

# WHAT DOES LEARNING LOOK LIKE IN A HISTORY MUSEUM?

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## **Introduction**

Perhaps one of the greatest challenges associated with understanding student learning within a history museum, rests with identifying learning itself (Wertsch, 2002). In this paper I will argue that the unique nature of out-of-school learning within a history museum requires that educators clearly identify what is meant by “learning” in such settings.

Central to this discussion is Falk and Dierking’s (2013) *Contextual Model of Learning*, which identifies four broad contexts for analysis of learning: personal, sociocultural, physical, and temporal. This model has been widely adopted by educators within museums, as a way of trying to make sense of how visitors learn in such settings. By virtue of extension, although this model is not specific to history and teaching in history museums, it can be considered broadly applicable, because it recognizes (regardless of age or discipline) that: “Learning begins with the individual. Learning involves others. Learning takes place somewhere” (Falk & Dierking, 2002, p.36), and learning continues over time (Falk & Dierking, 2013). Drawing largely upon cognitive research undertaken within science museums, educational researchers currently understand the following with regard to student learning in museums.

## **Personal Context**

A correlation exists between enjoyment and learning (Ash & Wells, 2007). Similarly, as Kydd (2005) has noted, learning in a museum is emotion-driven and motivated by pleasure. Personal factors, such as prior knowledge, interest, motivation, sociocultural beliefs, and prior experiences, will affect how visitors engage with a museum (Anderson et al., 2007). In turn, these factors are continuously shaped by the cultural institutions with which individuals come into contact, as well as by day-to-day experiences of living life (Martin, 2007). Thus, the skills and knowledge that students gain through classroom instruction ahead of time (as well as after), will contribute to their ability to learn within a history museum (Kydd, 2005). Ultimately, however, learning will be most memorable when students are given choice over what they wish to learn, and how they wish to control their learning experience (Falk & Dierking, 2013; Kydd, 2005).

## **Sociocultural Context**

While membership in a sociocultural community can be conscious or unconscious (Astor-Jack et al., 2007), the sociocultural identity of students seems

to shape what they perceive during a museum visit and what they will remember afterwards (Anderson et al., 2007). In addition, “the practice of dialogue improves the possibilities of learning” (Ash & Wells, 2007, p.3). Such dialogue involves multiple goals as well as multiple voices. As a result, the sociocultural identity that students bring to a history museum can change through dialogue, and this dialogue happens on many levels: (a) externally, between students and other visitors/teachers/tour guides; (b) socioculturally, within a student’s identity lens; and (c) internally, between the voices from the past/artifacts/curator (Astor-Jack et al., 2007; Martin, 2007). Thus, students will gain more learning benefits from dialogue, than from listening to a presentation (Kydd, 2005). Further, this dialogue can actually change the learning experience in ways that are unintended, unplanned, or would not occur otherwise (Anderson et al., 2007; Astor-Jack et al., 2007).

### **Physical Context**

Student learning is context-driven. In other words, the kind of thought processes that students engage in differs from place to place and from problem to problem (Martin, 2007). This is because learning is closely connected to the setting in which the learning takes place (Kydd, 2005; Martin, 2007). As a result, students may experience difficulty in extracting what they have learned from an in-school setting and applying it directly to an out-of-school setting. Within a history museum, however, it is the artifact collection itself, and the experience of the physical space, that will establish the focus for learning (Nakou, 2001).

### **Temporal Context**

Taking time to process information is key to remembering and establishing meaning within a museum (Kydd, 2005). In addition, what happens after the visit will effect learning elsewhere, because the tacit nature of learning is often not fully realized until much later, when the experience is combined with that of another setting (Anderson et al., 2007; Astor-Jack et al., 2007; Crowley & Jacobs, 2002; Falk & Dierking, 2013). As a result, learning within history museums must be planned out, as a series of extended visits and activities, each building upon the other, with ample time for reflection, and with each activity serving as a mediating tool for the next. (Ash & Wells, 2007; Falk & Dierking, 2013; Kydd, 2005).

### **Conclusion**

Together, these findings call for a re-thinking of history museums as much more than isolated experiences. They also necessitate an integrated approach to history education that embraces learning both inside and outside of the classroom. As complex sites of learning, history museums have the potential to provide a rich context for learning that is personal, sociocultural, physical and temporal in nature.

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**Biography**

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