Engaging Visitors to Create Positive Futures

John C. Anderson and Melissa A. Williams

Education leaders across the museum field are asking how the future of museum education will be different from the past and how we think of our work today. Are there “excellent” or “best practices” we should reconsider in light of ways that our world is changing? As we experience generational and cultural shifts — rapidly changing technology; increased expectations for customized options and crowd sourcing; the increasing energy within the climate system; and the changing demographics of the U.S., among others — we propose that museum education should orient our exploration of practice with a new goal in mind. That goal is for visitors to leave our institutions with a sense of themselves as empowered actors in the story of creating a positive future.

Each of our institutions — whether we focus on art, science, history, natural history, live animal or another content area — has a responsibility to help visitors engage in learning not only about the special items in our collections but thinking about their lives in relation to those collections.¹ To realize that goal, we need to be engaging expertise from social and cognitive sciences, including psychology, cultural anthropology, linguistics, and neuroscience far more than we have in the past. Most of us are very good at gathering and analyzing guest-satisfaction data, which has proved to be valuable for customer service and marketing. We have spent less money and time and effort to assess the educational impact of visiting, let alone the impact on individuals’ or groups’ sense of self that a visit may evoke or fail to evoke.²

Social sciences offer theories and approaches to assess our work and to provide us with practical guidance to making an impact. How can we use communications and cultural research to guide guests to think constructively about issues that have far reaching connections with our lives, such as climate change? What would be the impact on educators to shift from being providers
of experiences to agents of change? How can we satisfy guests’ interest in entertainment while driving more successfully toward the goal of citizen engagement? Answering these questions is difficult, but colleagues from the social sciences may help us to continue building understanding. Having answers is only one step toward translating theory into effective practice. Practicing and experimenting with new ideas about how to change the impacts of our work are key to shaping the future of museum education. Three articles in this issue provide examples of educators and institutions that are applying social science research to inform practice with a goal of engagement.

In their paper, “Turning Visitors into Citizens,” Bunten and Arvizu provide an overview of the theory of strategic framing. They outline the challenge of attracting attention to an issue in the face of a blur of available information and competition for attention in the midst of multiple worthy issues. Strategic framing offers a set of research-based strategies educators can use to shape their communications in order to help audiences think productively about solutions that they can participate in or support. The strategies include appealing to values that are commonly shared and using carefully tested metaphors to provide a concrete way to think about the mechanism at the heart of the issue. Careful framing helps to avoid mental traps — ideas that are unhelpful to the process or dialog and that are common among Americans.

Several articles in this issue are related to work of The National Network for Ocean and Climate Change Interpretation (NNOCCI), which is applying the theory of strategic framing within efforts to fostering a growing community of practice among educators who address issues of climate change and ocean change in their work. While those examples are all related to climate change, the core concepts of strategic framing can be applied to other issues as well.

Aaron Pope and Elizabeth Selna from the California Academy of Sciences explain how learning with a group of colleagues in a Study Circle offered new ideas to shape programming. They learned that connecting with values that Americans hold in common can help educators to make progress connecting the problem of ocean acidification — an issue that is little known and esoteric for most Americans. They explore how to link this little known issue to daily lives and experiences and successfully make requests of visitors to participate in mitigating continued deleterious effects. We can orient our work to help visitors find ways to reflect what they care about, and, in light of that, to consider how to engage with issues through the lens of shared values.

Moving from theory to practice across an institution takes time and effort as illustrated by Amy Fleischer’s article about the work at Massachusetts
Audubon Society to build climate change into their educational content. A new theory can provide a valuable push to open new ideas about what to do to advance an institutional priority. But new challenges can arise even where there is support from institutional leaders and also from front line staff. In the case of Mass Audubon, educators raised legitimate concerns that the theory may not address concerns about the developmental level of young children and the risk of cuing up fear rather than empowerment. Creative educators can do a lot, but there are limits to their capacity for developing and executing a rigorous research program to address new questions that come up as they work with new ideas.

Noreen Brand, from the Illinois Holocaust Museum & Education Center uses social science research to inform plans to build understanding of the themes and issues at the core of the Holocaust including character education and civics. Like Fleischer’s story from Mass Audubon, Brand reflects the importance of meeting younger learners where they are developmentally. In this case the museum is able to engage children in the kinds of positive citizenship behaviors that both enable future ability to grapple with the more emotionally challenging content of the Holocaust, but also promote actions that they can take right now to create positive futures. Through sustained investment of time and attention one learns to appreciate and care for another.

Taking on the work of converting educational experiences from a focus on sharing content to a focus on fostering engagement in important issues of our time will challenge us intellectually but it will also challenge us emotionally. Where it is comfortable and satisfying to answer questions raised by our audiences, it can be emotional work to direct attention to connections between our exhibits and our lives and larger issues shaped by our daily choices and the systems in which we live. Among dedicated and personally motivated educators, there can be resistance to addressing particular topics in the context of an exhibit based on affective concerns. Fraser and Swim assessed changes in hopefulness among cohorts of educators who participated in a Study Circle training program about climate change interpretation. They found that increased hopefulness correlated with a tendency toward engaging in more discussion about the issue with others.

In order for museum educators to apply theory in practice, we may need to move through an uncomfortable learning experience. Adopting new theory may be akin to learning a new language. It doesn’t feel comfortable, but we know it can open new opportunities for communication with a lot more people. Fraser and Swim’s research reinforces the idea that fostering
communities of practice among educators can be a way to support hopefulness and thereby stimulate effort needed for the ongoing learning process to build the future of museum education.

Overall, this issue of *JME* hopes to engage you in questioning theories behind our educational practices with the hope of provoking reflection, dialog and debate about we can challenge ourselves to shape new “best practices” for the next generation and the societal contexts in which they will be operating.

Notes

3. Study Circles are facilitated learning groups that take place over six months and include pairs of staff from ten institutions. They focus on learning about strategic framing and also about climate science.

About the Authors

John Anderson is Director of Education at New England Aquarium, where he leads efforts to develop programs that foster an ethic of ocean stewardship. Currently, he is directing the *National Network for Ocean and Climate Change Interpretation*. Anderson earned his MA in biology from Boston University and his BA in biology from Oberlin College and is a Senior Fellow of the Environmental Leadership Program.

Melissa A. Williams serves as the Vice President for Learning at John G. Shedd Aquarium where she oversees teams responsible for planning, implementing, and evaluating learning programs and guest engagement at the aquarium, in the field, and online. A runner, rock climber, and lover of food, she lives on the far north side of Chicago.