

COMMENTARY

Learning from Objects: A Future for 21st Century Urban Arts Education

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THE STATE OF US URBAN ARTS EDUCATION IN 2009

Among the 510 promises Obama (2008) made the American public in his presidential campaign was a promise to use his position to endorse the arts in our public educational system (St. Petersburg Times, 2008). Included in this endorsement was his promise to fund an Artist's Corps program, which would bring and train young artists to low-income schools and their surrounding communities. If this promise is fulfilled, it is surely a welcome change of priorities to many of our country's arts educators. In the previous administration, many arts educators faced the seemingly arts-friendly rhetoric of the No Child Left Behind Act, but were left with little real support for enhancing, let alone maintaining, their school arts programs. In a time of decreased funding for the arts, many arts educators have been forced to defend a causation (rather than a simple correlation) for the arts and many attractive deliverables (like increased test and SAT scores) in order to maintain their place in the public school curriculum (Winner and Hetland, 2007). As Partnership 21st Century Skills suggests, the opposite should be the case, as skills readily learned within the arts, like creativity, innovation, and social collaboration, are marked as important skills to foster in learners today (Partnership for 21st Century Skills, 2007).

Arts Education Partnership (2000) suggests that there are key ways that schools can utilize their local cultural partners to enhance their school arts education programs. Local cultural partners that schools traditionally partner with for their arts education needs are museums. Although many arts educators realize the benefit of such partnerships instinctively, it is important to consider why these stu-

dent experiences in museums are so important for learning. Some of the benefits of such partnerships can be found in uncovering the key learning qualities of object-based learning experiences, easily afforded to learners in museums. In our technological age, where mind and body are increasingly disconnected in the classroom, object-based learning—along with strong museum-school partnerships—provide many benefits for student learning.

In the following brief discussion, I will first outline some of the special mind-body connections that object-based learning in museums affords learners and how this learning is specific to the kind of object-based learning one finds in museums. Next, I will discuss how integral museum-school partnerships are to making a space for arts education in general school curriculum. Lastly, I will make a case for increased funding for museum-school partnerships and object-based learning school initiatives, as I think they should begin to be rightly seen as part of the future for arts education in the 21st century. In reviewing all of these ideas, I hope to reinvigorate the argument that, in the current technological learning revolution of the early 21st century, we do not forget the great benefits of learning from physical objects.

Body and Mind, Making, and Museum Learning

Educators often ask themselves a fundamental question: How can I best utilize the precious potential of my students' minds? As we begin to frame how the arts can be reengaged in our educational system today, it is pertinent again to see how we might best connect learners' bodies with their minds. We must explore again the tie between experience and thinking. In his seminal work, *Art as Experience*,

Dewey (1934) discusses the connection between the body's actions and the mind, as he suggests that arts learning is closely connected to bodily experience. Varela (1999), a more recent philosopher, writes of how humans begin to know and learn through the experience of their bodies, just as animals do. In 2009, as we consider what future arts education has in 21st century learning, we should begin to look more closely at what arts education can do to reengage a mind-body connection in education. Recognizing the relationship of arts education to objects is an efficient way to reengage this connection.

Before they became public institutions, museums started first as private and personalized collections, or cabinets of curiosities and wonder. The first museums started as haphazard collections of fascinating things, often existing in glass cases in people's homes as jumbles of natural history objects, manuscripts, artifacts, and ephemera. As Weil (1995) explains, a contemporary museum's collection of objects is just as haphazard and may be representative more of "local wonders" (p. 15) than any sort of universal ones. In turn, the information housed in museum collections may be just as fleeting as any idea is within a learner's mind. A museum collection can teach visiting students that objects are representative of the transitory nature of ideas (Weil, 1995). The similar impermanent nature of both ideas and objects connect in the state of wonder that both incur in the learner. Just as a wonderful idea connects the learner to his specific time and place, a wonderful object does as well. This similarity of their wonder is the stuff of meaningful learning.

How, then, does the state of wonder present in the best museum collections help people learn? What about the physical make-up of museums engages learners more than a set of facts alone?

Why is a museum, as a particular kind of learning environment, so special? As Hein (1998) describes, “museums are extraordinary places where visitors have an incredible range of experiences” (p. 2). Often the act of museum going is social in nature, whether social in a family context or in the context of a school group. Whatever the case, museum going is both experiential and social and, likewise, educative in both the Deweyian and the Vygotskian sense of the word¹. Museums provide special environments for learning, as they have the ability to create and recreate experiences for learning in a bodily and social way that simple conceptual learning cannot. Human learning is an enormously complex endeavor, so it would make sense that an ideal learning environment should be equally as complex. Learning environments, like museums, which take into account the sensory needs of their learners (their sight, their feeling, and sometimes audial responses and reactions), have the greatest possibility of engaging the learner in a fully bodily way. Museums afford a special kind of learning; they do more than teach learners a simple set of facts, they show them cultural worlds that have been lost into the insatiable vortex of time (Hein, 1998).

Reengaging a mind-body connection for learning can be best achieved in learning from objects. Many contemporary learning theorists have suggested as such, and not only in the context of discussion about art. In recent literature, a group of researchers have been doing work that seems to reconnect body and mind through the act of making new physical objects in the classroom. Barry and Kanematsu (2008) suggest ways that teachers can create learning environments that support original thinking through multi-sensory and interdisciplinary approaches. Burke-Adams (2007) writes that learning to think of new ideas is not an “intangible component” (p. 58) of the classroom but a process that requires teachers to use tools to foster it. Jacucci and Wagner (2007) describe an ideal classroom in which materials (e.g., art objects) expand collaborative communication and promote new ideas by the very act of pinning them down to

finite reality. As we move forward into a digital learning age where objects are becoming less and less important to educational contexts, it is pertinent that we reengage our students’ mind-body connections with the experience of real art objects. How this can be done efficiently is through the benefits of museum-school partnerships and the objects with which they ask students to come in contact directly.

Object-based Learning: Looking at its Benefits

Learning from objects in museums helps learners access their imaginations to engage with a set of concepts, the history of a people, the history of an aesthetic movement, or the cultural norms of a society. Still, what is it in a set of objects that aids learning so much? Researchers like Frost (2001) think it is an object’s connection to the culture that made it that gives learners an opportunity to interact with a culture (and its ideas) on a bodily level. Smith (1989) writes that it is the constantly changing status of artifacts through history that allows students to better understand how the status of ideas change throughout history. When student learners engage with objects during museum-school partnerships, they access the rich cultural significance of these changing relationships. And, as they begin to see the changing meaning of objects in relation to their changing selves, they begin to get a larger, critical perspective of the mercurial nature of the world around them and their relational place within it.

Objects provide an important curricular set up for learners to access information. No matter the kind of museum in which they are housed (constructivist, traditional, or otherwise), the nature of objects makes them, for all practical purposes, physical repositories geared toward individualistic learning. When museums present the information they seek to convey, the objects within them govern how the information is presented and organized. There is a finiteness to a set of objects, and this engages a learner’s mind through his physical experiences (Dewey, 1934). Scholars like

Weil (1995) point out that some educators might see that this could be a kind of limitation for learning. However, some might see the physical finiteness as a helpful constraint, as it keeps ideas manageable in their determinate forms.

In addition, how museums choose to curate their collections gives learners a lot of information about the world. For example, an art museum may choose to organize its objects as part of a group of aesthetic movements or it may choose to organize its objects in groupings of time periods and cultures. Or it may act as the Dewey-constructed Barnes Foundation and organize its objects entirely by aesthetic principles and provide surprising juxtapositions.² Nevertheless, all museums present a physical curriculum that is intrinsically geared towards individualistic learning and experience.

As Weil (1995) explains, we represent our world of experiences through the objects in our museums and help to create an alternative world of objects for learners—one that projects directly into learners’ imaginations and allows them to learn deeply. When a learner experiences an object in its material form, something engages within him that is deeper than learning from the text or visuals of his classroom alone (Dewey, 1963). Intrinsic to this is his ability to experience the ideas he learning about in the world in its material form. Objects house the human drama and help reflect the human condition back to learners. This human relationship to objects (and direct access to them through museum-school partnerships) can help to dissolve the cultural barriers that sometimes mire them in unjust power relationships. As Dell (1987) argues, there is an egalitarian nature to cultural art objects themselves, as a museum full of them provides a physical example of cultural products that is paradoxically both tied up and free of cultural relevancies through their physical presences. Although the objects themselves are bound up with cultural significance, allowing students access to them creates agency and, in this way, helps to promote a more democratic distribution of information. Duncan (1995) argues that museums themselves mediate the

public's views of the art objects they hold. In this way, the objects of a museum provide students with a constantly changing set of information about themselves, hopelessly relevant to the context of their home institutions, their histories, their makers, museum visitors, and the objects surrounding them. As learners can begin to engage with the universality of object collection and learn based on the human lessons these objects hold, they can learn in a more just system and engage with timeless ideas of the human and natural world.

TAKING STUDENTS TO WHERE THE OBJECTS ARE: THE BENEFITS OF MUSEUM-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS

The kind of learning that occurs in museums is distinct, as museums are both repositories of culture and themselves learning environments that allow students to engage with the objects that have traveled through time as physical entities or things. In considering the partnership works of the arts and education, no more so is this partnership more evident and important than in the halls of a museum. As Pearce (1921) explains, "supplement[ing] historical records with relics illustrating the matters with which they deal, such as weapons, costumes, personal belongings of famous personages" (p. 11) is a way to connect with the people who lived through the history. Museums, whose role has arguably always been to act as repositories of culture (and being both susceptible to and representative of all the underlying power issues present in a culture), can be exciting places for students to learn more about the ideas they encounter in schools. As Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson (1995) write, many of our great adults had their future career paths sparked by a museum visit as children. And since many urban schools have had their arts funding cut drastically in recent years (due to both the NCLB assessment movement in education and governmental funding cuts for education in general), museum-school partnerships seem to be a way to help students access the cultural knowledge that might be inaccessible to them otherwise.

Museums have a long history of working with schools to enrich schools' arts programming with their own collections and resources (Hall & Bannon, 2006). Contemporary museum-school partnerships seem to take a varied many ways of implementing programming (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007), all of which are quite dependent on the types of museums, the age groups of the children involved, and other practical considerations, such as locale and accessibility of students to the museum. What is evident above and beyond these specific considerations is that younger students are often the learners in museum-school partnerships (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). Future researchers might seek to uncover both *why* this is the case and how in fact these younger students are learning. For example, a good question might be: How might young learners, within the halls of humanity's wonderful things (museums), experience this sense of awe and how is it important in sparking their lifelong learning?

Nightingale's (2006) work at the Victoria and Albert Museum has shown that by creating educational "programmes linked to culturally specific collections," she has allowed her museum to reach "specific communities" (p. 82) that might otherwise feel shut out of museums, due to the unseen (but felt) cultural boundaries present in elite art institutions. This and other similar shifts in relational educational programming at numerous museums around the world have profound implications for museum learning. Message (2006) argues that the best museums today make transparent their curatorial decisions in hallmark postmodern fashion. Other museum-school partnerships simply ask students to engage with interesting objects. Museum-school partnerships like The Museum Learning Initiative at Albany Institute of History and Art, Fitchburg Arts Academy's learning partnership with the Fitchburg Art Museum, and The Smithsonian Early Enrichment Center have more traditional, but successful, approaches to quality museum learning programs in which student lessons in a variety of subjects are taught directly in contact with objects from the

museum. Whatever the methods used, in contemporary museum-school partnerships, contemporary art educators should see the use of objects as cultural and educative tools as noteworthy. Inherent in these programs is the idea that people learn from objects in a deep way and, as arts educators, we should continue to support programs like them.

The benefits of learning in museums are worthy enough to break down cultural barriers for partnerships with schools (Berry, 1998), especially since the very act of a partnership helps to soften the boundaries between two institutions that prevent the sharing of information. Museums themselves help to break down learning barriers between the real and imagined worlds and can act as important catalysts for learning in this way. As Lorimer (2003) writes, as a museum exhibit full of objects "allows co-presence of subjects with models and swatches of an integrated world" (p. 34), subjects (learners) are better able to enter the space of their own imaginations. This important imaginative space gives them both agency within the world through access to their own minds and helps them to have more meaningful learning experiences.

For example, if a third grader is studying the country of France in her social studies class, going to the local museum and viewing (and in some cases, perhaps actually touching) in person the artifacts of such a culture helps to make alive in her imagination the world of France in a way text or 2-D visuals might not on their own. A museum experience helps to ignite a child's imagination and, subsequently, her learning. As Greene (1995) discusses, when the "imagination enters" into a learning experience, it becomes the "felt possibility of looking beyond the boundary where the backyard ends or the road narrows, diminishing out of sight" (p. 26). When children learn from objects, they begin to see the "integrated world" (Lorimer, 2003, p. 34) in which they live more fully and freely. This learning should be a "felt possibility" (Greene, 1995, p. 26) in order to be a meaningful one. Children *feel* their learning in a museum environment as they experience the knowledge

they are learning or, in some cases, as they are actually touching it. As children learn in museum settings, they begin to comprehend ideas in their entirety. This comprehension is related to their sensory experiences and imaginations being activated (Sartre, 1940) for great learning benefit.

Most arts educators, and educators in other subjects, would argue that in developing students' imaginations in school you begin to develop "a more active sensibility and awareness" (Greene, 1995, p. 8) within learners. It would follow, then, that learning within experiential learning environments like museums would instill active sensibility in learners through active learning with objects. Certainly, as learners engage with the objects in museums, they somehow engage with the *real thing* (Gurian, 1999). What real means is another story. The objects within museums are the real relics of the past, however culturally skewed a view these relics might hold. Objects in museums are forever caught up in the boundaries of their time and the power dynamics therein. Still, as students learn from the *real things*, they arguably learn differently (and many might argue better) than from facts alone. And as long as there are publicly accessible collections of objects, learners might as well have every opportunity possible to learn from them.

THE ARGUMENT FOR AN OBJECT-BASED ARTS EDUCATION THROUGH ENGAGED MUSEUM-SCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS IN URBAN SCHOOLS: CONCLUDING REMARKS

The urban high school graduation crisis is finally getting more exposure among policymakers and the media. In "Cities in Crisis: A Special Analytic Report on High School Graduation," Swanson (2008) states that high school graduation rates are on average 15 percentage points lower in our nation's urban centers. The National Endowment for the Arts (2008) has indicated that arts programming can play a role in increasing high school graduation rates. While Swanson (2008) does not identify any rela-

tionships between arts education (let alone object-based arts education or museum-school partnerships) and the possibility of higher graduation rates, he does explain that a student's community largely affects the possibility of her graduation. When this community, whether it be school or home, fails to engage students' imaginations, something goes wrong for student learning.

Despite these conclusions, when funding gets cut from schools to make room for subjects that might positively affect graduation rates, like math and science, what usually goes first is funding to the arts. As arts educators, we need to consider how to create new communities of learning in our urban schools that are alternative ways to engage our students' imaginations. Museums provide a backdrop to create these communities, as the objects they house both contain the real world and inspire new ones through an engagement of students' imaginations. Museum-school partnerships could be a powerful 21st century learning tool in cultivating better learning experiences for our students and helping to slow down, and potentially stop, the high school graduation crisis.

Greene (1995) argues that the arts can bring unexplored possibilities to student learning, reengage student agency and imaginations, and thus, bring about social change through this reengagement. Perkins (1994) explains that the visual intelligence stimulated by engaging with art objects during arts learning sessions strengthens learners' imaginations, which, in turn, strengthens critical thinking skills. By engaging students with an object-based arts curriculum, we can begin to reengage students with the important mind-body connections that may be left out of many digital learning initiatives. By giving funding and support to increase museum-school partnerships, by encouraging teachers in all disciplines to use objects in their classrooms, and by asking students to create and co-construct with their peers their own novel objects, we might begin to give our students "the comprehension of *total reality*" (Freire, 2006, p. 108) they so deserve. Looking forward at how we might best improve

graduation rates in our schools and the depth of learning occurring therein, it is necessary that we begin to think of learning from art objects as synonymous with quality arts learning (and, moreover, quality learning in general) and provide the platform for object-based learning in our urban schools.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 To define these theorists' relationships to the word *educative*: a Deweyian definition of *educative* is learning that is experiential in nature and a Vygotskyian definition of *educative* is learning that is social in nature.
- 2 "Surprising juxtapositions," of course, is only a fitting description to a public that is familiar with other more normative methods of museum education. Barnes' and Dewey's choices in the Barnes Foundation can be seen as ironic and elitist or democratic, depending on your view. Certainly, their choices can be seen as both simultaneously.

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