

## TEACHING IN SITU: NONFORMAL MUSEUM EDUCATION

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### **Abstract:**

*Museum education is one of the most ubiquitous forms of nonformal education and one of the least researched, particularly when it comes to understanding the role of the nonformal museum educator (docent). In response to this concern, this qualitative study explored how docents made meaning of their nonformal museum education practice. Through the use of observations, visitor feedback, and interviews with docents, a much more complex picture is revealed of nonformal education than what historically has been reported in the literature. Furthermore, the findings have significant implications for teaching in museum settings.*

### **Résumé**

*L'éducation dans les musées est l'un des plus omniprésents formes de l'éducation non formelle, et l'un des moins étudié, particulièrement lorsqu'il s'agit de comprendre le rôle de l'éducateur au musée (guide). Cette étude qualitative a examiné comment les guides ont compris la pratique d'éducation dans le musée. À l'aide des observations, les réaction des visiteurs et les entretiens avec les guides, une peinture beaucoup plus complexe est révélée de l'éducation nonformelle que ce qui a historiquement été annoncé dans la littérature. En outre, les conclusions ont des implications significatives pour enseigner dans les cadres des musées.*

### Introduction

Museum education for adult visitors is a ubiquitous form of nonformal adult education. On any given day of the week, millions of adults visit museums all over North America. The exact participation rates are not known; however, the American Association of Museums (AAM) and the Canadian Museums Association (CMM) combined estimates identify over 18,000 museums located in the North America with over 900 million visitors a year (American Association of Museums, 2008; Canadian Museums Association, 2008). Even though the visitors of most museums are children, more than 94% offer some type of adult programming (Sachatello-Sawyer, 1995).

Historically, the field of adult education has recognized museum education as an important medium for adult learning, particularly as museums "have placed greater emphasis on interpreting their collections to their publics" (Chobot, 1989, p. 369). Past handbooks of adult and continuing education in North America reflect extensive chapters on the role of museums in adult education (e.g., Ely, 1948; Knowles, 1960; Merriam & Cunningham, 1989; Rowden, 1936; Smith, Aker, & Kidd, 1970). Further, in an effort to recognize the needs of the adult learner a significant step was initiated by the AAM Standing Professional Committee on Education with the intent to engage leading adult educators to share their ideas in regard to adult museum education. Their work resulted in a series of seminars and small publications that culminated in an educational guide (Collins, 1981). Sources and guidebooks printed by the AAM and the American Association of State and Local History continue to promote ideas and methods from the field of adult education (Grenier, 2005).

Similar efforts have emerged from the European Association for the Education of Adults (EAEA) in 1995 to better understand the relationship between museum education and adult learning. "It was argued that a growing awareness of the need for collaboration with and utilizing museums for adult education was emerging, and that greater opportunities for collaboration between educational and cultural agents should be created" (Chadwick & Stannett, 2000, p. 1). As a result, a number of projects were initiated, such as edited books on the state of museums and adult education in countries throughout Europe. Also, extensive surveys were carried out on how museums use keyworkers (cultural mediators who are intermediaries between museums and the public) in the promotion of lifelong learning (Anderson, Gray, & Chadwick, 2003; Gray & Chadwick, 2001).

However, despite these efforts by the AAM, EAEA, and other museum organizations, "the study of museums as an informal source for learning by adults has waned" (Grenier, 2005, p. 27). This lack of attention is apparent in the latest handbook of adult education, which does not provide a chapter on museums or the general study of nonformal education. The "neglect of museums and art galleries is also evident in the majority of writings about education provision in Australia" (Brennan, 1994, p. 97). In addition, museums themselves historically do not have a strong tradition of research. "Empirical studies of any sort are rare, even in major journals such as *Museum News*" (Zeidler & Surber, 1999, p. 114). What little research that has been published has focused predominantly on programming for children (Chobot & Chobot, 1990; Sachatello-Sawyer, et al., 2002). Concerning adult learning, Dudzinska-Przesmitzki & Grenier (2008) identified two trends: most research is not informed by theory or is theory generating, and there is "strange absence of adult

education and learning theory in museum studies” (p. 19). Research focusing on adults has been predominantly concerned with visitor outcomes, perceptions of exhibits, etc., with little attention given to museum educators (e.g. docents, volunteers) and how they make meaning of practice within this unique nonformal setting (e.g., Grenier, 2005; Hirsch & Silverman, 2000; Lang, Reeve, & Woollard, 2006; Sachatello-Sawyer et al., 2002).

Despite this shortcoming there are a few studies that begin to lend insight into the practice of the museum educator or docent (e.g., Anderson, Gray, & Chadwick, 2003; Gray & Chadwick, 2001; Grenier, 2005; Sachatello-Sawyer et al., 2002). For example, Sachatello-Sawyer et al. collected surveys, interviews, and observations from 116 docents in the United States. Key findings about docents reveal that they see themselves as facilitators of learning, encourage hands-on participation, convey a sense of fun, are knowledgeable of (and about the) subject matter, and seek to actively engage participants. Although informative, this study mostly provides a list of attributes, methods, and barriers experienced by the docent, and it lacks a theoretical framework to help make sense of the various phenomena and how they relate to each other within a nonformal educational setting. Furthermore, and most significantly, there is little appreciation of the museum nonformal education context — that of teaching *in situ* (original setting) and its role in shaping a docent’s practice.

An area that begins to address these concerns and offers insight into the practice of docents is the literature on local nonformal education. Local nonformal education like nonformal education (most often associated with international development) is indicative of any intentional and organized effort to educate adults outside the formal setting. The “local” emphasis refers to a focus on nonformal education in developed countries inclusive of education found in museums, natural parks, community centres, and other cultural and historical sites (Taylor, 2006).

Nonformal education has historically been described as visitor-centred (a nonhierarchical relationship between docent and visitor), less structured, more present-time focused, collaborative, and responsive to localized needs (Ahmed & Coombs, 1975; Bock & Bock, 1989; Courtney, 1991; Ewert, 1991; Jarvis, 1987; Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; Reed & Loughran, 1984; Rogers, 2004, 2005). However, research has found nonformal education to be much more presenter-centred and structured than previously discussed. In addition, there are a number of teaching challenges not found to such degree in formal educational settings. For example, docents often have little systematic training, work on a voluntary basis, and are selected primarily for their content expertise. Visitor participation is voluntary (learners can often come and go as they please), there is often a high degree of heterogeneity (e.g., age, educational background, culture) among the visitors, and the museum experience often involves one-time presentations with little opportunity to build meaningful relationships with learners. Concerning the nonformal setting itself, there are frequently ongoing distractions and, at times, safety issues, particularly in public or natural locations (Taylor, 2006).

A recent case study on local nonformal education in natural parks and consumer education sites reveals a much more complex picture of nonformal education than what is presently described in the literature. Most significant is the consistency found among nonformal educators in their beliefs and epistemological assumptions about teaching (e.g.,

transmission model, interactive, experiential) and their interrelationship with content (e.g., instrumental) in the context of the nonformal setting (e.g., voluntary participation, temporal constraints) (Taylor, 2006, 2008). Although informative, this study scratches the surface about nonformal education and much work still needs to be done, particularly in museums, which are one of the most ubiquitous forms of local nonformal education in developed countries.

This study is an effort to duplicate the previous work (Taylor, 2006) in museums, further exploring the complex nature of teaching in nonformal settings. Questions that guide this study include: How do docents conceptualize their role and that of the visitor? To what extent do docents share similar teaching approaches? How does the nonformal context, teaching *in situ*, in museums shape their practice? Understanding the docents’ perspective of museum education is essential not only to bring greater understanding to local nonformal education as a viable category for the field of adult education, but to provide ways to improve practice in this unique nonformal educational setting. Much could be learned that could help future docents with their practice and with the general practice of nonformal education. Therefore, the purpose of this study is twofold: to explore the practice of museum education from the perspective of docents and to develop a greater understanding of the nonformal context and how it shapes the museum experience.

### Theoretical Frameworks

There are two theoretical frameworks that inform this study. One comes from the museum education literature focusing on educational approaches used by docents (Hein, 1998). The second involves a contemporary perspective of nonformal education (Rogers, 2005). Together, these frameworks help provide a theoretical grounding to the practice of museum education in nonformal settings.

Hein (1998) identified four museum educational approaches: didactic expository education; stimulus-response education; discovery learning; and constructivist learning. Didactic expository education involves the development of a lesson based on a particular subject matter, which is then taught or lectured, often in the style of a story narrative with few alternative or conflicting perspectives. Museums that practice didactic expository education are normally organized sequentially and utilize didactic components of written labels to achieve specific objectives (Hein; Jordanova, 1989). Stimulus-response education is grounded in behaviourist philosophy. Behaviourist exhibitions are designed to “have reinforcing components that repeatedly impress the stimulus on the visitor and reward appropriate response” (Hein, p. 29). Proponents of behaviourist exhibitions advocate for arrangement of the museum environment, exhibition ideas, and artifacts to produce a predetermined observable behaviour in museum visitors (Screven, 1974). Discovery learning embraces experiential methods that result in a change of understanding for the visitor. Museums that practise discovery learning have exhibitions and/or docents that allow for exploration and do not require a specific path, labels that pose questions, and interactive adult workshops. Lastly is constructivist learning, which encourages participants to construct their own meaning of the museum experience. Constructivist learning allows for numerous entry points to their exhibitions, represents a wide range of viewpoints, and enables adults to connect with objects via life experiences. Two essential components to

constructivist learning include the active engagement on the visitor's part in the learning process and a confirmation of learning through the visitor's own thought process (Mayer, 2005). These four educational approaches are not always distinct, and they overlap in a variety of ways within nonformal educational settings.

To help make sense of nonformal education, Rogers (2004, 2005) provides the most contemporary perspective. Although more focused on international development than local nonformal education, he argues that nonformal education as a concept and practice is significant because it reminds educators that there are other educational endeavours outside the formal system, with the potential for activism and educational reform. He offers a new paradigm of nonformal education, where it is placed not in opposition to other categories of education, but on a continuum located in relationship to other categories. The use of a continuum allows for educational programs offered by museums, literacy groups, and public schools to be placed anywhere within the field based on the degree it reflects characteristics of a particular category. Four key concepts make up the continuum of education, including formal education, nonformal education, participatory education, and informal learning (Rogers, 2005).

To better understand how the different concepts relate to each other it is necessary to discuss three related characteristics, that of flexibility, participation, and contextualization. Flexibility is at the heart of nonformal education. It is, for example, "the ability to employ nonprofessional or para-professional teachers; the need to adapt the curriculum or to develop new curricula to meet local needs" (Rogers, 2005, p. 249). In relationship to the continuum above, as an educational program is more flexible and responsive to local or individual needs it moves to the right in the opposite direction to a more standardized program of formal education that is generally less responsive to individual needs (e.g., chemistry course at a community college). A second concept is participation, the level of involvement by learners in the educational endeavour. Participation is reflected in the degree the learners apply what they learned to their life, how actively they are engaged in educational activities, and the degree they share in the decision-making of the educational experience. For example, Rogers sees nonformal education, within a developmental context, having limited participation because the provider often determines local control, limiting the range of shared decision-making. On the other hand, participatory education is found in programs where learners "determine the contents and time scale of the learning program as well as the logistics" (p. 255). Like flexibility, learners experience greater participation as educational programs move to the right on the continuum. The extreme would be informal learning, where the individual directs his or her own learning. The third characteristic, contextualization, uses the language of organizational theory and group dynamics. The more contextualized a program, the more it is personalized to local and individual needs and interest. The less contextualized or decontextualized, the greater degree of standardization, such as formal groups. For example, the curriculum in a college science course is the same regardless of who participates. As an educational program becomes more flexible and participatory (moving to the right of the continuum), it reflects greater contextualization and becomes less standardized and more responsive to local interest and needs. Rogers' model makes great progress in giving a distinction to different forms of education, particularly the significance of context, although it reveals little of what goes on in the actual everyday

practice of the nonformal educator and how his or her practice is shaped by the nonformal setting.

### Methodology

The design of this study uses a basic qualitative interpretive orientation (Merriam, 2002), allowing the researcher to explore the lived experience of the docent. “This involves carefully and thoroughly capturing and describing how people experience some phenomenon — how they perceive it, describe it, feel about it, judge it, remember it, make sense of it, and talk about it with others” (Willis, 2007, p. 202). In addition, qualitative research provides the means to better understand deeply held assumptions about teaching by the docent and how the nonformal setting influences their practice.

A purposeful sample of 11 docents (mid-Atlantic United States), who regularly led museum tours (e.g., historical, art) for adult visitors, was selected for this study. Study participants were identified by museum directors, and then contacted by e-mail and/or by phone to determine if they were willing to be observed and interviewed. Most were docents or volunteers who worked part-time for a museum, were not trained formally in the practice of education, and were chosen to lead tours based on their content expertise. Pseudonyms were used in the findings to protect the participants’ identities. Docents’ roles and responsibilities were consistently similar across the sites.

The museum sites were small private and public historic institutions that practised nonformal education and offered liberal access to adult visitors. These museums were located *in situ* (Gardner, 1991) or close approximation of the original — meaning in the original location, although true *in situ* varied depending upon the museum location. Being inside an original (a space for which art was specifically created), and in some cases a restored building or fabricated setting, provided the docents (and visitors) a feel of *in situ*. One museum site was an artist’s (a craftsman and sculptor of wood) home and studio where guided tours were given by appointment. The home itself and the artist’s work inside were presented as if the artist still lived in the house. Visitors were allowed to experience the home and the artist’s work close-up and touch many of the pieces. The two other museums were part of a historical society that offered educational events (e.g., regional history festival) and tours of local historical buildings (e.g., tavern, industrial museum). For example, during a regional history festival, docents dressed in period clothing were observed leading tours through a historical tavern (early 1800s) and the owner’s home. Docents made an effort to treat the visitors as guests in the home. The third site was an industrial museum. The building itself was an old factory and much of the museum included objects that had to do with industrial evolution of the local community. Finally, concerning any limitations of the chosen sites it is important to recognize that not all the museum sites were authentically *in situ*, but those that were not were very close fabrications of the original location.

Methods of data collection for this study included observations, surveys, and interviews. Observations consisted of shadowing each docent, sometimes on multiple tours. Tours were 10 to 60 minutes in length. Field notes were taken, noting docent and visitor interactions, general teaching approaches, and a chronology of tour events. At the end of the tour visitors were given an optional survey to complete, which was either read to them in larger groups or completed individually. The survey asked for feedback about the tour

concerning the docent's teaching approach, what was most helpful in promoting learning, why they were on the tour, and their general perceptions of the educational experience.

Following the observation, semi-structured interviews (60 minutes) were set up with each docent. The goal of the interview, in conjunction with the observation and surveys, was to gain a better understanding of how the docent made meaning of leading museum tours for adult visitors in a nonformal setting. Each interview was accompanied by a field note elicitation technique (interview prompt) developed from the observations and surveys. The field notes helped trigger memories of the tour and beliefs about teaching, and provided a mutual experience between the researcher and study participant from which to frame the interview (Taylor, 2005). Questions for each interview were developed from the survey responses and field notes, and included other general questions designed to help reveal the docent's underlying assumptions about teaching and learning within a museum setting. The general questions focused on tour preparations, role of the docent, role of the visitor, best practices, and challenges of teaching in a nonformal setting.

Analyzing data involved a constant comparative analysis where each interview was transcribed and systematically examined (Willis, 2007). Themes were identified and separated from the original transcript. This "coding and retrieving" of organizing key words or phrases revealed broader categories of how the docents made meaning of their tour practice (Willis, p. 135). Once the initial categories were identified, further synthesis and refining of the themes was initiated, until each category was saturated and stood clearly from the other categories. Furthermore, to enhance trustworthiness, the interpretation and labeling of categories required consensus among all the researchers.

### **Findings**

There are five themes that emerge from this data. The first four focus on the museum educator (diligent hosts, proud stewards, storytellers, and promoters of fun) and the last (contextual influences) focuses on educating in a museum setting and how it shapes practice.

#### ***Diligent Hosts***

The docents in our study were keenly aware that they were representatives of historic sites, with an acute sense of responsibility for visitor and museum experience. Their role is best described as diligent host, reflected in a strong obligation to "take care" of those on the tour, to ensure that visitors got what they wanted (information and/or entertainment) and were made to feel welcome. Three interrelated characteristics of the diligent host were the importance of assessing the audience, quickly establishing a rapport, and requesting manageable expectations from visitors.

Like any good host, the docents assessed the visitors to attempt to tailor their presentations somewhat to the needs and interests of those who came to listen. Assessing generally took place at the beginning of the tour and involved eliciting questions to determine the audience backgrounds, level of interest, and reasons for visiting the museum. Small tour groups allowed for more intimate conversation initiated by the docents, while larger ones tended to be in the form of informal polls, to gather information such as how

the visitors were related to each other, where they were from, and how they arrived at this historical site, with an intent to make connections between the site and personal lives of the audience. For example, David, a director of a historic home site, stated it simply: "I try to make sure I know where they are from . . . That will gear the way I present my tour." Similarly, Sarah, a history buff and docent for six years, tailors her presentation based on "what level people are at" and "does that initially and then probably when I am entering the storage room. After I give the storage room I kind of read whether or not they were interested in it." Pre-tour and ongoing assessment was a theme we heard from many docents who want to make the tour relevant, educational, and interesting. Equipped with this knowledge of visitors hailing from a particular geographic region or sharing a particular hobby, the docents accommodated the audience by injecting relevant facts based on the audience's background. Alternatively, they would skip over basic geographic history if the group was from the local area.

Assessing the audience assisted docents in building a rapport with their tour visitors. Transitioning from meeting the visitors to determining their interests, to establishing bonds with visitors was a reoccurring theme. For example, Andrea, a volunteer docent, said, "What I try to accomplish during the introductory period is to find out why they are here. If somebody says I built my own house or I am a woodworker . . . I will go back to that and make a personal connection." Given their limited amount of time together, anywhere from 10 minutes to a half an hour, docents quickly sought to establish a relationship with the visitors and ensure a level of comfort for them. For instance, Ray, a full-time docent, described the importance of establishing a rapport by saying, "I mean because then you are able to relate . . . I think it makes it much more personable. I develop a rapport which makes me more comfortable." Creating a bond or an immediate relationship with visitors to help make the museum experience more pleasurable is a common goal of hosts.

Remaining hospitable, docents had minimal expectations of visitors, in that they were explicit though manageable as far as preparation and effort to help ensure an enjoyable experience for the visitors. Mindful that visitors choose to go on a tour, docents made a point to name specific things visitors could do to help make the tour a more successful experience. The focus of their expectations centred on attitude (level of interest and openness) and how respectful they were of others and the site (e.g., objects) during the museum tour. For example, Sarah expressed expectations concerning interest and level of attention:

I expect them to be interested. I want them to be interested. If they are going to come and they are going to take my tour they better be interested. . . . I want people to listen to me and not answer a cell phone call in the middle of my tour, which happens. I hope people are interested, I hope they will listen and I hope they would also ask questions. I want them to ask questions. I can't always answer how they made that particular type of trim. I can't answer every question but I like to try.

Similarly, Bernice, a volunteer docent at a sculptor's home, stated, "I expect them to be open. I expect them to be willing to be moved, willing to be surprised. I expect them to not talk when I'm talking. I expect them to follow the ground rules that were set." Likewise, Andrea, an adult college student and docent at more than one historic site, said:



The common courtesies of participating in a tour: don't talk on your cell phone, don't eat buffalo wings in front of me — people do that — don't talk. You know, just common manners, which is almost never a problem. I can't anticipate that happening. I do expect them to respect what we ask of them. The places, all of his works just begged to be touched and I expect them not to do those things if I ask them not to. I expect them to ask a lot of questions and I hope that they will.

The mostly volunteer group of docents were altruistic in their perspective of educating the visitors. They did not see them simply as visitors, but as learners whom they wanted to have an experience that offered relevancy, interest, and meaning.

### *Proud Stewards*

Along with taking care of visitors, the docents also demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility toward the museum itself, aware of their role as stewards of the museum who were instructed to ensure the safety of objects. Most were passionate about their responsibility as custodians of the collections while on a tour in a historic building or room. For instance, after observing a visitor open a cabinet in a historic home, Bernice stated: "People can't just strut off and just go open up cabinets and check things out. It makes me very nervous because I feel responsible . . . My primary responsibility is to make sure that the integrity of the objects and their safety is guaranteed." Similarly, Gwen, also aware of the rules of the historic home for security purposes, said that one of "the responsibilities as a docent" is that she is "always the last one going up stairs and the last one going downstairs to make sure anyone is not casing the place." The docents' sense of responsibility and ownership of the objects was evident also in how the docents valued their roles and the sites that they represented.

The docents saw themselves not only as stewards of the museum itself but also as stewards of the visitors' museum experience. The service they provided was symbiotic in that both they and the museum visitors learned new things and enjoyed the time spent appreciating and discovering history and artifacts from the region. For example, Jason, a membership coordinator and docent at an artist's home, best captured it when he said, "It is fun to make people feel wonderment or awe. I mean it is neat to change people's lives." Equally passionate was retired teacher and docent at an artist's home, Anne, who creatively described her role: "I'm like an explorer taking a small group of people into a place they have never been before. It still amazes me." Appreciating the amazement felt by visitors while on the tour was also brought up by Frank, a director of a historic site, who described a museum experience where a visitor "at the end of the tour he couldn't stop shaking my hand and he is looking at my face and he is just saying this is the most incredible experience I have had in my life." These seasoned docents in particular possessed the ability to recognize the impact their tours had on participants. The sense of fulfillment each felt was in what they said and in the emotion displayed when being interviewed. Anne was so moved describing how she felt about what she did on the tour that she cried as she struggled to put into words how much joy and satisfaction she has gained over the years. Reflecting on a strong commitments to education was seen more among the more experienced docents.

### *Storytellers*

Most of the docents viewed themselves as imparting information as storytellers. Even though they identified themselves by various titles (guide, docent, etc.), at the core of their practice was the process of relaying information to their audience through narrative experiences. The nature of storytelling in the museum setting had four sub-categories: unscripted process, content-centred, narrative format, and questioning.

The docents who we observed spoke of not using a script on tours. This unscripted process was described as the freedom of each docent to choose various sub-topics and tour components that fit into the general overall theme provided by the museum without being required to ask specific questions or to achieve consistent observable objectives. This idea seemed to rest well with the docents, or as Bernice openly expressed, "I just don't like to be scripted." Unscripted preparation becomes second nature without the need for further planning or with "no pre-planning," as described by Sarah. In regard to preparation, Jason related, "No, there was when I first started. But I have been doing it long enough now that I could do it in my sleep if I had to. So I don't have a lot of prep time."

Despite a goal of individuality among many of the docents and an assumed freedom to discuss topics of their own choosing, the docents placed a great deal of emphasis on ensuring that specific content was covered. For instance, Frank recognized his responsibility to set the context of the tour: "I see it as I need to make sure I am giving them some context, concentrate on the where and why fors and whens and that kind of thing. Not to make it a dry didactic history lesson but to make sure I am covering those bases." Similarly, Andrea commented, "You do want to get across some of those major facts."

Not only was certain information always shared, but most seemed to follow a specific route from station to station or room to room. The docents felt a requirement to present certain key themes or topics along this path, which were often arranged chronologically. For example Jennifer, a volunteer docent, stated, "I have to follow the path. I have to go from this room to this room to this room and I can't decide to skip one or go here and then come back, but other than that, you know, if I include the facts I can present them any way I want." Upon reflection the docents recognized the basic consistency or routine of their tours, as in the case of Frank's statement, "Probably any given tour I imagine 85 to 90% of my tour is basically the same."

In contrast to this content-centred form of presentation, the docents demonstrated some individuality in their delivery. This feeling of freedom seems directly attributed to the practice of storytelling in a narrative format. The storytelling process is seen as a personal one, with each docent choosing what they share with the visitors and how it is told. For example, Gwen stated, "You got to come up with the story you want to tell, the overall story." The use of storytelling converts the didactic factual requirements of the presentation into a narrative, promoting greater interest among visitors, and plays to and builds on the unique character of each docent. Similarly, Sarah states, "I try to make the facts into an interesting story. It's not really a story but it's more than a string of facts."

Docents also attempted to enhance the storytelling experience through an exchange of questions, promoting interaction between audience and the docents. Numerous questions from the visitors were seen as a sign of a successful tour. For instance, Andrea

stated, “I expect them to ask a lot of questions and I hope that they will.” Docents used questioning as a form of gauging their audience and also as a measure of their audience’s interest in the tour. Similarly, Kate expresses that “I hope people are interested, I hope they will listen and I hope they would also ask questions. I want them to ask questions.” Phil, a volunteer interpretive guide, echoes this sentiment: “They are interested enough in what we are saying [then] they have questions. . . . We try to get the questions out of them if we possibly could.”

### *Promoters of Fun*

A final finding that was significant among docents was the importance of making the museum experience fun. Furthermore, the experience of fun was something that manifested in several areas: that of the docent, the audience/visitor, and the museum itself. First and foremost it was very important that the docent him or herself experienced enjoyment and fun when leading a tour. For example, Aileen, who leads tours of a sculptor’s home, stated, “It’s got to be fun for me. I do it as a volunteer. If I can’t have fun I probably wouldn’t be doing it.” Similarly, Phil described why he continually leads tours well into his retirement years:

I’m not paid for the job one way or the other. Except in the “thank you,” maybe what they take away with them, the look of interest on their faces, that is really the only thing we get and a luncheon once a year. I just find it fun, just like I found teaching fun. . . . If teaching wasn’t fun to me then I wouldn’t have gone into it. I want to do the things I like to do.

In addition to the docent having fun, it is important also that the visitor have fun. For example, Jason sees having fun as criteria for a successful learning experience. He stated, “For me a successful experience means they are going to have fun and they are going to learn something and those two things are not mutually exclusive. Actually I think they are related. I think when people learn stuff they have fun.” Similarly, Frank sees fun as an important outcome of the museum experience for the visitor, a way to measure a successful tour. He explained what he wants the visitor to leave with:

I think giving them a sense of enjoyment as much as anything. I see it as an education process but in a broader sense. Education in their terms as well as mine. I try not to have a point at the end . . . [I] make it general enough and fun enough and enjoyable enough that they are free to go home with whatever they take from it.

The last area of fun is from the perspective of the museum itself, its location. One museum site in particular, that of the sculptor’s home, was perceived to be inherently fun due to the life the sculptor lived and how his work was integrated into the very fabric of his home. For example, Frank stated, “Part of that is when I came here that was one of the things that was emphasized, that [artist name] had fun doing what he was doing; he wouldn’t bother doing it if he couldn’t enjoy doing it, which is the essence of what this place is about.” This perception is further substantiated by Andrea, who stated, “I don’t know what you would have to be to come to a place like the [artist name] museum and

think, well this stinks, this is not fun at all. . . . Its very nature, it is just fun and incredibly interesting.”

### **Contextual Influences**

Key to each museum’s educational experience was the context, the setting where the teaching and learning took place. Context is defined here as the actual historic site along with the deliberate and purposeful arrangement of objects. Within this environment the docents felt a strong connection to the site and the objects and took enjoyment in sharing their knowledge with visitors. They wanted interested visitors to experience the objects in their original setting, *in situ* or close fabrication of the setting.

The richness of the particular site and the objects unique and special to that place were important sources of motivation for the docents. They felt a sense of privilege in being able to conduct the program in the original setting. This was particularly evident in tours of an artist’s home and studio. For example, Andrea exclaimed the site “doesn’t need me. It doesn’t need anybody. All anybody has to do is walk in that space and go wow.” Similarly, Bernice commented, “I could shut up the whole time and just be in the room.” However, for other locations the docent was central to fostering an experience of *in situ* by bringing objects and the special place to life for the visitor. As Phil remarked, “I have to be on the site to show them the actual artifacts.” At a minority of the sites visitors were actually allowed to engage the objects directly, through handling and touching original artifacts (as opposed to most locations where audiences were limited to visual appreciation and walking through the locations). This proved highly satisfactory for both docent and visitor. Julie felt this to be important especially with specific objects, “with that piece to just touch it and just love it.”

Along with the power of learning on location, was the contextual influence of time. All of the docents took issue with the time constraint available for programming. For example, Sarah pointed out that, “Those 10-minute tours are really tough because I like to talk a lot.” The management of time became even more difficult if the visitors were highly interested, engaging in much discussion and questions. Further complicating this issue was that docents often had to deal with varying timetables for tours. Jennifer expressed, “If you think that one tour is 45 minutes and one is one and a half hours you know you are making decisions about what it is you are going to talk about.” Sometimes this led to confusion. When informed to finish her tour within an hour, Gwen “was panicked.” While concern usually revolved around not having enough time, Sam noted that the length of the tours may be taxing to the visitor: “It is one and a half hours on fairly hard floors. The typical tour is about one and a half hours. So sometimes the comfort level is not there depending on the group, of course.” Time was always a greater arbiter of the museum experience, and a successful museum experience was often determined by how well time was managed.

### **Discussion and Future Research**

The findings of this study are consistent with Taylor’s (2006) study that museum education as nonformal education is a much more complex site of teaching and learning than reported in the literature historically (e.g., Ahmed & Coombs, 1975; Courtney, 1991; Ewert, 1991;

Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). To shed light on this complexity and inconsistencies found in the earlier literature, several issues warrant further discussion.

For one, many of the docents in the study seem to make sense of their practice in a museum in similar ways. Despite the diversity of museum settings represented, there was shared emphasis among docents on the importance of assessing visitors' needs, developing a rapport and a narrative delivery, and encouraging visitor questions on the tour, as well as the power of learning *in situ* (in the original setting or close fabrication), just to mention a few. In addition, the similarity found among the docents was consistent in many ways to what Taylor (2006) reported in a case study about nonformal educators at natural parks and consumer education sites. For example, docents reported a similar emphasis on visitor (learner) assessment, epistemological principles (conveying of knowledge), and conditions for learning (temporal constraints) to what was found among nonformal environmental educators and home improvement instructors. The minor variations between sites seem to be a product of both context and teaching beliefs held by the nonformal educator within a particular setting. For example, many museum educational experiences are contextually similar to educational experiences that take place in natural settings (state and local parks). Each is often located *in situ* or a close fabrication, allowing for situated approaches to learning, an issue that was overlooked in Taylor's (2006) study. Learning in the original is a museum phenomenon best described as learning in a more authentic setting. Its meaning is brought to life in Courtney's (1995) description of a visit to the Sixth Floor Museum in Dallas, the actual location where Oswald shot President Kennedy:

It is an authentic context for learning . . . there is no gainsaying of the profundity of the emotion you experience as, unrestrained by person or barrier, you approach one of a number of windows which affords a would-be assassin barely interrupted visual passage to the street and plaza below. (p. 4)

Furthermore, learning in the original space allows a "teacher-less classroom" (Courtney, 1995, p. 6), which is similar to how some of the participants described their role as docents in the sculptor's home. For example, Andrea exclaimed the site "doesn't need me. It doesn't need anybody." In this context the docent is seen in an adjunct role, supportive, but not the main source of the learning experience (Courtney, 1995).

In addition to the power of teaching in an original location, other contextual factors emerged that seem to bring clarity to nonformal education and the practice of museum education. They include influence of voluntary participation and temporal constraints. Each was mentioned, some more explicitly than others in the findings. For example, the influence of voluntary participation, where the choice of participation resides with the visitor, was implicitly apparent through the minimal behavioural expectations expressed by docents of visitors while in the museum. Museum literature refers to this phenomenon as "free choice" where the learner has the choice to attend or not attend (physically and mentally) to an educational event. It demands that the nonformal educator provide an educational experience that captures the learners' attention so they choose to attend (Falk, 2001; Falk & Dierking, 2002). Overly high expectations or other demands (e.g., required participation in museum activities) by the docent would have conflicted with the interests of some visitors and discouraged participation in general. Another factor of

voluntary participation is revealed through a metaphor: "the power of feet" (Taylor, 2006). "The power of feet is the power garnered or held by the learner as a byproduct of voluntary participation within a public location" (p. 305). The ease of the visitor to participate or not in a nonformal educational experience seems to shift some control of the learning experience from the docent to the visitor. It also seems to explain other factors in addition to the minimal expectations, such as the emphasis on the fun and temporal constraints. The emphasis on fun is a strategy to keep the visitor interested. A more enjoyable and interesting museum experience is more likely to captivate and maintain visitor attention on the museum experience and not on their "feet," increase docent-visitor interaction, and minimize visitor attrition. Also, the length of their attention span and/or the length visitors can stand pose temporal constraints on the docent, limiting the time he or she can engage the audience in the museum experience.

Furthermore, docents seem to struggle with a number of tensions or conflicting conceptions of teaching that are, to some degree, products of the nonformal education setting. For example, many of the docents at the beginning of a presentation or tour would assess the visitors' interest for establishing greater relevancy and establishing a rapport, implying a learner-centered teaching orientation. However, once the initial assessment was concluded there was a shift back to a more teacher-centred orientation. Although unscripted, epistemologically there is a strong emphasis on the transmission of knowledge, such that certain information had to be conveyed for a successful museum experience. Without this information the museum experience would be incomplete and the conveying of content generally took precedence over other museum activities. This conception of teaching is consistent with the educational aim of the modernist museum, which "is to enlighten and to educate, to layout knowledge for the visitor such that it may be absorbed . . . . In the transmission-model approach, the processes of communication are reduced to a single, one-way, linear trajectory" (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, pp. 15–16).

Despite this emphasis on the transference of information many of the docents spoke of not wanting to rely predominantly on a didactic approach (lecturing) during a museum experience, even though this typically has been the dominant method to museum education (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000). Further complicating the sharing of information was a deep desire by many docents to interact with visitors. They wanted an engaging group of visitors who asked questions. It was often the level of engagement that was used to determine if the museum experience was successful or not. However, temporal constraints previously discussed make it difficult to accomplish both the conveying of information in a didactic or narrative format and time for interaction with the learner. It is important to note that the form of interaction was still content-driven, where the visitor was seeking additional information or clarity on a topic of presentation, and less about the constructing of knowledge between the visitor and the docent. These aforementioned conflicting tensions were also seen in the research on the park and consumer nonformal education sites in Taylor's (2006) study. The findings in various cases (parks, museums, home improvement stores) reveal an emphasis on content delivery, which is inconsistent with what is reported in the literature (Ahmed & Coombs, 1975; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999) about nonformal education.

A final point of discussion is how these findings inform the theoretical framework of this study, that of Rogers' (2005) conception of nonformal education. As previously discussed, he identified three characteristics (flexibility, participation, and contextualization) that can be used to make sense of different educational programs and where they fall on a continuum between formal and participatory education. Beginning with the characteristic of flexibility, on the surface museum education seems responsive to local and individual needs (e.g., para-professional teachers, visitor assessment). However, the findings in this study as well as Taylor's (2006) reveal a different perspective. Nonformal educators seem to adhere to a deeply rooted structure, both in belief and practice. This implicit structure manifested in a number of ways, such as a strong adherence to an established agenda (e.g., beginning with an introduction, assessing the learner, routine presentation experience), a commitment to the content, and an emphasis on providing an enjoyable or fun experience. It is the museum objects and/or site that drive the experience regardless of local interest and needs.

Furthermore, the second characteristic, participation, is limited predominantly to the choice of attending a museum event or not. For most museum experiences there is little active participation by visitors concerning decision-making about content, organization, and delivery of the museum experience. Due to the nature of most museums where visitors are not allowed to touch or interact with the objects, participation is mostly observation at a distance, except for the opportunity to engage the docent in content-driven questions. It is important to note that in a small number of museum experiences, visitors were observed having opportunities to take more active roles (e.g., wearing period clothing, demonstrating the functions of an historic object).

The third characteristic, contextualization, the degree of standardization, also does not adequately capture the museum education experience as nonformal education. Except for the initial visitor assessment, most museum educators seem to provide similar educational experiences regardless, not less standardization as described by Rogers (2005). The only modification mentioned by some docents is reflected in their own personal approach to giving a museum tour and an attempt to alter the museum presentation somewhat if the visitors are from the local area or not. This analysis would seem to imply that museum education experiences observed in this study are more indicative of formal education than nonformal education. However, another interpretation resides in the historically uncontested assumptions that are embedded in the literature about nonformal education (e.g. Bock & Bock, 1989; Courtney, 1991; Ewert, 1991; Jarvis, 1987; Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Most of the literature is generally anecdotally based and often shares similar definitional sources (e.g., Ahmed & Coombs, 1975) with little critical analysis of its meaning and in-depth understanding of what actually happens in local nonformal educational settings, particularly in developed countries. Nonformal education seems to be less about learner-centred and unstructured approaches to teaching and being responsive to local needs, and more about voluntary participation (e.g. free choice), temporal constraints, fun and entertainment, and a transmission epistemological orientation. In other words, museum education as nonformal education is different from formal education, but understanding the differences resides in conducting definitive research about the everyday practice of nonformal educators.

Further research should include more in depth investigation into the construct of "free choice." Questions to be explored include: How "free" are participants able to choose what and how they engage in nonformal activities? Is the visiting of museums a by-product of the norms of a particular socio-economic group (e.g., Bourdieu)? Are visitors seeking out comfortable experiences in museums that serve to reinforce their world views or are free choice experiences safe venues for exploring different cultures, different world views? The meaning of choice has significant educational implications for docents concerning their educational approaches to visitors in museums. Another research direction should focus on better understanding the nature of fun and enjoyment as a means to foster understanding in nonformal education. What is fun? What are its inherent components? How are docents taught how to foster fun and enjoyment, skills that often are intangible and directly tied to an individual's personality and how they relate to others?

The practical implications of this study are significant. It makes apparent for docents as well as those who train docents the importance of being aware of the nonformal education setting, related challenges, and how the setting shapes practice. The more docents are aware of how the context shapes practice and their own conceptions of teaching, the more control they will have over the nonformal setting and responsiveness to visitor needs and interest. Furthermore, this study helps bring clarity to the concept of nonformal education through the identification of characteristics that are distinctive to this particular adult education setting. As this clarity continues to emerge, nonformal education could potentially offer insight into ways to improve practice in formal settings.

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