

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and Never the Two Shall Meet: A Critical Review of Museum Studies and Adult Education Literature

Dana Dudzinska-Przesmitzki and Robin S. Grenier
University of Connecticut

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Abstract: Both museum and adult learning researchers seek to understand how to best educate adults. Despite a plethora of common areas where the two fields intersect this review found limited evidence of shared epistemological, theoretical and empirical research or “roots”. Given the mutual interests of these fields it is argued that sharing of epistemological, theoretical and empirical research would benefit both. Implications and future research opportunities are discussed.

Introduction

Museums, by their very nature, have the ability to make distinctive and notable contributions to the nonformal and informal education of adults (Dudzinska-Przesmitzki and Grenier, in press). Interestingly though, the notion of the contributing role of museums in adult education and learning is not new. Museums have long held a place within the field of adult education as a context for providing educational opportunities to their patrons and staff (Grenier, 2007). As early as the 1920’s, references to adult learning in museums were discussed within the adult education literature (see the handbook proceedings of the American Association for Adult Education 1928 and 1936).

Despite this early recognition, the two fields have, for the most part, existed in relative nescient state of each other’s research. It was not until the late 20th century that the veil between the fields began to lift, as the two started to see the untapped potential each held for the other. Both museum education and adult learning researchers have worked to better understand how to best educate adults. Museum researchers have focused their attention to program planning, the context of facilitating visitor learning, and the characteristics of affect exhibit design. For adult learning researchers, many of the same interests apply, particularly in the areas of context based learning, program planning, and informal learning experiences. The fact that a reciprocal affiliation should exist between these two fields seems natural and intuitive given their common areas of interests.

Instead, the two fields coexist in analogous research worlds, only rarely intermingling to exchange ideas and theories. Alas, Kipling’s famous refrain (from the Ballad of East and West), “east is east and west is west”, serves as a metaphor for the two fields and the distance between an interdisciplinary approach to their common research interests. Given this divide, we investigated the ways in which research in museum studies and adult education run parallel and intersect with each other in order to reenergize interest in museums as sources of adult learning and stimulate discourse between the two fields, so that mutual understanding and collaboration can occur and contribute to the growth of theory and practice.

Methods

Wading through the burgeoning literature domains of adult learning and museums studies proved to be a navigational challenge. As such, we chose to explicitly focus our search of the

two fields in couple ways. First, we chose to concentrate *mostly* on peer reviewed literature. This was done in order to develop an understanding of the contemporary state of conceptual and empirical research in higher education devoted to adult learning in the museum context. To this end, online academic search engines (including Dissertation Abstracts, Web of Science, ERIC, ProQuest Direct, and ABI) facilitated our search. Within these databases, we focused our search using a combination of terms (adult education, adult learning, museums, museology, museum studies, visitor studies, and museum education) and limiting dates. We elected to limit the timeframe of the studies we selected to between 1997 and 2007, except when older seminal pieces could not be ignored.

Findings

Based on our review, we found two recurring themes within the literature. First, adult education research and museum studies research parallel each other in numerous areas and topics. Second, adult education research and museum studies research do, in rare instances, intersect with each other (e.g. terminology and supporting theories). Due to space constraints, this section does not encompass an exhaustive review of all of the research parallels between the two fields. Rather examples are discussed to highlight distinctions between the fields.

Parallels

Given the two fields' mutual interest in understanding and facilitating adult learning, it seems there would be commonly investigated areas between the fields. However, one observed trend in the literatures was the tendency for the two fields to diverge in their exploration of a mutually researched topic. Divergence did not necessarily mean the two areas of research were juxtaposed, but more often museum studies and adult learning were using the same underlying ideas, but different language and theoretical models. These parallel instances highlight the comparable direction and course of the researches' focus, and emphasizing the need for dialogue and sharing of ideas between the two fields.

Use of language. A primary example of parallel language that arose from our review was the disciplines' development and use of "free-choice learning" and "informal learning". In museum studies, free-choice learning describes learning instances that emphasize learner choice and control over the learning (Falk & Dierking, 2000). Similarly, in adult education, informal learning is any activity involving the pursuit of knowledge, or skills that happens without the presence of an externally imposed curriculum of formal and nonformal educational institutional programs (Livingstone, 1999). In both instances, the real issue is not where learning occurs, but how it occurs. Although Falk and Dierking (2000) acknowledge that the term informal learning was established first, they argue that the "informal" modifier in front of the word "learning" may signify to some that the fundamental processes of learning differs solely as a function of the physical setting. Given this, they argue that their term "free-choice" learning better denotes the unique characteristics of such learning. This conflict aside, the two terms are describing the same phenomena.

Theoretical frameworks. The second parallel was from the comparable theoretical frameworks held by both fields. Over time, both museum studies and adult education have developed similar theoretical frameworks for conceptualizing the variables that can affect adult learning. Of particular interest is the acknowledgment of the potential impact of individual factors (i.e. motivations, prior knowledge & experiences), learning setting factors (i.e. within group affects & physical space) and socio-cultural factors (i.e. outside immediate social group, culture & politics) on adults' learning.

From the museum studies, Falk and Dierking's (2000) popular Contextual Model of Learning (CML) acknowledges that learning in informal settings is a complex phenomenon and that it is situated within a series of contexts. The CML portrays this contextually driven meaning making as the process and product of the interactions between an individual's personal, physical and socio-cultural contexts over time. In a related vein, particular models of adult learning, like Illeris' (2002) three dimensions of learning model, Jarvis' (2006) Learning Process model and Sheckley Kehrhahn, Bell and Grenier's (2008) TRIO model of Adult Learning, are analogous to the CML's framework. Illeris' (2002) three dimensions of learning model, for example, propose that an adult's learning is influenced by the individual's cognitions and emotions, as well as by the environmental and society contexts in which he lives. Similarly, Jarvis's (2006) Learning Process model argues that a learner comes into learning activities with their own "life history" which interact with the learning environment to affect the adult and their learning. Likewise, the TRIO model developed by Sheckley, Kehrhahn, Bell and Grenier (2008) also echoes the theme of individual and environmental elements coinciding to create optimal conditions for adult learning, but in professional learning activities. However, despite the fields' comparable frameworks neither field appears to borrow or contribute to the others' development.

Other area in which both fields were found to possess similar research frameworks were in the realms of social justice, inclusion, and accessibility- as they pertain to who is able to gain access to learning. Within museum studies, discussions about inclusion and access are centered on two key arguments. First, after the social fervor of the 1960s, museums were derided by critics as "instruments of state authority and elite influence" (McClellan, 2007, p. 566). This criticism led to a period of institutional reflectivity (Ross, 2004) and realization that many museum practices were exclusive and socially divisive and needed changing (Hooper-Greenhill, 1988). This awareness led to outreach programs designed to attract a broader community base previously marginalized by museum policies and politics (O'Neil, 2006) and research addressing the outcomes of such approaches. Museum studies scholars began to explore how their assumptions about visitor learning and existing methods of instruction were not representative non-Western and other historically marginalized traditions (McClellan, 2007).

Furthermore, researchers are increasingly recognizing museums as positive tools for community development as well as a means of encouraging cultural conservation (Kreps, 2003), yet adult education literature, where critical theory and social justice as they apply to adult learning are studied in depth is noticeably absent from museum studies. Within the adult learning field, critical theory asserts that adults' are capable learning beings that develop an understanding of themselves and the world they live in via the experiences they accumulate over the course of their lives (Habermas, 1972). The development of their understandings though, may be negatively influenced by the ideologies, institutions and social practices within the learners' milieu. According to critical theorists, these influences are viewed as 'active agents' shaping adult learning and potentially preventing adults from acquiring and competencies needed to achieve their full individual potential (Habermas, 1972). Furthermore, Mezirow (1978) argues that from a critical theory standpoint, the primary purpose of the adult educator (regardless of setting) is to encourage participants to become critically reflective and aware of the cultural and psychological assumptions that influence how they view themselves and their relationships to different societal entities. Such an approach to understanding how the external world and its institutions can influence adult learning could provide museum studies researchers and practitioners with a useful framework for understanding their own influence on patron learning.

Intersections

The review of literature also yielded instances in which the two fields of museum studies and adult education overlapped. These intersections were the mutual utilization of similar epistemological and theoretical “roots”, and included: constructivism, and andragogy.

In both fields constructivism is approached as the acknowledgment that knowledge is created by learners, as well as through their interactions with others and with the world around them (Philips, 1995; Spalter, Stone, Meier, Miller and Simpson, 2002). Like adult education, museum studies have utilized constructivist theory (as derived from adult education research) to investigate a plethora of adult learning related topics. For example, investigations into the impact of immersive virtual reality (IVR) environments in hands-on exhibits on patron learning (Spalter, et al., 2002); and how, as time passes, peoples and cultures imbue museum objects with changing values and significance, and manipulate and contest their meanings across generations (Alberti, 2005) have explicitly utilized a constructivist focus.

Aside from its research applications, museum researchers have also debated the applicability of the constructivist paradigm in museum settings. Part of this debate centers around the contested belief that the museum context is a perfect environment for constructivist learning due to its stimuli-laden and experience-invoking environment (Allen, 2003; Falk and Dierking, 1992). Others however, have countered that just because museums provide adult visitors with hands-on experiences and object-rich environments, one should not assume, without empirical evidence that museums are the perfect setting for constructivism (Osborne, 1998) since “interactivity is in the mind- not just in the hands” (Bradburne, 2001, p. 80). Despite their position however, the majority of museum studies authors mention here have all utilized, albeit to a varying degree, research developed by adult education authors to develop their premises.

Lastly, considering the epistemological similarities between constructivism and andragogy, one could argue that it is of little surprise that the concept of andragogy has also been accepted by museum researchers and practitioners. Museum researchers assert, for example, that adult museum patrons tend to be more self-directed (Allen, 1993), possess different motivations (Falk, Mousouri & Coulson, 2005) and prefer a higher degree of choice and control over their learning experiences (Falk & Dierking, 2000) in comparison to other museum-going populations. These assertions do more than simply echoes of Knowles’ assumptions, but rather, like the previous paragraph highlight the intersection of the two literature fields as they progress in their mutual understanding of adult learning.

Discussion and Implications

For the fields of museum studies and adult education to continue to evolve a deeper understanding of adult learning in non-school contexts, museums and adult educators need to find a common ground for describing adult learning and furthering a research agenda that ultimately benefits the learning experiences of adults. The use of different terminology and theories may limit the research constituencies’ willingness to read and consider a piece of research. Additionally, these parallels may potentially cause researchers to become bogged down in semantics frustrating their ability to make their larger points. These, in turn, may hamper the reach and communication of a solidly crafted piece of research, causing researchers on either side to miss significant contributions to adult learning scholarship.

Even in the face of such issues, opportunities exist to bridge the parallel streams of research and create intersections of research. Consider, for example, the previously discussed museum studies discourse on inclusion and accessibility. Museum researchers are clearly seeking better ways to promote the active engagement of all sections of society. In this instance, what

adult education researcher brings to the table is a fundamental understanding of how learning relates to culture, power, and creative agency. As such, adult education literature, via its critical theory research, has the opportunity to inform museum studies about the influence of socio-political factors that may affect adult learning within museum contexts. Such “nesting” activities would create a larger body of theoretical and empirical research with which to understand adult learning.

Additionally, we should point out that museums serve as a rich resource for investigating how adult education theory can guide practice and better serve adults in experiential and contextually based learning environments. Indeed, what sets museum learning apart from dominant pedagogies is that the learning process that takes place situates visitors in a radically different set of pedagogical practices and experiences (Dudzinska-Przesmitzki and Grenier, in press). Adult education research has long overlooked the potential of museums as rich examples and proving grounds of lifelong learning and a source of research settings that yield new perspectives to enhance existing adult education theory. If parallels are not addressed, museum educators may continue to use a narrow body of research and ignore a wide range of educational philosophies that may contribute to their in-use models of museum education.

One issue that some may find as interesting as the parallels and intersections discussed in this paper, are the reasons for why they occurred in the first place. Although it is merely informed speculation, we suspect that both parallels and intersections may have arisen due to different levels of phenomenon. Despite the similarity in research interests, for instance, differences in how the two fields historically developed may have influenced the framing of common problems, leading to occurrences of research parallels between the fields. Intersections, on the other hand, may be the product of far more systemic socio-cultural phenomena. Both fields co-exist within a larger, shared environment and given their similar research interests, may tend to react to changes in their milieu by looking across discipline lines to see how ‘neighboring’ fields are reacting to the socio-cultural event. The aging and retirement of the baby boomer generation for example, is one cultural phenomenon that has influenced both museum and adult educators. While both fields are increasing devoting discussion time to understanding the learning needs and interests of older learners, these discussions are, in our opinion, more grounded in each other’s literature than other issues that are founded on more individual discipline phenomenon.

Ultimately, we the fields of museum studies and adult education can benefit from mutual sharing of concepts and insights into how adults learn. However, if this benefit is to come to fruition changes need to be made in how the two fields build off of and grow from each others’ established knowledge bases. From our perspective, we see it as the responsibility of both adult education and museum studies to further examine how museums contribute to adult learning in order to draw from a theoretically informed knowledge base for museum practices.

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