

A Scenario for the Future of Museum Educators



Mary Kay Cunningham

Abstract More than any other staff member, museum educators' knowledge and experience working with visitors make them uniquely qualified to take on leadership roles as museums transform themselves into lifelong learning organizations. The article encourages museum educators to initiate discussions about change by offering a fictional scenario of future leadership roles and a framework of relevant questions challenging educators, along with other staff, to begin their own organizational transformation.

“...if we worry that there's a shortage of leaders, we're just looking in the wrong place, usually at the top of some hierarchy. Instead, we need to look around us, to look locally. And we need to look at ourselves.”

Margaret Wheatley¹

Our world is changing rapidly. When global travel, communication, and media were limited, it was enough for museums to offer information and artifacts that expanded our access to unknown culture, history, science, or art forms. But with innovations like the worldwide web and social media, visitors want and need opportunities to contribute to a dialogue with the museum and each other—to personalize the experience for themselves and to be a part of something with others. This means that museums must continue to evolve.

We anticipate the day, perhaps soon, when our museums' successes will no longer be measured solely by the extent of their collections and research, nor even by the numbers of visitors who participate in programs or events, but additionally and significantly by our ability to serve, engage, and enrich our communities. As museums shift towards being more visitor-centered and maintaining relevancy by forging connections with our communities,

they will require strong leadership. Museum educators are uniquely suited to lead this change.²

Every day the front-line interactions of educators double as regular focus groups with our target audiences and provide rich insights about what people want and need from our institutions. We know first-hand the richness of their learning conversations, the depth of their connections, and the power of an “a-ha” moment. This knowledge is power.

Museum educators must seize this opportunity to leverage our knowledge of learning and experiences with visitors to make ourselves indispensable in this time of change. If we are to remain relevant and continue evolving, it is not enough for educators to focus on advancing our skills as facilitators of quality learning experiences. We must also consider how our particular expertise qualifies us for leadership roles while museums prepare to transform themselves into responsive institutions that customize visitor experiences.³ As museums become, in fact, lifelong learning organizations.

Change of this scale will require that we fundamentally alter the way we operate. Beyond the rhetoric of calling ourselves “educational institutions” and claims of being “visitor-centered,” we must commit to becoming learning organizations *internally* as well as externally. Creating exemplary learning experiences for visitors begins by encouraging and supporting museum staff as lifelong learners.

Throughout this edition of the *Journal*, we argue that if museums are to succeed, they must become the learning organizations Peter Senge describes in his book *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization* (2006), “where people continually expand their capacity to create the desired results; where new patterns of thinking are nurtured; where collective aspiration is set free; where people are continually learning to see the whole together.” But what does that look like in practice? Try to picture the following in your own museum, as part of your own day.

A SAMPLING OF FUTURE ROLES FOR MUSEUM EDUCATORS⁴

An hour before the museum’s doors are opened, museum educators are already fulfilling their role as facilitators of learning—both anticipating and planning for experiences with visitors and, equally important, supporting learning among the staff in their institution and in the broader field of museum education.

Before preparing for daily programs on the floor, Andrew logs onto OLLME (Online Learning Laboratory for Museum Educators—a **free digital repository for practical tools and information**) to watch videos of educators from other museums facilitating a program that he had shared via OLLME a month earlier. This exchange inspired Andrew to try new techniques and made him feel a part of a community. This video was one of many items on his OLLME queue that he looked forward to reviewing during his weekly allotted time for professional development.

Elizabeth, responsible for job-embedded, museum-wide professional development, begins her monthly shared learning experience for staff managers in all divisions of the museum. Based on observations of their work and conversations with each manager about their needs, today's seminar offers tools for managers to support their staff in a **critical reflection of their work and developing their own measures of success**. Later that day, Elizabeth will meet with Akari, a newly hired educator, for cognitive coaching⁵ to develop goals for increasing his own knowledge about facilitating free-choice learning.

For next month's manager professional development, David and Kate, two experienced museum educators, will facilitate a dialogue on the social nature of learning in museums. This exercise is an excerpt of the larger collaborative learning seminar they offer internally for volunteer and staff museum educators and externally as **consultants for other museum's front-line staff**. They document their methods from these seminars and **measure the impact** of the new facilitation strategies on visitor learning in a variety of institutions in hopes of **publishing** their results by the end of the year.

Lisha leads an **interdisciplinary team** of staff from the Visitor Learning Division (staff from education, experience and exhibit development, visitor studies, and social media) in prototyping a new facilitator-friendly⁶ exhibit. After months of **collaborating** at every stage of **interpretive planning** and design, the team awaits the arrival of Gladys, a skilled volunteer facilitator, who will test the exhibit with visitors during the **evaluation** today.

Carlos was already on his video conference with the principal of a nearby middle school and the director of the Boys & Girls Club finalizing their joint **grant proposal**. Their **partnership** promised an alternative model for meeting the school's learning targets while offering enrichment programs connecting these children and their families to life-long learning outside the classroom. Just last week Carlos had made his case for the need for such a program when he accompanied the museum's director to **lobby the state's legislature** about the importance of funding learning experiences in museums.

In the Visitor Experience Design Center, Leah and Jasmine check postings for activities and exhibits available at the museum that day. The Center exists to **support visitors in customizing their experience** using the tenets of participatory design⁷ and **to initiate a relationship between the staff and visitors** that grows with repeat visitation. Using data from past visitors and individualized preferences and group needs⁸ entered by the visitor, the Experience Design program produces a prioritized list of recommendations for experiences most likely to offer the highest impact. Leah's role today included guiding visitors through the program and discussing recommendations. Jasmine was already chatting electronically with one of the "Community Designers" (members) planning their visit from home. During their correspondence, she solicits ideas for new programs and exhibits and personally invites them to an upcoming experience uniquely matched to their interests and abilities.

More than just highlighting the possible ways educators might lead, the scenario depicts a museum that is "learning to see the whole together"—a future where *learning*, both for the visitor and staff of the museum, is the unifying agent for everyone working to create a powerful visitor experience. An active learning community is created in the museum that both models and supports the learning we want to foster in our visitors.

Now consider the bolded text above which emphasizes the many ways museum educators might be able to increase the relevancy and public value of the institution as a learning organization. In the scenario we see museum educators:

1. **Deepening their own understanding** of how to be successful, empowered, and fulfilled by their daily work as museum educators

2. **Overseeing job-embedded, museum-wide professional development** centered on individually set performance goals and building staff capacity to support visitor learning
3. **Sharing expertise and exchanging information** to enhance their knowledge and credibility in the field and contribute to common knowledge, language and practice
4. **Leading cross-departmental learning and planning groups** to maximize potential of the institution to fulfill its' mission and bolster internal value for learning
5. **Developing strategic partnerships** with community and **servicing as an advocate** of free-choice learning to harnesses financial support
6. **Preparing to facilitate peak learning experiences** that are customized to meet the needs of the visitor and employing the proven practices of successful free-choice learning

These various roles are natural extensions of the work we already engage in as museum educators. In addition to our commitment to educating the public, we have the skills to educate vertically for our administrators, and horizontally to others in the institution. Fostering lifelong learning (for both visitors and staff) is not only instrumental to sustaining a learning organization,⁹ but an opportunity for museum educators to apply their skills and deepen their own practice. These kinds of experiences will offer much needed reward and incentive for educators to remain engaged (rather than switching professions) to become the future leaders within our institutions.

In light of heavy workloads and unforgiving schedules, it is asking a lot for educators to take on leadership roles. But if those of us most passionate about learning do not step forward to advocate for this transformation, who will? Knowing where to start can be overwhelming, but simplify the task by temporally ignoring future unknowns (time, funding, etc) and challenge yourself to simply start a conversation about change.

Begin by creating your own think tank. When considering who might participate ask:

- Who will constructively challenge and expand my ideas about the future?
- Beyond education staff, who can serve as representatives from all roles involved in visitor learning (exhibits, visitor studies, etc)?
- Are there other stakeholders that could contribute to the conversation? Volunteers, teachers, members, visitor groups, advocacy organizations?

Next, begin dreaming about the future. If we know we need to change, we must acknowledge what is known about our current (and past) practice, but devote our energy devising what we want our museums to be in the future. As Tony Wagner writes, “Your system--any system--is perfectly designed to produce the results you’re getting.”¹⁰ Subsequently, since the current systems in our museums are not delivering what we (or our visitors) want and need, then how can we reshape our values (or revisit the mission of the institution) and systems to support becoming a learning organization? Consider the following questions (posed from the perspective of your institution):

- What data will we need to collect to promote advancements and measure our success as a learning organization? What would be our criteria for success?
- How might the mission or core values/beliefs of the organization need to change for our museum to value the work (in addition to the outputs) of becoming a learning organization?
- What would working in our museum look like if it were truly a learning organization? How would our roles and interactions be different than today?
- How would the all staff and departments involved with visitor learning work together?
- How might we share our experience with others in the field beyond the current methods of publications and conference presentations?
- What kinds of experiences, responsibilities, and support will keep us engaged and rewarded in our work?

While there may be examples of museums already operating or providing learning experiences as described in the scenario, it is not enough to say, “let’s be more like *them*.” Each institution must chart a course and undergo a change process that empowers¹¹ staff to create experiences by building on their expertise and intuition, while meeting the needs of their unique audiences. These questions are just the beginning of a journey towards becoming learning organizations.¹²

Some members of the museum field who helped shape this article echo our new president, talking less about the need for a definitive set of skills to facilitate change and more about the need for a “set of curiosities”¹³ to guide us; less about having everyone reach agreement around the table, and more about creating our own “team of rivals”¹⁴ that can create a thoughtful dialogue about what the future should be.

As leaders in this transformation to being a learning organization we don't have to have the answers, we just have to initiate the experience of learning together by inviting diverse perspectives to a conversation, doing our best thinking, promoting innovation, advocating for time to test the most promising of ideas, encouraging change based on our findings, and continuing the learning conversation--regardless of the results.

In times of change, learners inherit the Earth, while the learned find themselves beautifully equipped to deal with a world that no longer exists.

Eric Hoffer

Notes

1. Margaret Wheatley, *Turning To One Another*, 2nd edition. (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009).
2. See additional discussion of educator's role in leading change in several articles in Fall 2008 issue of *Journal of Museum Education*. Especially the article by Jennifer Wild Czajkowski and Shirlee Hudson Hill, "Transformation and Interpretation; What is the Museum Educator's Role?"
3. There are too many references to list here, but a rich resource of information about visitor experiences and future trends can be found in the following publications:

John H. Falk and Beverly K. Sheppard, *Thriving In the Knowledge Age: New Business Models for Museums and Other Cultural Institutions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman/AltaMira, 2006).

Stephanie Weaver, *Creating Great Visitor Experiences; A Guide for Museums, Parks, Zoos, Gardens, & Libraries*. (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2007).

Mary Ellen Munley, et al., "Envisioning A Customized Museum: An Agenda to Guide Reflective Practice and Research" *In Principle In Practice; Museums as Learning Institutions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman/AltaMira, 2007):77-90.

Tasmin Astor-Jack, et al., "Investigating Socially Mediated Learning" *In Principle In Practice; Museums as Learning Institutions* (Lanham, MD: Rowman/AltaMira, 2007): 217-228.
4. The scenario was created with the help of my own think tank comprised of museum and school administrators, university faculty, exhibit developers, researchers, consultants, and current and former front-line educators. Their ideas, hopes, and even cautionary tales all resulted in this vision for the future. Endless thanks to Lynn Dierking, John Falk, David Ebitz, Erik Holland, Scott Pattison, Lynn Uyen Tran, Stephanie Weaver, Julie Smith, David Perry, David Snyder, Kim Aziz, Dan Moeller, Mary Roberts and especially Mark Larson and Tina Nolan.
5. Cognitive Coaching involves offering tools for stimulating reflection of one's own practice that enables the professional to develop their own plan for development and problem solving. (www.cognitivecoaching.com)
6. Mary Kay Cunningham and Scott Pattison, "Fostering Facilitation: Designing Exhibits and Training Staff for Conversational Interpretation" *National Association for Interpretation's Proceedings Collections 2006-2008*. (Fort Collins, CO, InterpPress 2008). Please feel free to contact the author for a PDF of this article at marykay@visitordialogue.com.
7. See Nina Simon's upcoming book on Participatory Design with supporting information at <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2009/02/what-do-you-need-to-make-argument-for.html>.

8. Learn more about identities and needs of visitors in John Falk's new book, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (Left Coast Press, 2009) and for family groups, *Family Learning in Museums: The PISEC Perspective* (PISEC 1998)
9. Michael Fullan "Understanding Change", *The Jossey-Bass Reader on Educational Leadership* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Press: 2007) :170
10. Tony Wagner, *Change Leadership; a Practical Guide to Transforming Our Schools* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass 2006): 106
11. For excellent article on impacts of empowerment and cultural change in institutions see Mary Theresa Seig and Ken Bubp's article, "The Culture of Empowerment; Driving and Sustaining Change at Conner Prairie" *Curator* 51/2. (April 2008): 208.
12. The last article in this issue of the *Journal*, "The Leader's Bookshelf" will offer an annotated bibliography of resources that will provide tools or examples for how to craft a path for becoming a learning organization.
13. Specific term used in personal communications with John Falk, February 2009.
14. Reference to Doris Kearns Goodwin's book, *Team of Rivals; The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln* (Simon & Schuster 2005)

References

- Falk, John H. and Beverly K. Sheppard, *Thriving in the Knowledge Age: New Business Models for Museums and Other Cultural Institutions* (Lanham, MD: AltaMira Press, 2006).
- Munley, Mary Ellen, and Randy Roberts, "Are Museum Educators Still Necessary?" *Journal of Museum Education* 31, no.1 (Spring 2006).

Mary Kay Cunningham is an independent museum professional with over 15 years experience working with museums and cultural institutions. Her company, Dialogue, works to improve visitor learning experiences through collaborative seminars about conversational interpretation and facilitating visitor experience planning. Mary Kay is the author of The Interpreters Training Manual for Museums, a best-selling book published by the American Association of Museums in 2004. She can be contacted at marykay@visitordialogue.com.

