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## **INTEGRATED EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES IN THE UNIVERSAL MUSEUM: FIVE WAYS FORWARD**

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Whatever the other characteristics of the universal museum, education must be one of its core functions. That is, education both of regular visitors and those who are not but who are members of the local, regional or national communities served by the museum. In this sense, universal refers to making the museum accessible to all: accessible physically and intellectually. This relates to what I mean by education. It is far broader than what takes place between teachers and pupils in a formal setting. Education is also about providing environments where people will be inspired or provoked to know, to question. To reflect about themselves and the wider human and natural world. A universal museum should be a great facilitator of these learning processes.

In this paper I shall focus on five ways in which there can be integration of educational opportunities in the universal museum. For examples to illustrate these themes I shall draw on practices in a small sample of museums in Europe and the USA

### **1. INTEGRATING WITH NEEDS OF THE ADULT POPULATION**

These needs may be identified by adult education bodies, by adults individually, by museums or by these groups working in partnership. Two examples show joint enterprises in action. An art museum in Wausau, Wisconsin, USA, arranged an exhibition of needlework by recent settlers in their community, the Hmong people from Laos. Following this successful introduction to the museum, community leaders helping the Hmong to learn English discussed with the museum how it could become involved in this work, it was decided that images of birds, relatively culture-free, could provide a stimulus for learning English and the museum thus

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extended its education programs in a way the curators responsible for the exhibitions could not have originally anticipated. In the UK a national body concerned with developing adults basic skills (the Adult literacy Basic Skills Unit) has funded various partnership schemes. A school and a museum in Wales developed a project to help parents who could not read. Some 50 women joined the project. They visited an 'open air' museum showing aspects of C19th life, to learn about life then and contribute their own family memories. On a second visit the women brought their children, having been empowered to talk about the exhibits and having gained confidence in these new surroundings. This confidence and pleasure in learning is seen as an important element in learning basic skills such as reading.

The Nordiska Museum in Stockholm has helped parents to introduce their children to social history by creating the 'play house' - a space which is in great contrast to the formality of the rest of the museum. In the 'play house' stories and household activities are based on life in the last century. Another Swedish museum has been pro-active in responding to the educational needs of unemployed people. Young and older unemployed adults can spend several weeks in the museum demonstrating their former work and learning to develop communication skills. In 1994 this related to recycling, the theme of the main exhibition.

A final illustration is the well-established link which many museums have with more traditional Adult Education courses, such as hosting an art class making use of the museum's environment. Regrettably in England, too often classes for adults which are held in museum's lecture rooms, ignore the collections.

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## 2. INTEGRATING THE PROVISION FOR ALL AGE GROUPS

In England It has been more common for children to have opportunities for learning in museums which are not available to adults. One example is learning through handling artefacts. However, these activities are becoming more common for adults as they already are in other countries. One example includes installing 'touch panels' or having docents with bags containing samples of fabrics to show visitors brocade, linen and velvet for example, which is featured in furnishings or costumes in the displays. Areas have been built into some displays at the American History Museum in Washington D.C. specifically to give adults as well as children the option of handling objects and trying to assemble replica/sections of objects such as a piggin, a small barrel.

On some occasions when specialists such as artists or story-tellers visit museums only pre-booked school groups may enjoy their skills. Sunderland Museum in the north of England has several times employed artists during the summer holidays to work with visitors of all ages and create a communal picture. All involved learned about design and the techniques of producing a fabric collage. The result was put on display to delight all visitors.

Loan services in England were once supplied only to schools, but increasingly these resources are now available to a wide range of community groups, such as community homes for elderly people, hospitals and prisons. The loan kits contain original and replica material, sometimes intended to generate reminiscences at other times to relate to a temporary exhibition. A kit about the work of J M W Turner was create initially for the latter purpose. An outreach loan kit commissioned by Stockholm's Medieval Museum has been designed with the needs of blind as well as sighted people in mind. The loan case itself has raised pictures related to the medieval topic.

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### **3. INTEGRATING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES WITH THE WHOLE WORK OR THE MUSEUM**

One aspect of this integration is to inform visitors what the staff's responsibilities are. A small museum in the south of England placed photographs of the staff with brief explanations about their work at the entrance to the museum. Some of the museums' functions such as conservation and accessioning should be included in the museums' remit to educate the public about their work. Allowing the public access to museum colleagues while they are at work could be distracting, but there are times when conservation work can be done in sight of the public. Labels too could explain the conservation needs of different materials.

Increasingly museums in the U.K. are recording their accessions on computer databases. Selections from this information can be made available to the public in various ways: in the museum's library or on CD-ROM which is becoming more widely available (for example the National Gallery in London now sells a CD-ROM of its collection). Finally in this section, museums could also link their marketing strategies with their educational objectives. Selling monographs and other books about the collections is common place but less usual is to see material linked with the theme of an exhibition. The children's Museum In Boston USA sells material for recycling after arranging a display which stresses the need for recycling.

### **4. INTEGRATING EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES WITH CURRENT ISSUES IN THE LOCAL AND NATIONAL COMMUNITY:**

Museums' exhibition and collections policies need to be responsive to this as do the educational programs. Without necessarily providing new displays, activities can from time to time focus on for example, ecological issues. As part of Earth Day celebrations at a museum of building, visitors could

choose to take part in a game which involved designing a city center along ecologically sound lines.

Museums have also developed improving links with groups in their communities so that new exhibitions can reflect their needs and interests. Visitors with vision and hearing impairments have been given more appropriate access to the collections in some museums. Visitors who are deaf and hearing visitors were given a new perspective on art when the 'Deaf Way' highlighted artists who were deaf. The pictures were not brought together into one exhibition. Participating galleries in Washington D.C. simply put an additional label alongside selected pictures to explain that they were part of the 'Deaf Way' theme.

In an attempt to bring people into the museum who were not regular visitors Stockholm's City Museum liaised with community groups to select people who would be interested in showing what their homes were like. The resulting displays were an honest presentation of aspirations, pride and messy reality.

## **5. EDUCATIONAL OPPORTUNITIES WHICH INTEGRATE WITH SCHOOLS**

This is by no means a new partnership, but some of the characteristics of this integration are new in England. Here, museums have responded magnificently to the great challenge of the country's first National Curriculum. Museum education staff and their colleagues have contributed to the debate on draft curricular documents, have introduced new programmes for schools and have published many booklets to show how their collections relate to the topics which schools now have to study. One innovative booklet explains how science can be studied during a visit to a fine and decorative arts collection in a university museum.

Schools in some countries have linked with museums to help pupils to become familiar with the 'world of work'. Teenagers (14-16) have spent one or two weeks at a museum for work experience. Another museum has encouraged

children to express their aspirations and future ambitions for a display.

One of my favourite museum labels expresses the museum's expectations of its visitors in a simple way: it invites visitors to 'muse, converse, and learn'. Underlying this are all the possibilities I have outlined for museums to make education one of their core functions, integrated into their own and their communities' lives. Training museum personnel, especially those already in post, is needed if this is to be a reality in many museums. It is also essential if museums are to fulfil one of the criteria of being universal.