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Lifelong learning in museums: a critical appraisal

Margaret O'Brien and Fiona Candlin

Museums are often considered storehouses of treasure in which museum staff research, preserve and display objects. Indeed, according to David Anderson's report *A Commonwealth: Museums in the Learning Age*, this is precisely how the majority of museums characterise themselves¹. In contrast, government policy initiatives on the role of museums in the twenty first century come as something of a shock to the system. Rather than placing the emphasis upon exhibition and collection management, current policy urges museums to develop educational programmes that focus on issues of social inclusion, life skills and employment. Yet, as we will explore in this paper, envisaging the museum as an active force in social, cultural and economic regeneration is by no means new. Here we critically examine current policy documents and compare them to earlier educational approaches at The British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum. Both these institutions have very specific histories and demonstrate the problems of making generalisations about museums as, we will later suggest, recent policy documents tend towards.

The government's agenda for museums is closely tied into the concept of the learning society. *The Learning Age* Green Paper suggests that learning gives us the opportunity to develop personal confidence, it enhances our quality of life and improves our chances of getting a job. When in work, learning provides the tools to manage technological and industrial change; it helps generate research, ideas and innovation, while in social terms it enables us to cope with the 'risk society'. In short, lifelong learning benefits individuals, businesses, communities and ultimately the nation. This learning society is essential to the economy, to a sense of social cohesion and importantly it is seen as offering a way out of dependency and low expectation².

For the government, museums have a role to play in creating this learning society. *The Learning Power of Museums* policy document suggests that while museums can provide a study resource for students in formal education they also offer great scope for informal learning. Precisely because museums are a public space wherein learning and leisure are combined they can encourage adults who find formal education too intimidating to take a first step towards lifelong learning. Moreover, the specific environment of museums has advantages in relation to learning and its wider implications. Among these are 'the special circumstance of learning in the presence of real objects (which) inspire curiosity and creative thinking'³.

Creative thinking is mentioned recurrently throughout government policy on museums and while it is perceived as having a personal benefit, it also directly contributes to the economy.

The *Learning Power* document states:

Increasingly the workplace requires people to think creatively, to apply creative thinking to complex management and technical problems and we need to provide the talent base for our creative industries – the media, the performing arts, film and design. Museums are themselves centres of creativity whose collections and exhibitions are often designed by staff trained in one of the creative industries and whose talents often inspire others working in the creative sphere or who aspire to join it.⁴

The museum experience is not intended to be an aesthetic or creative one for its own sake but has a positive role in supporting business and the workforce.

The concept of the museum as an educational institution and site for personal and social improvement refers to a history of museums' involvement with learning. David Anderson suggests that in the nineteenth century museums were much more closely integrated with the adult education sector than is the case today⁵, and similarly David Blunkett and Chris Smith note that 'many of our museums were originally created as educational organisations and we believe that more could and should be made of their great educational potential today'⁶. The potential for social engagement is further reiterated in *The Centres for Social Change* document which stated that 'many museums and galleries have a tradition of reaching across social divisions'⁷. Yet the notion of museums as agents of lifelong learning needs further interrogation. Not all museums have been wholeheartedly supportive of education and definitions of education, learning and reform remain open to question. Here we will look briefly at approaches to adult education at the Victoria and Albert Museum and The British Museum and consider their legacy in contemporary museum practice.

The South Kensington Museum (later renamed the Victoria and Albert Museum and now known as the V&A) was set up in 1857 as an instrument of mass education. In a pioneering initiative it aimed at improving public taste and developing the national provision of art and design education which was intended to keep Britain in the forefront of world manufacture and trade. The key figure in this development was Henry Cole who directed public art education from 1852 to 1873. An example of the new style civil servant - middle class, committed to public service and influenced by Utilitarian ideas Cole was committed to progress through administrative reform and education⁸.

Cole reformed the Schools of Design, a network of institutions set up by the government to provide training for artisans in industrial design. His ideas for properly trained designers and art teachers resulted in a highly mechanistic and lengthy progression involving 23 stages of

instruction. This blueprint came to be named the South Kensington system and was widely exported abroad. Integral to the system was the notion of making exact copies from the best examples of contemporary applied arts and from the great masters of the fine arts and sculpture. Cole was closely involved in setting up The Great Exhibition of 1851 and subsequently pioneered smaller exhibitions of good design and manufacture such as 'Ornamental Manufactures' at the London School that included public lectures and a catalogue giving the processes of production of each object. The Great Exhibition, effectively a celebration of industrial and imperial capitalism, both directly funded the foundation of the South Kensington Museum and had an influence upon its collections and methods of display⁹. The collections comprised of 'useful artefacts' and examples of decorative as well as fine arts. The ceramics and metalwork displays were organised by material and process, indicating that the Museum was aiming at design and craft practitioners. This method of display by material eventually structured the organisation of the museum and was widely copied in applied arts museums across the world. The purely instructional rationale for display did not, however, survive for long and the policy of acquiring good examples of contemporary design stopped with Cole's retirement. The change from collecting for teaching purposes to collecting as an end in itself was just as rapid.

Cole's approach to museums as educational agents that contribute to national standards and economic success is certainly in tune with today's thinking. Indeed his first report to the Board of Trade has resonance today:

¼ a museum presents probably the only effectual means of educating the adult, who cannot be expected to go to school like the youth, and the necessity for teaching the grown man is quite as great as that of training the child . . . If it be connected with lectures and means are taken to point out its uses and applications it becomes elevated from being a mere unintelligible lounge for idlers into an impressive schoolroom for everyone¹⁰.

Equally, the V&A's role as an educative body was substantiated in an inclusive policy towards opening which made provision for working class attendance. From its inception free entry was available to the public on three days and two evenings a week. Evening visitor numbers made up over 40% of attendance between 1857 - 1883 and were explicitly intended to encourage audiences other than the middle classes. As Cole somewhat sentimentally remarks:

In the evening, the working man comes to this museum, from his one or two dimly lighted, cheerless dwelling rooms, in his fustian jacket, with his shirt collars a little trimmed up, accompanied by his threes and fours and fives of little fustian jackets, a wife, in her best bonnet, and a baby, of course, under her shawl¹¹.

Encouraging the working classes to visit the museum was not an approach shared by all other institutions. The British Museum certainly used the rhetoric of public inclusion and education but

whether or not its claims found practical application is less evident. For example in 1816 the acquisition of the Elgin Marbles was justified in part through an appeal to the public good. J.W. Croker argued the Parthenon Sculptures would be 'for the use of the people, for the encouragement of arts, the increase of manufactures . . . to guide the exertion of the artist, the mechanic and even the labourer'¹². Similarly, the original decision of Parliament in 1753 to set up the first national secular museum had also been couched in terms of the good of society rather than the intrinsic value of the collections.

Yet despite the stipulation in the Act of Parliament which established The British Museum in 1753 that the Museum should grant 'free access to all studious and curious persons'¹³ the first 100 years of the Museum's existence was characterised by a grudging and gradualist approach to public access. It was only in 1810 that visitors were allowed to explore the collections on their own and it took until 1837 for the museum to open on public holidays. Previously, Museum trustees had resisted opening hours that would encourage the 'wrong types':

People of a higher grade would hardly wish to come to the Museum at the same time with sailors from the dock-yards and girls whom they might bring with them. I do not think such people would gain any improvement from the sight of our collections.¹⁴

To some extent this less than enthusiastic response to access was indicative of the Museum's emphasis on scholarship. For The British Museum, of which the library perhaps formed the most significant component, access meant scholarly access:

I want the poor student to have the same means of indulging his *learned* curiosity, of following his rational pursuits, of consulting the same authorities, of following the most intricate enquiry as the richest man in the kingdom ¹⁵ (our italics).

This emphasis on scholarship is still evident today. The British Museum employs well over one hundred curatorial staff who are partly engaged in aspects of research, publishing, conferences or teaching at graduate and post-graduate level. Within the Museum there is a strong sense that this is an academic institution, that the staff embody a high level of expertise and in some quarters there is anxiety that access provision might undermine these founding traditions of scholarship and the fundamental function of a museum.

Traditional scholarship can, however, inadvertently result in a certain kind of exclusivity. Academic methods of labelling and display combined with the sheer size of the collections and the grandiose architecture of the museum can create an awe inspiring rather than an educational experience. Although visitors can admire what they see, the displays do not overtly provide them with ways of accessing different levels of expertise.

The British Museum and the Victoria and Albert Museum both had and declared different educational priorities. Ostensibly New Labour's ambitions are closer to Henry Cole's but in many ways exceed them in scope. Like Cole, New Labour sees museums as supporting economic progress in (what are now called) the creative industries, but current aspirations extend to the museum as agent of social reform. As we will go on to argue this potentially involves a number of institutional tensions and historic ironies, particularly at establishments such as The British Museum.

The policy document *Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All*, suggests that 'learning can be a powerful agent in combating social exclusion by giving people the abilities, skills and confidence to engage with society'¹⁶. These forms of learning can take place outside of the classroom and museums can have a role in this process. The document continues:

Cultural activities can be pivotal to social cohesion and social change, helping generate community identity and pride, celebrate cultural and ethnic diversity and improve educational attainment. ^{1/4} Collections can be a starting point with individuals relating to objects and displays that trigger their interest, but the experience can also involve interacting with others and learning social skills, increasing motivation, developing numeracy and literacy skills and raising self esteem.¹⁷

Cultural involvement can be an end in itself but here it is perceived as a means of drawing people into a larger community, of improving their life prospects through the acquisition of skills and aptitudes. As in *The Learning Power of Museums* document, cultural activity is again conceived of as being instrumental, here as part of a larger plan for reform.

Taken to its logical conclusions the social inclusion agenda means nothing short of institutional change on a grand scale. In most cases museums have recognised this and have already implemented changes to varying degrees. Recent government policy reiterates some of the initiatives that have taken place, most notably those by the regional museums. *Centres for Social Change* suggests that museums must seek to become relevant to a wider audience. Museum staff should ask how the collections can potentially make a difference to the lives of people at risk from social exclusion, how museum services can improve this audience's quality of life and how our activities within the museum can have an impact on creating positive and social change. Recommendations include detailed access initiatives such as changing opening hours, charging systems, developing ICT access, outreach programmes, close partnership with community organisations and social services. Importantly, the policy document also suggests that exhibition and acquisition policies should reflect the cultural and social diversity of the organisations' target

and actual audience, while people at risk of social exclusion should be involved in collecting and curation at a planning level.

As we have suggested there is something of a historic irony in museums becoming the agents of social inclusion. With very few exceptions metropolitan museums have been exclusive in attitudes to their potential audiences¹⁸. More fundamentally, they have created categories of cultural value from which the majority of people are excluded. Collecting, conservation and display are not neutral activities but embody the class, gender and racial values of the historical period. Clearly then, social inclusion initiatives are not only about generating larger and more various audiences but require a re-examination of museum practices.

This kind of examination is taking place to a greater or lesser extent within different institutions. Education is gaining ground but only in relation to its previously marginalised position and in many institutions, particularly the national museums, it often remains an add-on after curatorial departments have completed exhibition planning. Moreover, a higher status for education does not guarantee that the community outside the museum has a greater degree of involvement in the museums' decision making as current policy recommends.

There is also a contradiction within government policy towards social inclusion in museums. The kind of outreach programmes, educational events and exhibition re-organisation recommended by government policy have serious resource implications. Although government policies recommend that museums 'use their resources more imaginatively in order to support new strategies' of social inclusion, lifelong learning in its broadest sense undoubtedly remains an expensive option¹⁹. At the same time museums are under pressure to become self-accounting and to profit from visitors when they can, placing free or non-profit education provision increasingly under threat.

Thus, within contemporary museums there is a tripartite relationship amongst education, curatorial and marketing staff. In consequence, the future of lifelong learning in museums becomes a balancing act between profit generation led by newly influential marketing departments, the need to satisfy funding criteria that increasingly prioritises a social agenda and traditional curatorial scholarship. The competing voices of these three groups does imply that individual museums are not homogenous institutions but not that these different interests are necessarily antagonistic. Unfortunately, in a climate of continuing expansion and competition for limited resources they can become precisely that.

How diverse museum staff respond to a welfare agenda and whether that agenda adequately accommodates existing skills and knowledge is another issue and source of tension. Tension is perhaps inevitable, for museums, as we have explored, have specific histories and any attempt to wrest them away from ingrained practices and approaches will cause personal, professional and institutional disruption. Social inclusion policies cannot just be overlaid in blanket fashion over

the whole museum sector but need to be considered in specific institutional, geographical and social contexts. Potentially, however, these tensions and debates could be productive. An emphasis on access and inclusion challenges received ideas within the museum service concerning professionalism, curation, collecting and indeed it raises the very issue of what the museum is today.

¹. Anderson D (1999) *A Commonwealth: Museums in the Learning Age*, A report to the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, London: The Stationary Office p.39.

². *The Learning Age* (1998) London: Department of Education and Employment Section 2.

³. *The Learning Power of Museums – A Vision for Museum Education* (2000) London: Department of Culture, Media and Sport p 4. Why exactly museum objects rather than ‘ordinary’ objects should be deemed real or what particular impact the ‘real’ has is left unquestioned.

⁴. *ibid* p 5

⁵. Anderson D (1995) ‘Gradgrind Driving Queen Mab’s Chariot’ Chadwick A and Stannet A (eds) *Museums and the Education of Adults Leicester* NIACE p20

⁶. *The Learning Power of Museums – A Vision for Museum Education* (2000) *op cit* p 3

⁷. *Centres for Change: Museums, Galleries, Archives for All* (2000) London: Department of Culture Media and Sport p 9

⁸. Cole’s role in setting up the Great Exhibition along with his skill in making the right social and political connections led to his appointment as head of the new government Department of Practical Art in 1853.

⁹. A financial surplus of £213,305 from the Great Exhibition was used to purchase land on which now stands the Victoria and Albert, Science and Natural History museums.

¹⁰. Cole H quoted in Minihan J (1977) *The Nationalisation of Culture*, London: Hamish Hamilton, p 60

¹¹. *Museums and the Education of Adults Leicester* (1995) *op cit* p15

¹². Quoted in Minihan J (1977) *The Nationalisation of Culture*, London: Hamish Hamilton, p 18

¹³. Quoted in Caygill M (2000) *The story of the British Museum*, London, British Museum Press, p 6

¹⁴. Panizzi A quoted *ibid* p25

¹⁵. Miller E (1973) *That Noble Cabinet* London: Andre Deutsch p 145

¹⁶. *Centres for Social Change* *op cit* p 7

¹⁷. *ibid* p 9

¹⁸. For a more detailed discussion of this point see for instance: Goldgar A (2000) ‘The British Museum and the Virtual Representation of Culture in the Eighteenth Century’ *Albion* 32, 2 pp. 195-231

¹⁹. *Centres for Social Change* *op cit* p 26