

We have used our results to make modifications within the exhibit that increase the attractiveness of certain conservation action elements. Once we analyze the results of the card sorts next summer, we will continue to search for ways to reduce behavioral barriers and help visitors join us in our conservation mission

Acknowledgments

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April Award Luncheon

The gala event of the year for members of the Visitor Studies Association will be the April Award luncheon on Friday noon, July 18, at the Visitor Studies Conference. Be sure to reserve your place for it when you return your conference registration form and fee.

The \$20 luncheon at the Birmingham Botanical Garden will be an entertaining as well as a fund-raising event. VSA member, museum administrator, and professional comedian, D. Neil Bremer from Chicago, will provide an irreverent look at museums, poking lighthearted fun at the culture of museums, of evaluators, and of researchers. Through humor he challenges the way that audiences perceive museums and the way that museums view their audiences.

While performing as a professional comic in Chicago, Neil has received critical acclaim, including these reviews: "Check out Bremer closely; the man really has a flair," and "Bremer is a well-rounded performer, and both shows allow him to demonstrate his considerable comedic gifts, his talent at improvisation, his skills as a musician, and an impressive singing voice." No VSA member will want to miss this entertaining performance, plus have the opportunity to raise funds for the April Award travelship. The first presentation of the travelship will be made at the luncheon. The recipient will be the guest of VSA at the Conference and at the luncheon.

Let Neil Bremer lighten your spirits while you enjoy the opportunity to assist a junior member of VSA to attend the 1997 Conference.

From Knowledge to Narrative: Educators and the Changing Museum

Author's Synopsis

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In 1988 the development of an exhibit at the Chicago Botanic Garden provided an occasion for an extensive, multidisciplinary study about the history of museum educators and the impact they have had on the museum institution. The result is *From Knowledge to Narrative: Educators and the Changing Museum*, published by the Smithsonian Institution Press this year.

From Knowledge to Narrative does three main things: 1) it documents the rise of the museum education profession in America over the last 200 years; 2) it argues that the emergence of this profession has raised questions about the nature of knowledge and authority that have rocked the very core of the institution; and 3) it suggests that these questions in turn hold serious implications for what it now means to educate.

The study is simultaneously a history, an ethnography, and a critique. It uses a real-life example of exhibit making to reflect on the current situation in museums and it analyzes that situation within a wider historical and philosophical context. This approach anchors the analysis in the everyday realities of practice while recognizing that those realities stand on deeper, often unexamined, assumptions and traditions.

This study draws on three different methods of analysis. First, it uses ethnography, in that the data include the voices and actions of the exhibit team (or "culture," if you will). Second, it uses literary criticism, in that it treats the physical exhibition as a "text" with messages, both overt and covert, that bear interpretation. Third, it uses historical analysis, in that it refers to the circumstances of the past in order to distinguish and to characterize those of the present.

The work of detecting and interpreting this evidence follows a particular format, which is less a chronicle than it is a series of snapshots. Each chapter begins with a close look at one exhibit component, presenting an account of its preliminary versions along with the institution's debates surrounding its development. These debates dramatize some key issues in the field, which is itself then situated in a larger historical and critical tradition. Four exhibit components illuminate four issues, each of which penetrates at successively deeper levels the central question of the book—how the establishment of the museum education profession has changed the institution.

A Paradigm Shift

Basically, this book tells the story of education in museums. It is a story about the emergence of a new profession, and it is the story of a revolution—in values, knowledge, and power. Museum educators have brought visitors' perspectives to bear on the treatment of collections: how they are displayed, what is said about them, who does the saying. As

a result, traditional scholarly definitions of objects are beginning to be accompanied or replaced by alternative interpretations based on different criteria of meaning.

These events mark the occurrence in museums of a much wider shift in thought, one that has touched nearly everyone in the business of knowledge. This shift has seen conventional views of knowledge as objective and absolute challenged by the notion that knowledge is socially constructed, shaped by the interests and values of the knower. Museums, then, may be said to be less about the transmission of knowledge than about the construction of narratives: by staff, by visitors, by anyone who holds a relationship to museum collections.

This thinking calls into question not just the once-unassailable authority of the scientist curator but also the role of museum educators whose responsibility it has traditionally been to help interpret collections to visitors. After all, if knowledge is no longer transmitted, but produced, why not just let visitors be and experience our collections as they will? New views of knowledge have not eradicated the need for education but have rendered it more acute. Only now the task of education is about not just interpreting objects but deciphering interpretations: in other words, anticipating and negotiating between the narratives constructed by visitors and the narratives constructed by museums.

In short, educators are at the forefront of what can only be described as a paradigm shift in museums, from knowledge to knowledges, science to narrative. Educators play an important part in helping the institution adapt to this shift.

Organization of the Chapters

Chapter 1, "Education as Entertainment," deals with the museum as an institution with particular purposes, responsibilities, and methods of operation. It introduces a conflict that has stood at the heart of the American museum—scholarship vs. popularization—and traces that conflict's various permutations throughout its history. With the emergence of professional museum educators in the early twentieth century, that conflict was transformed forever, as were the political and organizational structures by which museums had traditionally operated. The first chapter, then, concerns itself with shifts in the division of labor, and in particular, with their effect on the definition of education in museums.

Chapter 2, "Education as Empowerment," delves deeper and looks at how those shifts in organization led to more subtle but no less transformative shifts in the nature of authority and knowledge in the institution. These changes are traced through the various approaches that museums have employed to interpret their collections throughout the last century. They offer a glimpse into museums' evolving stance toward the meanings of objects, the authors of those meanings, and the visitors who view them.

Chapter 3, "Education as Experience," peels back yet another layer and inquires into how the nature of the visitor's experience has been altered by these changes. If the presence and activities of educators has affected the nature not only of

the institution but of the objects it displays, the question of how visitors have begun to encounter both museum and object must be raised. This is perhaps the most elusive question addressed in these chapters, as it is concerned with nothing as accessible as organizational structure of interpretive method but with the nature of inner experience. Furthermore, it concerns itself less with the conscious experiences that visitors report than with the unconscious factors that help explain their attraction to today's museums and exhibits. It draws its evidence largely from historical and ethnographic studies about how people experience objects, and its findings are subsequently applied to the museum setting.

Chapter 4, "Education as Ethics," takes a step back from the first three chapters. It examines the ethical problem of selecting and presenting interpretations in a world that admits multiple points of view. In particular, it analyzes the ways that museum activities are by nature ideologically bound and the problems that this poses to their professed responsibility to society's whole range of constituencies. Having moved successively through the institution's working layers to the heart of the visitor experience, then, the book returns full circle to analyze the museum's role in directing and shaping that experience.

Finally, Chapter 5, "Education as a Narrative Endeavor," summarizes the implications of these analyses for our understanding of education's definition and role in museums. It demonstrates the sense in which education is fundamentally a meaning-making activity that involves a constant negotiation between the stories given by museums and those brought by visitors. As such, it suggests some alternative methods and models for understanding the museum experience as a way of overcoming the inevitable connotations that the word "education" carries. Further, it suggests the institution's gradual transformation into a new sort of genre that is based less on objects than on experience.

Implications

The significance of this analysis for the museum field is threefold. First, it penetrates the everyday discourse in which staff regularly engage and demonstrates the sense in which educators' concerns raise quite radical issues related to the nature of knowledge and authority. Second, it identifies and characterizes the implications of educators' concerns for the way the institution defines and carries out its mission. And third, in doing the first two, it bridges the two quite separate worlds of theory and practice. In sum, it opens up some new questions and avenues for the future study (as well as operation) of museums.



ChanSpotting #1

He went to Spain to be part of the visitor studies meeting there and gave a great talk and participated in a toga party.