

Affective Learning, Affective Experience: What Does It Have to Do With Museum Education?

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This paper is bound up by the paradox that it must try to put into words something that is by nature profoundly nonverbal. Be that as it may, it will attempt to address some of the issues related to affective learning in the museum setting. Two areas in particular will be discussed: factors that have shaped attitudes in the museum toward affective experience; and the role affect plays in the whole learning process. The first has to do with why learning has tended to be neglected in the institution; and the second with the value it, in fact, holds for visitor learning and experience.

To begin with: What is affective learning? The term is commonly used in a couple of different ways. The first has to do with more emotional, sensory, right-brain types of learning. This is probably the more common definition, and it is the one that the dictionary gives: "an emotion or feeling attached to an idea, object, etc." (Webster's New World Dictionary, Second College Edition, 1986). Affective learning is commonly contrasted with cognitive learning which is more verbal, information-based, and left-brain (Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia, 1964).

A second way this term is frequently used is with reference to the acquisition of attitudes and values. As Ross Loomis puts it, "Affective criteria are based on acquired emotional reactions to exhibit settings and materials, values, preferences, and – quite commonly – the acquisition or change of specific attitudes" (Loomis, 1987, p. 236).

Both of these definitions are in fact quite related, as will become clear later in this paper. For the moment, however, I'm more interested in the first, what we'll call "experience-based" learning in contrast to "information-based." I've borrowed those terms from Marlene Chambers' work on interpretation (Chambers, 1988), because one of the things I'll be arguing later is that it is the former, the experience, that shapes our reception of the latter, information.

But first let's take a look at some of the factors that have contributed to museums' neglect of affective modes of learning in their educational and interpretive activities.

What's So Bad About Affect? The Stigma of Right-Brain Learning in a Left-Brain World

One of the striking things about affective learning is that it's something that we have known about for quite sometime; but we're still deficient in our language and understanding of just what it is and what we do about it as it relates to our visitors. By now it has become common knowledge that visitors bring a whole range of interests, needs, and goals to museums. It has also become common knowledge that once there, they have a range of types of experience. Visitor studies conducted in the last twenty years have confirmed this fact; and museum staff have accordingly broadened their notion of what constitutes "education" and "learning" to include other non-cognitive experiences like social interaction, private reverie, and play. Still, when it comes to practice, many educators remain tied to traditional information-based notions of education and learning. Interpretation more often than not continues to make the communication of information a primary goal.

There are many reasons why that is the case. One is simply that that is our tradition. The term "education" has long been associated with the kind of information-based instruction that occurs in classroom settings. Applied to museums, the term retained those associations, and appropriately so at the time. The museum education profession, after all, was born out of the need to interpret collections, to make them intelligible to viewers. The history of education in museums is a history of conflict over the uses of collections, and in particular over visitors' right to have access to objects – not just physical access but intellectual access as well: what something is, why it is significant, and so on. The result is that practically our entire interpretive tradition has been based on the communication of information.

A second reason that our notions of learning have tended to be more information-based is that educational research has generally concerned itself with factors related to improving students' retention of information: class size, curricular materials, communication methods, parental support. For the most part, affective considerations such as students' attitudes have been studied only to the extent that they relate to improving performance in the classroom, although lately there has been a little more work on questions about moral development in children, for example, and values acquisition (Kohlberg, 1981; Gilligan, 1977).

Visitor research, on the other hand, has done a better job at documenting the presence and importance of affective factors in the museum setting (See Note 1). But as accepting as staff say they are of the importance of those factors, the language used to talk about it is still on the level of: "We want visitors to have a pleasant experience;" or "We want them to feel moved." While I don't mean to belittle any of those kinds of goals, I think that many times we unconsciously do, because they are always the footnotes to the "real," more serious goals that describe what

visitors will come away knowing. It is those knowledge-based goals that we are good at articulating and testing.

This brings us to the third reason for our strong association between information and learning, and it is this one that I think really holds the key to why museums have neglected affect. I don't believe the problem is just lack of language or research, nor is it simply tradition. At bottom, I believe the problem is rooted in values. We live in a culture that values work, productivity, and performance. And those kinds of goal-oriented activities are fostered by cognitive, rational kinds of thought. Naturally, that is the kind of learning we have come to privilege as well.

Not only is that the kind of learning and thinking that society privileges, it is the kind of learning and thinking that museums have generally privileged. Because curators have traditionally had authority over museum collections, their scientific and historical methods of knowing have long dominated the institution, both in the production of knowledge for the scholarly community as well as in the communication of that knowledge to visitors.

With the emergence of professions like museum education and exhibit development, that communication function has, in many museums, been taken out of curators' hands. But not without a struggle. It is no secret that educators have spent much of their short existence at the bottom of the institutional hierarchy. The public interest that they represent, after all, has traditionally not been as highly valued as the scholarly interest that their curatorial colleagues represent. Educators' credibility, then, has been built in part by their adoption of modes of thought and reasoning that are valued in the institution. The work of visitor evaluation and research has been highly instrumental in establishing that credibility by providing scientifically sound tools, information, and theory in which to ground educational activities. That scientific language, after all, is the dominant language; it is the language that curators employ and that the institution values.

A key reason that affective learning remains on the periphery of our vocabulary and practice, then, is that it has never fit easily into museums' dominant epistemology. Nor does it lend itself readily to the rigorous sort of descriptive and testing procedures as other more rational modes of thought. Educators, as a result, have tended to shy away from it because they don't want to risk their hard-won credibility. For the fact is, even though we protest the opposite, affect still carries lightweight associations. And the fact also is, that as far as museum educators have come, they have yet to achieve full political and professional acceptance in the institution.

If our neglect of affective learning is rooted in the system of values that dominate the institution, then the question that needs to be asked is, of what value is affective learning? Why should we concern ourselves with it? In the next section I would like to suggest some ways in which affect bears on our ideas about learning.

What's So Great About Affect? The Role of Affect in the Learning Process

Clearly visitors have affective responses to their encounters in museums: "The exhibit was boring;" "Their tour was fun;" "That object was neat." What role do these responses play in their assimilation of the experience? Four suggestions follow that elaborate what those roles might be.

Motivation

The first has to do with motivation – motivating interest, motivating attention, providing the so-called "hook." Educators and interpreters are always looking for some quirky, interesting thing to hook visitors' attention – maybe a catchy label title, maybe a touch-cart of objects to handle. I would like to suggest that the effectiveness of those hooks are tied closely to affective factors, because their appeal often operates at a terribly gut level.

For example, when staff at the Chicago Botanic Garden began working on ways to do conservation education, we had a knee-jerk reaction: "We'll do a program on using native plants in the landscape;" "We'll develop a demonstration on composting;" "We'll write a brochure about Illinois' disappearing prairie." Every single idea turned out to be completely information-based.

What we were forgetting, and what every single person who has spent any time talking to visitors knows, is the fact that 55% of our visitors came just to get outdoors on a nice day. And, that what touches them most immediately are visceral kinds of things – what's in bloom, what the geese doing, how hot it is . . . We have a book for recording bird sightings that everybody uses (erroneously) as a visitor comment book; this book is chock-full of comments about how beautiful the gardens are, the unusual color of some flower, and so on. My point is to suggest that it is these affective responses that first impact on people, and that move them to do something like scribble their reactions in a bird book.

The upshot for educators is that conservation education can begin in one's gut just as well as one's head. In other words, to get people to care about something like conservation we have got to get them to care about plants; and to get them to care about plants we have to get them to see that plants are "neat," however they define the word. For if a visitor is able to make that first, visceral connection, then maybe the next time they run across that article in *Time* magazine about deforestation they will stop and read it.

Values Formation

The second consideration has to do with the role of affect in shaping people's values and beliefs. This idea finds its source in some of the work in leisure sciences having to do with the role of leisure experiences in people's lives. There has been a tendency among social scientists to treat experiences that offer more personal, intrinsic rewards (such as leisure pursuits) as secondary to more instrumental activities that are required to survive (such as working at a job or making dinner). It makes sense, after all, that productive activities required for survival should be functionally prior to those that offer more intangible, personal kinds of gratification.

But the suggestion has also been made that while they may not be functionally prior, they are ontologically prior, meaning that it is those expressive, affective, leisure kinds of experiences which give meaning and value to the more instrumental activities in which we have no choice but to engage. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1981) put it this way:

“As a person matures, the most rewarding experiences still tend to occur in expressive leisure contexts such as games, sports, intimate interactions, artistic, and religious activities. These experiences provide criterion for fulfillment that can and often does serve as a critical standard for the rest of life . . . Thus it could be argued that the most basic meaning of work and other instrumental activities is naturally determined by reference to meanings developed in leisure settings rather than vice-versa.” (p. 333)

In other words, it is in that expressive, affective mode that people come to know what is rewarding to them. It is there that they discover the criteria by which they evaluate all other life activities.

State of Mind

This brings us to our third consideration, which has to do with what I call state of mind. Perhaps the example that is the most familiar to museum people is Csikszentmihalyi's (1975; 1981) work on “flow.” His work shows that when a person is deeply involved in some activity, they lose themselves in a state of intense concentration or connectedness, so that whatever they are doing just flows – hence, the name. This experience may occur with any sort of activity, from athletics to writing to – yes, even learning. Flow describes a state of mind that is absolutely optimum for learning to occur. And it is a state of mind that is profoundly affective because it has to do with how one feels about what one is doing – in Csikszentmihalyi's words, not too bored and not too anxious: somewhere in-between that feels just right.

The implications of this idea for museums lies in their sensitivity to visitors' feelings – including their interests, preconceptions, or anything

else that might contribute to their encounter with an exhibit or program. For it is this initial affective response that shapes visitors' receptivity to the message being conveyed.

Learning Modes

The fourth consideration has to do with the variety of modes through which people are capable of receiving information. Interpretive vehicles tend to be created around verbal forms: written labels, spoken words, and so on. But affect goes beyond words; it operates at a visceral, emotional, sensory level, so that messages may be received through very imagistic, symbolic modes. Messages, after all, reside throughout the physical fabric of our institutions: from the comfort and negotiability of the whole physical setting to the character of the front-line personnel, to the ambiance of the individual exhibits and galleries, to, finally, the interpretive messages themselves.

That fact leads us to a broadened notion of what constitutes interpretation because visitors' affective modes are picking up all kinds of subtle messages that have nothing to do with the explicit messages we convey through our labels and other interpretive devices. Of all the museum personnel, exhibit designers are probably the most sensitive and responsive to this fact, the very nature of whose work is concerned with space, image, and feeling. They understand that a museum visit is first and foremost a physical encounter, and that it is all those physical facts of layout and color and lighting that provide the first impact on a visitor. Learning, then, or better experience, is happening at many levels beyond the literal messages we send.

Summary

None of these comments are meant to belie the value of information-based learning and interpretation. It is the nature of our institutions, after all, that they provide a whole variety of experiences to a whole diversity of people. But the fact is, there are all kinds of value systems and interests operating that shape our decisions about what we do and who we do them for.

In general, it has been my experience that most museum staff who have anything to do with visitors are genuinely supportive of and believe in the value of affective learning. But neither our actions nor our practice adequately reflect that support. And the reason is not just lack of creativity, although there aren't many good models of what affective interpretation even looks like. The reason ultimately has to do with larger social and institutional values about what is knowledge, what is learning, and what is the appropriate work of education.

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Note

1. As visitor surveys began to be more widely conducted in the 1970's, evidence mounted that far more than learning was going on during a museum visit. In a widely circulated and unfortunately unpublished manuscript (*The Museum as a Symbolic Experience*, 1974), Sheldon Annis hypothesized three distinct categories of visitor experience: educational, reverential, and associational. Marilyn Hood's work on the reasons people do not go to museums focused on psychographic factors (attitudes, values, preferences) of frequent, occasional, and nonvisitors (see her synopsis in *Museum News*, 1983). Other visitor researchers since that time (for example, Minda Borun and Lois Silverman) have concerned themselves with developing instruments for measuring affective experiences.