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 a outline of progressive education theory will be followed by examples of recent democratic educational programs and exhibitions in museums.

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 [education] 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 museum1 and his writings have been reprinted1 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, 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 soon after the American Constitution was adopted and the United States government was founded.

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’.” 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 led 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?

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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 a combination of progressive pedagogy — children went out into the community, they learned and were able 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 race 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.20

Another example of socio-political progressive pedagogy – children’s education and the attempts to include local history that related to their lives, they had a combination of progressive pedagogy – children’s effort directed by Otto Glöckel illustrates the importance of the imperial schools. He was an avid museumgoer, and between the academic and non-academic distinctions between education for boys and girls, he included museums in his theoretical writing about education and he arranged for the children to participate in the museum education. Dewey himself recognized that museums could be used as a political institution. Its ultimate goal was to strive for democracy; to change the status quo and achieve equality. Progressive education is the education that strives to become more democratic; to change the status quo and achieve equality. Dewey was aware of the huge disparity in wealth, lack of equal civil rights, and the need for social or political aim 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 have a political alignment with minority groups. For example, the National Underground Railroad FREEDOM CENTER at The J. Paul Getty Museum in 2011. He is the author, with Mary Alexander, of Museums, Places of Learning (AAM, 1998), Learning in the Museum (Routledge, 1998), and Progressive Museum Practice: John Dewey and Democracy (Left Coast Press, 2012), as well as numerous articles on visitor studies, museum education and museology.

George E. Hein

George E. Hein, originally trained as a chemist, turned to science education and then museum education, joining Lesley University in 1975. He became Professor Emeritus a Lesley University in 1998. He was a Fulbright Research Fellow in Science Education at Kings’ College, London (1990), visiting faculty member at the University of Leicester Museum Studies Program (1996), Howard Hughes Visiting Scholar at the California Institute of Technology (1998), Osher Fellow at The Exploratorium in San Francisco (1999), Visiting Professor at University of Technology, Sydney (2000), Research Fellow at the Center for Education and Museum Studies at the Smithsonian Institution (2009-10), and Guest Scholar at The J. Paul Getty Museum in 2011. He is the author, with Mary Alexander, of Museums, Places of Learning (AAM, 1998), Learning in the Museum (Routledge, 1998), and Progressive Museum Practice: John Dewey and Democracy (Left Coast Press, 2012), as well as numerous articles on visitor studies, museum education and museology. He has lectured widely in the United States and abroad including Austria, Brazil, Croatia, Denmark, Finland, Greece, Iceland, Mexico, Norway, Portugal, Spain, and Taiwan. He has been active in ICOM/CECA serving as both secretary and president of CECA in the 1990s. His primary current interest is the significance of John Dewey’s work for museums. For more information and on-line publications and lectures, see http://george-hein.com.