

Book Review



Book Title:

"Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning"

Falk, J H & Dierking, L D (2000)

Altamira Press ISBN 0 7425 0295 3

Reviewer:

Dr Paulette M McManus

Museum and Heritage Consultant

This book is a development of the ideas proposed by the authors in their earlier book 'The Museum Experience' (1992, Whalesback Books). In that book it was suggested that the museum visitor's experience is determined by the fluid interaction between three contexts related to the visit: the personal, the social and the physical. When you think about it, broadly, these three contexts can be seen to operate whenever we are conscious. Falk & Dierking then proposed that most learning theories were derived from a formal education point of view or were based on laboratory studies and so neglected to take these three contexts and their peculiar expression in informal educational environments into account.

Evaluators and researchers are often asked to produce evidence of learning as an outcome of visiting a particular site. The trouble is that human beings are very complex creatures and learning is a complex activity undertaken by them. It is extremely difficult to conceptualise how to investigate, let alone evaluate, the learning which takes place in daily life and on free choice visits to cultural spaces such as museums. Therefore, a new publication which offers a point of view which helps us to think about how to think about learning as a human characteristic is very valuable and welcome.

'Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning' seems, to me, to be two books in one. Chapters One to Seven present a densely referenced mosaic of theory and research information from many disciplines along with evaluation findings from informal educational environments. All is combined to aim at providing a platform from which to consider learning within their three part experience model. Chapters Eight to Twelve are much less densely referenced and are more concerned with providing a 'manual' of recommendations and guidelines for museums. I shall consider the beginning half of the book first.

Chapter One discusses free choice learning as influenced by the personal, social and physical contexts. The next chapter further develops the theme of the personal context through consideration of the notions of motivation and the sense of self. The concept of prior knowledge is a difficult one to handle within learning theories and many museum

people like to tie it down to everyday experience whereas I would say that it could include personal knowledge of how to think, to investigate and to learn. Chapter Three expands the 1992 social context part of the experience model to include the cultural context within which interaction with others occurs. It is suggested that shared knowledge and experience define communities of learners. Chapter four expands theoretically on the earlier description of the physical context as it considers the role of physical context in general in the creation of memories and in relation to awareness of place. The next three chapters return to the topics of the three just described.

I found this first section to be very interesting and stimulating to read and would recommend it to others interested in learning theory. However, the continual circling back to both major themes and common learning theory concepts throughout was rather vexing and, in the end, left me with a hazy picture of the author's view of learning in museums as opposed to other everyday free choice learning situations.

My chief complaint with the first seven chapters was the manner of referencing the work of others. In places references seemed to me to be needlessly dense and quite often the same reference was used repeatedly within a paragraph rather than at the end of it. Numbers were given in the text which referred to authors listed by name at the end of chapters so I needed two bookmarks to check a reference I was interested in by, finally, looking for the name in the bibliography at the end of the book. It required quite a lot of effort to check whether I could agree or accept some statements supported by references and I imagine a less determined reader would soon abandon the effort and just accept the text. I also found that many references were to unpublished evaluation reports or dissertations rather than to refereed published works, so making access more difficult for others who might wish to explore or build on the insights developed by the authors.

Throughout 'Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning', when considering museum based research and evaluations, there are many interesting references to the author's own work. I would have liked, also, to see a wider range of visitor study work reported as it is of great interest to me to see findings repeated in differing contexts. I would also have liked to be given sample sizes more often as that aids comparison with other studies.

The 'second section' of recommendations has some useful maxims for museum professionals. Recommendations for using the author's 'factors influencing learning' in order to offer better potential 'learning experiences' are given. Topics also discussed are the use of leisure time as a leisure resource; learning across the life span; eco and cultural tourism and the gaps between those who can benefit from these broad societal

trends and the 'have nots' who cannot. The book finishes with a SWOT analysis of the key points affecting museums in the future.

Those interested in visitor studies and informal educational environments will find much to interest them, and to think about, in this book and I expect to see many quotations from it in student work.

This review has been abridged from one published in the American VSA newsletter last year. The VSA editors are thanked for permission.

(This abridged review was originally published in VSG Newsletter Issue 5 November 2001)