

Knowledge (Objectives, Content, Audience) + Tools = Success

By Cathy Blackbourn

Good morning and welcome to the OAAG and OMA symposium “iMuseum: New Tools for New and Traditional Audiences”

As museum, archive and gallery workers with the responsibility for planning and delivering public programs and exhibits, the audience-focused aspect of museum work, we all know that we should have clear objectives for what we plan to do – objectives for our audiences (external) and, possibly, objectives for our institution (internal). In this opening presentation for both days of the Symposium, I want to provide a context for the knowledge, and experience we will be adding to our arsenals. I will often use the term educators throughout this presentation but I mean it to include those who create museum experiences through programs, events and exhibits, both in the museum and from a distance through technology.

Fortunately many of our colleagues throughout North America are seeking the answers to the same “big” questions we will be considering over the next two days:

Who is driving technology and 2.0 initiatives in museums? What roles do and should educators and exhibit planners play? How are these roles/approaches different from those of marketing and communication or development officers? How are museums and museum educators working with technology to foster deep and interactive conversations with their visitors? Rather than seeing technology solely as a distribution method or as a marketing tool, how can museum educators use online platforms to expand their teaching practice in a way that remains in alignment with their professional goals and beliefs?

You should feel proudly professional that you are here today to participate in these expanded discussions which make our audiences the focus of the work we do and the sharing of lessons learned will contribute to our field as a whole in a significant way.

You will see that we are recording presentations and discussions with the purpose of producing a published Proceedings to share with our colleagues throughout the sector.

What I intend to focus on this morning is the research and planning we know we should do but, like most in the education and public program side, we often skip in our rush to the delivery of content or activity. In this age of rapidly changing technology that has the potential to help us meet a variety of audience needs and expectations, we feel under increasing pressure, often self-imposed, to “jump in” but serious reflection will benefit us all as we take the opportunity to hear about what others are doing, to discuss the opportunities and consider the implications.

There are some big questions that we should keep at the forefront while we listen and discuss:

- With so many options for reaching visitors virtually, how do museums define visitor experience?
- How are educators using technology to create new and meaningful experiences for their visitors both on and off site?
- What constitutes a "museum experience" - can that happen offsite, specifically online?(is an offsite or online experience "authentic"?) and
- how does that compare to current thought about what constitutes a museum experience?

While educators in the museum field all over the world are working to incorporate technological tools into a variety of educational experiences, perhaps the more important (and more difficult) question is:

- how do museums incorporate their practice into the larger world of technology in a meaningful way?

Several recent trends in art museum education (Rika Burnham & Elliott Kai-Kee, Melinda Mayer, etc.) have focused on conversation and dialogue as core to effective museum teaching. At the same time, museum technology is enabling methods of delivery which parallel that conversational/dialogical/interactive process (smARThistory.org, ArtBabble, Twitter, iPhone apps, etc.). In an interesting way, technologies have been refocusing back on the "human element" of museum education and some of the core elements of participant-centered learning experiences that occur in our galleries. But these alignments between museum communication and technological possibility are not always shared by the "institution" itself. Another excellent reason for the thinking and planning we are undertaking today.

We will be hearing from a number of excellent presenters and sharing information which can serve the overall goal of advancing the process of CONVERSATION in museum & gallery education and exhibition.

The subject of this presentation came about as a result of a lunchtime conversation with my counterpart at the Canadian Conservation Institute last August. In our "museum trainer nerd" way we were discussing her current challenge of developing a successful learning platform of any kind, the how to deliver, without vital information about audience, program objectives and content. In my colleague's case, she had been asked to come up with a blended learning approach using both an online learning platform that would "bookend" a face-to-face seminar/workshop that would be delivered in four countries in four different languages. The challenge she and I were discussing was that she had not been provided with learning objectives, a clear idea of the content which was intended to be communicated in the face-to-face component or audience

expectations and therefore found it almost impossible to identify an appropriate and effective learning platform to support the online aspect of the course.

So, after we start to absorb some of the big, overarching questions that our institutions need to address, let's look at the knowledge we need to have **before** making successful delivery mechanism decisions (and investments):

Audience

We need to stop guessing or assuming and find out or ask different segments of our audiences what they want/expect from us specifically and from leisure or learning activities generally. What do they like? What don't they like? Where do they look for information when they are looking for an enjoyable activity/outing/event?

What kinds of sensibilities emerge in the young people who have grown up in digital environments? How is this different than say, retired adults who may be interested in volunteering and learning at our museums? Some of the audience roundtables this afternoon will get you started and you might want establish your own audience roundtable or youth council early in the planning for a specific event, program or exhibit whether virtual or in your institution. Who will be interested in what you are planning or how could you present it in a way that would be interesting to a specific audience? **Here is a scavenger hunt question for you to take to this afternoon's roundtables – what audience or audiences would be interested in an APP & APPS (appetizers) party to launch your museum's new app? (show Billy Munnely). I should have the new iPad as a prize for this but, the prize will have to be the satisfaction of applying audience research to successful event planning.**

Do you know what teachers want from online resources? Are they even looking for online resources? Pre-packaged materials or tools to create their own content with the resources of a museum? [Bring teachers or field research into the conversation?]. Do

students use them? Does it differ depending on the student's age/grade? Just recently, for example, this question was posted on the museum-ed listserv:

"we are eager to learn about anyone's direct experience with producing educational website projects focused on social studies curriculum for 5-8th graders. In your experience, are these resources used primarily in the classroom facilitated by the teacher, self-directed in a lab or at home?" Good questions to ask and good information to have before embarking on an expensive website-based project.

A lot has been (and continues to be) explored about the social aspects of learning in museums---and potential for learning interaction/participation unique to museum and gallery spaces. In intentional efforts to teach 21c skill sets¹, how are museums using 21st c practices of teaching and learning through innovative social experiences? How do guides, staff, artists, visitors and new communication tools come into play? Add to this the 21 c skills themselves, and the buzz about participatory experiences, communities of practice and communities of learners.

And one final audience to consider...our own staff! How can new digital technology be used for staff and docent training? To further discussion? To disseminate information and encourage discussion through blogs, podcasts, and wikis? If we develop these, will they be used? Will they improve our programs or just be an expensive (time and money) add-on?

I am looking forward to a lot of discussion in some of the roundtables over the next two days that will share examples of successes and --- less than successes, that will build all of our knowledge and experience.

Content / = or Deliver /share / create content to / with your audience

¹Institute of Museum and Library Services, Museums, Libraries and 21st Century Skills, July 2009

Content is once again a potentially contentious issue that must be addressed, if not settled, across the institution well before any public program or event begins. This can look like yet another equation: Deliver **or** share **or** create content to **or** with your audience

- How are Web 2.0 initiatives opening the museum to new and more diverse voices?
- How are Web 2.0 initiatives shifting exhibition and program design to be more user-centered?
- How are Web 2.0 initiatives changing museum's roles in terms of social change and social activism?

The researchers and thinkers that I am currently most excited about are raising these questions. Front-of-house/public focussed individuals, such as most of you, are often very enthusiastic about the opportunities to share authority, to include more voices in the stories that are shared in our exhibits (both virtual and within our buildings) and in our programs. Some of these so-called “social media” opportunities don’t even require technology. But content is often the place where “the rubber hits the road” and the old “educator vs. curator” perspective once again becomes an area of conflict or at least misunderstanding. The implications of power-sharing with audience over content need to be addressed, if not totally resolved, well before the exhibit is installed (again virtually or actually) or the program delivered. How comfortable is the whole institution with sharing control of content with visitors both within the institution and outside? Do we want to simply put our content out there or engage in dialogue to build that content?

And, not actually part of the equation I started with, are **internal Human Resource considerations** – What sort of staff and other resources (time) does it really take to successfully run “free” 2.0 applications? Are they just free or are they meeting your objectives?

Okay...now with all of those questions and considerations resolved at your institution, we can move on to ...

Tools

I return to some of the big questions raised at the beginning of my presentation that, I think can be more thoughtfully addressed once the questions about objectives, audience, and content have been resolved. How can technology foster deep and interactive conversations with our visitors? Rather than seeing technology solely as a distribution method or as a marketing tool, how can museum educators use online platforms and social media to expand their teaching practice in a way that aligns with their institutional goals and beliefs?

What will be most effective in delivering/sharing/creating content to/with our desired audience?

What are the pros and cons to embracing technology in the museum? Do we have the needed time, money, staff knowledge and skills or will we need to seek those out?

That is a LOT of questions! As you hear and discuss each morning's presentations and participate in tomorrow's roundtable sessions, pay particular attention to what their project's objectives (both internal and external) were, what content they wanted to share and their organization as a whole was comfortable with sharing, what they knew about their target audience "going in" and their resulting decisions about the tool(s) they chose to use. Did this knowledge result in a successful project for their institution and audience? Would it result in a successful project at your institution? **You decide.**

This symposium, therefore is not just about sharing and discussing knowledge about research, audience & tools but about modelling processes that you can take back and apply at your own institutions. I am so excited about what will come out of the iMuseum symposium...for each of you and for our sector. Thanks for coming and thanks for participating.