

Chapter 6

Cooperation, Collaboration, Challenge: How to Work with the Changing Nature of Educational Audiences in Museums

Lynda Kelly and Pauline Fitzgerald

Staff at the Australian Museum have worked with Susan Groundwater-Smith since 2003. A chance encounter at an educational research conference at the University of Technology, Sydney, marked the beginning of a most productive, rewarding and fun partnership with Susan. Beginning with work on our own professional development as we were challenged to think about our own pedagogical practices, through to embracing the voice of students and educators has meant that the Museum continues to provide valued learning experiences for a whole range of audiences that visit our physical and online sites. Susan has been instrumental in this shift, always providing a high level of intellectual stimulation and challenge for Museum staff, along with a range of techniques and ideas that we still use in our own creative workshops today. As well, Susan has become a much valued and loved friend and mentor to many of our current and former staff members.

Since the publication of George Hein's seminal work, *Learning in the Museums* (Hein 1998), museums have endeavoured to provide constructivist learning experiences for educational audiences. However, the nature of contemporary educational practice has necessitated that museums develop deeper and more sustained relationships with their audiences which, by doing so, presents many challenges for museums. A key component of this change is the need for ongoing and sustained consultation in an equal, respectful and two-way relationship, where both the audience and the museum are transformed in some way. This represents a major shift for both museums and museum professionals, many of whom have long been used to a one-to-many relationship with their audiences, rather than the many-to-many model currently being championed by a range of museum thinkers (Cameron and Kelly 2010; Freedman 2000; Heumann Gurian 2010; Russo et al. 2008).

L. Kelly (✉)
The Australian Museum, Sydney, Australia
e-mail: lynda.kelly@austmus.gov.au

Background: Museum Learning and Audience Research

A large range of people visit museums: from the very young to the very old; and across different groups: families, friends, schools, couples. Museums are exciting places for visitors as they tell stories about the objects they hold and the research they undertake in a variety of ways. Museums are unique contexts for learning, often called ‘free-choice’ learning environments (Falk and Dierking 2000). Museums have the opportunity to shape identities—through access to objects, information and knowledge, visitors can see themselves and their culture reflected in ways that encourage new connections, meaning making and learning. Museums have developed from being repositories of knowledge and objects to having a ‘...multifaceted, outward looking role as hosts who invite visitors inside to wonder, encounter and learn’ (Schauble et al. 1997, p. 3). Falk and Dierking (2000, p. 225) suggested that museums ‘...need to be understood and promoted as integral parts of a society-wide learning infrastructure’ as they are an important part of a broader educational environment and complement other forms of learning. Museums are considered to be informal learning environments (Falk 2004; Hein 1998; Kelly 2007), described as ‘...self-directed, voluntary, and guided by individual needs and interests—learning that we will engage in throughout our lives’ (Falk and Dierking 2002, p. 9).

Museums have always seen themselves as having an educational role with the earliest museums founded on the premise of ‘education for the uneducated masses’ (Bennett 1995), ‘cabinets of curiosities’ (Weil 1995) established to ‘...raise the level of public understanding...to elevate the spirit of its visitors...to refine and uplift the common taste’ (Weil 1997, p. 257). More recently, there has been a conceptual change from thinking about museums as places of education to places for learning, responding to the needs and interests of visitors (Bradburne 1998; Cameron and Kelly 2010; Falk 2004; Falk and Dierking 2000; Kelly 2007). Weil (1999) stated that museums need to transform themselves from ‘...being *about* something to being *for* somebody’ (p. 229, emphasis in original).

Audience research is a discipline of museum practice that provides information about visitors and non-visitors to museums and other cultural institutions, influencing the ways museums think about and meet the needs of their audiences and stakeholders. Audience research is also a strategic management tool that provides data to assist museums more effectively plan and develop exhibitions and programmes; to meet their corporate goals; and to learn as organisations. McManus (1991, p. 35) pointed out that ‘...audience evaluation is fundamental to all aspects of museum planning. If changes are to be made in any avenue of institutional endeavour they need to be informed by a comprehensive description of the audience and its likely behaviour’.

Over the past 15–20 years, increasing emphasis has been placed on research into museum learning and visitor experiences across a range of audience groups. This paralleled the move towards a body of research that is more qualitatively based, answering complex questions, rather than quantitatively focussed on narrow organisa-

tional problems (Kelly 2005). The Australian Museum¹ has been active in audience research for over 15 years, and is considered a world leader in this area. Over the past seven years, in response to a variety of internal staffing changes and new exhibitions coupled with external pressures to provide more visitor-centred experiences, the Australian Museum has developed an ethos where consulting young visitors is considered an integral part of its audience research practice through developing networks and partnerships with these audiences (Kelly 2005; Kelly et al. 2002; Kelly and Groundwater-Smith 2009), primarily via the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools (Groundwater-Smith and Kelly 2010).

Why consult young people? It is increasingly understood that young people, in order to productively participate in social and academic life, need to be active agents in that life. Unlike the adults who surround them today's young people have been born into a digital world. They know it, they understand it and they can navigate within it. The emergence of Web 2.0² now means that individuals have more control over how, where and when they learn and consult a wide range of information sources in their own time and space (Kelly and Russo 2010). Old models of teaching and telling are no longer sufficient. As Cornu (2004) has observed in relation to schools, knowledge is now networked and requires an understanding of a collective intelligence over and above individual enterprise. The internet, and more specifically Web 2.0 has opened up a whole new way of engaging audiences, with social media³ now giving access to people—where those with common interests can meet, share ideas and collaborate. Seely Brown and Adler (2008, p. 18) feel that the most profound impact of the internet is '...its ability to support and expand the various aspects of social learning' and therefore, the ability to solve problems together (Kelly and Russo 2010).

The same holds true for museums, which have such a vital role to play in developing enjoyable and engaging learning among their visitors. Young people can provide legitimate insights into the educational enterprises that are designed for them, whether these be within or outside schools; in real time or in the digital space. It is generally agreed that improvement in engagement can come about when the views

¹ The Australian Museum, Sydney, was established in 1827 and is Australia's (and one of the world's) oldest natural history and anthropological museums. The mission of the Australian Museum is 'Inspiring the exploration of nature and cultures.' The primary functions of the Museum are to make information, collections and research available to a wide range of audiences through undertaking scientific research and managing a vast range of collections in the areas of zoology, mineralogy, palaeontology and anthropology. As well, public communication and learning through physical exhibitions, public programmes, publishing, regional outreach and online delivery of services are ways the Museum communicates with a wide variety of audiences. Annually, the Museum attracts between 250,000 and 400,000 visitors to the College Street site and over 15 million visitors to the website <http://australianmuseum.net.au/>. Accessed 30 April 2010.

² 'The term "Web 2.0" (2004–present) is commonly associated with web applications that facilitate interactive information sharing, interoperability, user-centred design and collaboration on the World Wide Web.' http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Web_2.0. Accessed 30 April 2010.

³ 'Social media is a term for the tools and platforms people use to publish, converse and share content online. The tools include blogs, wikis, podcasts, and sites to share photos and bookmarks.' <http://socialmedia.wikispaces.com/A-Z+of+social+media>. Accessed 30 April 2010.

of young people are systematically collected and interrogated (Falk and Dierking 2000; Piscitelli and Anderson 2001). When we consult young people and treat them seriously, whether designing the learning spaces, the organisation of the learning, or the learning experiences, it is possible to develop a product or process that will have greater relevance for them and one with which they will wish to engage. Designing for learning must not only relate to re-conceptualising places and spaces when developing or redeveloping facilities and programmes, but equally importantly, re-examining old and sometimes ‘tired’ learning environments (Groundwater-Smith and Kelly 2010). Paradoxically it is the case that young people are rarely consulted and, as a result, learning experiences are often designed *for* them and not *with* them.

What is sought is a consultative model that is flexible and responsive and accounts for the various technological convergences, new knowledge and better understanding of an interactive pedagogy (Valenti 2002). Designing for positive learning outcomes is currently being led by those who are challenging the conventions that are institution-centric and turning to those that are learner-focussed. This chapter presents a snapshot of the groundbreaking work of the Australian Museum, in partnership with Susan Groundwater-Smith and the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools, who have been working together since 2003 in consulting and collaborating with a range of educational audiences, including both young people and teachers. A key component of this work was the close involvement of Museum staff, who have now taken on board many of the techniques, as well as the mindset developed through this partnership, when consulting with other audiences.

The Genesis of the Partnership: *As We See It: Improving Learning at the Museum*

In 2003, Museum management in consultation with public programme staff decided to review the kinds of learning experiences being offered, focussing on questions such as how visitors make, or not make, meaning from the objects that are displayed, the forms of display, the accompanying text (whether print or digital), the physical settings and staff who are available to provide assistance of one kind or another. From these questions the study *As We See It: Improving Learning at the Museum* was conceived to engage both Museum staff and young people in a process to reflect on ways current Museum practices impact on their learning.

This study was the first project undertaken between the Museum and the Coalition, and consisted of two phases. The first, focussing on the Museum’s own practices, involved a range of education and interpretive staff gathering photographic images which they felt assisted or inhibited visitor learning in the Museum. Their images were collated as posters which conceptually linked the images and provided additional text that acted as signposts for the viewer. A series of discussions and workshops were held with staff participants to share reflections and come to a collective understanding of what an ideal learning experience could look like from the Museum’s perspective. In the second phase, students from a range of schools from

the Coalition visited the Museum and were given disposable cameras to document what they felt helped and hindered their learning. The students also made posters which they then presented to Museum staff at a series of visits undertaken to their respective schools.

This phase of the project was considered so useful and engaging for Museum staff that further collaborations followed over the next few years. These consultations came to be known as *Kids' Colleges* and, to date, three have been held—exhibition development (2006), digital learning (2007) and climate change (2008), with a *Teachers' College* held in 2009. As the first two colleges have been described elsewhere (see Kelly and Groundwater-Smith 2009; Groundwater-Smith and Kelly 2010), this chapter will focus on later projects, as well as a reflection about how the Museum has applied the principles underlying *Kids' Colleges* to a different context.

2008 Climate Change *Kids' College*

The Museum's third *Kids' College* was held in December 2008 and was designed to gain an insight into the understandings and perspectives held by young people around the issues of climate change and sustainability. The information elicited informed the development of the Museum's *Climate Change: Our Future Our Choice* exhibition on show at the Museum from May to August 2009 (and currently at Sci-Tech, Western Australia).

Twenty-two students from eight schools in the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools network participated in the consultation, along with a range of Museum staff including education officers, audience researchers, exhibition planners, designers and scientists. The participants spent a full day at the Museum, with activities undertaken including the following:

- An outline of exhibition development to date.
- Voting for an exhibition title.
- Cloud storm answering the question: *When you hear the words climate change what words, thoughts, images spring to mind?*
- Sharing a pre-event task asking a parent, a teacher, a younger child and a friend: *What are your questions about climate change?*
- Testing interactives planned for the exhibition.
- Visiting a Museum scientist in their workspace to learn about their area of research.
- Creating a two-minute news story on an issue relating to climate change.
- Discussion of how individual schools are addressing issues of climate change.
- Exploration of the understanding of a carbon footprint.
- Fact finding: *What have you heard about climate change at a local, national and international level and what are your information sources?*
- Writing a postcard to a politician and a message to the Museum.

For Museum staff, participating in this event provided an invaluable insight into the interests and expectations of young people who may visit this exhibition. The power of hearing first hand could not be overstated, and Museum staff achieved a greater awareness of the knowledge and understanding that young people have regarding the challenging issue of climate change. The opportunity to test some of the exhibition components allowed for adjustments to be made and the best possible options delivered across a wide range of audiences, not just young people. The input of participating students informed the development of the exhibition reflecting the importance attached to the contribution of young people to Museum exhibitions and programmes. Significantly, one of the participating students now writes the *Cut the Carbon*⁴ blog on the 'Climate Change' section of the Museum's website.

Feedback from the students about the day was very positive. They clearly enjoyed and appreciated the opportunity to express their ideas in a respectful, attentive environment, as illustrated in the following comments:

Everything you are doing is great. I think the world leaders' game was a really good idea and it will intrigue people in the Museum. The key to help climate change is education and this is what the Museum is doing. Keep up the good ideas and work.

Great job!!! It was really cool to meet one of the scientists and go and see where everyone works and what they do. The new climate change exhibition will be a success. We all like interactive things.

Keep going with the research and the actions on trying to reduce climate change. Also I think that today was a really good idea and I think the museum should continue holding more days like today.

The *Climate Change: Our Future Our Choice* summative evaluation found that the exhibition was highly appealing to teenagers, especially the interactive and provocative elements, while providing them with new ideas for action. Feedback on the specific interactives that *Kids' College* participants helped design showed that teenagers understood the intended objectives and messages of each. Overall, teenagers surveyed considered the exhibition worth visiting, they enjoyed the experience, learned from it and would recommend it to their friends.

2009 Teachers' College

As a key audience group and decision-maker in museum visiting, teachers have often been overlooked in audience research, yet their role in the visit is critical (Griffin 2004, 2007; Robins and Woollard 2003). Studies of how teachers both view their role in a museum visit and how they engage with students have found some tension between these two functions (Griffin 2007). Teachers often feel out of their comfort zone and focus on the logistics of the actual visit, rather than on student learning.

⁴ <http://australianmuseum.net.au/Cut-the-Carbon/>. Accessed 30 April 2010.

As Griffin (2007, p. 39) notes: ‘The major issues with regards to teachers’ facilitation of learning in museums are the overriding sense of stress over organisational and management issues and the lack of understanding of the appropriate pedagogical approaches.’ Similar issues were found in a study of art and design teachers in London, where the teachers ‘often perceived a distinct change in their role when they took students to museums and galleries...characterised as moving away from the teaching activities of the classroom (demonstrative, informative, activity-based) toward more passive and organisational roles (supervisory, observational, pastoral)’ (Robins and Woollard 2003, p. 4). Griffin (2007, p. 39) recommended that ‘The best pathway may be to develop closer collaboration between teachers and museum educators.’

Given the considerable usefulness of previous *Kids’ Colleges*, the engagement of Museum staff in the process, and a desire to develop a deeper relationship with teachers, a decision was made to offer teachers from the Coalition an opportunity to participate in a *Teachers’ College* in November 2009. Modelled on the highly successful *Kids’ College* events held over the previous four years the aim of this consultation was to explore the ways in which the Museum could contribute to the teaching and learning taking place in classrooms around New South Wales (NSW) and beyond. It was felt that by combining the riches of the Museum, both in terms of its collections and expertise, with the skills and knowledge of the participating teachers, the Museum would achieve a better understanding of the ways in which resources could be developed to enhance the teaching and learning of *both* students *and* teachers.

The format of the day was similar to previous *Kids’ Colleges* involving an intense full day programme of activities:

- Introduction to the Museum and its long history
- Sharing stories of participants’ personal Museum experiences, good and disastrous, funny and tragic
- Ranking eight statements regarding Museum learning
- Developing a shared understanding about learning in museums
- Group visits to various Museum exhibitions, programmes and collections
- Planning a learning experience and sharing the ideas developed
- Final thoughts and lessons for the Museum via sending a postcard with the title *You are the key*

Teachers responded enthusiastically to the programme and provided valuable insights into the diverse learning environments in which they operate. The day had a positive impact upon the participants and represents just the beginning of an opportunity to engage with teachers to provide the best possible learning experiences for their students. Museum staff felt that *Teachers’ College* had a positive impact upon the participants and that they had a great deal to offer in the way of advice. Staff reported that they had benefitted in terms of getting close to their audience with many of the informal conversations encouraging a broader discussion of practices than would otherwise emerge. It was also an opportunity to learn about how

the Museum could better engage teachers and students, as well as networking and making connections to enable further discussion and consultation to take place. Overall, staff felt that *Teachers' College* stimulated new ideas for programmes—because the participants came from such a range of schools and settings (from early childhood to senior secondary) they were able to identify matters that they would like to see the Museum engage with, in particular in the area of Indigenous education.

The opportunity to consult with teachers across the broad spectrum of state and independent schools, K-12 and a range of geographic locations and socio-economic circumstances was enormously valuable. To gain an insight into the daily reality of their learning environment will greatly assist the Museum in developing future learning resources that will be relevant and engaging while meet the needs of both students and teachers. These creative, enthusiastic educators eagerly offered their ideas and opinions and their passion for the Museum's potential was inspiring. The day also had a positive impact upon the participants and represents just the beginning of an opportunity to engage with teachers to provide the best possible learning experiences for their students. Some of the teachers' comments on their postcard to the Museum included the following:

Students will have a brighter future and greater opportunities to own their learning and really understand and become engaged with their learning by being able to come to the museum.

Education is the key and the Museum is a real and concrete way of making education relevant. Providing the opportunity of working with teachers collaboratively is real education.

By taking ideas from teachers (the educators) you are helping to stimulate children's development in all ages. We too are constantly learning from you, therefore we are both 'opening the door with the key' for children. Thank you.

Thank you for the wonderful experience today. The Museum is always a place of inspiration and wonder. It revs us up as educators to see just what we can do for our students and ourselves. Leaving here as excited as I arrived!

Consulting one's constituency, especially a group of peers, is always challenging. The temptation is to first inform and then consult. This can have both positive and negative outcomes. By informing it is possible to cut across misconceptions and lack of knowledge, however, it can be the case that providing a high level of information at the outset will orient participants in a particular fashion and may predetermine the outcomes. The choice in *Teachers' College* was to develop an interactive structure that would allow both functions to occur. Much information was shared through the visits to various sections of the Museum and through the interactions with Museum staff. It does seem clear that working with teachers gives an insight into the conditions within which they operate and the many competing demands that they face as they seek to provide authentic and worthwhile learning experiences for their students. In the main the Museum played the role of listener. It will now be incumbent upon it and its staff to make decisions about the ways in which the voices of teachers can inform and enhance its educational practices in developing learning power across the spectrum.

Applying Lessons from the Partnership: Pacific Cultures Consultation

Many of the principles and procedures of *Kids' Colleges* were employed when undertaking front end evaluation for a proposed new exhibition on Pacific Cultures planned for the Australian Museum. In this instance Museum staff members visited two Coalition schools while a third visited the Museum. Schools were selected on the basis of their high proportion of students with Pacific Island heritage and included a primary school, a girl's secondary school and a boy's secondary school. A focus group was also held on site for community groups.

After a brief introduction to this project outlining the Museum's intention to develop an exhibition to showcase their extraordinary collection of more than 60,000 objects from the Pacific region participants were asked to explore three key questions:

- What stories should we tell?
- Which objects from our collection should we include?
- How can we link our collection to a contemporary context?

The students were very forthright in their opinions and some of the key messages to emerge from this consultation which will need to be considered in the ongoing development of this exhibition were the strength of the connection participants have with their culture and how immersed they are in the practicing these customs. They considered this exhibition to be an opportunity for them to showcase their culture and portray themselves in a positive light. Several students made mention of the perceived negative stereotype young Pacific Islanders have in the community. For older people this exhibition was seen as a way to educate a younger generation and help them to 'hang on' to their culture, for example:

Try to get across the point to contemporary/younger Pacific Islanders that this is what they have to be proud of, that they belong to this culture whether or not they know much about it or 'practice' aspects of it. It's about connectivity, community, origins and pride.

All participants responded with overwhelming enthusiasm and provided very useful information and direction for the exhibition project team. The message that came through from all groups was one of passion for their culture and gratitude that the Museum was asking them for their advice and opinions:

Please continue to consult Pacific communities about your exhibition. We appreciate you including us in your planning and we will also ensure that our input is relevant and applicable.

Museum, thank you for being concerned about Islanders and what we have to share, including our history and how we came to be.

Thanks for coming to our school and wanting our opinion and ideas! Yay!

Once again the benefits of this experience were significant for both the Museum and the participants as demonstrated in the following quotes:

I think that this is a great idea. I believe it will make Islanders of our generation appreciate their culture more. The more the exhibition looks like their culture; there will be more of a personal impact on them.

I reckon that people who work with you should go to more schools and talk to other students and take some ideas about what could go into the Museum. Make sure when people say some cultural things, they pronounce it properly. Keep the audience happy and satisfied with the time they've spent at the museum. More awareness of the Pacific culture and customs. Thank you!

Conclusion

The relationship built with the Coalition of Knowledge Building Schools has been of great help to the Museum over a number of years and hugely rewarding for the staff that plan and participate in the events. It has provided an insight into the K-12 schools environment across NSW and allowed the Australian Museum to be truly consultative. This ongoing consultation has informed the development of exhibition spaces and programmes and helped to define the future direction of the organisation. The ongoing association between the Museum, the Coalition schools, teachers and students has been successful as the relationship has an authentic purpose and continuity. All partners take on collective responsibility through the promotion of consultation, collaboration and democratic decision making. Overall it continues to be an exercise of trust, with continued benefits to all.

For the Museum it is a privilege to share in the enthusiasm and energy of the teachers and students from participating schools. It has had a strong and positive impact on the staff members fortunate enough to be involved in these events. The organisation as a whole has benefited from having 'an ear to the ground' with students and teachers and the conditions under which they operate. The diversity of the Coalition schools allows the Museum a snapshot into the variety of learning environments facing students in NSW. The Museum has learned new ways to engage young people in exhibitions, programmes and website development processes and an appreciation of the perspectives and depth of understanding displayed by young people in their responses to these. As one staff member stated:

The idea of interactive discussions led by a table leader allowed for ideas to be shared in a comfortable atmosphere. The sense of excitement and shared passion was obvious. The teachers' loved sharing their experiences and this was supported by encouraging staff.

The teachers see the relationship as a great way to both reward some students and to develop others. For those who participated in *Teachers' College* the benefits are best summarised in their final messages to the Museum:

A place of possibilities, presentations, people and panorama. I have appreciated your openness, willingness to share and listen and your helpfulness.

Today you have provided me with a key to unlock my mind so that I can now try to unlock the hearts and minds of my students.

This experience has opened my mind and eyes to what a museum experience should be.

For the students, attending a *Kids' College* event is a very exciting opportunity. Spending time behind the scenes of the Museum interacting with the scientists is

a highlight for many. Their feedback indicates they feel welcomed, valued and respected as well as having great fun! They appreciate being listened to and their views acted on:

I had the greatest time I've ever had. I learnt so many things so that I would recommend that they continue to get together like this because it is a great idea, but there should be more than three people from each school.

...a great experience because it shows how small a creature can be while still being really significant to us. It opened up another choice of what I can do in the future.

The kids were very proud to have been involved in the day. They came back with self-esteem brimming. I printed the photo for the kids and just gave it to them. The smiles were amazing. I was still laughing at the awesome day she had. It was such a privilege for these kids to be involved in such a review; they would never have had this opportunity in their local high schools.

The reciprocal nature of the relationship is clear, as is the notion of cooperation and collaboration. However, the nature of contemporary educational practice has necessitated that museums develop deeper and more sustained relationships with their audiences which, by doing so, presents many challenges. A key component of this change is the need for ongoing and sustained consultation in an equal, respectful and two-way relationship, where both the audience and the museum are transformed in some way. The impact of the partnership with the Coalition is best illustrated through the feedback the Museum receives after hosting these events, as reported throughout this chapter. This spirit of learning together will ensure the relationship grows, deepens and continues to benefit all involved. As one student participant concluded:

The whole thing I thoroughly enjoyed! I love all of it and getting the chance to have my say. If I had to choose a favourite part of it all I would most definitely say being taken on a tour of the Museum and just being able to state our opinion with meaning.

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