



MUSEUM
EDUCATION
ROUNDTABLE

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Author Interview

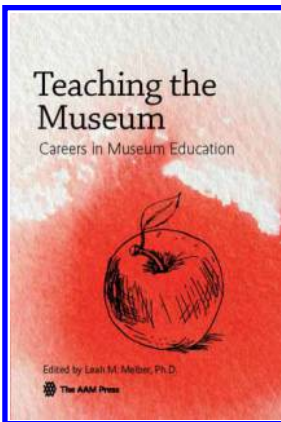
***Teaching the Museum:
Careers in Museum Education***

edited by Leah M. Melber

interview by Susan B. Spero

Teaching the Museum: Careers in Museum Education, by Leah M. Melber

Susan B. Spero



160 pages. The American Alliance of Museums Press. 2014. \$29.25 (paper). ISBN 978-1-933253-92-3.

Teaching the Museum: Careers in Museum Education offers valuable advice to museum professionals at all points in their careers. The book contains personal essays by museum educators from a variety of international institutions. Each author portrays a career-changing situation and reveals lessons learned that shine a light on real-life job struggles and successes. In May I talked with author and editor, Leah Melber, Senior Director, Hurvis Center for Learning Innovation and Collaboration at the Lincoln Park Zoo.

Susan: Your introduction in *Teaching the Museum* delightfully tells the inspiration for this book—that you wanted to capture those bits of professional advice often caught in casual conversation during a car ride or over a drink. Once inspired, how did you guide the development of the book? How did you select the voices?

Leah: When I got the idea it literally was in the middle of the night when I was jetlagged in a hotel room in India. My thought at that point was to send an invitation to all of the colleagues who I find interesting for a variety of reasons. I sent out my ideas and then waited to see who would get back to me. I think that while half of the battle is identifying people who have something to say, the other half is finding someone who is eager to say something, and who looks forward to sharing his or her thoughts and wisdom. That natural process helped self-select who was as excited about the project as myself.

After that, I started looking at who had responded positively and identified any missing holes. Did I have a variety of types of institutions? Did I have a variety of geographic locations? When I saw a hole, I solicited those who had not responded and also applied a little more pressure to some who needed encouragement, or reached out to people I did not think of when I sent that initial email. I did this particularly for the international voices. While the book flows as a whole, a reader can also pick out an essay by a recognized name, or perhaps by the type of institution an author represents.

I also wanted some practical elements such as when Sarah Marcotte discusses getting involved in our professional communities. I was hoping the essays would be relevant for professionals at a variety of levels, so not just advice for the brand-new professional but also for someone who has been in it for just a few years and still is looking for inspiration. Likewise, there are discussions of going to graduate school, as well as about considering jobs that initially might not seem like the right match. The book looks at many different things that can be helpful at all career levels.

Susan: How did you settle on your structure of the four sections: Climbing the Ladder; Doing Your Best; When Obstacles Arise; and Looking Forward?

Leah: When we got to a point where I had a workable set, I asked everyone for either a summary or the first opening paragraph. Once I had the short paragraphs I looked at how they might fit together: I did not want to dictate to anyone what they needed to say. Generally the voices that came out fell into the book's current arrangement.

Susan: How did you work with the authors to get their stories?

Leah: When I decided to do an edited volume, it was specifically because I had great faith that the authors' stories would be dynamic because they are all at such different places in their careers. The variety came from selecting a pretty diverse group of individuals that I had connected to in various ways: some I knew more professionally, and some more personally. And those relationships also impacted the type of stories they told, either because of the ways that we had known each other or some of the conversations we might have had over the years.

I shared my story as a sample right up front. I think that also helped the authors see that if I was willing to be vulnerable they might be too, I modeled that I wanted them to start with the advice, start with the story, start with what happened. What makes them think in certain ways? Then they could go into some of the background, tie in pedagogical theory or just stay with their personal experience. As you read the essays some of them

have very provocative first and second sentences. That is what grabs readers: they are having a conversation. This book is for those who perhaps already have plenty of academic books on the bookshelf and want something a little lighter — something that is going to be helpful to their career in a different way.

Susan: Some of the stories are so riveting because they ring true with what happens on the ground. More than anything I find this book to be about those critical soft skills so essential to working in a museum. You've gathered great examples: from evaluator Beverly Serrell openly writing about how she managed being fired from the Shed Aquarium; to California Association of Museums Celeste DeWald's frank discussion on making mistakes and the value of honestly admitting them. Did you have soft skills in mind when you crafted the book?

Leah: The book is 100 percent intentionally trying to address soft skills. In the totality of my career, I have seen individuals' significant success because of their mastery of those soft skills. In particular, it is being able to work with a variety of personalities—which we know informal learning institutions are famous for—be it an academic curator, a comptroller, or CEO. For me, being able to successfully navigate socially and emotionally within the museum world is what takes someone from being good to great in the field. This is something that is very challenging to teach, and when people come to me for advice, it is usually around those soft skill ideas. In my experience, advice-seeking rarely concerns topics that can be academically obtained elsewhere. I decided that I could keep talking to advice-seekers, or I could figure out a way for all of us to put together something that would reach a broader cross-section of our field.

Susan: What surprised you about the advice you collected?

Leah: There were definitely things that came out that surprised me a little bit and that is part of the benefit of having multiple voices, as opposed to perhaps just me writing an advice book which I felt would be very short sided, and very one-dimensional. The candor at which people shared some of their challenging situations was something that surprised me. I was hoping authors would be that vulnerable, yet I was surprised at how willing they were to really say it like it is.

Susan: Not only have you gathered seasoned voices, but you also have included afterword articles for each section written by emerging professionals.

Leah: I wanted a group of diverse writers so that all readers can see themselves in what they are reading. As I was reviewing it, I realized there is a lot of advice from more seasoned professionals, but I did not want the book to become another seminar. I wanted there to be a bit more give-and-take

which is hard to have in a book format. I identified four emerging professionals to reflect on what they took away from reading each of the sections of articles. These reflections make the book more relevant to those in graduate programs who want to take a break from the academic journals and read something that might further their career in a different way. Emerging professionals perspectives highlight that this isn't only what senior staff think is helpful, but rather that this advice is timely and relevant for this next generation of professionals.

Susan: How do you see *Teaching the Museum* within the stream of museum career-and-work-focused publications, such as Wendy Luke and Greg Stevens' *A Life in Museums: Managing Your Museum Career*?

Leah: When I initially approached Greg Stevens to participate he let me know that his project was in the works, and I then asked him to contribute something that would not conflict. He submitted his article for *Teaching the Museum* reflecting on what he calls his "career lifetimes" a phrase that captures his successive career path. I knew my book could be a complementary work to the book he coauthored with Wendy Luke. Theirs is more generalized, academic, and far reaching while mine contains more individualized voices.

Susan: Any final thoughts?

Leah: It's up to readers to identify the voices in the book that most resonate for them, and then pull the advice that they feel is most relevant for their work. For example, my contribution, "Say yes and figure it out later" is a method that works for me and it might work for people who have a similar work style as myself. For others, that advice may not be the right choice. They might realize that their personality is better attuned to some of the other chapters.

Lastly, I'd like to encourage seasoned professionals to be inspired to share their own advice because I can guarantee every single person reading this book is going to have his or her own story to tell, that is just as riveting and just as engaging. On the flip side, don't be afraid to ask someone for additional advice outside of what is in a textbook. Wherever readers are in their careers, I think they can bring their professional development to the next level by using their networking abilities.

About the Interviewer

Professor Susan Spero teaches Museum Studies at the John F. Kennedy University in Berkeley, California. Her classes focus on learning theory, programming and planning, as well as museums interactive technologies. She has produced interpretive and curriculum projects for multiple institutions in the San Francisco Bay area. She

currently serves on the board of the Museum Education Roundtable that publishes the *Journal of Museum Education*, and on the Communications Committee of the Western Museums Association. Her M.A. and Ph.D. are awarded from The Ohio State University.

MUSEUM EDUCATION ROUNDTABLE

Together - Realizing Connections on the Pathways to Best Practices

Journal of Museum Education Reader Guide

Author Interview

Teaching the Museum: Careers in Museum Education

Edited by Leah M. Melber | Interview by Susan B. Spero

As museum educators we know the value and benefits of reflective practice, yet we rarely make time to develop this habit of mind due to the pressing needs of our day-to-day work. Inspired by the *JME* interview by Susan B. Spero with Leah M. Melber on museum education careers, the questions below are intended to help foster your own individual reflection as well as dialogue among museum colleagues.

Discussion Questions:

1. What inspired you to get involved in the museum education field? Was there one crystal clear moment that led you in this direction or did you come to the field in an unconventional way?
2. Recall a childhood memory or memorable experience in a museum, zoo, or aquarium. How does that experience influence your current practice philosophically or practically?
3. Is there someone who has made a significant impact on your career in museums and if so what influence did they have?
4. What resources help you stay informed and engaged in the latest developments in museum education and other fields?
5. What are some of your unique attributes and strengths and how do they support and enhance your work?
6. What have you found to be most rewarding about your work? What is an accomplishment in your museum education career of which you are particularly proud? Why?

continued

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“Teaching the Museum: Careers in Museum Education, by Leah M. Melber” author interview by Susan B. Spero is published in the *Journal of Museum Education* v.39 n.3.

7. What have you found to be the greatest challenges in your work as a museum educator?
How has failure informed your choices?
8. What role does risk-taking play in your day-to-day work or your career path?
9. In your current position, what is your personal mission? How do you teach by example and live your mission on a daily basis?
10. What are your goals and aspirations for the future? What skills or experiences do you feel you need to develop in order to advance your career and take on a leadership role in your institution and/or in the field?

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For Further Reading:

Perspectives on Professional Reading

from Jeanne Vergeront's *Museum Notes* blog:

<http://museumnotes.blogspot.com/2014/08/perspectives-on-professional-reading.html>

What does a museum educator do? (And do we need them?)

from Rebecca Herz's *Museum Questions* blog:

<http://museumquestions.com/2014/07/23/what-does-a-museum-educator-do-and-do-we-need-them/>

The Changing Role of Museum Educators: A Conversation

from Gretchen Jennings' *Museum Commons* blog:

<http://www.museumcommons.com/2014/08/doshould-museum-educators-conversation.html>

Childhood Museum Memories and Adult Visitation: does museum type matter?

from Reach Advisors' *Museum Audience Insight* blog:

http://reachadvisors.typepad.com/museum_audience_insight/2010/12/childhood-museum-memories-and-adult-visitation-does-museum-type-matter.html

Gretchen Dietrich: On Museum Learning

from the Association of Art Museum Directors *From the Field* blog:

<https://aamd.org/our-members/from-the-field/gretchen-dietrich-on-museum-learning>

How I Got Here

from Nina Simon's *Museum 2.0* blog:

<http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2010/11/how-i-got-here.html>

"What We Do Best: Making the Case for Museum Learning in its Own Right"

by Ben Garcia from v.37 n.2 issue of the *Journal of Museum Education*:

<http://museumeducation.info/wp-content/uploads/2012/06/jme.v37.n2.FREE.pdf>

A Life in Museums: Managing Your Museum Career

Greg Stevens and Wendy Luke, Editors

<https://www.aam-us.org/ProductCatalog/Product?ID=182>

Teaching the Museum: Careers in Museum Education

Leah M. Melber, Editor

<https://www.aam-us.org/ProductCatalog/Product?ID=4506>

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