning*, edited by Gail Durbin on behalf of the Group for Education in Museums (1996), is a Reader that has been compiled with the explicit objective of providing vital reading for museum educators who find themselves working as part of an exhibition development team. Sections cover learning theory, audience research, exhibition planning and case-studies, text and evaluation. This book is designed for pragmatic empirical use, although many of the readings deal with theoretical and philosophical issues in some depth. Many people, not only museum and gallery educators, will find this book extremely useful.

In Britain a major new report, *A Common Wealth: Museums and Learning in the United Kingdom* (Anderson 1997) has stimulated a great deal of professional interest in the development and significance of the educational role of museums and galleries. The report shocked many with its findings of the low esteem that many museums still accord to education. However, it must be remembered that when a general picture of museum provision is attempted, this includes a very large proportion of very small museums. Many of these very small museums are run by volunteers, are not open all the time, and are sometimes very under-resourced. Sometimes their roles are very limited and specific. Many museums such as these do not value their educational role as they might.

The report's brief was to 'review the current activities of museums in the United Kingdom as centres for formal and informal learning, and to identify how this function can be effectively developed'. This the report does very impressively. It identifies twelve targets for the development of museum education which, if they were to be accomplished, would indeed change the public role of museums. The report also presents a perceptive and thoughtful philosophical statement on museums as learning institutions. As such, it stands as a major contribution to the development of the educational role of the museum.

The study of the educational role of museums needs to cover a broad range of material, drawn from diverse but related fields. These include communication studies, cultural studies, sociology, educational theory and practice, and museum studies. However, it is difficult for students to appreciate the relevance of these fields of enquiry, if the writing is not related to museum and gallery work. Any course of study in this area, therefore, needs to work between theory and practice. Theory that cannot illuminate day-to-day responsibilities will not be useful to museum workers, and will not enable professional growth and development. On the other hand, it is not a great deal of help either to read in a descriptive way about the practices of other people, without being able to analyse from a critical and informed standpoint the approaches adopted and the results obtained. Many of the papers I have chosen for inclusion in this edition have either proved their worth to students, or are useful in that they draw on theory external to the museum field in such a way that relationships can readily be made.

The book has been restructured into four main sections: communication theories; learning in museums; developing effective exhibitions; and thinking about museum audiences. Each of these will be briefly introduced at its beginning. I have written a new introduction to the book, which places the sections of the book, and the issues each section addresses, in a contextual relationship; this is Chapter 1, in the first section. There are some suggestions for further reading in this introductory chapter and the reader is also referred to the bibliographies of the individual chapters that follow.

I hope the book will raise questions, stimulate debate, increase motivation to pursue these important issues further and, above all, be enjoyable.

Eilean Hooper-Greenhill  
Leicester, 1998

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- Durbin, G. (ed.) (1996) *Developing Museum Exhibitions for Life-long Learning*, ed. on behalf of the Group for Education in Museums, London: HMSO.
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# *Part I*

## *Communication theories*

The chapters in this first section of the Reader indicate how ideas about museum communication have changed in recent years. They enable greater detail to be pursued in relation to some of the issues that are raised in Chapter 1, the Reader introduction.

Chapter 2 charts the development of museum audience studies and the approach to museum communication which is largely based on the transmission model. Chapter 3 offers a more cultural and interpretist approach to the understanding of communication. Chapter 4 presents a case-study of exhibition analysis. The analysis, which uses methods based in semiotics, exposes the exhibition as based on a transmission view of communication, both its subjects and its potential audience being ignored.

Museums have always been intimately interconnected to prevailing and changing views of what counted as truth, which itself emerged from contemporary structures of knowledge. Thus, as what counted as 'truth' changed across the centuries, museums and the interpretation of objects changed too.

Today we are at a further point of change. Some people call this a shift from the modern age to postmodern times. Others dispute both the names used and the nature and depth of the change. However, undoubtedly, museums are at a point of rapid and radical reinvention. Much of this change is to do with new ways of thinking about what counts as 'true' in museums today.

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