Lifelong Learning In Museums: In Pursuit Of Andragogy

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Abstract

Lifelong Learning in Museums was supported by the Smithsonian Institution's Office of Museum Programs' Research Fellowship in Museum Practices. The study is a small step in the investigation of the nature of adult learning behavior in the museum environment. A bracketed framework of four dimensions of adult learning behavior is presented. These four theoretical learning behaviors provide a window to view the behavior of adult learners within a museum exhibition. The four adult learning behaviors postulated are labeled in the study as social learning, theoretical learning, inquiry learning, and intuitive learning.

Introduction

This article reports a qualitative study examining the behavior of adult learners in a museum exhibition. *Beyond Category: The Musical Genius of Duke Ellington,* a Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES) exhibition was used as a backdrop to analyzing such behavior. According to the SITES exhibition catalog, *Beyond Category's*

> principal focus . . . is Ellington's music, presented in a series of environments that are provocative visual settings for Ellington's compositions. Rare photographs, manuscripts, artifacts, theatrical techniques, and special lighting are used to evoke scenes from Ellington's youth in Washington, his earliest years as a novice musician in New York, travels with his carefully cultivated orchestra, and some of his most exciting performances around the world. The design will echo Ellington's layering of colors, textures, tones, and timbres in his painterly approach to creating music. (Teller, 1993, p. 1)

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A sample population of adults born before 1945 and after 1960 were interviewed and observed as they interacted with components of the exhibition. A retrospective history of the intentions of the developers and reflections of individuals associated with the project was also conducted to give some insight into the establishment of dimensions by which the study of adult learning behavior in such an exhibition could be analyzed and correlated to adult learning behavior theory.

Methodology

The research is structured into three sections. The first of these unfolds the verbalized reflections of the developers of the SITES exhibition, *Beyond Category: the Musical Genius of Duke Ellington,* in regards to their intentions for the exhibition as a learning environment. Through interviews with the organizers, a picture of the intentions of the developers unfolds. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1980) refer to these types of informants as "experts whose familiarity . . . indicated that they would give us an idea of what" (p. 63) the phenomenon of the adult learning behavior might be in this environment. A bracketed framework of four dimensions of the adult learning behavior is presented within this retrospective history. These four theoretical learning behaviors provide a window to view the behavior of adult learners within the chosen museum exhibition. *Beyond Category* provides a wide range of exhibition display techniques in which to observe learning behavior.

An older adult audience, defined as museum visitors born before 1945, are the primary focus of the study. Observation of this audience and selected interviews with representative informants were conducted in the second phase of the research. Younger adults, born after 1960, were also observed and interviewed as a comparison group. This section of the study uses observational notes and transcriptions of a select number (24) of interviews with informants to analyze the manifestation of the four dimensions of adult learning behavior outlined in the study. These behaviors are expounded upon with the intent of revealing some of the phenomena of adult learning. The responses of the pre-Baby Boomer informants are compared with, and discussed in relationship to, the post-Baby Boomer informants' behavior and responses.

These observed and theorized aspects of adult learning in a museum exhibition environment are then discussed. The field work findings are analyzed and placed into the context of existing studies; a more general-ized discussion of adult learning behavior also takes place in this section.

The Exhibition

The general impression revealed by these responses was that the exhibition was developed as an introduction to the music and times of Duke Ellington's life. The model visitor could be viewed as an adult non-music buff with at least a high school education. No special considerations, outside of providing easy physical access, were consciously or intentionally designed into the exhibition for any special learning group, such as older adults. The model visitor envisioned by the developers was not required to have a knowledge of the music of Duke Ellington. The expert respondents felt that the show gives audiences a knowledge of Duke and his music, that the interactives work extremely well, and that the set constructions give a sense of the time and place of Duke Ellington's music. These intentions seem to have manifested themselves in the responses of visitors and in the behaviors that were observed. The race, gender, ethnicity, and age factors of the audience were also not a conscious element in the design of the exhibition itself.

Many developers did expect an older audience and felt that a draw to the environment of the exhibition would be a generationally driven nostalgia for pre-World War II jazz and swing music. This group, made up of more than one generation, is loosely defined as those visitors born before 1945, or before the Baby Boomer generation. According to the data collected for this report the pre-1945 audience that was observed and interviewed did verbalize some magnetism to the musical material. Yet most of the non-expert respondents had not lived a childhood or young adulthood filled with the music of Duke Ellington and were, in fact, transformed by the experience to accommodate the so-called nostalgic music of Duke Ellington as a new element in the broadening of their horizons.

Dimensions of Adult Learning Behavior

"No provider of adult education is likely to deny that the range of adult learning needs is extensive and that each person has a unique set of needs" (Lowe, 1975, p. 49). The developers of the Duke Ellington exhibition brought forward a designed environment that provides adults with a range of opportunities to learn about the subject matter. While distinct learning styles were not taken into consideration, the developers intuitively organized an exhibition that allowed adult learners to make choices that would best fit their interests and abilities.

The preliminary listing of learning behaviors noted below is related directly to data collected at the Museum of the City of New York and correlated with the age factor of the population observed and interviewed. These dimensions come from a response to the question, "What are the dimensions of adult learning behavior in a museum exhibition?" The categories are abstracted slices of the phenomenon of adult learning behavior.

From the "generative question" (Strauss, 1987) stated above the dimensions of adult learning behavior have been theorized as social, theoretical, inquiry, and intuitive. Since verification is not an issue in this qualitative study, the data collected and analyzed were not used to prove the validity of these metaphors for adult learning behavior; rather, the data were used to interpret adult learning behavior through the window of these dimensions.

It is the belief of the writer that these four dimensions can best link the observed specific behaviors of adult learners with theories of adult learning behavior in general. The distinctions offered below are, in terms of positivistic trends of inquiry, more creative than validating. Yet, for the purposes of this study, they provide the analytic structure by which the dialogue begins.

Social Learning

This is a learning behavior based on the manifestation of receptivity to actual concrete experience with one or more people. This dimension includes categories of behavior that represent interaction on a personal level within the exhibition; the learner seeks feedback and interaction from companions, guides, guards, and other people. Continued questioning of the content and purpose of the exhibition is a hallmark of this learning dimension.

Theoretical Learning

This is a learning behavior based on rationalizations and abstract cause-and-effect behavior. Actions that belie a comfort with structured, text-type learning and more academic approaches to assimilating information are manifested in this learning behavior, as well as behavior that fits well with the lecture format of a program or the text portions of an exhibition. These learners do not find much satisfaction in the physical interactive components of the exhibition or other dimensions that sit outside of the didactic teaching methods of the experience. A discussion of the logical progression of the themes of the exhibition and a formula-

rization of theories associated with the themes of the exhibition is noted. Such learners recount many of the facts learned from the exhibition in order to form logical conclusions about the exhibition.

Inquiry Learning

This is a learning behavior that manifests itself through physical interaction with exhibition components. Seeking of individualized learning modalities and interactive elements is a hallmark of this dimension. The physical act of doing is the dominant characteristic of this learning modality. An interest in the technical aspect of the exhibition is also to be found in this learning behavior.

Intuitive Learning

This is a learning behavior based on imaginative thinking and reverie. Hesitation to participate in the more extroverted aspects of the experience and, upon reflection, a manifestation of careful observation for the pursuit of personalizing the experience is expected. A manifestation of broader issues associated with the exhibition themes and a generation of ideas that are formed as analogies to these themes are noted.

Learning Behaviors: A Discussion

Four adult learning dimensions were postulated above. The following is an expansion of the parameters of those dimensions. These dimensions of learning are pragmatic lenses to interpret the phenomenon of adult learning behavior in the museum environment. This personal and idiosyncratic behavior has been broken into these four constituent parts as a matter of discourse and for critical analysis. Each adult learner visiting a museum exhibition brings a personal historical perspective that shapes the learning experience. Wain (1987) states this internal conversation as "the critical premise of the hermeneutical outlook" in "that we understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief, and thus have no need to view it as accuracy or representation; knowledge is something negotiated in social practice rather than an attempt to 'mirror nature'" (p. 10).

As in this study, the facts of visitors' behavior are mediated by the a priori conditions of their inquiry. No data provided by an informant, therefore, is irrelevant to the interpretation of the phenomenon. The pursued interpretation of visitors' experience must also reflect the historical and idiosyncratic perspective of the writer whose interpretation is informed by this transaction.

Social Learning

As individuals make conscious and tacit choices about and during a museum experience, they are also caught in the context of their habituated experiences. The paradox of being caught in the maze of one's own life of transactions has been referred to by Heidegger and others as the hermeneutic circle (Hirsch, 1967). In making meaning out of an experience, an individual is limited in the interpretation of that encounter and, therefore, in the assimilation and accommodation of new understanding from the encounter by the circle of knowledge and understanding which the individual brings to the experience itself. Yet learning takes place, and, at times, through the experience and reflection upon the experience, individuals are able to make a leap outside of the confines of the circle of their own context.

Social learning was denoted as a behavior that is based on the manifestation of receptivity to actual concrete experience with one or more people. This definition is, of course, a surface representation of the dynamics of making sense of an experience. Certainly the individual and his or her compatriots on a trip to the museum share in the experience and have conversations that elicit information from the parties involved. Much of this behavior

> occurs in childhood both through socialization (informal or tacit learning of norms from parents, friends, and mentors that allows us to fit into society) and through our schooling. Although we are encouraged to become increasingly self-directed in our learning as we grow older, the learning provided by our particular culture and by the idiosyncratic requirements of parents or parent surrogates is the learning that is rewarded. (Mezirow, 1991, p. 1)

In the museum environment social learners share in the experience with others and, through this interaction with others, are able to make sense of the information being provided. That sense is shaped not just by the interactions with others, but by the social context from which this group of explorers takes its cues. The learning behavior of adults in the museum environment is dependent on community conventions learned over a lifetime and upon the context of accepted cultural behavior. Through the reflective mode of conversation and feedback with others, the social learner has the opportunity to take on the mantel of understanding of the others with whom she or he interacts.

The museum exhibition provides a convenient backdrop or catalyst

for the initiation of this process of socialization. As in any learning situation, the experience is shaped by the personal history and cultural context of the individual. Those more briefed in the museum experience may be able to tap into many levels of a museum exhibition and interpret the experience with and for others in a way that provides a deeper transformation of the self and the other.

Theoretical Learning

It was stated earlier that theoretical learning belied a comfort with structured, text-type learning and more academic approaches to assimilating information. In formal education environments learning, traditionally, has taken place under the direction of an instructor. In the more informal environment of the museum the instructor might very well be seen to be replaced by the text itself. This is the exhibition's didactic mode of operation.

The text might very well be used by visitors as a means to weave a meaning for the exhibition as a whole. Most exhibition texts have a logical progression that leads a reader from one set of ideas to others. Summary conclusions are normally left to the visitor to formulate. The reading of museum exhibition text panels and labels is an unforced and often leisurely learning behavior.   Learners in this environment don't have to be intimidated by an instructor, as might be transacted in formal learning environments. The choices an adult makes in the use of an exhibition are more spontaneous than in a formal setting, yet the structure of the text itself can provide a structure to the adult learner's experience that is in keeping with tutorial models found in adult education programs (Brookfield, 1986).

Theoretical learners might be expected to recount many of the facts of the exhibition in order to form a logical conclusion as to the meaning or significance of the exhibition. This requires reflective time in order to regurgitate and articulate the text of the exhibition. As in social learning, and all the modalities of learning postulated, the learner participates in the experience within the framework of habituated experiences which, in turn, shape the reading of the text. The greater the number of real life experiences that the adult learner has in common with the text of the exhibition, the greater the likelihood of translation of the text into a significant articulation of the information provided.

Theoretical learners might reflect on their experience with the exhibition through expressive details, as is done in storytelling. This sharing furthers the resonation of the text and enlivens the personal meaning of the

exhibition to the adult learner. Unlike formal education programs, the museum exhibition environment invites adult learners to structure their own critical inquiry. This opportunity allows adult learners to place the information of the exhibition into the context of their own lives. Critical thinking tools and practice in museum exhibition encounters may be necessary to make this type of transaction a reality. Theoretical learners require a certain amount of discipline. What Brookfield (1986) calls "performance characteristics," including the ability "to master theoretical knowledge, to increase problem-solving capacities, [and] to use practical knowledge" (p. 171), may be needed to analyze the data provided and to make analogous connections with other areas of interest or knowledge.

Inquiry Learning

Adult learning behavior in museum exhibition environments, and in other informal and formal educational settings, may be viewed as a spontaneous discovery of new ideas and information. "All methods of discovery learning start by assuming that the learner must actively create the experience through which he learns and that the learner himself must deduce rules" (Rogers, 1971, pp. 138-139). The implication for the museum environment is that some adult learners seek out a more physical and personal interaction with exhibition components. It was noted in interviews with, and observations of, informants that younger adults' inquiries involved more lengthy interaction with interactive video and listening booth components of the exhibition, whereas the older population sampled spent more time looking at text panels and labels and inquiring into the music itself.

The inquiry learner is making choices that represent a more challenging approach to the exhibition environment. According to Carr (1985), "Because the learner is the source of design and inquiry and because the best path is not always clear, a strong tolerance for ambiguity is useful. So is a patient, responsive spirit" (p. 54). A number of older adults observed in the Duke Ellington exhibition manifested a greater patience in reading text and a more leisurely pace in meditating upon objects and tableaus. Carr (1985) continues, "Unlike learners in schools, self-directed learners in cultural institutions are responsible for the quality of both questions and answers" (p. 57).

It appears, on the surface at least, that older adults on solo trips to the Duke Ellington exhibition portrayed a more questioning or inquiring approach to the life, times, and music of Duke Ellington than younger respondents. Some of the older informants expressed great joy in strolling

leisurely through the exhibition and in finding new information about Ellington's music, enough to push them toward further inquiry into the subject matter outside of their museum visit. Although some younger informants expressed surprises and great interest in such specific points of inquiry as the Cotton Club or the impact of New York City on Duke Ellington's music, they also seemed less inclined to complete the process and follow through on a more involved path of inquiry.

Intuitive Learning

It is, of course, difficult to reduce any learning experience mechanistically into discreet blocks of behavior. As stated earlier, none of the perceived learning behaviors discussed in this study exist in a vacuum. They are necessarily woven into the complexity of human behavior. None is in a more honored position than another, and no hierarchy of benefits to learners exists. With that in mind, it is still beneficial to bracket out the perceived phenomenon of the four behaviors observed in this study.

Intuitive learning is no exception, and in many respects it is the most difficult to witness and abstract from transcripts. "Intuition--the ability to have immediate, direct knowledge without the use of language or reason--also plays a key role" (Mezirow, 1991, p. 14). What might be most significant about adult learning behavior in the museum environment is this "direct knowledge without the use of language or reason." The intuitive learning behavior amounts to a sort of internal tutor that guides the learner through exhibitions, making suggestions as to what to pay attention to, what to watch, what to guard against, and what to give of oneself to the experience. The intuitive learner apprehends the object within the exhibition as opposed to thinking about it and making conscious choices of intent to seek out particular items.

Conclusion

At the outset of this study the assumption was held that the American population is graying in proportion to its youth and that it is becoming increasingly clear that such educational institutions as museums must make a dynamic shift toward incorporating older adult learners into the foundations of their programming and exhibition design. In fact, many museums across the country have been doing just that, and this study reinforces that reality by pointing to the need for basic research on adult learning behavior in these unique informal educational settings. It is hoped that the four learning behaviors proposed in this study might be used by

educators and exhibition developers to outline programming and exhibition design components that attend to these mechanistically reduced learning style needs.

Programmers might consider a greater array of educational formats to account for these learning styles. Seminar-type programming, in which adults might be able to interact on a more personal level, fits in well with the dimensions of social learning discussed. Traditional lectures and demonstrations might suit theoretical learners, whereas hands-on activities and interactive programming might be more appropriate for inquiry learners. Self-guiding materials and room for meditative experiences could be organized for intuitive learning styles.

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