

MUSEUM EDUCATION ROUNDTABLE

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Journal of Museum Education Reader Guide

Why Creativity? Articulating and Championing a Museum's Social Mission

Cindy Meyers Foley

In response to the field-wide call for inclusiveness, many museums are re-examining their social mission and exploring how creativity can be incorporated into the overall vision and values of the institution. The questions below were developed in conjunction with the author and are intended to foster conversations and dialogue among museum staff from across departments on the role creativity can play in enhancing the experiences of both those who visit and work in museums.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does creativity mean to you personally and professionally?
2. What research resources on museums, creativity, and evaluation are you aware of? What are the ways in which you communicate and share these resources with the field?
3. As a museum educator, how would you practically apply the larger concept of creativity introduced in this article? What might be the challenges you would face in applying this concept?
4. How do you measure outcomes, such as creative thinking, in your museum?
5. Does your museum have a social mission? If your museum has a social mission, how is it defined and currently incorporated in your institution's overall vision, mission and values, exhibits, programs, and community partnerships?
6. If creativity is a value in your institution, how is it incorporated into your institution's vision and mission? What are some of the ways your museum fosters staff creativity/creative thinking?
7. If you would like to change/modify the culture, values and strategies of your museum, how would you go about doing this?
8. As a museum, what are some of the risks you have taken that have led to change and dynamic progress?

continued

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9. What do you think must happen for museums to have real impact on thinking (critical and creative) skills?

10. What would you like to ask the author about this article?

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Why Creativity? Articulating and Championing a Museum's Social Mission

Cindy Meyers Foley

Abstract In late 2006, the Columbus Museum of Art adopted a new framework that established creativity as the lens for learning and visitor experiences. When the Columbus Museum of Art committed to creativity as a focus and lens for learning, the work and nature of its education department adapted and changed. What is a museum's responsibility to its community? This article explores why case making and advocacy around creativity became essential, how this impacted the education department, and what implications this holds for the future of art education.

Most of the things that are interesting, important, and human are the result of creativity.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi¹

In 2006, months after being hired as the director of education for the Columbus Museum of Art (CMA), Executive Director Nannette Maciejunes asked me, "What is the purpose or value of an education department in an ... no, our, art museum." We were in the early stages of a capital campaign and Nannette, realizing that the answer to this question would profoundly impact her capacity to engage potential contributors to the campaign, needed me to articulate the response in "a trim, one page document." I quickly began thinking about my response but I was caught off guard. I realized the traditional way I had answered the "What is museum education?" question did not quite work. Responses like "art exposure and appreciation," "to share the stories that

objects reveal,” “to develop visual literacy” or “enrichment” seemed beneficial to the museum, and to ensuring a cultured society that would value institutions like CMA, but what about the visitor? What do they deeply value and how do we address their needs? I pondered the question for hours — writing something then deleting it. My final draft was not a one-page document, but rather a diagram (Figure 1).

I pitched the diagram to Nannette explaining that education at CMA was needed and valued in our community because we believe in and honor the power of creativity. When you walk into our museum, what you encounter are the byproducts of some of the most creative thinkers who have graced the planet — iconic artists like Claude Monet or Edward Hopper or international artists who reign from or live in Columbus like George Bellows, Aminah Robinson and Ann Hamilton. These artists questioned, challenged the norms of society, played with ideas and materials, embraced ambiguity, and bravely and passionately engaged in developing creative products even when those around them rejected their work. Nannette’s exercise forced me to articulate that creativity was not something that we just valued in the arts, but something we value within our community. Everyone is capable of creativity. Creative thinking is needed at every level of school, in all lines of work, at every stage of life.²

Upon sharing my revelation with Nannette, she demonstrated why she is a great leader. She agreed with my argument, but she actually pushed further,

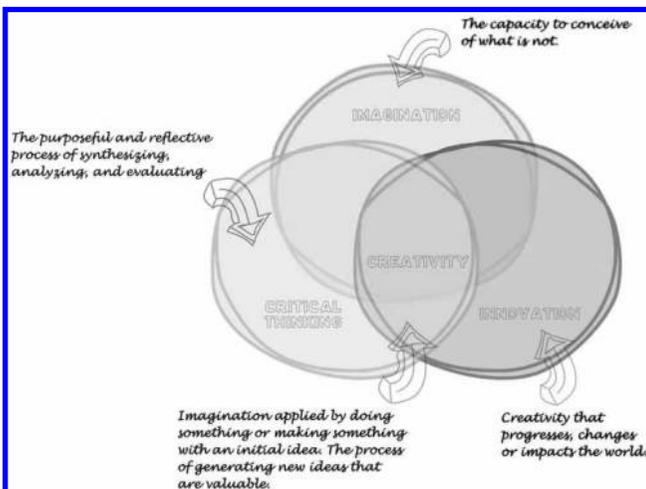


Figure 1 CMA educational framework. Courtesy of the Columbus Museum of Art.

asking what we are doing to truly impact creativity in our community. At that point, I realized our case making and steadfast belief in this direction was essential. For the first time in my career, my role was as visionary, imagining what the museum could be and developing a case and a team to implement change. Art museums, in particular, have struggled to articulate and demonstrate their social impact beyond playing the role of guardians and authorities of culture. But our communities are searching for more than this, they need places and institutions that foster positive change and meaning in the lives of citizens.³ Museum work is social work and we have a social responsibility to our community. Our “ways of existing” must be questioned, including hierarchical work culture; territorial departments; and a narrow view of our work product that still focuses on the objects, exhibitions, and design aesthetics instead of how are we making positive social change in our communities. If change and intentionality around impact are not prioritized soon, art museums may find themselves irrelevant. Because of this, the traditional position of director of education must shift from chief pedagogy and program planning expert to institutional visionary, case making architect, cheerleader, and political strategist. The Columbus Museum of Art embarked on this journey and as the director of education, I learned that reimagining the work of the education department actually resulted in reimagining our entire institution.

The Case for Creativity

Shortly after Nannette’s challenge to articulate how we truly impact creativity in our community, the education staff regrouped. We reflected on our work, and sought thought leaders to challenge and aid us as we eliminated, reworked, and implemented a range of programs and initiatives.⁴ As we became more intentional, senior leadership became more committed and encouraging, which led to a three-prong creativity agenda that developed over a period of three years. These commitments reflected not only a departmental focus but also an institutional responsibility to creativity:

- Dedicating the entire 18,000-square-foot first floor of our soon-to-be renovated 1931 building to become a Center for Creativity (CFC). The CFC would act as a catalyst, a jumping-off point for individuals and groups to discover their unique connections to creativity. This space would provide a myriad of experiences that engage visitors with art and with each other, model the creative process,

highlight creativity in action and underscore the importance of creativity in our community (Figure 2).

- Reimagining our philosophy and approach across the entire range of our programming (from preK-12 school programming, to our university partners, to our families who are caring for loved ones with Alzheimer's) to ensure that we demonstrate impact by developing measurable outcomes that promote creativity. This effort meant dedicating considerable resources (both staff and financial) to evaluation efforts (Figure 3).
- Adding creativity to our institutional values and revising our strategic plan to outline how CMA could play a significant role in contributing to creative engagement in our community.

In order to support and champion these efforts, I recognized the need for making a strong rationale for creativity. This focus was new to our institution, and it indicated that the traditional answer to “why we exist” was in question. It would shake our core, create rifts between staff, cause many of our traditional champions to question our path, and for some, make the decision to leave us entirely. Bolstered by Nannette and my team, I embarked on crafting a persuasive, passionate, thoughtful case for creativity.

As an art educator/art museum educator, creativity was something I had embraced since studying with Dr. George Szekely when I was an undergraduate



Figure 2 Visitors creating tape paintings in the Big Idea Gallery in the Center for Creativity. Photo courtesy of the Columbus Museum of Art.



Figure 3 Artful Adventures outcomes address cultivating the imagination in young children and understanding the importance of the imagination for adult participants. Photo courtesy of the Columbus Museum of Art.

at the University of Kentucky. Throughout his career, Szekely has championed an approach to art education that privileges play and imagination to provoke students to think and experiment like artists.⁵ This may seem natural for art educators, but in fact, in the early 1990s, his approach was quite different and even in juxtaposition to popular approaches like Discipline Based Art Education (DBAE). In DBAE, emphasis is placed in areas like aesthetics, art history and art criticism, integration, making art, and the school-museum collaboration. While DBAE became a prevalent approach to learning in art museums, approaches like Szekely's that cultivated play and ambiguous studio challenges were rare. In 2002, I pursued creativity in a different role when I curated *Playground* for the Institute for Contemporary Art at the Maine College of Art. The exhibition featured artists William Wegman, Lucky DeBellevue, Kimberly Hart, Harrell Fletcher, Miranda July, Jason Rognes, and Thad Simerly, who, through their work, demonstrate how artists play with ideas and materials as a catalyst for their creative process. My case making for creativity had its roots in carefully considering the thinking artists employ.

The campaign for creativity at CMA began with constructing our own definition. Creativity involves the process of developing new ideas (imagination),

synthesizing and evaluating those ideas (critical thinking), and doing something of value with the results (creativity). An ideal outcome for creative ideas, actions or products is to progress, change, or impact the world (innovation). In 2007, when we adopted creativity, we were not alone. A national creativity campaign had begun, headlined by economists like Dan Pink, educational reformists like Sir Kenneth Robinson and Tony Wagner, and science and brain researchers like Robert Root Bernstein and Jonah Lehrer. In response, new approaches to education were rolling out, such as Ken Kay's Partnership for 21st Century Skills (P21) and IDEO's Design Thinking.⁶ In 2009, the Institute for Museum and Library Services published *Museums, Libraries and 21st Century Skills* that served as a guiding framework for informal learning institutions.⁷ The language and arguments provided by these individuals and institutions helped me make a relevant, passionate case for creativity. Our planet is facing unprecedented problems — population growth, diminishing natural resources, challenged economies, and technological evolutions. Leaders in government, business and education are desperate for innovative solutions and new ways to approach an ever-changing world. Creativity is essential to solving these problems, and yet little has been done to cultivate it within the very institutions that are desperate for it. Today, our nation, our society, our businesses, our families, and our children all run the risk of failure unless we once again prioritize creative thinking. Society has changed, due to a whole range of issues from educational reform acts to recessions, global competition to parental fear. These issues and many others encouraged us to do what we can to reverse or reimagine these trends.

In 2007, four members of our education team attended the National Art Education Association conference in New York when keynote speaker Dan Pink said, "We have progressed from a society of farmers to a society of factory workers to a society of knowledge workers. And now we are progressing to a society of creators and empathizers, of pattern recognizers and meaning makers in the Conceptual Age."⁸ He told us the MFA degree will become the new MBA. Key corporations will be seeking individuals with whole new minds. We knew then that artists would be the model for our work at the museum. The way artists think, learn, and engage in the world involves deep questioning, a comfort with ambiguity, and a sophisticated understanding of play as process. The staggering amount of research exploring the brain and creativity has almost overnight disproven the right brain/left brain myth as well as proven how we can generate and strengthen our creative capacities by exercising our thinking.⁹ Creative thinking has been best addressed by a

number of researchers who have explored creativity through a *habits of mind* lens. Habits focus on ways of work or activities rather than content or results. Influential research included Project Zero's *Studio Habits of Mind*, Michele and Robert Root-Bernstein's *13 Thinking Tools of Highly Creative People*, and the Habits of Mind from the Coalition of Essential Schools.¹⁰ These systems demonstrate the profound impact creativity has on not only our capacity as learners but as empathic and active citizens.

Our case making became more urgent and more concrete when in July 2010, *Newsweek* magazine published "The Creativity Crisis in America."¹¹ The article notes that since 1960, IQ and creativity have been tested every ten years, and each decade the IQ and creativity scores increased by ten points until 1990. Over the next decade, in the United States, IQ scores continued to rise, but creativity scores started to tumble — with the most significant decreases in K-6th graders. Many have speculated on potential causes, from standardized testing and No Child Left Behind legislation to the reduction of unstructured playtime, but what is clear is that the country is at a critical juncture, what the *Newsweek* authors called a "crisis." While the decrease of creativity continues, the importance of creativity as an essential skill for success in the global economy is steadily rising. The 2010 IBM Global CEO study cited creativity as the number one desired leadership skill and President Obama has also paid attention and called for educators to focus on creativity in his 2012 State of the Union address.¹² Additionally, the 21st Century Skills and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math (STEM) national education movements count creativity as one of the key elements needed to compete in today's workforce. Leaders worldwide recognize that in business, education, and civic life, fostering critical and creative thinking is essential for preparing today's students for successful and productive lives in the twenty-first century. Sadly though, as Sir Ken Robinson stated in his 2006 TED talk, the formal education system is challenged to make any significant progress in fostering creativity.¹³ That then leaves one particular group ideally suited to make gains — institutions of informal education.

The Evolving Education Department

As the case for creativity was being bolstered and CMA was exploring what it meant to adopt creativity as an institution value, the education department evolved. Fundamentally, in order to impact creativity in our community, the education department needed to take the lead, especially if formal education

was challenged to make any significant impact around creativity. Over the next seven years, the changes within the education department would be profound. We reevaluated every aspect of our work: programs ended, positions were eliminated, job titles changed, risky experiments were launched, and each member of the department (about 12 full- and part-time individuals) embarked on a journey of ambiguity, research, soul searching, and reflection. We took retreats, created reading groups, blocked time for brainstorming, and adopted a “Pixar” approach to our office work.¹⁴ The changes we made on behalf of our cause and our community personally and deeply changed each of us.

My role as the department team leader was to make the case for creativity in our work but even more important, to model and create a culture that would embody questioning, idea generation, risk taking, and play. We could not design for creativity unless we knew precisely what it looked, felt, and sounded like in our work. Almost immediately, the misconceptions, clichés, and biases to creativity our community shared with us helped us focus our direction. The biggest issues raised were: “Creativity is soft, it cannot be evaluated or improved” FALSE! Or “Only creative types, like artists, are creative. It is something that you are just born with.” FALSE! In response to what we heard, two main guiding questions emerged:

1. How can we be intentional about the impact of creativity?
2. How does our focus on creativity relate to art education?

Many people have difficulty with creativity; it is hard to define and is often associated with silliness or frivolity. Without evidence to demonstrate how creativity in your work and life impacts your thinking, decision making, and future success, it can be difficult to convince educators or businesses to intentionally work on necessary skills. But assessing creative growth and the impact of creativity is not impossible. We began breaking down the elements of creative thinking and learning, and identifying what it looks and sounds like. We soon concluded that tracking that growth and change would be our biggest challenge and the area where we can make the biggest contribution to the field.

Before we could assess and evaluate creativity, though, we first needed to develop an internal culture that embraced change. Ironically, it was embracing evaluation that allowed for us to change. Prior to 2007, we were not an institution focused on outcomes. Like most other museums, we defined our work by process and sometimes by output, but not by the impact we made. To us, evaluation meant gathering quantitative data for funders. In 2007, we were

introduced to Jessica Luke, a senior researcher at the Institute for Learning Innovation, who had vast experience in evaluating learning in art museums. Jessica provided us with a crash course on evaluation and outcomes. Articulating outcomes helped us keep the focus on the audience rather than our personal interests. If the change we wanted to make in our visitors related to creativity, then the program design had to address those learning outcomes. Guiding questions helped us unite efforts and address issues that were larger than particular programs. This bank of questions became a litmus test for what work needed to be done:

1. What does lifelong learning look like in the twenty-first century?
2. What do we want visitors to gain from their visit to the museum?
3. How can an art museum have an impact on school reform?
4. What fosters teaching for creativity?
5. How do we help our families cultivate the next generation of thinkers?
6. What must happen for art museums to have real impact on thinking (critical & creative) skills?
7. How do collecting initiatives, scholarship, and selection of exhibitions support the new model?

By 2009, staff developed outcomes for nearly all programs and special exhibitions during the planning process. Outcomes enabled us to create strategies that resulted, we hoped, in the intended learning by visitors. Evaluating those outcomes was tricky, though. We fantasized about hiring a full-time evaluator, and still do, but knew adding a full-time position with the level of experience we wanted was unrealistic, especially during a major capital campaign. So, we explored a variety of models, including part-time evaluators, contracted evaluators, all the while keeping Jessica on to coach, advise, and work with us on key programs and exhibitions. Jessica's bigger role was to help us grapple with our guiding questions and our decision to become intentional about creativity. She met regularly with Nannette and senior staff to help align efforts across the institution, sent us readings, connected us to colleagues, and shared research she was gathering from a range of sources. What Jessica really taught us to do was to question. Soon, nothing was sacred. We reexamined all programs and initiatives, even ones beloved by staff and visitors. For each we asked whether the change we intended was being accomplished. If not, would changes to the program in its next cycle move us closer to our intended outcomes? If not, the program would end and the lessons learned would be applied to other initiatives. One example of this was CMA Game Show.

After opening the Center, we struggled with how to engage adults with creative thinking. Game Show was designed to allow museum visitors to participate in a live, simulcast game show where the goal of the show was to demonstrate your capacity for tackling creative challenges. Local partners co-created the challenges with staff. For example, the Columbus Roller Girls need a new mascot, so a three-minute challenge was designed for the selected contestants to use the provided supplies to design, dress, and pitch the new mascot to the audience and representatives from the Columbus Roller Girls (Figure 4).

Game Show was ridiculously fun. But after each show we would reflect on our outcome and retool. Eventually, after six events we realized while what was happening was delightful for the audience and incredibly creative for our staff and partners, it was not impacting adult creativity in a significant way. The “failure” of Game Show was not that it was not well-attended or enjoyed, but that it had not moved the needle around cultivating questioning, idea development, and play in our adult visitors. But, Game Show was important because it led to what is now one of our most successful programs, the Connector Series, where museum visitors of all ages are invited to join with local creative makers to produce and think together. Now those incredibly important partners that we cultivated during Game Show have linked us to a whole new network that helps us develop opportunities for visitors to think, explore, and play (Figure 5).



Figure 4 Game Show participants collaborating to develop a mascot for the Columbus Roller Girls. Photo courtesy of the Columbus Museum of Art.



Figure 5 Museum visitors were empowered to document and respond to the hidden mysteries of the museum by artist Caitlin Lynch and The Center for Lacunal Inquiry during the Connector Series. Photo courtesy of the Columbus Museum of Art.

Reimagining Art Education

As our practice has changed and become more intentional, our thoughts and beliefs about art education have also been impacted. In the past, when a Claude Monet exhibition was on display, we taught our students about Monet, demonstrated his techniques and allowed them to experiment with those techniques. Although this approach to art museum education programming is standard in the field, we realized that we were not pushing students to think like artists, to question their world like Monet, challenge the popular and safe thinking of their time, like Monet did. Students may have been engaged and satisfied, but just because they were creating something does not mean they were being creative.

The analogy we began to use to explain why our old programming no longer met our goals was to compare it to a LEGO kit. In assembling a LEGO kit, you practice perseverance, following directions, and self-correction — all good things to learn, but not creativity. But once the model is broken and the direction booklet is lost then those LEGOs have the potential for creativity. (Of course, this concept has been popularized by *The LEGO Movie*.)

The art education model we practiced at the museum may have met many needs: art appreciation, art exposure, developing perseverance, craft, and observation. But through evaluation and reflection we came to realize that we were neglecting idea development, play, ambiguity, and transdisciplinary research. We were not teaching for creativity. These realizations were upsetting but also liberating. We stopped offering programs that “museums are supposed to do” in favor of programs that would intentionally help our visitors and participants question and think for themselves. Our job has become helping them wonder, to tease out what they care deeply about, to challenge them with provocations and be the encouraging voice when they tried something new, took a risk, and even failed. We act as artist mentors and coaches to help them realize their ideas. Our outcomes became focused on questioning and idea development. Gone are outcomes focused in appreciating art or art museums, art historical content, technique development, and aesthetics.

Three Leaders for Change

The Columbus Museum of Art is a model for articulating social mission and intentionally working to make impact around that vision. In reflecting on my role and work, I realized the full extent of my evolving position when I heard David Perkins of Harvard’s Project Zero talk about leadership that supports change. Perkins makes a case that when change is at play we actually need three types of leaders to ensure success.¹⁵ I had become the conceptual or visionary leader — the person asking the big questions, formulating the plan, and thinking about the structure, function and evaluation of the work. Staff within the education department, in particular Jessimi Jones, Rachel Trinkley, and Merilee Mostov, had become the practical visionaries or the people responsible for implementing the work.¹⁶ And Nannette, our director, was the political visionary or the person who is advancing the work in the larger community, making connections and providing support at a higher level. Our ability to make change was in large part due to diversifying the role of leadership, and with that change has come a vibrant twenty-first-century community institution and redefined public value.

Notes

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About the Author

Cindy Meyers Foley is the Executive Assistant Director and Director of Learning and Experience at the Columbus Museum of Art. Since arriving in 2006, Foley has worked to reimagine the CMA as a twenty-first-century institution that is intentional, transformative, and participatory. Led by her vision, the CMA developed a strategic approach to learning that cultivates, champions, and celebrates creativity. In 2011, the CMA opened an 18,000-square-foot Center for Creativity as a catalyst for discovery through captivating spaces and engaging experiences.

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