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## **Multiliteracies in Non-School Contexts: Museums as Cultural Texts**

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Museums are sites for learning that are commonly visited by schools. However the act of visiting museums is complexly situated in broader social and cultural relations. This paper argues that museum visiting as a cultural practice requires specific museum-based literacies that are rarely identified or explicitly taught by museums or schools. The lack of focus on literacy events and practices reinforces exclusionary perceptions that are supported by statistics that show museum visiting to be unequally participated in within the population. In examining the implications of context-based literacies for educational interactions that occur outside the school, this presentation explores degrees of congruence between schools, museums and academic disciplines, the impact of institutional meaning systems and systems of representation, differing degrees of cultural competence and the role of agency. Museums will be treated as cultural texts, with engagement conceived as involving the interpretation of texts that communicate through a variety of means, the construction of meaning and the written, verbal and experiential expression of that meaning. It is anticipated that addressing the social and cognitive demands of non-school contexts through a critical literacy will enable learning potentials to be realized and empowered cultural identities to be developed.

### **Introduction: Museums as sites for learning**

Museums are informal venues for lifelong learning that have been widely utilized by schools as sites for learning. They are conceived as public institutions that collect, preserve, and exhibit significant collections, objects, research and information that document and celebrate human existence. While museums in general have many similar characteristics, there are important differences related to the specific focus of museum collections. Museums can broadly focus on art, history, science and technology, anthropology, military history, natural history, children's museums, with particular specialisations also evident. They can vary greatly in their activities, size, location and relation to region and culture. Consequently the following discussion will focus on museums in general, but specify a particular interest in art museums. In recognizing that research in this area is limited, the discussion is exploratory in nature and constitutes the starting point for future study. It is focused on opportunities for learning and is generated from a school-based perspective.

### **Museum visiting as a cultural practice**

Over the past three decades the development of a "new museology" (Mayrand 1985, p. 201) has focused on the potential of museums as a positive social force. Discourse within the museological field attests to the democratic potential of museums and shows evidence of wide acceptance of the principle of public access for all. However, despite critical focus and reported transformations within the museum field, research shows that the democratic potential of museums is still not being realized, particularly in the case of art museums. While visitor statistics may indicate that museum visiting has

become a mass activity, individuals of above average affluence and education continue to be disproportionately represented among museum audiences (Bennett and Frow, 1991; Hooper-Greenhill, 1988; McCarthy, 1990; Merriman, 1991; Spring, 1992). According to Bennett (1996) this suggests a continuing contradiction between the conception of museums as a public cultural resources to be administered for the benefit of all citizens, and its social capture by a limited social strata.

While new approaches to museology have challenged conventional and historical ideas, it appears that the museum field has remained divided by internal disagreements about what represents or embodies the field and its values (Mathewson, 2006). In art museums, in particular, some sections of the museum community believe they should remain scholarly institutions where art is experienced in an atmosphere of reverence, while opposing factions believe museums should be engaging, entertaining institutions that promote wide access. The inability of museums to resolve these issues has led to a situation in which attempts are being made to define a new category of activity while remaining limited by old patterns of thought and language (Mathewson, 2006).

In addition to internal disagreements, a substantial body of research exists that identifies factors that impede access to art museums including:

- the association of the physical setting with notions of worship, authority and intimidation (Adams, 1990; DiMaggio and Useem, 1978; Hein, 1998; Hooper-Greenhill, 1988; Millard, 1994; Reeves, 1990)
- the idea that aesthetic contemplation is the superior response (Adams, 1990; Hooper-Greenhill, 1996; Merriman, 1991)
- a scholarly, inflexible and authoritative bias (Harper, 1990; Heumann Gurian 1991; Hooper-Greenhill, 1996; Rice, 1997)
- class divisions among staff and potential audiences (Connell, 1983; Harper, 1990; Rice, 1997)
- interpretations that assume intellectual passivity and homogeneity (Geddes, 1990; Horne 1986; McCarthy, 1990)
- the presentation of contemporary art (Bennett, 1994; Bennett and Frow, 1991; Rice, 1997; Worts, 1996)
- the Romantic assumption that art is a universal language accessible to all (Rice, 1997; Worts, 1996)

Museum education has made significant efforts to address issues of accessibility. Contemporary discussion acknowledges that art museum visitors are at different levels of development in terms of their ability to utilize art museums and that meaningful engagement with art museum contexts is dependent on the acquisition of specific skills and competences (Anderson, 1997; Hooper-Greenhill, 2004; Housen and Duke, 1998; Mitchell, 1996; Sheppard, 1993; Stapp, 1984). Consideration of museum learning as a process rather than an outcome has facilitated the idea of education in museums as exploratory, broad, experiential, complex and multi-layered. A Post-Structuralist viewpoint is evident in the introduction of notions of textuality and intertextuality as a means of empowering museum visitors (McCarthy, 1990; Roberts, 1997; Silverman, 1995). This introduces a burgeoning consideration of museums as texts and audiences as readers engaging in a process of interpretation that facilitates movement from

passive consumers to active producers of individual meaning. Such notions inform consideration of the literacy nature and requirements of museums as sites for learning.

### **Literacy, multiliteracies and museum discourses**

Literacy has been defined as ...“the ability to make and share meaning by constructing and interpreting texts” (Winch, Ross-Johnston, Holliday, Ljungdahl and March, 2006, p. xxxii). Contemporary notions of literacy evidence an expansion of definition to view text as any communication involving language. It is acknowledged that it is through language that we learn to make meaning and to make sense of experiences (Emmitt, Pollock and Komesaroff, 2003, pg.13). Language makes it possible for us to objectify, conceptualise and express, while also operating to structure our experience. It is used to represent the world to us and it is the way we represent our view of the world to others. As language is the basis of interaction, competence in literacy is thus crucial to full participation in social practice.

The term “multiliteracies” as coined by the New London Group (1996), adds further complexity to discussions of literacy. It acknowledges that communication crosses cultural and national boundaries, and recognizes that the nature of contemporary media requires an understanding and ability to use multiple modes of communication and a range of media products, often in combination. Duncum (2004, p. 253) also refers to “multiliteracy” as a post-structuralist insight that any cultural site can be understood according to multiple readings, generated from multiple positions. Consideration of multiliteracies demands that any consideration of literacy must account for the text forms associated with emergent technologies that utilize multiple modes of communication (Kalantzis, Cope and Fehring, 2002), consider the proliferation of different communication patterns that reflect a diversity of cultures and acknowledge the generation of a multiplicity of meanings.

Museum visiting inevitably involves multiple and interacting language and communication. The language that is involved is diverse and incorporates multimodal literacies including: linguistic, visual, audio, gestural, spatial patterns, technological and print-based. Language is verbally spoken; socially discussed; provided through text on panels, in labels, in pamphlets and in accompanying catalogues and books; visually represented; represented in and through objects; experienced through multiple senses and physical movement; and involving technological manipulation. A further dimension is added when the physical space of the museum building is considered as a spatial text that needs to be negotiated. Meaningful participation in the literacy practices involved in museum visiting involves a degree of competence in reading, interpreting and constructing meaning from these multiple forms of language. Participation also involves an ability to negotiate the complex dialogic relationship that exists between the written word, the spoken word, images, objects, time and space. In art museums in particular, this relationship is not always straight forward or consistent.

In addition to the multiple forms of language observed to exist, museums also incorporate meaning systems and forms of representation that have been historically established and institutionally reproduced and legitimated. They constitute a certain “discourse” as defined by Gee (1991, pg. 4), which impacts on the interpretation and practices of museum visitors in relation to the museum experience. Consistent with

Gee's definition, the traditional museum discourse is inherently ideological, resistant to internal criticism and self scrutiny, concerned with certain objects, concepts, viewpoints and values. This discourse is communicated and accumulated through the variety of museum-based texts that have been noted, while also having an existence in the historical memory of visitors. It carries meaning and power and effectively positions museum visitors, often in a dominated position, in relation to the authority of museums (Mathewson, 2003, 2006).

Despite educational theories that have disproved notions of transcendence, and postmodern ideologies that question accepted viewpoints, aesthetic philosophies and authoritative methods of presentation and representation prevail within the museum environment (Duncan, 1995; Horne, 1984; Heumann Gurian, 1991; Hooper-Greenhill, 1988; Rice, 1997; Roberts, 1997). Interactions within art museums, in particular, tend to legitimize idealist aesthetics and inculcate a view of preferences and practices as a gift of nature or innate talent rather than an arbitrary effect of the social distribution of power. Through such interactions, passive, idealist approaches to art museums and artworks have been historically perpetuated. Resultant experiences based on this approach have thus communicated an idealist relation to art museum as legitimate.

This has not been without opposition, however. Pierre Bourdieu (1968, 1984) determined that aesthetic appreciation is socially determined and that the competence to decipher the specialized messages transmitted in works of art is learned. In his intellectualist theory of artistic perception, Bourdieu argues that a work of art "only exists as such for a person who has the means to appropriate it, or in other words, to decipher it" (Bourdieu, 1968, p. 594). He further states that "The richness of the 'reception'...depends primarily on the competence of the 'receiver'...on the degree to which he or she can master the code of the 'message'" (Bourdieu and Darbel, 1991, p. 38). The consumption of a work of culture is thus seen to involve an act of deciphering or decoding which presupposes practical or explicit mastery of a cultural cipher or code. According to such a theory an encounter with a work of art is not "love at first sight" but presupposes an act of cognition which implies the implementation of a cognitive acquirement.

### **Approaches to museum literacy**

Contemporary approaches to museum education, have responded to theories such as Bourdieu's to view the practice of interpreting art works and understanding the museum experience as one which uncovers different explanatory possibilities and in doing so uncovers layers of significance that alter over time and in relation to the individual visitor (Roberts, 1997). Such views recognise that as a literacy event that occurs within a public institution, museum visiting is situated within broader social relations, is differentially realized and is a social activity that individuals have varying experiences of, as a result of their life histories and personal subjectivities. Consequently museum visiting adheres to Barton's (1994, pg.34) social view of literacy, which suggests that:

1. Literacy is a social activity and can be best described in terms of the literacy practices which people draw upon in literacy events.
2. People have different literacies which they make use of, associated with different domains of life.

3. People's literacy practices are situated in broader social relations. This makes it necessary to describe the social setting of literacy events including the ways in which social institutions support particular literacies.
4. Literacy is based upon a system of symbols. It is a symbolic system used for communication and as such exists in relation to other systems of information exchange.
5. Literacy is a symbolic system used for representing the world to ourselves. Literacy is part of our thinking. It is part of the technology of thought.
6. We have awareness, attitudes and values with respect to literacy and these attitudes and values guide our actions.
7. Literacy has a history. Our individual life histories contain many literacy events from early childhood onwards, which the present is built upon.
8. A literacy event also has a social history. Current practices are created out of the past.

While Barton's social view of literacy can be generically applied to literacy events and practices across diverse settings, the multi-faceted nature of the particular skills associated with museum learning has been acknowledged within the limited literature that specifically addresses museum literacy. In 1984, Carol B. Stapp observed that "museum literacy" was then a newly emerging phrase that articulated the older idea of a philosophy of museum accessibility. Stapp conceived of the concept of museum literacy as embracing the notion that certain skills and competencies are necessary for visitors to utilize museums purposefully and independently. She defined it in the following manner:

... Basic museum literacy means competence in reading objects (visual literacy), but full museum literacy signifies competence in drawing upon the museum's holdings and services purposefully and independently. Museum-literacy therefore implies genuine and full visitor access to the museum by virtue of mastery of the language of museum objects and familiarity with the museum as an institution. In a word, the museum literate visitor is "empowered" (1984, p. 112).

The development of visual literacy is widely referred to in the literature specifically addressing art museums and is referred to by Stapp (1984) as part of basic museum literacy. It is a concept that acknowledges that looking at art is a deeply complex, culturally loaded action requiring a specific framework (Rice, 1988). Studies generally suggest that visual literacy is a set of skills that can and should be taught in museum settings in partnerships with schools. Rice (1988, p. 149) identifies these skills as including;

- the increased awareness that comes from direct observation
- an expanded vocabulary adequate for talking about the formal elements of art and effective in communicating the feelings that one gets when looking at objects
- the ability to think critically about art.

Despite positive assertions of the value of visual literacy, the unpublished, in-house program evaluations conducted by Housen at the Museum of Modern Art from 1989 to 1993 questioned the value of the direct teaching of visual literacy in the museum context in relation to school audiences (Housen and Duke, 1998). A reason for this is suggested by Duncum (2004, p.252) in his assertion that “There are no exclusively visual sites. All cultural sites that involve imagery include various ratios of other communicative modes and many employ more than vision”. In response to this Duncum proposes a discipline-based rethinking of the traditional, exclusive focus on the visual, within art education, that can also be considered as relevant for the art museum setting. This involves the employment of multiliteracies to encompass the making of meaning through the interaction of a range of communicative modes.

Stapp’s (1984) observation of the rare use of the term museum literacy, can be further traced to the present day. However, as Stapp noted then, many discussions of museum learning have alluded to the idea of museum literacy without recourse to the actual term. As investigations in this area have increased, attention has been focused on identification of the particular skills associated with museum learning (Anderson, 1997; Housen and Duke, 1998; Mitchell, 1996; Sheppard, 1993). The importance of such work, and its application within any educational experience in museums, is emphasized in Ralph A. Smith’s (1985) assertion that the principal purpose of museum education to be “to help museum visitors acquire a trained capacity for aesthetic appreciation” (1985, p. 10) that must be formally taught. Goodman (1985, p. 57) supports this in stating that:

Unless the museum, despite its handicaps, finds ways of inculcating the ability to see and of aiding and abetting the exercise of that ability, the other functions of the museum will be pointless and its works as dormant as books in an unreadable language or in locked bindings.

Despite the noted acknowledgements, Stapp (1984) has argued that schools do not address the knowledge, skills and attitudes for museum literacy. This neglect has been attributed to the misunderstood notion that a command of the museum language is spontaneous and innate.

### **Implications for museums, schools and academic disciplines**

School-based education is widely acknowledged as potentially providing a foundation of museum visiting capacities (Anderson, 1997; Bourdieu and Darbel, 1991; Hooper-Greenhill, 1994; Hughes, Jackson and Kidd, 2007; Mitchell, 1996; Smith, R.A., 1985; Stapp, 1984; Stone 1992a; Zeller, 1987). Recent observations of the characteristic use of museums by school-based teachers suggest that a relatively passive, idealist approach to museum experiences, as identified by Stapp, has continued, with teachers lacking confidence and competence in the museum setting (Mathewson, 2006). For example, research conducted by Stone (1992a) suggests that while art educators utilize art museums, they do so at arms length, invest minimal effort and fail to integrate museum experiences into classroom learning. Hooper-Greenhill (1991) also identifies integration of museum experiences into the curriculum as a problem. In addition she argues that school visits tend to be seen as a chance to acquire information rather than

an opportunity to develop the processes of learning (Clarke, 1989 in Hooper-Greenhill 1991). She asserts that students are often confused about the purpose of the trip as teachers do not always have fully defined educational objectives but tend to rely on the visit as a justification in itself. This latter argument is supported by Janette Griffin (1998, 1999) and Harrison and Naef (1985), who claim that the literature addressing school visits to museums reveals that teachers express vague or limited learning goals for their excursions, concentrating mainly on enrichment and social interaction.

While collaboration between museums and schools is consistently noted as important to the development of positive learning relationships (Eisner and Dobbs, 1986; Grinder and McCoy, 1985; Newsom and Silver, 1978; Stone, 1992b), numerous researchers identify a major factor hindering co-operative and collaborative relations as a general lack of insight into the different professional worlds of museums and schools and the differing roles and responsibilities of those involved (Eisner and Dobbs, 1986; Newsom and Silver, 1978; Walsh-Piper, 1989). The lack of understanding is seen to result in a lack of communication, lack of unity, and in some cases, friction. In addition, Walsh-Piper (1989) identifies different pedagogical standards in schools and museums, and more specifically, a lack of museum literacy training in teacher preparation (Berry, 1998). Contributing to this situation is the differing nature of each educational environment. Current terms used to describe the kinds of learning that occur in museums include “informal”, “free-choice” and “self-directed” (Hughes, Jackson and Kidd, 2007). As cultural and educational institutions, museums focus on objects, their interpretation and their preservation. Importantly these objects are placed within open, visually-oriented physical spaces that vary in structure, formality, comfort and welcome (Vallance, 2007) and are moved through by participants (Harrison and Naef, 1985). The distinctive qualities of museum learning have been observed as being: focused on subject matter connected to the museum collection (Vallance, 2007); self paced and self directed (Heumann Gurian, 1991), based on participative, exploratory, activity based encounters (Xanthoudaki, 1998; Beer, 1992); and characterized by social interaction (Griffin, 1998, 1999; McManus, 1987, 1988; Silverman, 1995; Xanthoudaki, 1998; Zeller, 1985). Griffin (1999, p. 8) identifies the unique learning opportunities offered by museums as: opportunities to closely examine objects or specimens; opportunities for comparison that allow trends and patterns to be deciphered; natural learning processes that incorporate the sharing and communication of ideas and the raising of questions; and opportunities to develop perceptual skills that teach how to gather information from objects and experiences.

### **New models for engaging with multiliteracies**

The discussion that has preceded has been exploratory in its scope. While it has identified museum visiting as a literacy event and has identified the multiliteracies involved in the museum site, the complexity of the literacy requirements of museums have not yet been adequately dealt with. In the interests of advancing further discussion, some antecedents of a pedagogy of museum literacy will be proposed. This represents some provisional considerations worthy of future engagement and development.

Identification of a specific museum literacy has significant implications for education in museums, and particularly for museum/school relationships, as it recognizes the

particular demands of developing learning experiences in the museum setting that enable cultural participation. However, the interaction of modes that are evident, the incorporation of multiliteracies implicated, the various sign systems that are employed, and the unique nature of the museum learning environment make this a challenging task. Models to guide pedagogy are needed to expand on traditional views of literacy and articulate how museum visiting can be approached as a literacy event in which effective literacy practices can be enacted. In accordance with (Thwaites 1999, p.11): “Notions of a “cultured person” must change to match this new world of literacy and education”.

Teaching children to be literate in any setting is not just a set of skills that can be transferred. Rather, education needs to enable them to participate in social situations using the required literacy practices. This involves ways of talking, interacting, thinking, feeling, reading, valuing and using tools and symbols. According to Luke and Freebody (1995, p. 5 in Winch et al, 2006, p.xxxiv): “Literacy education is ultimately about the kinds of citizens/subjects that could and should be constructed....its about access and apprenticeship into institutions and resources, discourses and texts.”

One proposal that potentially informs the development of approaches is the New London Group’s (1996) pedagogy of multiliteracies. It has four components, which include: situated practice; overt instruction; critical framing; and, transformed practice. Situated practice involves situating meaning making in real world contexts that build on the lifeworld experiences of students. Overt instruction involves the development of an explicit metalanguage of design. Critical framing involves interpretation in relation to social context and purposes. Transformed practice involves the transformation of existing meanings to new contexts to create new meanings.

Situated practice as related to sociocultural settings and context- specific domains and practices (Lave & Wenger 1991; McConaghy, 2002; Rogoff and Lave, 1990; Wertsch, 1985) has particular relevance to the uniqueness of museum sites. Situated practice requires consideration of variations between contexts and involves an approach that does not rely solely on explanation, but also involves demonstration and enaction (New London Group, 2000). It further requires skilful and integrated scaffolding, to draw upon the cultural resources for learning (Mills, 2006, p.28). Applied to museums, situated practice requires acknowledgement of the knowledge, experience, and cultural attitudes of learners, analysis of the cultural location of museums and immersion in the discourse of museums, to build connections between previous learning and the sources of information found in museums. Situated practice further suggests a reconsideration of how museums relate to academic disciplines, and how that relationship impacts on the structure of knowledge and experience. For example, as art museums are related to the visual arts, situated practice, as an element of a broader view of literacy should expand focus beyond the art museum to incorporate the study of the visual arts.

Kalantzis and Cope (2005) propose four knowledge processes that are useful in a multiliteracies pedagogy: (1) experiencing the known and the new; (2) conceptualising by naming concepts and theorising; (3) analysing functions and interests; and (4) applying appropriately and creatively. Experiencing the known and the new recognizes that, as individuals have familiar domains of experience, situations and texts, the

incorporation of the new can involve a cultural shift that requires scaffolding. It engages new forms of subjectivity that are congruent with the situated use of literacy in museums. Conceptualising by naming concepts and theorizing recognizes the need to provide learners with a language to understand, consider and discuss their experiences and interpretations of museums. Analysing functions and interests acknowledges that social purpose and cultural background affects the text a writer constructs. It further addresses the varying critical practices of code breaker, text user, text participant and text analyst (Luke and Freebody, 1999, 2000). Applying appropriately and creatively is a process that recognizes situated practice and the importance of expressing meaning through action. It guides the development of authentic, multi-directional opportunities for learners to move from being passive consumers to active participants. This involves an ability to understand and participate in the texts that are presented, leading ultimately to the construction of texts that bridge narrative gaps and represent personal meaning. These texts can be written, verbal, visual or experiential.

Few authors have engaged with the issue of multiliteracies as related to art museums or art education. In the absence of such studies, Duncum (2004) has proposed the contemporary visual culture movement as addressing multiliteracies in art education. Part of a broader movement that encapsulates the sciences, social sciences and humanities, this movement has reconceptualised art education to focus on visual culture (Chalmers, 1999, 2001; Duncum, 1997, 1999, 2002, 2003; Freedman, 1994, 1999, 2000, 2005; Hamblen, 1990; Tavin, 2003, 2005). It has arisen from an acknowledgement that communication and meaning is derived from many kinds of visual imagery. The particular relevance of this model for museums is its central concern with the study of visual images within their social and cultural contexts. Also of use is the typical focus placed on the political, economic and the everyday as social activity. Duncum (1999) has proposed that students need to develop a critical perspective toward the values inherent in aesthetic sites. Where art education assumes that art is inherently valuable and accepts the prescribed canon of the artworld, an art education based on visual culture assumes images to be sites of ideological struggle and uses the student's own cultural experiences as a starting point. Duncum (2002, p. 10) states that the basic orientation is to understand not to celebrate. The critical understanding and empowerment acknowledged as ultimate goals of an art education based on visual culture present particular potential when related to the development of more diverse and critical art museum audiences.

### **Conclusion: The realization of learning potential and the formation of cultural identities**

Museum visiting is a cultural practice that is emblematic of social difference. While issues of access have been widely acknowledged, museums have had limited success in addressing those issues successfully. Consideration of issues of access in relation to the significant literacy requirements of museums, suggests that increasing focus on the explicit teaching of museum-based literacies, may impact on the realization of museum visiting opportunities and the development of cultural competence in the museum setting. Schools can provide initial experiences with museums that have the potential to promote future museum visiting. While, in the past, schools have been limited in their ability to realise this potential, a focus on the development of museum-based

literacies would enable them to address areas of educational congruence, while also authentically addressing areas of divergence, between schools, museums and related academic disciplines. To achieve this end, there is a need to develop models for teaching and learning in the museum setting. Pedagogies of multiliteracies provide effective starting points for the development of literacies that provide educators and learners, alike, with opportunities to engage with a multitude of texts in critical and purposeful manners. Such an approach requires a reconsideration of cultural identities in recognition that cultural practice is not a transcendental ability, transferred through a gift of grace or birthright. Rather, it is developed through experience and opportunities to actively engage with the situated language of museums.

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