



Number 6

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of Roundtable Discussions*

How will learning be different
in the 21st century? What will
the 21st century learner pursue?

And how will these pursuits
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Working Paper

The 21st Century Learner *Cultural Institutions as Content Providers*

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Having crossed the threshold into this century, much looks familiar. Institutions are still hard pressed to find the balance between supply and demand, for example, and many people are challenged to acquire new skills in order to manage accelerating change. The shift to a “new economy” society has outstripped traditional approaches to just about everything, including the ways people are provided information and learn.

However, many of our clients see great opportunity in this landscape. As they reach into their communities, they are learning that audience development can foster community development. Meeting people where they play, worship, or gather for other reasons makes connections that help define a community. In the process of whetting peoples’ appetites for programs, these institutions have fostered a kind of learning that many people, including new audiences, find enthralling.

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So libraries offer a shuttle to cyberspace, as well as the expertise to navigate there. Museums lead people back into their own past by sending them to their attics to unearth family letters for a database. And an alliance to collect the stories of quilters and quilt-making introduces one generation to the ways of others. This is the picture of 21st century learning, in unexpected places, often structured by the learners themselves.

What will the 21st century learner do?

The 21st century learner will pursue knowledge both within and outside the envelope of formal education. As people live longer and gain greater access to sources of learning, age will no longer define who is a student. The 21st century learner will:

- be accustomed to information in visual bytes;
- expect content to be customized and malleable, capable of being searched, sorted, and reconfigured;
- respond to novelty and surprise over routine;
- want information delivered at warp speed.

Additionally, 21st century learners will want to construct their own courses of study. But they will also need help with information literacy – the core competencies and critical thinking skills that enable them to “read” objects and forms, find answers, and create something meaningful from the glut.

Who will respond to these learners?

Although content providers of all kinds have value to offer the 21st century learner, cultural institutions are especially well-positioned. They have honed strategies for working in their communities. They can utilize the unique resources in their collections and on their stages. They are ideal partners to other organizations and fields looking for conduits to existing audiences. They understand the importance of expertise, authenticity, and context for the experiences they offer. And they can work in multiple formats – hands-on, studio, interactive, as well as traditional presentation and learning styles.

What are the elements of success?

A few elements appear as consistent themes across the various strategies that many leading-edge institutions are employing to reach the 21st century learner:

- Alliances. Many heads are better than one in combining assets for learning and in reaching these learners.
- Delivery systems. Learning outside the bounds of formal education will demand a new infrastructure. This is where technology comes in.
- Inter-disciplinary. The specialty “silos” of the last century can be tapped and their contents mixed, like so much rich grain.
- Inclusive. Multiple ages and sectors of society have a hunger for learning, and all want to be included.

We asked a few friends from the field to survey the 21st century learning landscape from their vantage points and to report what they see.

Comments

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At the heart of the revolution that is so profoundly changing the landscape of learning in our time is an emphasis on connectivity. While most closely associated with the complex imagery of webs, links, and journeys through cyberspace, this concept is also central to the museum and library experience. One version of connectivity conjures a learner seated at a computer, traveling through a vast hologram of resources, intersections, and choices. Another places the learner in a library or museum, following paths of inquiry through first-hand encounters with texts and artifacts. Both reflect a learner-centered approach that is self-directed, activity-based, and highly personal.

As the shift to a technological society transforms our

understanding of learning, we need daring alliances that combine these two visions of connectivity. After all, the vast collections of museums and libraries are dense with ideas and insights. Even a single object may become a node for learning, offering webs of radiating information that connect it to history, art, technology, religion, ritual, science, and the natural world. New systems are needed to unlock the power of these collections, creating broad public access and facilitating a fresh spirit of inquiry.

In creating these new systems and alliances, we might apply other concepts that are redefining learning in the 21st century. Multiplicity is one of them. It underscores the importance of individuality, variety, and openness, and reminds us that we must accommodate multiple learning styles, reach multiple generations, and provide multiple points of entry – all in a multicultural and multi-linguistic environment. Information literacy, another concept, emphasizes skill-building and organizational tools to support critical thinking and analysis. The learning environment is also described as fluent, laboratory-like, and decentralized – all concepts that support inquiry as an open-ended, creative process.

Museums and libraries have spoken the language of the 21st century learner for many years, but have been challenged to increase accessibility and overcome their exclusivity. It may be that no other institutions have more resources to support learning across a lifetime. But museums and libraries can't succeed alone. What is essential now is a new kind of network, a system of complementary resources, and a repertoire of tools and connections that

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Yes, this sounds like us, all right: 21st century learners, pumped full of visual stimulation, sorting through dense streams of information, picking and choosing what we pay attention to, on the lookout for the unusual and surprising. And getting agitated when our delivery systems take a few extra seconds to download. But how adept are we at interpreting all this data? What skills will we

increasingly need to sort, sift, and weave together the bits of streaming information into a significant whole? What will give us new insights, or allow us to make new connections and construct personal meanings?

At the Exploratorium, we have initiated several research and exhibition projects that attempt to dig deeper into questions of visual literacy, interpretation, and meaning-making. For example, in “Revealing Bodies,” our current temporary exhibition on scientific and cultural representations of the human body, we have juxtaposed familiar images, like the sonogram in a Volvo ad, with objects, artworks, an 18th century Italian wax “Medical Venus,” and images from the National Institutes of Health’s digitized “Visible Human” project on the internet. The exhibition does not provide content in the traditional sense – there is no fixed story line – but it poses interesting and even disturbing questions as we ask visitors to consider the images in the context of their makers and the cultures in which they were made. Where did the bodies come from? What information does each representation contain, and what is left out? Who traditionally was (or is) doing the looking? How much of what we think we see is based on our own predilections, and how much is “objective” or “neutral?”

This is an unusual exhibition for the Exploratorium, full of objects and images and not as many interactive elements as we usually provide. Yet people are spending significant time in the gallery, looking intensely, engaging in conversations, reading exhibit books, making poignant observations. Their comments indicate that they appreciate our posing of questions, our juxtapositions of the familiar and unfamiliar, and the open-endedness with which we have organized the material. Such content exploration is going to be intensely sought after in the years to come, I believe, as we all try to make sense of this new and future world.

Museums and libraries, with their long experience in collecting information and objects and their commitment to inquiry-fostering activities, are well-situated to help us grapple with issues of interpretation and meaning-making. But in a world where unlimited access to content is already an outcome of the new technologies, museums and libraries will need to undergo their own morphing, evolving from being primarily content providers to being content explorers and 21st century learners themselves.

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As cultural institutions face the imperatives of a new age, there is a growing collective understanding that the times have changed forever. The realm of learning and populist education provides a case in point. During the last half century, learning was greatly expanded in our society, and those denied the benefits of that expansion framed their grievance as a social injustice. But the new age will soon find its stride, and the dissonance of the past will give way to the search for useful purposes for new technologies and the wealth created by them.

Institutions that present cultural information and illuminate the meanings and mysteries of things cultural will have new opportunities to enrich learning in their communities and beyond. The old highbrow-lowbrow paradigm will give way to popular forms of education for a cross-section of patrons, many of them first-time visitors to certain kinds of cultural spaces. Indeed, the very meaning of patronage is being transformed as cultural institutions promote

knowledge to more people in an attempt to inform, dazzle, entertain, and uplift. In the process, new technologies are changing the playing field, giving cultural providers the ability to situate their work in the arenas of lifetime learning, distance learning, and cultural democracy.

Efforts that challenge educational and cultural elitism have a long history, and yet the popularization of learning is now on a scale unseen in the past. As such, culturally engaged professionals should be emboldened. We are at a very interesting intersection in American life. America's older cities, in partnership with the cultural organizations in them, are discovering new ways to market themselves as places of intellectual and social excitement. Atavistic beliefs about race, gender, and class have been challenged by what we now know of the social construction of difference. The ability to amass new information and disseminate it in exciting ways should encourage our cultural organizations to articulate more complicated, intellectually challenging narratives about culture.

Twenty-first century learning will be enhanced by these and other paradigm-shifting developments. Cultural institutions can only benefit from these realities as they pass along their meanings to a new generation of citizenry.