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The history of museum education is as old as the history of the public museum. It also has always served a political purpose. The appropriate educational theory for public museums in a democratic society has both a pedagogic and a political component. These two are combined in the concept of “progressive” education, as described by John Dewey and others. A brief history of museum education and an outline of progressive education theory will be followed by examples of recent democratic educational programs and exhibitions in museums.

Dějiny muzejní edukace jsou stejně staré jako samotná historie veřejných muzeí, která po celou dobu své existence zároveň vždy sloužila politickým účelům. Příslušná teorie vzdělávání pro veřejná muzea v demokratické společnosti tedy zahrnuje jak pedagogickou, tak i politickou složku. Obě jsou obsaženy v konceptu „progresivní“ edukace, který rozpracoval John Dewey aj. Kromě stručné historie muzejní edukace a nástinu teorie progresivní edukace jsou v příspěvku uváděny i příklady demokratických edukačních programů a výstav v současných muzeích.

George E. Hein

A Democratic Theory of Museum Education

Introduction

In the brief time available, I wish to cover, in condensed form, three major related topics. First, I examine the meaning and history of museum education, which, for me, represents the implementation of what is commonly known as “progressive” education practices. Secondly, I will define what I mean by progressive education; and finally I propose to give a few examples of this kind of museum education in practice.

More than sixty years ago, Theodore Low (1942), an American art museum educator, wrote an important, now much neglected, monograph *The Museum as a Social Instrument*. The document, sponsored by the Committee on Education of the American Association of Museums was published in the midst of the Second World War, a time when the whole society was concerned about the future of our democratic way of life. I mention this larger context in which Low’s book appeared because he addressed how museums might support post-war society. Also, we should always consider the general social and political conditions that influence our own work. His comments seem particularly relevant to this conference, which celebrates the 50th anniversary of the founding of a museum studies program not long after that major war.

Low acknowledges that museums can do little directly to support the war effort, beyond contributing to public morale. However, in his view they need to prepare “for the peace to come” and plan to shape society to support the democratic goals that the nation was fighting to defend. He writes,

Briefly, the purpose and the only purpose of museums is education in all its varied aspects from scholarly research to the simple arousing of curiosity. That education, however, must be active, not passive, and it must always be intimately connected with the life of the people. [It] ...must be thought of as existing for the public and not as processes isolated and self-sufficient unto themselves.¹

Low argues that education should not be a separate department of a museum, but should be recognized as a central function and seen as the responsibility of the entire staff; that the museum staff itself should be chosen by hiring people who profess a social consciousness, and that the museum embrace modern “popular education,” (which in his time meant using the then novel medium of radio) to reach larger audiences.

In arguing for education in the service of larger social purposes, he is encouraging art museums to follow the lead of John Cotton Dana, who advocated such an approach for all museums a generation earlier. Although Dana is now recognized as an advocate of the socially responsible museum² and his writings have been reprinted³ his views were not widely influential for decades. But this concept of the museum as primarily an educational institution and particularly as a *progressive educational* institution is as old as the modern museum itself and can be justified both on historical grounds as well as theoretical ones.

A Brief History of Museums

It is common knowledge that museums have a long history, dating back (at least) to the ancient museum and library in Alexandria and demonstrated by the various cabinets of curiosity, treasure chambers and royal collections amassed since ancient times. But the modern museum, a collection open to the public for edification and amusement, is essentially a product of the 18th Century enlightenment,⁴ closely associated with the rise of nationalism and the assumption of social responsibilities by emerging national governments. A well known early example of the modern, public museum is the Musée du Louvre, opened

² ZELLER, Terry. The historical and philosophical foundations of art museum education in America. In BERRY, Nancy and Susan MAYER (eds.). *Museum Education: History, Theory, and Practice*. Reston: The National Art Education Association, 1989, pp. 10–89.

³ PENISTON, William A. (ed.). *The New Museum: Selected Writings by John Cotton Dana*. Washington: American Association of Museums, 1999. 262 p.

⁴ WITTLIN, Alma S. *The Museum, its History and its Tasks in Education*. London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1949. 297 p.

¹ LOW, Theodore L. *The Museum as Social Instrument*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1942, p. 21.

by Napoleon for political and educational purposes to display the former private treasures of the Bourbons and to show off the “liberated” treasures from his expanding empire. In central Europe, the Hapsburg Empire’s royal collection was opened to the public in 1781 at the Belvedere Palace, where Christian von Mechel, in charge of the arrangement of works of art, laid stress on “a systematic presentation that was to be ‘educative’ rather than ‘enjoyable.’”⁵ Some credit him as the first to install works on the basis of country of origin or chronology; groupings that emphasize pedagogic relationships more than aesthetic ones.⁶

At the same time that these early examples of nationalization and imperialism were developed in Europe, the museum as educational force for the populace was enunciated in the new republican nation across the Atlantic Ocean. The United States, conceived as a radical democratic alternative to European governments, had a different conception of the role of education in society. Charles Willson Peale, patriot, artist, craftsman and entrepreneur, founded his Philadelphia Museum to benefit the educational needs of the newly emerging republic. His views paralleled those of his friend Thomas Jefferson; Peale argued for institutions that would provide educational benefits for the citizens of the new nation because education for all was an important component of creating a democratic society. Peale promoted his museum as a social necessity for educating the citizens of the new society.

*In a country whose institutions all depend upon the virtue of the people, which in its turn is secure only as they are well informed, the promotion of knowledge is the first of duties.*⁷

In the late 18th and early 19th centuries, museums were more visible as institutions for public education than they are today because public schools were scarce. Jefferson failed in his effort to have the Commonwealth of Virginia establish free primary schools for all, and a shockingly small percentage (by current standards) of the population went to school at all. In mid-19th Century, public schooling was still limited and museums were recognized as a major educational force. In 1826, when James Smithson willed his fortune to the United States, a country he respected for

its democratic principles even though he had never visited it, he stipulated that it be used “to found at Washington, an establishment for the increase and diffusion of knowledge among men.”⁸ Although Congress debated for several years about whether to accept this bequest, and although the first director did all he could to avoid starting a museum, Smithson’s bequest eventually lead to what is now the world’s largest collection of museums that proudly claims it is continuing its original mission of diffusing knowledge to the entire population.

The point I’m emphasizing is that the concept of a museum as an important educational institution goes back as far as the concept of the public museum; in fact the two are inseparably connected. And when we look at the current museum landscape we see a huge expansion both in writing about museums and in their increasing actions to provide benefits to their users. Simultaneously, modern museums with their emphasis on inclusion, meaning making and active learning (components of progressive education) are also increasingly accepting responsibility for social change that is associated with progressive educational practices. There are at least two journals founded in the past decade, *Museums & Society* and *Museums and Social Issues* that address this issue; books, such as *Looking Reality in the Eye: Museums and Social Responsibility*,⁹ and *Beyond Pedagogy: Reconsidering the Public Purpose of Museums*,¹⁰ and countless issues of journals, policy statements and professional conferences champion the social, political and educational role of museums. The next meeting of the American Alliance of Museums in April 2015 is devoted to the theme, *The Social Value of Museums: Inspiring Change*. The long history of the association of education with social benefits includes the work of your own Moravian Johan Amos Comenius, who wrote convincingly about the value of education for all the population.

But an unresolved question in our field remains: whether social responsibility is an additional component of museums’ many tasks, or whether it represents an integral part of a museum’s educational function. Is addressing socio-political issues a necessary aspect of a museum’s *raison d’être*, or is it a responsibility that some museums may choose to add and others may ignore?

The Socio-political Aspect of Education

I have argued elsewhere that museums are necessarily educational institutions and that progressive education, which necessarily includes a socio-political component, is their appropriate educational mode.¹¹ Museums are not institutions that follow a linear curriculum, nor are they part of a formal system that leads to degrees and certifications. Instead, museums are places where (with the exception of some specific programs) visitors are free to make their own meanings and to choose what they wish to learn. In addition, museums specialize in learning from objects as distinct from learning primarily through language. These are all attributes associated with progressive education, an approach that values the learner and the learner’s meaning making above didactic curricula that are intended to deliver specific content.

In addition, progressive education, as conceived by John Dewey and practiced for the past century in many locations world-wide, also has a strong socio-political component. It’s very name refers to a moral, political purpose: the adjective “progressive” was used by Dewey to emphasize that the kind of education he advocated and discussed in his major work on this subject, *Democracy and Education*,¹² linked his pedagogic views to the support of democratic society. His earlier pedagogic writings did not emphasize that word, but talked about educational reform. He added “progressive” to make clear the connection between democratic pedagogy and the education needed for a society to progress, to move in the direction of more social justice and increased democracy. It makes a connection between education and the progressive political movement that was a major political force at the time he was writing. Dewey contrasts progressive education to “static” education; the latter form of education is appropriate if the intention is merely to pass on the knowledge, customs and practices of the past to a new generation. If we were totally satisfied with our society, then static education would be called for, but if we strive to better society, then we need progressive education. It was not difficult for Dewey to illustrate why society at the beginning of the 20th Century had not reached perfection. His list of inequalities and problems – the existence of a large underclass,

⁵ WITTLIN, Alma S. *The Museum, its History and its Tasks in Education*. London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1949, p. 127.

⁶ SWOBODA, Gudrun (ed.). *Die kaiserliche Gemäldegalerie in Wien und die Anfänge des öffentlichen Kunstmuseums*. Vienna: Kunsthistorisches Museum, 2013. 307 p.

⁷ PEALE, Charles W. Memorial to the Pennsylvania Legislature. *American Daily Advertiser*. 1795, Dec. 26, *Peale Papers*, vol. 2 (Charles Willson Peale: *The Artist as Museum Keeper, 1791-1810*), pt. 1. Quoted in GREIFENSTEIN, Charles. *Founding the Museum*. In *Discovering Louis and Clark* [online]. [cit. 2015-11-26]. Available from www: <<http://lewis-clark.org/content/content-article.asp?ArticleID=2829>>.

⁸ BURLEIGH, Nina. *The Stranger and the Statesman: James Smithson, John Quincy Adams, and the Making of America’s Greatest Museum: The Smithsonian*. New York: HarperCollins, 2003. 320 p.

⁹ JANES, Robert R. and Gerald T. CONATY (eds.). *Looking Reality in the Eye: Museums and Social Responsibility*. Calgary: University of Calgary Press, 2005. 196 p.

¹⁰ TROFANENKO, Brenda and Avner SEGALL (eds.). *Beyond Pedagogy: Reconsidering the Public Purpose of Museums*. Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2014. 178 p.

¹¹ HEIN, George E. *Museum Education*. In MACDONALD, Sharon (ed.). *A Companion to Museum Studies*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006, pp. 340–352.

¹² DEWEY, John. *Democracy and Education*. New York: Macmillan, 1916. 434 p.

huge disparity in wealth, lack of equal civil rights for all, discrimination against recent immigrants – resonates powerfully with today's concerns. Progressive education is the education needed for a progressive society, i.e. one that strives to become more democratic; to change the *status quo* in the direction of ameliorating gaps between rich and poor, immigrants and native born, social classes, etc.

Thus, if education is acknowledged as the fundamental responsibility of museums, and museums acknowledge their progressive origins, then they must also accept their responsibility to work towards building and supporting a participatory democratic society. Dewey himself recognized that museums could and should be major components of a society's public education. He was an avid museumgoer, he included museums in his theoretical writing about education and he arranged for the children in his laboratory school during his years at the University of Chicago to make regular visits to museums.¹³

Another example of socio-political progressive education from this part of the world, if not specifically from the Czech Republic, is the educational program in Austria for a short time directly after World War One and continued in "Red" Vienna until 1934. The school reform effort directed by Otto Glöckel illustrates the combination of progressive pedagogy – children went out into the community, they learned local history that related to their lives, they had the opportunity to work with their hands – and the political actions of the school system – abolishing the strict discipline and curriculum of the imperial schools, attempted to include more democratic practices by diminishing the distinctions between education for boys and girls and between the academic and non-academic tracks, allowing women to teach, abolishing required Catholic religious instruction, etc.¹⁴

Constructivism and Progressive Museum Education Practices

Constructivism is an appropriate pedagogy for museums because it recognizes the inevitability of personal meaning making, and its adherents provide rich, open-ended environments, support interaction with material and

social contexts and engage the learner with material that is familiar. These practices are compatible with the progressive agenda; they can be used to encourage questioning current conditions and can point towards reflecting on social conditions. But, the association of constructivism with progressive education requires specific recognition of a social goal for education and embracing that social goal within the constructivist pedagogy. The combination of a progressive educational goal embedded in constructivist education programs is evident in a wide range of museum programs, and has been part of the mission for countless museums.

Perhaps the most obvious instances are those that are reflected in the structure and avowed purpose of some museums, frequently social history museums. For example, the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience, describes itself as:

*A worldwide network of ...historic sites specifically dedicated to remembering past struggles for justice and addressing their contemporary legacies.*¹⁵

In the United States, the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio reports on its web site:

*We reveal stories about freedom's heroes from the era of the Underground Railroad to contemporary times, challenging and inspiring everyone to take courageous steps for freedom today.*¹⁶

But the same goals can be seen in other categories of museums. Exhibitions with a specific social or political aim are not uncommon. For example, in 1989 at the 200th anniversary of the United States Constitution, the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History installed an exhibition, *A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans and the U.S. Constitution*.¹⁷ This bold exhibition asked whether the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II was justified based on the Constitution.

Some museums have a subtle but still progressive intention that goes beyond their pedagogic progressive qualities, although these are integral to their social aim. The origin of science centers is related to the desire of many physicists and other natural scientists to engage in socially useful activities after wartime efforts

to develop the atomic bomb and other weapons. The Exploratorium in San Francisco one of the first such museums, reflected its founder's belief that promoting scientific thinking might lead to a better world. In an introduction to a biography of Frank Oppenheimer and his work at the Exploratorium, Nobel Prize winner Murray Gell-Mann writes:

*At heart, Frank built the Exploratorium as a political institution. Its ultimate goal was to get people so addicted to understanding that they would somehow become inoculated against the clever deceptions of some advertisers and politicians ...the only true way, he thought, to solve our pressing global problems.*¹⁸

Twenty years ago, Fred Wilson startled the museum world through is "Mining the Museum" exhibitions in which he challenged both the professional staffs of museums and visitors by creating explosive exhibitions that juxtaposed objects or reframed labels to illustrate racist collection policies or other common exhibition practices that supported racist views of the world.¹⁹ Even very ordinary museum activities can become a powerful progressive actions when they are reconsidered as tools for expanding the vision of the museum to becoming more inclusive or incorporate ways in which their material resources – physical and virtual – are made available to a larger public. These topics are now widely discussed in various museum publications and blogs on social media.

Conclusion

The museum profession is changing rapidly with the advent of new technology, ubiquitous social media and increased recognition that to survive cultural institutions need to adjust to the changing demographics and social attitudes of ever increasing (and more diverse) populations. A plethora of methods for addressing these challenges are being suggested. Many expand the reach of traditional museums. But, if the museum community wants to embrace progressivism, it is important to consider not just the numbers of visitors who might participate, but whether that specific program, exhibition or collaboration also has the potential to contribute to greater democratization and social justice. That is the most significant challenge to museums today.

¹³ HEIN, George E. *Progressive Museum Practice: John Dewey and Democracy*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press, 2012, chapters 1 and 2, pp. 21–50.

¹⁴ ACHS, Oskar and Albert KRASSNIGG. *Drillschule, Lernschule, Arbeitsschule, Otto Glöckel und die österreichische Schulreform in der Ersten Republik*. Vienna: Jugend und Volk, 1974. 320 p.; HEIN, George E. *The Social History of Open Education. The Urban Review*, 1975, vol. 8, no. 2, pp. 96–119.

¹⁵ International Coalition of SITES of CONSCIENCE: *memory to action* [online]. [cit. 2015-11-26]. Available from [www: <http://www.sitesofconscience.org/members/enab-baladi/>](http://www.sitesofconscience.org/members/enab-baladi/).

¹⁶ National Underground Railroad FREEDOM CENTER. *About us: The Organization* [online]. [cit. 2015-11-26]. Available from [www: <http://freedomcenter.org/about-us>](http://freedomcenter.org/about-us).

¹⁷ Smithsonian: *National Museum of American History. A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans and the U. S. Constitution* [online]. [cit. 2015-11-26]. Available from [www: <http://amhistory.si.edu/perfectunion/experience/>](http://amhistory.si.edu/perfectunion/experience/).

¹⁸ GELL-MANN, Murray. Foreword. In COLE, K. C. *Something Incredibly Wonderful Happens: Frank Oppenheimer and his Astonishing Exploratorium*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt: Boston, 2009, p. XIV.

¹⁹ WILSON, Fred, Paula Marincola and Marjorie SCHWARTZER. *Mining the Museum Revisited: A Conversation*. In ADAIR, Bill, Benjamin FILENE, and Laura KOLOSKI (eds.). *Letting Go?: Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*. Philadelphia: Pew Center for Arts and Heritage, 2011, pp. 230–241.

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