The twenty-first century introduced a paradigm shift in the perception of education and its transmission. Teachers do not teach – rather, they facilitate learning; libraries are not buildings housing books – they are community resources, offering literacy and workshops for all ages. *The Manual of Museum Learning* embraces the trend of user experience. As its title indicates, the museum must be a system where learning occurs – not a venue where artifacts are showcased.

While education has long been a museum manifesto, its implementation has been tacit, dominated by the museum’s curatorial mission. At the turn of the twentieth century, three
eminent museum practitioners, George Brown Goode, Benjamin Ives Gilman and John Cotton Dana, each advocated a primary function for the museum: education, aesthetics and social responsibility, respectively. With John Dewey’s constructivist approach to education, the latitude of the educational experience expanded, so that now these three manifestos could overtly function in harmony. Though, it was only with postmodernity that the focal point shifted away from the provider – the museum institution – and onto the visitor.

The seminal literature of this genre was in 1992 with the publication of a book-length study *The Museum Experience* by John H. Falk and Lynn D. Dierking. The investigation approached museums from the visitor’s vantage, probing why people go to museums and what museum practitioners can do to enhance these experiences. In their follow-up book, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning* (2000), the authors augment their original research with pedagogical learning theories, giving the practitioner an applied appreciation of the subjective and contextual nature of visitor learning. These ideas were compounded by Nina Simon with her technique-driven handbook, *The Participatory Museum* (2010), in which she outlines how to make cultural institutions more dynamic, relevant and essential places.

In their second edition of *The Manual of Museum Learning*, Brad King and Barry Lord – executives at Lord Cultural Resources, the world’s largest cultural professional practice – revisit the field with an alternative approach, that of institutional change. The participatory museum can only be sustainable, they argue, if the objective of visitor-engagement is nested within the broader vision and management of the museum itself. Their comprehensive compilation of essays not only presents current trends in museum learning but also focuses on strategic implementation, detailing the processes of institutional change. Contributors include consultants from their own firm, as well as professionals within the museum industry. The book itself is divided in three parts, with each subsequent section spiraling and returning to the core principles of the latter but with added dimension – namely: part one identifies the structural components of the museum institution as well as the didactic principles of museum learning; part two combines the structural components within the learning framework; part three stresses the practice of institutional change and the implementation of strategic and sustainable objectives.

The central feature of museum learning, defined by Barry Lord in his first edition of *Museum Learning*, is informality. Formal learning is that which is externally prescribed; informal learning, rather than being arbitrary or superficial, is that which is internally synthesized. Thus, museum learning is the presentation of a multi-faceted narrative, which the visitor chooses to interpret in one of multiple ways. The choice, the subjective interpretation and the subsequent reflective awareness of why that choice was favored – the “Aha!” moment – are the affective and transformational qualities of informal learning. Against this backdrop, this second edition of *Museum Learning* explores how the museum institution must align its organizational structure, personnel and physical spaces to meet this outcome. Moreover, by grounding its mission in learning, the role of the museum within its community setting will develop too, increasing opportunities for a wider and more collaborative reach.

The organizational structure of many museums tends to be silo-based, with administrative, curatorial and facility management operating independently with little cross-collaboration. For institutional change to be systemic and sustainable, all departments must figuratively radiate from its core mission of user experience, with front-line staff and public programming given greater eminence than the back-end administrative department. Furthermore, long-established staff roles must be assessed for their compatibility with the museum’s values. For example, the curator is often a single individual, or group of individuals, possessing highly specialized knowledge, responsible for selecting the most representative artifacts into
the museum’s collections. The twenty-first-century curator must be all this, yet also have intuition with its audience, pinpoint culturally relevant themes and be sensitive to the tension between arms-length preservation and tactile engagement. Given these complex requirements, curatorship may be best effected as a cooperative, inter-departmental team, rendering the individual role as obsolete.

On a similar note, the docent, stereotypically portrayed as an earnest volunteer with copious knowledge but limited interpersonal flair, must be given tools and training to be, quite literally, the human face linking the visitor with the museum. The predominant pedagogy for museum learning has steered away from didactic lecture toward inquiry-based dialogue. There is often a schism between the visitor’s current awareness and the museum’s replete presentations, and a docent-facilitated, dialogic approach, can bridge this gap, inviting the visitor into the museum’s consciousness.

Case studies are interspersed throughout the book, highlighting the structural groundwork that culminates in this participatory link between audience and museum. Fifteen years ago, the leadership at the Columbus Museum of Art determined that they did not want museum visitors but they wanted museum users, analogous to people repeatedly using their neighborhood library. As part of their strategic overhaul, each exhibition was designed with multiple “connectors” – devices intentionally crafted to connect the visitor to exhibition outcomes. These connectors ranged from interactive media and tactile manipulatives to sensible seating configurations. While clearly presented, at times, the lengthy bulleted checklists enumerating the operational requirements of the learning environment appear banal – such as functional lighting and air-conditioning, or easy access to washrooms. These undoubtedly support the learning mission, but do not implicitly manifest it. Though, as the authors would stress, the cohesion of these mundane details are equivalently fundamental to the holistic mission of the museum itself.

The other prevalent theme of the book is the modern museum’s versatility within its wider community. Schools and museums have oft been perceived as kindred partners, purposefully concentrated on curricular topics. However, with the broadening of its mission to skill-based interpretation, the museum can expand its radius to many diverse collaborations. Any institution wanting its stakeholders to gain mastery in a respective discipline can find common cause at the museum. A study on the partnership with the Keck School of Medicine and the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art found that

through a constructivist approach to viewing and discussing nonrepresentational, contemporary art, students were able not only to apply their observational and interpretive skills in a safe, nonclinical setting but also to accept the facts that ambiguity is inherent to art, life, and clinical experience and that there can be more than one answer to many questions.

The museum’s online presence is briefly addressed, though arguably, the virtual frontier holds the maximum potential audience for museum learning. Similar to the concrete institution, the museum’s website must be developed by an inter-departmental team to ensure the content and interface is not only informational but also provides a learning experience. A host of platforms can be utilized to generate the type of immersiveness unique to the digital age. For example, a mobile app developed by the Buxton Museum in Derbyshire, UK, alerts the user of an archeological or historic connection between the user’s real-time geographic locale and its in-house artifacts.

Perhaps the biggest critique of the book is its lack of an evaluative framework. Aside for quantitative data, such as increased membership and repeat visitors, how should a museum gauge that its objectives have indeed been met? Can a visitor satisfaction rating-scale be an honest measure for affective critical-inquiry? Furthermore, from a management standpoint,
financial sustainability is the most basic criteria for institutional change. While the authors argue that adding to the social and educational value of the institution will attract the sponsorship of more philanthropic foundations and corporate organizations, little evidence is presented to support this conclusion. Including budget summaries alongside the case studies would have affirmed the long-term potency of their recommendations.

The Manual of Museum Learning is certainly a practical and thoughtful resource for those working or studying in the museum arena, and others can benefit from its broad offerings, too. Any professional working in an industry or institution with parallel goals as the learning museum can profit from its foundational approach to meaningful, systemic change.

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