

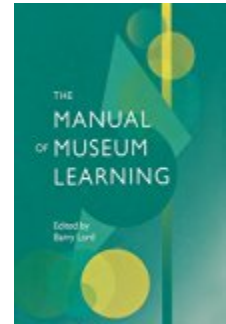
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



Barry Lord, Gail Dexter Lord, eds. *The Manual of Museum Learning*. Lanham: AltaMira Press, 2007. 320 pp. \$100.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7591-0970-4.

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Reviewing the Manual

The Manual of Museum Learning is, as its title claims, a manual in that it is a text of guidelines and instructions for individuals (in this case museum educators), whether paid staff or volunteer docents, who seek to complete specific tasks of informal education in a museum. One of a series of manuals including *The Manual of Museum Management* (1997), *The Manual of Museum Planning* (2nd ed. 1999), and *The Manual of Museum Exhibitions* (2002), this book is co-edited by Barry Lord and his wife Gail Dexter Lord of Lord Cultural Resources, the world's largest firm specializing in the planning of museums and cultural institutions. *The Manual of Museum Learning* is based on the definition of museum learning proposed by J. Falk and L. Dierking in their book *Learning from Museums* (2000), recently reviewed for H-AfrArts. That definition is based on the contextual learning model, an experience that occurs within personal, social, and physical contexts—not formal learning as occurs in school, but an informal process based on voluntary interaction between learner and objects. In an effort to use the most current research, *The Manual of Museum Learning* includes only books and articles published after 2000.

The book is divided into sections that correspond to three important questions about museum learning: Why is it needed? Who participates in museum learning? How do museums facilitate that learning?

The first section of this book asks “Why?” in order to “identify what museum learning is, why it matters, and its possibilities for enhancing the future of museums, and

of our civilization” (p. xiv). For over 200 years, museums have been a source of communication in a civil society through the display of objects, concepts, and phenomena in three-dimensional space—particularly important in technologically advanced societies where the average person spends an average of six hours a day looking at some form of two-dimensional screen (p. 6). Museum learning is now considered part of lifelong learning and contemporary museums will often use other media to interpret and enhance the visitor's interaction within museum spaces.

The contributors make a convincing argument for museums as “cultural accelerators” because they increase our awareness of social change by showing the evolution of objects, by interpreting changes, and by exhibiting works of art which are considered an expression of change whether accepted or rejected, beautiful or disturbing. *The Manual of Museum Learning* uses Picasso as an example of how what is shown in a museum can affect its visitors, since Picasso created what is considered the first Cubist painting as a result of his exposure to European collections of African art. Africa is also suggested as a place where museums may play an important role in preserving the past and helping people adapt to change. What the authors do not discuss here is why, despite being “cultural accelerators,” museums are considered by many to be static.

Elaine Heumann Gurian, the author of chapter 3, argues that museums will become a more essential part

of life for the everyday person, like libraries and malls. This future vision applied to museum collections and programs involves a shift from authority to facilitator. Museums will need to be searchable, like libraries, and offer visitors mall-like amenities, including adequate seating, eating options, shopping, and socializing opportunities. Of course the success of this future museum will be based on its accessibility during hours when the public is most available, notably evenings and weekends, and on a welcoming, helpful staff with governing structures that support them. *The Manual of Museum Learning* suggests that smaller, regional museums are best set up for such shifts in museum/public interaction.

Section 2 concentrates on “Who” by exploring “the range of both child and adult museum learners today, probing the potential to enhance the relevance and effectiveness of the museum experience” (p. xiv). Many visitors come to the museum without a conscious intent to learn, and this book seeks to aid the museum workers who try to provide learning experiences for them. Understanding what makes the museum relevant to visitors, and more importantly, what makes it irrelevant, is crucial to developing museum experiences that will attract a more diverse audience, a requirement for today’s government funding. The research suggests that museums involving representatives from target populations in the planning of exhibitions, activities, and programs and forming partnerships with organizations from their communities have been more successful than others in accomplishing this goal. Provided as a case study is the example of Constitution Hill in Johannesburg, South Africa (pp. 124-131) which also serves to incorporate the idea of the “museum of conscience” (p. 121), an institution that addresses current social issues.

American museums were among the first to recognize the importance of children as museum goers and to address their needs with education programs. Indeed, the education department has been the most successful advocate for the visitor rights of families with children, placing value on young visitors even though

other museum personnel—security, curators, researchers, administrators—have been less enthusiastic. Today’s museum environment demands that guards and floor staff be not only well trained but family-friendly, since they have the first and most direct contact with families when they visit.

This section also addresses the current relationship between formal learning at school and informal learning at the museum. Today’s North American schools have a mandate for a defined curriculum and accountability that makes museum tours harder to justify, despite a growing body of research that shows informal learning to be more effective than formal learning. Case studies illustrate how some museums are proving their relevance to school curricula to support an argument for increasing budgets for school programs in museums as well as more museum-school partnerships and museum teacher training.

The purpose of the last section is to address the “How”—that is, to document the means of achieving the results described in section 2 through the effective use of volunteers, professional staff, space and facilities, policies and plans, new technologies, evaluation procedures, and marketing techniques that are vital to making a museum learning program work. Again, a wide range of case studies is used to give the reader examples of how different museums have addressed these issues.

In the final chapter, the challenge of sustaining participation in museum learning is examined. The conclusion is that a diverse audience whose members come to the museum for many different reasons might be better served by more open-ended programs that help them structure more individualized and fulfilling visits themselves, building on the idea that “less is more.”

Taking a cue from this idea, one might concentrate on the list of features characterizing an education plan for museum learning provided on pp. 138-140, and simply distribute this to museum educators around the world as an abridged *Manual of Museum Learning*.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

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