

Journal of Museum Education

READER GUIDE

Volume 23, 2020

The Influence of Progressivism and the Works Progress Administration on Museum Education

Carissa DiCindio and Callan Steinmann

Reader Guide by:

Mariruth Leftwich & Naomi Ostwald Kawamura

With contributions by:

The MER Editorial Team

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

On the first page of this issue, the *Journal of Museum Education*'s assistant editor, Nathaniel Prottas, poses the question, "Where does the history museum education begin?," and while that is an important question, the larger question we can consider with this issue and reader guide article is, why does the history of museum education matter?

Examining the field through the lens of historical understanding allows us to be reflective of our roots, understand the paths forged before us, and articulate how our work today remains shaped and connected to the work of our predecessors, while shaping our relevance today. Given the nature of the historical journey laid out in this issue, it is helpful to consider how skills for understanding history can be used as a tool to maximize the impact of the articles. Historical thinking approaches can be used across disciplines as critical appraisal devices, prompting foundational questions to be asked that build knowledge, understanding, and connections from sources.

Dr. Peter Seixas (University of British Columbia) introduced an approach to history education which centers on six historical thinking concepts: establish historical significance, use evidence, identify continuity and change, analyze cause and consequence, take historical perspectives, and understand the ethical dimension. These concepts are useful tools through which museum educators might approach the teaching and learning of the past.

This Reader Guide will draw from the "Big Six" Historical Thinking concepts to reflect on this most recent article, focusing on the notion of "Continuity and Change." How can we make sense of the complex flows of history? Specifically for this article, how might we see aspects of the Works Progress Administration affect profound change in the area of museum education that we see today? Or are there aspects of our field that seem relatively unchanged? Seixas offers what he terms "guideposts" to further unpack each concept. We've included these here for "Continuity and Change":

Guidepost 1: Continuity and change are interwoven: both can exist together. Chronologies—the sequencing of events—can be a good starting point.

(continued)

Guidepost 2: Change is a process, with varying paces and patterns. Turning points are moments when the process of change shifts in direction or pace.

Guidepost 3: Progress and decline are broad evaluations of change over time. Depending on the impacts of change, progress for one people may be decline for another.

Guidepost 4: Periodization helps us organize our thinking about continuity and change. It is a process of interpretation, by which we decide which events or developments constitute a period of history.

Reader Guide Discussion Questions

Guidepost 1: *Chronologies can be a good starting point*

- The authors suggest that the events of the 1930s made the educational role of the museum more prominent. What series of events impacted the museum field?
- The Works Progress Administration was considered “temporary relief.” How did museums respond when these funds and programs ceased in the 1940s?

Guidepost 2: *Turning points are moment when the process of change shifts*

- The authors state that the WPA shifted the mission of art museums and arts museum education “toward reaching culturally and socio-economically diverse American audiences” (p.354). In what ways was this a shift from previous views?
- Was the Works Progress Administration a “turning point” for museum education?

Guidepost 3: *Progress and decline are broad evaluations of change over time*

- How big a step forward was the WPA, or was it a series of big and little steps?
- Change and progress are not synonymous. Did the changes during the WPA era promote long-term progress in the field of museum education?

Guidepost 4: *Decide which events or developments constitute a period of history*

- If the era of the WPA is one of progressivism, how would you describe the eras since that time? Are they distinctly different because of historical events or is there any continuity with the ideas of progressivism?
- Do you think that museums are always inherently shaped by the historical events of that time or was there something unique about the WPA that impacted the museum field?

Concluding Questions

- The authors believe that the “call for museums to demonstrate their worth to the public . . . is particularly resonant today.” In what ways do you think the story of the WPA is resonant for contemporary museum educators?
- How, if at all, has the Works Progress Administration changed the role of museums into the 21st Century?

(continued)

References

Seixas, P. (2006). *What is historical consciousness?* In R. Sandwell (Ed) *To the Past: History Education, Public Memory, & Citizenship in Canada*.

Seixas, P. (2017), A model of historical thinking, *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, 49(6), 593-605.

Seixas, P. & Morton, T. (2013). *The big six historical thinking concepts*. Toronto: Nelson Education.



Get the JME. Join MER!

The Journal of Museum Education is published by the Museum Education Roundtable.

We rely on your membership and support to continue producing the high quality scholarship used by museum educators to transform the field through learning, community building, and innovative practice.

Join MER today at
www.museumedu.org

Your membership includes 4 issues and access to online content including the full 44 volume JME archive.

MER is a volunteer-run, non-profit organization that inspires innovative thinking for the field through engagement with scholarly and practice-based content explored in the Journal of Museum Education.

 **MUSEUM
EDUCATION
ROUNDTABLE**
KNOWLEDGE IN ACTION™



**Is there a topic related
to museum education
that interests you?**

**Is there a museum
education issue that
needs to be addressed?**



*If so, consider making a proposal to
guest-edit a themed section of JME.*

Guest editors:

- Develop a thesis and identify perspectives that explore it.
- Invite authors and work with them to cultivate their ideas. Articles are peer-reviewed in a double-blind process.
- Write an introduction that introduces the theme and frames the articles.

JME editors work with guest editors to develop ideas and support authors.

Learn more at:

www.museumedu.org/submissions

or contact the editors at:

jmuseed@gmail.com

JOURNAL OF

MUSEUM EDUCATION