

## **Packing Away the Velvet Rope: The art museum as a site for adult learning**

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### **Introduction**

In the new National Gallery of Victoria at Federation Square, there is a text panel that tells literate visitors about what they can find on the other text panels. This explanatory text panel explains that, along with titles, names of artists, dates, media and cataloguing codes, some text panels contain additional text. This additional text, so the text panel tells us, has been written by a gallery curator, a famous Australian author, or a primary or secondary school child from Victoria.

What does this approach say to the adult visitor to the gallery?

After they have run the gauntlet of the Gattaca-like officials in dark suits standing around the foyer; after they have wandered for miles trying to find any decent signage; after breaking down in tears because the touch screens simply won't respond to their commands; after they have found and struggled upstairs with the nagging feeling they are going somewhere they shouldn't; after they have found their reading glasses or else asked someone else to read the text panel to them, what do they discover?

They discover that, because they are not a privileged gallery employee, a famous author, or a school kid, there is little possibility that this gallery will listen to or promote their thoughts about the art. There is little obvious possibility that the average adult visitor will be able to actively contribute to the communication about the art that they have come to use as part of either an entertainment or learning activity.

Implicitly, the adult realises that they are to be the silent guest, sneaking around the gallery in hushed awe, taking in without question the authorised opinions given to them, opinions which all seem to toe the same line and, in doing so, create a curious space in which, unlike the real world, there is no disagreement or divergent views.

The question that drives this talk and, indeed much of my thinking about museum education is simple: why can't Fatima Public, a textile worker from Footscray who left school after Year Ten, have an opportunity to steer the discourse conducted by the art museum in ways that meet her interests or serve her learning needs?

From this key question, others appear.

Why is it that the art museum's responsibility for the physical safety of our cultural objects seems to have been extended to ensuring some sort of intellectual protection as well?

Why does the velvet rope that stands around works of art to protect them from sticky fingers have a metaphorical equivalent that enshrines particular interpretive approaches and refuses or limits others?

Why does art museum interpretive practice seem to be grounded in discovering and promoting a ‘truth’ about a cultural object, but appears to take no heed of ‘truths’ that are important to the wider community?

Why do people talk about merely *visiting* an art museum, but seldom about *using* it?

Why do we talk about museum *audiences*, and not museum *participants*?

Why does the typical gallery guide or curator seldom ask the adult visitor for their opinions about the objects? Why is the wisdom of the visitor any less important than that of the gallery staff? Why aren’t gallery visitors actively encouraged to teach each other?

If art museums are a site for communication, with whom are art museums communicating? How do art museums determine the focus of this communication, and how much active listening do art museums do, both to the audiences that patronise them, as well as those who don’t?

### Adult learning

So from where do my woolly and mildly socialist ideas come?

They have been informed largely by my work and research in adult and community education.

I work for an organisation called Adult Learning Australia (ALA). The use of the word ‘learning’ in the organisation’s title is significant.

For one thing it reflects research that shows that adults attach more favourable connotations to the word ‘learning’ than they do to the word ‘education’. The word ‘education’ seems to conjure up negative memories of didactic curricula, classrooms, exams, dictatorial teachers, one-up-manship, and so forth.

But the use of the word ‘learning’ in our name also seeks to highlight the difference between an activity and an institution in which the activity takes place.

Education suggests something structured and formal, something that takes place at a designated venue or during a set period of time, something undertaken along set pathways to attain clearly described and predetermined goals. Education is something that stands alongside ‘work’, ‘play’, or ‘sleep’, as a clearly delineated activity.

‘Learning’, by contrast, is an activity that occurs independent of place and time; it cuts across all activities. It takes place within formal education settings – although an educational setting is not always the best place in which to learn – but it also happens at work, while on holiday, while watching television or during a visit to an art museum.

Learning is something that you can’t limit or control. You can seek to steer it in productive directions, you can seek to assess it and document it, or you can make it more difficult than it has to be, but you can’t force it where it doesn’t want to go or stop it from occurring.

Nor can you control what will be learnt in any given venue. For example, people will learn more than just facts about art from a visit to an art museum. But this is not a bad thing, nor should it be discouraged. If anything, such broad (one might be tempted to call it 'incidental') learning is just as valuable as the intended outcomes that stem from more structured learning activity, sometimes even more so. Similarly, a considerable amount of really valuable learning takes place as part of other, apparently, non-learning activity. For example, an enormous amount of learning takes place in the workplace, though little of this is formalised or, indeed, documented very well.

At Adult Learning Australia we believe that all learning activity is valuable, wherever it occurs and in whatever form it comes. However, some venues and forms of learning delivery can create, for some, a negative experience and, as such, create a barrier to participation. We believe that every effort should be made to remove obstacles that may unnecessarily impede both intended and incidental learning, including inappropriate modes of learning delivery. We are also working out ways in which this less formal or 'incidental' learning can be articulated and documented so that it can help expedite progression through formal education or job-seeking processes.

At Adult Learning Australia, we believe that learning should empower; that it should facilitate the ability for individuals to think and act for themselves. As such learning is not simply the memorising or regurgitation of facts.

Learning should not only empower the learner but, with regards to structured learning opportunities, the learner should be empowered to direct their own learning. That is, they should have the opportunity to control the speed of the learning and the way in which the learning activity is delivered. The skills and wisdom that they already have, as well as their learning goals, must also be taken into account. After all, for whose benefit is the learning activity being presented?

The process of providing a learning opportunity is one that involves facilitation. It is not, as is often assumed, an opportunity to show how much a person or institution knows and, conversely, how little the learner knows. Learning isn't a competitive sport. Learning should not be used as a tool to make someone feel stupid, nor is learning provision an opportunity to highlight perceived inadequacies in others by demonstrating superior grasp of a subject ourselves.

Too often, whether by intent or carelessness, an activity offered as a learning experience, simply becomes an opportunity for creating hierarchies. Too often the learner is not given the tools or opportunity to develop their own wisdom, but is forced to listen to and accept the knowledge of others. Too often the learners' own wisdom, experience, preferences and aspirations are overshadowed for the sake of the smooth running of a predetermined curriculum.

In our organisation, what we seek to do, is to raise awareness of the different forms that learning takes, and, once highlighted, examine ways in which this learning activity can be better supported and better built upon to facilitate the achievement of individual and community goals.

Our approach is grounded in the experience of the individual, seeking to encourage, support, enhance and recognise the individual's learning activity, wherever this learning takes place.

This focus on the learner, as opposed to a focus on a particular type of learning institution, goal or learning methodology, sets us apart from a lot of media or government thinking about learning. The latter approach is to focus on what we might term educational ‘silos’.

In these silos, the primary concern about the learner relates to their existence within a particular type of learning environment (such as Higher Education), or during in a particular life stage (such as youth), or while pursuing a particular outcome of learning (such as employment skills).

The ‘silo’ approach to thinking about learning inevitably creates hierarchies, in which one particular institution, a particular demographic or a particular educational outcome is elevated as being more important than the rest. Thus, young people, the formal education system and vocational outcomes are the current priorities in Australia. Consequently, the learning activities of older people, undertaken in less formal settings or are undertaken for health and wellbeing reasons, receive little official support in Australia, and are sometimes dismissed as trivial.

The ‘silo’ approach to learning also, inevitably, creates cracks and gaps into which the non-engaged or excluded members of our community fall. Once the learner passes out of a particular institution, demographic, or has a different learning goal – if they pass into one of the lesser ‘silos’, or, worse, if they don’t participate at all – there is little attention given to them.

Or, if attention is given to them it is often conceived in terms of the non-participant somehow being deficient, and rarely in terms of how the various institutions need to change their practice.

Studies have found that some of the people not currently engaged in structured learning activities, hold strong negative attitudes towards learning. (See, for example, the ACNielsen evaluation of Adult Learners' Week or the ANTA marketing study.)

One might be tempted to say that it is their right not to participate. That, despite the benefits that participation in learning activity may bring to improve their economic status, health, wellbeing and ability to participate in society, people have a right not to take part in learning activities if they don’t want to.

This argument would be sound if all things were equal. But they are not equal. Many people who have declared their opposition to participating in learning activity have based their attitude on bad experiences of learning delivered in settings, and using a mode of delivery, ill suited to their personalities, cultural affiliations, life goals or learning preferences.

People should not be let go, simply because our society’s recognised learning environments have failed to cater for them adequately.

At Adult Learning Australia we argue that, until we have made every effort to remove the barriers that may be standing in the way, we cannot simply give up on those who do not participate in learning.

Moreover, we argue that a fundamental part of the process of removing barriers is to change the way in which learning activity is conceived and delivered. We do not accept the view that the non-participant must change their ways so as to fit better with dominant modes of learning delivery.

### The potential of museums

So where do museums fit into all of this? Well, quite simply, Adult Learning Australia sees museums as one of the many sites in which learning journeys can be stimulated and enhanced.

More importantly, we see a role for museums and libraries in providing a gateway through which the person harbouring negative or restrictive views about learning can experience a different, more flexible, type of learning potentially better suited to their needs.

It is worth making the point here that when I am talking about museums as sites for adult learning activity, I am referring to the whole museum, not just the activities offered to visitors under the title 'Public Programs'.

Museums have great potential as sites to encourage, support and extend adult learning because their collections offer a wide range of points for engagement. Moreover, adults can control the speed and nature of their own engagement; they can come in groups or individually, and they can revisit objects as many times as they wish.

Perhaps most crucially, museums, like libraries, and unlike the traditional classroom, can be places in which a broad cross section of the community can, or rather should, feel comfortable and welcome. But this is where we run into trouble.

Museums, and especially art museums, are not places in which the whole adult community feels at home. Generally, the people who feel most at home are likely to be middle aged, have post-school qualifications, reasonably affluent and are regular museum visitors (see, for example, Kelly, et al. pp.52-53). This leaves a lot of the population feeling uncomfortable in or, worse, excluded, from art museums.

Sadly, despite their potential to provide people with alternative ways into learning activity, art museums seem not to be places that actively solicit, or legitimise, the range of learning journeys or outcomes that adults in our community need.

Unlike public libraries, which are a close cousin to the art museum, the average Australian art museum seems not to recognise its potential, or obligation to act, as a site for innovative adult learning support in its broadest, most empowering sense.

### Art Museums and public libraries

Why isn't an art museum like a library?

People use libraries for entertainment and for learning. If we are literate we can go into a library and find for ourselves what we are after.

If we are less literate, we can ask a librarian for some help in finding what we are after. The librarian will not only help locate a particular item but also offer some advice about how to use the cataloguing systems and other tools to enable us to continue our quest by ourselves.

Sometimes, we do not know specifically what we want – we may, for example, want something ‘light’ or something about China. The librarian will ask us a few skilfully designed questions to work out what we really want – do we want to learn about China the crockery or China the country? Do we want fiction or non-fiction? Do we want a book, video, DVD, CD, cassette tape, magazine or drawing?

Libraries support learning in other ways, by allowing their rooms to be used for English conversation groups, book clubs, or by setting up computer terminals on which people can freely explore the internet or have some computer tuition.

While they do have social agendas, libraries do not seem to have any official messages that they want to convey to their public. They do not seem to be concerned that their users might leave without a particular set of facts or message in their heads.

While they probably want people to feel positive towards research, reading and learning, libraries do not seem worried if someone leaves without knowing the names or dates of famous authors, or indeed, who the famous authors are and why they are famous.

They do not seem at all panicked that thousands of people leave their library each year with little idea about how a book is made.

And they do not seem concerned that the people who use the library do so in complete ignorance of what a senior librarian thinks are the best books, or what a senior librarian thinks a particular book means.

Libraries are simply content that people are interacting with their collections and that their support services meet the needs of the public.

Libraries feel they have done a good job when they have helped the public develop skills that will allow them to undertake projects on their own.

The whole basis of the library’s interaction with the general public is that the general public will initiate the process. The role of the library staff is to *facilitate* the quest that each individual user is on; the role of the library staff is not to dictate what quest the should be, nor to direct the starting or ending points of this journey.

So why aren’t art museums like libraries?

Sure, art works are big expensive greasy things that people can’t take away with them to look at on the bus or on the bog. And many art museum buildings are not big enough to display the entire collection at once. But these two factors do not adequately explain why art museums couldn’t interact with adults in a far more constructive way.

Somewhere along the line, the art museum has got it into its head that it must explain art to the public. That without their help – through thematic displays, audio tours, text

labels, catalogues, guided tours, films – visitors would simply stand in the foyer, dumbstruck, scratching their heads not know what to think, or what to learn.

Maybe the art museum *does* have to explain art to the general public. Maybe members of the general public who seem quite capable of reading a book, watching a film, or listening to music by themselves, do, in fact need to be given a helping hand when it comes to viewing art.

As in an public library, there will always be an important role for the art museum to play in offering assistance to those visitors who feel a little lost, or who are unsure about which works will be most useful in enhancing their entertainment or learning journeys.

However, the key difference between a library and art museum lies in who is empowered to determine the direction and nature of the communication that takes place between institution and visitor.

In the library, it is the visitor who initiates and directs the communication, often asking the librarian for help in finding things to assist in their learning or entertainment journey.

In the average Australian art museum, by contrast, it seems that it is the institution that has control over the content, nature and direction of the communication with the public.

How does this help the learner? Moreover, how can the visitor have her or his learning needs met if not given a chance to contribute to the nature or content of the art museum's communication with them?

### Who should own learning?

While I would argue that people should be permitted and encouraged to use art museums as sites for learning activity around a wide range of subjects, and not simply about art, learning about art is significant reason why people visit art museums. However, what is the content of the art-centred learning activity that takes place in art museums, and is this content what the learner is after?

If the text panels, guided tours, audio tours, exhibition designs and catalogues are anything to go by, then it seems that all anyone is interested in learning in an art museum are details of artists' biographies, art techniques, and how one artist influenced another.

Is this really what everyone in our community wants to learn about? Do vast numbers of people wake up in a cold sweat and think, I must know from where Monet got all his ideas? Does the army of commuters in Australia's cities stare out the window of the bus thinking, I wonder how many times Turner travelled to Europe and in what years? Are single mums in Mount Druitt arguing among themselves about the difference between a print and an impression?

I am not suggesting that these questions aren't interesting, nor am I saying that the great unwashed shouldn't be thinking about them.

What I am saying is that it is somewhat presumptuous of the art museum to restrict its support for learning activity to only the aspects of art that it deems good and proper.

And only speak to, or endorse the learning journeys of, people who share the same outlook.

Or, to think about it another way, who decided that art museums would never discuss the big and obvious questions that many people have as they walk around an art museum, such as:

- “What is art?”
- “Why does it cost so much?”
- “Who made this beautiful frame?”
- “What is that supposed to be?”
- “Why don’t I like this?”
- “Why can’t I understand this?”
- “Why is Sidney Nolan such a genius when my six year old can paint better than that?”
- “Why can’t anyone else see that this is just a tissue box cut to look like a face?”
- “Why doesn’t this painting have a title?”
- “Why is it important to me if this dead European man was a genius?”
- “Why is this image of a naked woman considered art and not pornography?”
- “Why aren’t there any Ken Done paintings in here?”

The answers to these questions, and many others that art museum visitors and non-visitors may have, are not easy to put onto a text panel, nor can they be easily memorised for regurgitation to the next tour group. But this does not mean that these common questions should be ignored or dismissed. Quite the opposite, these questions should be sought, addressed and promoted to help stimulate discussions among other visitors.

Difficult questions are the best catalyst for learning, and a focus on things that are of greatest relevance to the learner, is the best entry point through which to engage them.

And who says that the art museum has to be able to provide a definite answer anyway? There is no single answer to the question, ‘what is art’, but this will not stop people asking the question. To help them answer it, art museums should offer a range of opinions, some of which may even contract each other and some of which may not accord with the views held by certain gallery staff. But what is wrong with complexity?

By providing a range of answers to a question that really interests the visitor, the art museum is providing a valuable service and creating a genuine learning experience.

The point here is that the community has a right to be supported in their learning not dismissed, overlooked or ridiculed.

In an art museum, people must feel free to ask ‘dumb’ or difficult questions, offer their own wisdom, to make mistakes or even dismiss something they do not like or value strongly. They must also be given access to the full range of views and opinions, for only then, through the act of weighing up the merits of different ideas or sets of information, can understanding begin to take place.

This is not an argument for dumbing down, but a call to make the communication between the art museum and a diversity of members of the community more



sophisticated. It is a call for multiple conversations and a call for greater complexity in the exchange.

### So how should art museums operate?

The buzz words for the future of learning facilitation are ‘flexibility’ and ‘individualism’ (Tuijnman, p.5).

To be relevant in the world of learning, to serve the wider community, institutions such as art museums must offer more than the narrowly conceived or ‘traditional’ education delivery modes. They must foster learners’ voices, help people articulate their learning needs, and offer support for individual learning pathways.

But how can this work in practice? Well, it is quite simple, really, we need to turn the entire gallery on its head.

Instead of guides who are conversant in the dates, names and places of art, art museums need to develop an army of people who are expert in the facilitation of the learning process and who are expert in the culture and language of a diversity of audiences. While an openness to high art culture would be a bonus, these people do not have to support or perpetuate an official interpretation about the art, rather, they work to help people from diverse backgrounds and with diverse interests use works of art to further individual journeys. They also help people articulate their own wisdom about art by building and supporting a dialogue about art between members of the community.

This model, called the keyworker model, in which people from different communities are trained and supported by museums in the skills of facilitation, has proved effective in a number of sites in Europe. (See Stoger & Stannett)

Instead of curators creating exhibitions that address their own passions, or respond to their own questions, or else assume to appease popular taste, curators should work much as librarians in public libraries do.

The role of the curator is then to help people connect with art in ways that address the visitor’s own interests, within their own terms of reference, and for the benefit of their own learning and life goals. To do this, as much research must go into understanding people, as goes into finding out about the objects. After all, ‘if you don’t know who the learners are – their concerns, their ambitions, their background – how can you know you’re making a difference for them?’ (*Knowledge Builders*, p.4)

If it is discovered that people needed assistance in order to interact with art, then, instead of text panels, catalogues and audio tours which have been constructed to offer a single and consistent approach to art be it in terms agreeable details of biography, surface, artists intent or, occasionally, social context, there should be multiple points of interpretation.

Driven by extensive and sophisticated research into the things that interest and motivate different demographics, the multiple interpretations offered by the gallery for a particular art work might, for example, explain what had been the arguments for and against its

purchase. Other text panels might explore the artwork from a Feminist, Marxist, Conservative, Environmentalist or youth culture discourse.

Yet another text panel might offer some comments made by Fatima Public and her father when they visited the gallery. A curator or keyworker might have helped them put their views into words, but the content of the response would be their own, not the gallery's. By actively soliciting and supporting the voice of 'ordinary' visitors, the art museum would give permission to others to develop and articulate their own thoughts about art and through this process initiate or boost thousands of individual learning journeys.

Why couldn't this happen? Or, perhaps it is better to ask, why *shouldn't* this happen?

One shouldn't have to work in the museum, or be articulate, or be literate, or be interested in artists and art techniques to be able to use the collections as a learning tool. And one shouldn't feel like an outcast for wanting to talk about artwork in a different way.

After all, what is an art museum if not a collection of meditations on life, death, sex, drugs, sadness, laughter, innocence, inequality, poverty, anger, and god? And doesn't everyone have some wisdom in these things, and doesn't everyone deserve the opportunity to learn more about these things on their own terms, at their own pace, for their own reasons and in their own language?

But, maybe the key question for art museum staff is not *why shouldn't*, but *why should*, the art museum changes the way it operates. There are some clear benefits, benefits that become more valuable the greater the pressure on the art museum to prove its worth and justify its core funding.

By engaging in a two-way dialogue with adult visitors and non-visitors, the art museum's public interface becomes less hit and miss. Everything it does, with respect to the public, will be grounded in public needs. As a consequence, less money will have to be spent on convincing people to visit the institution, because the institution's services will be relevant, and hence, valued by the community. And, yes, there is a bums-on-sets (or feet-on-floor) dimension to this. If the services provided by the art museum meet real community needs, then more members of the community will come through the door.

### Conclusion

For art museums to become effective and valued sites for adult learning the way forward is clear. We must encourage a shift in the way that art museums think about themselves and also in what policy-makers, the media and the whole community demand from them.

Let us no longer talk about adult learning in art museums simply in terms of the occasional lecture or floor talk given a kindly volunteer who knows something about art, and is going to talk for 90 minutes non-stop about it.

Let us no longer measure adult activity in art museums in terms of the number of people through the door, the number of works in an exhibition, the number of lectures presented, the number of voluntary guides, or the number of catalogues sold. If we do

have to count numbers, then let us make the number of people who *do not* use art museums our key indicator.

Let us talk about adult interaction with museums in terms of quality, diversity, and of meeting a wide range of needs that the adult members of our community have, with facilitation, articulated.

Let us talk about art museums as sites for learning, where learning journeys started long ago and far away can continue and be given a boost to continue long after the museum has closed for the day.

Let us talk about moulding the art museum to fit the needs of the public, not the other way round.

Finally, let us banish, once and for all, the idea that learning is a task that involves herding people towards a set of knowledge that has been deemed important by the institution that has been given the job of caring for the *physical* wellbeing of our cultural heritage.

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#### A shameless plug

To continue this discussion, or start a new one about learning in museums, log onto Adult Learning Australia's discussion forum at: <http://www.ala.asn.au/limn>

Adult Learners' Week (1-8 September) is a national celebration of all forms of learning, including that which takes place in museums. All museums can become involved in the celebrations using the Week to promote the adult learning they provide: see <http://www.adultlearnersweek.org>

#### References

This paper has been informed by both first hand experience of Australia's art museums as a worker in them and as a visitor, and by conversations with a wide range of people, including people who don't visit museums, people who do, museum staff, academics and adult educators.

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Websites:

The Campaign for Learning through Museums and Galleries (UK):  
<http://www.clmg.org.uk/>

Resource (The Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries UK):  
<http://www.resource.gov.uk>  
especially the *Inspiring Learning for All Framework for Museums, Archives and Libraries*:  
[http://www.resource.gov.uk/documents/insplearn\\_v03.doc](http://www.resource.gov.uk/documents/insplearn_v03.doc)

Social Inclusion and Libraries - A Resource Guide (being updated to include museums and archives):  
<http://www.cilip.org.uk/groups/csg/si/index.html>