

The Informal Learning Program at the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago

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The Informal Learning Program (ILP), co-directed by Michael Spock and Deborah Perry, and initially funded by the Joyce Foundation of Chicago, has been in operation for over two years. The purpose of the program is to serve as an advocate for and to conduct research on informal learning and on the design and development of public spaces, programs, and exhibits. The first round of research projects is currently being completed.

The ILP is part of the Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago, a research and development center focusing on policies, practices, and programs affecting children and the families and communities in which they live. It is part of an emerging effort to better understand and demonstrate how primary support resources such as museums and other cultural organizations; music, drama, and art groups; organized sports; and after-school programs can be better applied to meeting the basic needs of children, families, and communities.

As museums continue to wrestle with what it means to be successful educational institutions, there is ongoing discussion within the field about museums as settings for extended and lifelong learning. The first ILP research project focused on what it means for someone to be a lifelong learner. Six individuals from the San Francisco area were selected to participate in this exploratory study because of their perceived passion for—and wealth of interesting stories about—learning. This study collected life-stories from these individuals about pivotal learning experiences including their perceptions of and perspectives on learning, educational influences in their lives, and personal educational encounters. Data consisted of videotaped interviews with each respondent, each interview lasting from two-and-a-half to three-and-a-half hours. All interviews were conducted during the spring of 1995 and took place in the home, work, or study environment.

Data analysis consisted of a systematic examination of the transcribed interviews and videotapes to get to know each individual as a lifelong learner and to gain a clearer understanding of the many forces and influences that contributed to their respective passions for learning.

The final research report includes detailed profiles of each of the respondents, excerpts from their stories told in their own words, and the researcher's reflections on common and pervasive lifelong learning themes that emerged during our conversations. The report concludes with implications for the informal learning and museum fields and with suggestions for the next round of research.

The research team for this first project was comprised of Michael Spock, Deborah Perry, and Shannon Jones, a research assistant.

In addition to examining what it means to be a lifelong learner and how museums can facilitate and promote lifelong learning, another area of interest centers on memorable and life-changing events that occur in museums. The second research project of the Informal Learning Program focused on museum professionals and their stories of pivotal educational moments in museums. These stories were either personal narratives of something that happened to the respondent, or stories that the respondents witnessed in their museums. Seventy-six individuals who attended the annual conferences of the Association of Youth Museums (AYM) and the American Association of Museums (AAM) in Philadelphia shared approximately four hundred stories with us during the spring of 1995. All interviews were videotaped and later transcribed.

An analysis of the many stories revealed a variety of ways in which respondents described how museums can and do make differences in people's lives. Ranging from profound experiences with objects, to museums as therapeutic environments, to epiphanies and moments of clarity, to seeds for learning that occurred years after a museum visit, to embarrassment and intimidation, these deeply felt stories demonstrated with passion and humor some of the ways that museum professionals talked about the meaning of museums in their lives. The final report of this second exploratory study articulates and describes some of the important contributions museums can and should make in people's lives. Full of interesting stories, the report concludes by discussing implications for the museum field and suggesting the next round of research.

In addition to the co-directors for the ILP, the research team for this second study included Eric Gyllenhaal, an exhibit developer at the Field Museum; Hope Jensen Leichter, the director of the Elbenwood Center for the Study of the Family as Educator at Columbia University; and Emily Forland, a Chapin Hall research assistant. A portion of this project is being carried out as part of Children's Museums: Bridges to the Future, a project under the sponsorship of the Arts Management Program of the Mandel Center for Non-profit Organizations of Case Western Reserve University.

As the Informal Learning Program wraps up these two initial research projects, we are seeking funds to carry out the next round of research. In addition, plans are underway to develop the second round of videotaped interviews into materials for use by the museum community for institutional planning, training, and advocacy work. For more information about the program or to obtain copies of either of the research reports described in this article, contact the co-directors at the address below.

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