

Blending Pedagogy and Content

A New Curriculum for Museum Teachers



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Abstract This article examines how curriculum studies can inform training and development programs for museum teachers (docents, interpreters, guides, gallery educators, and so on). It focuses on the results of a year-long study done with eight museum teachers in three Canadian informal learning settings. A key aim of this research was to examine the question of how museum teachers believe they learn to teach. The challenges and complexities of museum teaching are revealed and analyzed in order to identify effective approaches to training and development. While agreeing that all aspects of teacher understanding are important, the author concludes that pedagogical content knowledge, or the blending of content and pedagogy, is the area on which museums must focus in order to fulfill the potential of museum teachers and teaching.

How can curriculum theory inform the practice of docent training and development? How can the understandings of docents, interpreters, museum guides, and gallery educators be organized into a curriculum of training and continuing development?¹ And what significance might such a curriculum have for museum education as a whole?

Although the literature on teaching in museums is expanding, this article is guided and shaped by the “conceptual map” offered by curriculum studies.² Most of the curriculum theorists I reference clearly have in mind the curriculum of the school. While not a school, a museum does encompass deliberately educational activities. A museum can be said to have a curriculum in the broadest sense of the word—curriculum as a medium by which educators attempt to represent what happens or what ought to happen in educational practice and how it is to be achieved.

For my research on the nature of teaching in museums as experienced by museum teachers, I used Joseph Schwab’s model of the curricular common-

places to begin to explore the broad boundaries of subject matter, milieu, learners and learning, and teachers and teaching.³ In order to concentrate on the commonplace of teachers and teaching, I then employed Lee Shulman's discussion of the four knowledge bases essential for teaching—scholarship in content disciplines, educational materials and structures, formal educational scholarship, and the wisdom of practice.⁴ Key to my inquiry was Shulman's model of pedagogical reasoning and action. This process of transforming content into active teaching results in what Shulman terms "pedagogical content knowledge" and is the unique province of the teacher—what distinguishes him or her from the content specialist.⁵

I utilized the guidelines provided by Schwab and Shulman to address four questions of my own: **What do museum teachers know? How do museum teachers conceptualize teaching in the museum? What reasoning lies behind museum teaching? And the one I consider in this article: How do museum teachers believe they learn to teach in museums?** These research questions were premised on the conviction, as Elliott Eisner says, that it is "more important to understand what people experience than to focus simply on what they do."⁶ Through interpretive research, with its focus on sense-making, it is possible to explore and develop a tentative understanding of the museum and of the broader social context within which teaching occurs from the perspective of the teachers themselves. From this emerges not abstract generalizations about museum teaching and teachers, but a better understanding of their lived experiences.

Over a year-long period I worked closely with eight docents, interpreters, and gallery educators, whom I call "museum teacher-participants" in this article, drawn from three Canadian informal learning settings: a community history museum, an art gallery, and a nature center.⁷ I employed qualitative research methods of participant-observation, conversational interview, and reflective practice. I was a participant-observer in thirty tours and conducted twenty-two in-depth interviews with these museum teacher-participants, as well as additional meetings with other education staff members at the three sites. Transcriptions of field notes, interviews, and interpretive accounts were given to museum teacher-participants involved to check for errors and plausibility. The rich description in interpretive accounts that contributes to believability for both participants and readers can also threaten the anonymity of museum teacher-participants and so this reference check was particularly important.

Through such intensive study I hoped to come to terms with at least some of the properties of teaching in non-school settings as the beginning of a larger effort to collect, collate, and interpret the practical knowledge of

museum teachers. My personal experience as a museum educator of long-standing, coupled with extensive reading of the museum literature, allows a degree of generalizability, but clearly my findings need to be investigated in other settings, with other museum teachers.

HOW DO MUSEUM TEACHERS BELIEVE THEY LEARN TO TEACH?

Let me begin with a look at how museum teachers themselves believe they learn to teach. Museum teacher-participants described learning to teach in their settings as organic growth rather than a linear process. They talked about orientations, evaluations, first-time tours, and “trial and error” experimentation. When asked how they actually learned to teach, the museum teacher-participants told me about three methods: getting content information; observation, or shadowing, of fellow museum teachers; and the experience of teaching itself.

The museum teacher-participants recalled their orientation to museum teaching as primarily an introduction to the content of the site’s subject matter. Interpreter training at the community history museum, for example, was described by them as “binders and binders and binders of all sorts of information” that involved “a LOT of reading.” For those who came to the site with no previous knowledge of the subject matter, information remained just facts. New interpreters often had little idea of how research was done or how meaning was made in history, the discipline associated with the museum.

Observation of veteran interpreters, docents, and educators—what some museum teacher-participants called “shadowing”—featured prominently in all accounts of learning to teach. Yet learning by observation was often restricted by the new museum teacher’s inability to see what was happening “in the wings.”⁸ Simply watching another person lead a tour was not enough. As one museum teacher-participant noted: “I had been taught *this* script and if it varied from *that* script, I didn’t know! We don’t talk about that tool. We talk about this tool. I can tell you about *this* one.” Shadowing was felt to be successful only when it was accompanied by focused discussion among the teachers involved. Without this reasoned approach, it was tempting for many new museum teachers to simply duplicate the style of the practitioner whom they first shadowed. “I can’t work the way she does [anymore],” a second museum teacher-participant told me. “I did at the beginning. I almost sounded like her because that was how I learned.”

Some of the museum teacher-participants found assistance in their development by becoming part of a larger “community of practice” through interactions with fellow interpreters, docents, or gallery educators.⁹ Such communities of practice helped the participants frame their experiences by providing models of teaching. However, the success of these communities of practice was seen by museum teacher-participants to be heavily influenced by institutional controls and by the marginalization many encountered. One museum teacher-participant argued that a genuine community of practice would develop only when individual docents were confident in their own skills of “thinking and doing.” He believed that the art gallery at which he volunteered discouraged such development. “You continue to grow only if you’re allowed to try those dynamic things that new people try. If you’re not allowed to try them, then you start doing these things, you get frustrated, then you pack it in and you go someplace else.”

Each of the museum teacher-participants recounted that any kind of experience in teaching was a major factor in learning how to teach in the museum, gallery, or park. Some drew upon past experience in school teaching, others compiled experiences from their work in the one institution, and still others accumulated teaching experiences in a variety of settings. Experience was sometimes depicted as something captured in the past and applied to situations in the present, a kind of “mechanical application of pedagogical algorithms.”¹⁰ At other times experience was imagined by the museum teacher-participant as something ongoing, growing, and expanding, something that demanded continuity and interaction with past, present, and future situations.

The museum teacher-participants frequently referred to what they believed to be instinctive or automatic about their teaching. One museum teacher-participant found it difficult to describe what she did when she was teaching because “It’s like driving a car and somebody says, “How come you put the clutch in? When do you put the clutch in and move the gear?” For those techniques to succeed, however, they required other, more thoughtful acts that integrated them into a well-rounded whole. Otherwise, what museum teacher-participants saw as experience resulted in a narrowing of the choice of actions on which they would be able to draw in the future, becoming a kind of groove or rut. Museum teacher-participants felt that the nature of museum teaching tended to frustrate efforts to get out of this rut. Not only were they on site infrequently, irregularly, and with different colleagues, but tours were short and conducted with changing groups of

learners. Time spent teaching on-site appears to be critical for the development of a museum teacher.¹¹

Museum teacher-participants with extensive experience in teaching—for example, the retired schoolteachers in the study—felt they had developed a repertoire of teaching behaviors that they could “cue back up” whenever the situation demanded. Again, these experiences could be limiting if they were not reflected upon and adapted to the unique conditions of the museum, gallery, or nature center, as opposed to the old, familiar classroom setting. For those who came directly to museum teaching, an extensive collection of teaching behaviors became available only when they were assigned a significant number of tours or programs on which they were then able to reflect.

Taken together, from the perspective of docents, interpreters, and a gallery educator, these findings present a portrait of teaching in museums, galleries, and nature centers that is both highly complex and challenging.

Training and Continuing Development for Museum Teachers

How do we develop for docents, interpreters, and gallery educators a broad curriculum of training and continuing development that meets these challenges? My work with the museum teacher-participants suggests that Shulman’s four knowledge bases are all important in the training and development of museum teachers: scholarship in the content discipline(s) related to the institution (art, history, or science); the educational materials and settings of the museum—the materials, institutions, organizations, and mechanisms that form not only the “tools of the trade” for museum teaching but also the context for it; formal educational scholarship—the scholarly literature and empirical research on learning and teaching in museums; and the “wisdom of practice”—“the maxims that guide (or provide reflective rationalization for) the practices of able teachers.”¹² In my own work and in conversation with docent coordinators and interpretive trainers across Canada and the U.S., I have found that many training and development programs do address some or even all of these knowledge bases. The challenge for those providing training and development becomes not one of presenting more information but rather helping docents, interpreters, and guides blend these discrete chunks of knowledge into elegant moments of museum teaching.

Robin Grenier’s recent work on the development of expertise in docents is helpful here.¹³ Her three key findings provide a framework through which we may look at the process of training and development for every museum teacher:

- Expert docents have both acquired and preexisting characteristics
- The process of expertise development is cyclical and fluid
- Context is critical to the nature of docent expertise

Characteristics of an Effective Museum Teacher

We might begin by agreeing upon the characteristics of an effective museum teacher. As many docent coordinators and interpretive trainers contend, training and development begin with recruitment. Grenier identifies several preexisting characteristics that seem to make the development of docent expertise more likely: adaptability, enthusiasm, commitment to the institution or to the role of museum teacher, and a sense of humor.¹⁴ The key *acquired* characteristic Grenier identifies is mastery of content or subject-matter.¹⁵ This helps to explain why so many museum teachers demand and so many training programs supply endless amounts of content, as evidenced by the experiences of museum teacher-participants recounted above. However, my own study indicates that equally important for learning to teach are museum teachers' own conceptions of learning and learners and the conceptions held by those responsible for training and professional development in informal learning settings.

Museum teacher-participants were not generally aware of the museum literature and only rarely referred to more general educational theories of learning and teaching. Instead, underlying their work were relatively simple theories that enabled them to order their teaching activities. Two basic orientations to learning emerged: objectivist and constructivist. The objectivists in the study conceived of knowledge as existing independently of the people who know it. Museum teachers coming from this orientation see themselves as having full responsibility for the learning processes while the museum learner is seen as a repository of knowledge, the vessel to be filled. For an objectivist, museum education is more a product than a process. Museum teacher-participants with this objectivist orientation tended to see absorption of more and more knowledge as the intent of training and professional development. This limited for them the success of endeavors such as observation and the formation of a community of practice, which depend for their success upon a more constructivist understanding of the nature of learning. On the other hand, the constructivists among the museum teacher-participants saw the museum visitor or learner as engaged with them in the purposeful reconstruction of the knowledge offered. Museum education was

perceived by them to be the “process of how to get there . . . how they can explore . . . and come to their own conclusions” rather than a path to a pre-defined outcome. Learning was seen to stem from a long-term relationship between teacher and learner.

Of equal importance in the development of teaching was the museum teacher-participants’ belief in the learners’ capacity to learn. If learning is defined as a long-term phenomenon then museum learners cannot be seen to *learn* within the one- or two-hour time span of their visit. Therefore, because they cannot be there to see learning take hold and develop, constructivist museum teacher-participants have to be “optimistic” about the capacity of learners to learn in the long-term. These museum teacher-participants tended to see learning as a lifelong process associated with enjoyment. They worked hard to get students to return to a museum, gallery, or park independently, where there is the potential for students to become self-directed learners. As a result, these museum teacher-participants tended to be *constructivist optimists* with regard to learning and learners in the museum.

Conceptions of learning and learners could be addressed by adoption of a more constructivist approach to training and development, one that encourages museum teachers to first reflect upon their own processes of inquiry in the museum and then to compare and contrast them not only with those of their peers but also with formal theories of educational scholarship. Coupled with interactions with museum learners and ensuing reflection with peers and colleagues, such an approach could encourage a better sense of the constructivist dynamic of teaching than does the present, more objectivist approach to museum training, which sometimes emphasizes acquisition of information and shadowing of peers without thoughtful reflection.

A Cyclical and Fluid Process of Development

Shulman describes pedagogical content knowledge as “the capacity of the teacher to transform the content knowledge he or she possesses into forms that are pedagogically powerful and yet adaptive to the variations in ability and background presented by the students.”¹⁶ He reasons that all teaching begins with some form of text, piece of material, set of values, or needs with which the teacher is presented and challenged to take what he or she already understands and make it ready for effective instruction. Pedagogical reasoning then involves a cycle through the activities of comprehension, transformation, instruction, evaluation, reflection, and new comprehensions,

although not necessarily in that order.¹⁷ These steps sound familiar because they echo the work of John Dewey and others on experiential education.¹⁸ Shulman's model offers little that is new to museum educators in that respect. What it does offer, however, is a way to approach and study the blending of content and pedagogy that can often seem so mysterious in the museum setting.

Grenier again offers assistance by identifying three stages in a docent's development of pedagogical content knowledge: "dependence" (dependence on others, including people and information), "growing independence" (beyond reliance to a point of comfort with scripts and procedures), and "transcendence" (command of material, secure in knowledge and abilities to such an extent that they freely and easily make judgments on content, delivery, and execution).¹⁹ Docents within each phase require markedly different forms of development to help them move through what is a cyclical and fluid process, so that formal programs, directed study, mentoring, and shadowing work well for those in the dependent phase, while those in the transcendent stage benefit from reflective practice and experimentation. A multi-dimensional picture of the organic nature of training and development for museum teachers emerges. What is often presented as a linear process of group orientation, training, and continuing development may need to be re-invented on a far more personalized scale.

Context Is Critical

Finally, the "authenticity" of museum teaching requires that it be grounded in the setting and that prior knowledge of museums be reflected upon and discussed in terms of the present teaching situation. It is critical that new learning be deliberately reflected upon and linked to on-site teaching practice. Museum teacher-participants in my study talked about integrating new knowledge into existing conceptual structures through reflective practice, alone and in groups. Observations of and interactions with fellow museum teachers that encouraged reflection and new comprehensions were productive overall, but they could be detrimental when the structure provided for reflection was inadequate. Deliberate thought needs to be given to assisting personal reflective practice and the operations of communities of practice. If this is not undertaken, new knowledge is likely to be jettisoned in favor of a return to the tried and true whenever dissonance is encountered.

At the same time, there is an associated need for more training and ongoing education *across* institutions of informal learning under the auspices

of regional consortia of museums and associations of museum workers or through written case studies of teaching practice.²⁰ Although this kind of training and development is common among paid, full-time staff it is less so for many museum teachers. The findings of my study indicate that museum teachers are often “trapped in a solipsistic universe in which only their own experiences [are] potentially educative.”²¹

The encouragement of reflection and genuine participation by museum teacher-participants illuminates the thinking behind tours and programs. It also helps to better ground for all museum workers the philosophical framework of museum education within the institution as a whole. As I have tried to demonstrate in this article using the curriculum theories of Schwab and Shulman, clarification of the organizing principles of museum teaching benefits museum teachers and visitors alike.

CONCLUSION

The lens of curriculum studies allows for closer scrutiny of the meanings of *teacher* and *teaching* in the museum. Among those in the field, there is general consensus that museum teachers would benefit from a more concerted and thoughtful approach to their training and continuing development, but funding constraints and staff reductions have left fewer experienced and knowledgeable full-time staff. Remaining education coordinators are pressed to provide additional time, energy, or money for the development of museum teachers. Museum teachers themselves are often part-time volunteer or contract workers who may have little incentive, time, or energy to pursue additional training and continuing development of their teaching practice.

A curriculum for training and continuing development requires institutions to take more seriously their role in the development of museum teachers. This will involve a radical shift in perspective—from one of how museum teachers may be *used* to fulfill the institutional mission, to one of how museum teachers may be *enabled* to learn and improve their practice. A new curriculum will require not necessarily more time or money, but rather a more thoughtful and reasoned approach and commitment to the better definition and nurture of the teacher in the museum setting.

Notes

1. I will use the term “museum teacher” to encompass all these job titles.

2. Elizabeth Vallance, "Ways of Knowing and Curricular Conceptions: Implications for Program Planning," in *Learning and Teaching the Ways of Knowing* (Part II), ed. Elliott Eisner (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).
3. M. Christine Castle, "Interpreters, Docents and Educators: Ways of Knowing, Ways of Teaching in a History Museum, an Art Gallery, and a Nature Centre" (PhD diss., University of Toronto, 2001); Joseph J. Schwab, "The Practical 4: Something for Curriculum Professors to Do." *Curriculum Inquiry* 13 (1983): 239–65. For application to the museum setting, see also Elizabeth Vallance, "A Curriculum-Theory Model of the Art Museum Milieu as Teacher." *Journal of Museum Education* 28, no. 1 (2003): 8–16.
4. Lee S. Shulman, "Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the New Reform." *Harvard Educational Review* 57, no. 1 (1987): 1–22.
5. *Ibid*, 15.
6. Michael F. Connelly and Jean D. Clandinin, *Teachers as Curriculum Planners* (Toronto: OISE Press, 1988), ix.
7. The assurance of anonymity was a condition of entry for me as a researcher so I refer to the participating sites using only these generic terms.
8. Dan C. Lortie, *Schoolteacher: A Sociological Study* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), 62.
9. Eugene Matusov and Barbara Rogoff, "Evidence of Development from People's Participation in Communities of Learning," in *Public Institutions for Personal Learning: Establishing a Research Agenda*, ed. John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1995).
10. Brent Kilbourn, *For the Love of Teaching* (London, Ontario: Althouse Press, 1998), 55.
11. Patterson Williams, "Teaching or Touring?" in *Museum Education Anthology: 1973–1983*, ed. Susan K. Nichols (Washington, DC: Museum Education Roundtable, 1984), 45–49.
12. Shulman, "Knowledge and Teaching," 11.
13. Robin Sankowski Grenier, "How Museum Docents Develop Expertise" (PhD diss., University of Georgia, 2005).
14. *Ibid*, 139.
15. *Ibid*, 145.
16. Shulman, "Knowledge and Teaching," 15.
17. *Ibid*, 14.
18. See John Dewey, "Experience and Thinking," in *Democracy and Education: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Education* (New York: The Macmillan Co., 1916), http://www.ilt.columbia.edu/publications/Projects/digitexts/dewey/d_e/chapter11.html (accessed February 21, 2006).
19. Grenier, "How Museum Docents Develop Expertise," 151–158.
20. M. Christine Castle, "Using Case Studies to Meet Challenges in Museums, Galleries, and Other Sites." *The Docent Educator* 14, no. 4 (2003): 14–16.
21. Lee S. Shulman, "Theory, Practice, and the Education of Professionals." *The Elementary School Journal* 98, no. 5 (1998): 521.

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