

Submission to the National Museum of Australia
Review of Exhibition and Public Programs

John Cross
Research Manager,
Adult Learning Australia,
PO Box 308 Jamison Centre ACT 2614
Tel: 02 6251 9887

March 2003

Overview

Adult Learning Australia (ALA) is a peak body whose mission is to foster and promote the value of all forms of adult learning activity.

This submission seeks specifically to address point number 2 in the terms of reference for the inquiry, that is, making recommendations on the future priorities to be addressed by the Museum.

In brief, Adult Learning Australia believes that the National Museum offers one of the better Australian examples of how adult learning can be supported in museums. The Museum has shown its commitment to adult learning by presenting a lively and varied Public Program that includes, among other things, debates about contemporary issues. The Museum has also demonstrated its commitment to adult audiences through its participation in projects such as the *Energise, Engaged, Everywhere* report that examined the needs of older Australians in the context of museums. The recent work in developing a learning circle program for older visitors is also to be applauded.

Members of the Museum's staff have participated enthusiastically in activities co-ordinated by Adult Learning Australia, such as the *Going Beyond the Tour* learning circle workshop conducted during Adult Learners' Week 2002, and also participated in the launch of Adult Learners' Week 2001 which took place at the Museum.

However, we feel that facilitation of adult learning still takes second place behind the development of innovative learning activities for children and the creation of an 'entertaining' day out. We also believe that the facilitation of learning activity for all adults is not yet supported throughout all the museum's work.

Recommendations

1. That an explicitly named adult learning officer or unit be developed within the Museum's Education Division whose responsibility it is to develop a wide range of innovative programs and experiences to support and to facilitate a range of learning styles, learning interests and learning outcomes;

2. That the facilitation of learning becomes a central activity of all aspects of museum operations, and that a working knowledge (adult) learning principles – such as multiple intelligence and an understanding of different attitudes to learning within the community – be a core skill set for all museum staff involved in direct or indirect communication with the public, including curators and exhibition designers;
3. That there be a concerted effort to meet the needs of adult audiences who do not feel comfortable within museums, who hold negative attitudes towards learning or who are otherwise excluded from participation in traditional learning modes or institutions;
4. That the NMA develop, encourage and promote ways in which adult visitors and non-visitors can better contribute to the content of, and method of communication used in, the discourses that the museum initiates, including public program events as well as the way in which objects are interpreted through, for example, text panels;
5. That objects in the collection are interpreted in multiple and, even, divergent ways so as to stimulate discussion among museum visitors and so as to serve as a catalyst for further independent learning activity;
6. That there is an activity developed for adults, along the lines of ‘k-space’ that offers adults an opportunity to explore creativity within a virtual reality context (without having to fight off children to have access to it).

Some background notes

What is learning?

‘Learning’ is an activity that occurs independent of place and time; it cuts across all activities. It takes place within formal education settings – although an educational setting is not always the best place in which to learn – but it also happens at work, while on holiday, while watching television or during a visit to an art museum.

Learning is something that can’t be limited or controlled. It can be steered in productive directions, attempts can be made to assess and document it, and it can be made more difficult than it has to be, but learning can’t be forced where it doesn’t want to go, limited or stopped from occurring.

Nor can you control what will be learnt in any given venue. For example, people will learn more than just facts about the objects on display from a visit to a museum. But this is not a bad thing, nor should it be discouraged. If anything, such broad (it might be called ‘incidental’) learning is just as valuable as the intended outcomes that stem from more structured learning activity, sometimes even more so.

All learning activity is valuable, wherever it occurs and in whatever form it comes. However, some venues and forms of learning delivery can create for some a negative experience and, as such, create a barrier to participation. We believe that every effort should be made to

remove obstacles that may unnecessarily impede both intended and incidental learning, including inappropriate modes of learning delivery.

Learning should not only empower the learner but the learner should be empowered to direct their own learning. That is, they should have the opportunity to control the speed of the learning and the way in which the learning activity is delivered. The skills and wisdom that they already have, as well as their learning goals, must also be taken into account. After all, for whose benefit is the learning activity being presented?

The process of providing a learning opportunity is one that involves facilitation. It is not, as is often assumed, an opportunity to show how much a person or institution knows and, conversely, how little the learner knows. Learning isn't a competitive sport. Learning should not be used as a tool to make someone feel stupid, nor is learning provision an opportunity to highlight perceived inadequacies in others by demonstrating superior grasp of a subject ourselves.

Too often, whether by intent or carelessness, an activity offered as a learning experience, simply becomes an opportunity for creating hierarchies. Too often the learner is not given the tools or opportunity to develop their own wisdom, but is forced to listen to and accept the knowledge of others. Too often the learners' own wisdom, experience, preferences and aspirations are overshadowed for the sake of the smooth running of a predetermined curriculum.

Adult Learning Australia's approach to learning is one that is grounded in concern about the nature and value of the experience for the individual. We believe that any development of learning experiences, including museum exhibits and public programs, must start from and be grounded in the needs and interests of the learner.

Museums and adult learning

Arguably, some of the most significant providers of adult learning experiences in Australia are museums, zoos, botanical gardens and similar places. Such places are free or inexpensive, easy to access without prior arrangements, and support self-directed and intergenerational learning activity. In addition, many provide more formal learning programs.

In their formal educational activities, many museums offer innovative and inclusive programs for children. However, few museums offer the same level of innovation and inclusiveness in their learning programs for adult visitors.

Providing valuable learning opportunities for adults is enormously challenging, but it is a challenge that museums must face if they are to continue to claim to belong to a town, state or nation and if they are to access public funds.

An adult who visits a museum will have cultural baggage. They will also come with likes and dislikes with regards to how they learn. Adults can be stubborn, egotistical, and need to feel valued. Adults have a tremendous wealth of first hand life experience and deep understanding of at least a couple of subject areas. While they may not always be able to

articulate their learning preferences, cultural or emotional baggage, adults, unlike children, are better able to remove themselves from, or avoid altogether, what they perceive to be unpleasant or irrelevant experiences. Moreover, they can tell their friends and family not to bother either.

In a recent publication, *Knowledge Building: Fresh thinking about learners and their teachers* (ANTA 2002), there is a good summary of the conditions in which adults learn best:

- The prior learning of the student is appreciated;
- The subject matter is relevant to their immediate needs;
- The learning environment encourages dialogue and interaction;
- Mistakes are seen as valuable opportunities to learn;
- The subject matter is presented using a range of approaches.

For the typical visitor to a typical museum opportunities to participate in the learning process are offered by exhibits, exhibition design, text labels, tours, floor talks, lectures, catalogues, films, computers, informal conversations and contemplation.

Most of the activities that adults undertake in museums are passive: looking, listening, reading, watching, walking along a predetermined path. Tours, floor talks and lectures offer opportunities for some interaction, but this is often in the form of the learner asking (polite) questions in a few minutes at the end of an activity if there is time. Even then it is expected that the audience member will direct questions to the 'expert', not fellow audience members.

Learner-driven learning is rarely encouraged among adults in museum settings. Rarely are adults in museums encouraged to create, dispute, perform, play, experiment or construct. Curiously, however, while museums do not encourage adults to do these things, many of these things form the mainstay of children's programming in museums.

Complexity also seems to be removed from the adult learning experience in the museum. Difficult questions are the best catalyst for learning. And while museum programs for children are often full of activities in which children are asked closed and open questions, often a museum's learning facilitation for adults (lectures, text panels, catalogues and so on), will make a concerted effort to avoid stimulating debate, to avoid complexity or and to avoid offering divergent interpretations. Seldom are adult visitors actively challenged by the museum to engage in higher order thinking. Rather, most museums simply provide short definitive explanations to questions that the museum assumes (often without any justification), its adult visitors will ask. This does not, it seems, serve the learning needs of adults in the most constructive way for it makes the visitor passive and hence less likely to be stimulated to engage fully in the potential learning journeys.

In their interpretative work, museums should provide a range of answers to a range of questions that a diversity of real people have asked. By this means the museum will be providing a valuable service and creating a genuine learning experience, similar to the learner-driven environment found in public libraries.

The National Museum and Adult Learning

On most counts the National Museum of Australia provides better learning experience for adults than many other museums. Its broad approach in terms of subject matter is a welcome attempt at social inclusion within an institution-type that is traditionally marred by elitism.

However, it appears that in their conception and promotion of formal learning programs, the National Museum has, at times, fallen into the trap of offering experiences for children that encourage activity, creativity and an opportunity to voice opinions, while offering experiences for adults that encourage passivity or else a quiet deference to 'experts'.

For all its apparent innovation, and despite its claims to be 'interactive', the National Museum of Australia is, like any old museum, for adults at least, still very much a hands-in-pockets experience. As an adult, the visit to the National Museum of Australia still consists largely of standing, reading, listening and peering. There are a few buttons to push, but these are simply ways of selecting different reading, listening and peering experiences.

The introduction of 'touch trolleys' is a welcome activity and clearly a step in the right direction, however better promotion of these as being for adult, as well as children's use, might be needed.

It would be good too to allow adult access to 'k-space', or, better still, to develop an 'a-space' that offers adults a similar opportunity to explore creativity within a virtual reality context. While adults are probably not precluded from participating in 'k-space', it has clearly been designed and promoted as children's experience and is, at most times dominated by children.

Finally, from my understanding of the Museum's operations, the facilitation and provision of adult learning experiences does not fall within the Museum's Education division, which I believe mainly looks after school-aged children, but occurs within the area of Public Programs.

In many museums, Public Programs has more to do with marketing, revenue-raising and event co-ordination, than with the development of quality learning experiences. Often, Public Programs are viewed as an appendage to the 'real' work of the institution. By moving responsibility for the facilitation and provision of adult learning to within the National Museum's Education Division it would send a clear message that the support of learning for adults is an important activity for the Museum, not as a means to something else, but as core activity in and of itself.