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Visitor to Visitor Learning:

Setting Up Open-Ended Inquiry in an Unstaffed Space

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Visitor to Visitor Learning: Setting Up Open-Ended Inquiry in an Unstaffed Space

by Phillippa Pitts

The work of museum educators shines when it applies sound learning theory and pedagogy to practice. Phillippa Pitts' article, "Visitor to Visitor Learning: Setting Up Open-Ended Inquiry in an Unstaffed Space," offers readers creative, reflective, and practical examples of unstaffed, visitor-centered activities that are grounded within theoretical frameworks from the beginning. This work takes place in the Portland Museum of Art (PMA); however, the activities that have been developed use approaches that are accessible and transferable to all kinds of institutions.

Pitts sets the stage for her work with this statement from adult learning pioneer Malcolm Knowles, "At the heart of education is learning, not teaching, and so our focus has started to shift from what the teacher does to what happens to the learners" (p. 306).

As she acknowledges, the idea of a learner-centered approach stretches back to the work of early learning theorists, such as Vygotsky, "who articulated learning as a co-constructed process of social interaction and emphasized the value of proximal peers as coaches and collaborators," (p. 306) but it also links to contemporary work. Specifically, Pitts draws from 1) the more recent pedagogy of John Falk, 2) teaching practices such as Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), a process which draws visitors into artworks using their own observations, and 3) the "seven criteria for designing family-friendly interactive exhibits" developed by the Philadelphia/Camden Informal Science Education Collaborative (PISEC): multi-sided, multi-user, accessible, multi-outcome, multi-modal, readable, and relevant.

She describes three unstaffed "workshops" in the article:

- A coloring book wall (Fig. 1/p. 307), which invited visitors to test how color provides information to a landscape scene, offering clues as to the place, time, season, weather, and mood.
- A flock of bird sculptures (Fig. 2/p. 308), created using only crumpled newsprint and paper tape in a variety of patterns.
- A web of ideas (Fig. 3/p. 309), where visitors to picked up coffee-stained cards and sharde with others what they saw.

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As Pitts illustrates, the creations of the visitors dominate the space, making for an egalitarian environment defined equally by staff and visitors. "Although museum staff design each prompt, material set, and installation, the emphasis unmistakably rests on visitors' creations" (p. 308).

All the activities explore a single question with prompts that "conspicuously lack a right answer" (p. 307) but are carefully scaffolded with clear, simple directions. For the Bird Sculptures, for example, the directions were "Shape, tape and decorate" (p. 311).

This Reader Guide invites us to reflect on and discuss the following as a way to consider how Pitts' work intersects with our own practice as museum educators.

You can **access the article online** through our publishing partner Taylor & Francis's *Journal of Museum Education* web page.

Questions for Discussion

1. Are there already examples of facilitated "workshop" spaces in your institutions? How could you leverage those kinds of spaces to develop unstaffed interactions among visitors?
2. PMA incorporated design principals based on the research for creating family-friendly spaces. What design elements do you use to draw in your broadest audiences?
3. These workshops were scaffolded with specific criteria to help visitors creatively engage with the given prompt. They were: 1) to offer questions with fewer choices, 2) to use familiar materials and 3) to have clear and creative constraints.

Discuss the productive tension between creating effective frames/constraints and designing open-ended activities.

4. What are some of the challenges you have faced or might face with an unstaffed, participatory, and hands-on gallery experience?
5. The PMA chose to deliberately call these activities "workshops." What name do you currently use, and what other names can you brainstorm to describe these kinds of activities?
6. What are or might be some of the logistical challenges to maintaining these kinds of gallery activities?
7. Given the open-ended nature of these activities, each new workshop was extensively prototyped. In what ways, if any, do you try out new work before it becomes available to the public?

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8. To evaluate the effectiveness of their workshops, the PMA collected data about the following:
- Time on task
 - Comments/conversation relating to lived experiences
 - Engagements/exchanges within visitor group
 - Engagements/exchanges with unaffiliated visitors
 - The range of ways visitors explored the given prompt

In what ways, if any, has your institution assessed gallery activities? If you have not, in what ways might similar assessments be implemented into some of your gallery activities?