

## **History Education and the ‘Educational’ Role of Museums**

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Last year, I attended an invigorating conference hosted by the National Council for History Education in Boston. From the inspirational keynote speech by historian David McCullough to the session where an energetic classroom teacher showcased a creative DBQ project in her 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom, the conference left me energized by the passion for teaching history among educators. But at the same time, I was dismayed by the absence of history museum representation, except for a handful of museum exhibitors, at this national history education conference.

Even though I know that several variables could have contributed to the small presence of the history museum sector, I am concerned by the growing realization that there is a lack of appreciation among educators for the intellectual tools and expertise with artifacts and primary source material that museums can bring to the teaching of history. In talking with teachers at the conference, I discovered that there is indeed a need to better communicate to teachers how history museums can transmit new knowledge and skills in an engaging and resource rich environment.

Rather than coming back disillusioned from the conference, I decided to be proactive. I picked up the phone and called the NCHE office and was pleasantly surprised to be greeted by an enthusiastic staff member who happened to be none other than the brand new Executive Director, Peter Siebert. Peter is passionate about being a catalyst for change in his new leadership role. Coming from a museum background, Peter understands the power of museums in enhancing history education. He shares my belief that teachers could gain tremendously by tapping the teaching tools offered by museums and that NCHE could play a role in facilitating an important conversation between museums and schools. As I was planning a trip to Washington, D.C., I proposed a meeting to convert our ideas into action steps. Peter arranged for my counterpart at Colonial Williamsburg, Director of Education Bill White, to join our conversation. The three of us met and discussed what could be done to transform this disconnect into a real connection. A few weeks later Sarah Jenks, Director of Education from Fords Theatre also joined our conversation. We agreed that many teachers already understand the power of museums in terms of intellectual content and that some regularly tap their resources, but we also found that apart from field trips, museums remain largely underutilized educational resources, especially in the area of teacher education.

I believe that if museums are to play a more significant role in history education, they need to work more proactively in two specific areas: field trip enhancement and teacher education. Museums and teachers need to question if field trips are educationally substantive and connected. If not, they need to ask what can be done to elevate this powerful education-cultural sector partnership for better student achievement and engagement. How many field trips translate into direct learning experiences and what number is mostly just for ‘fun’? Are teachers dialoguing and partnering with the education staff of their museums and historical societies before or after the field trips, so that direct links can be made for the students learning inside and outside the classroom? Are all museums cognizant of the changes in the national standards and state level content expectations and do they continually align their educational offerings to meet those

expectations? Are teachers asking museums for more curriculum aligned resources? Are museums using technology effectively to offer Webinar and/or offsite training workshops if teachers are unable to travel to museum sites? Are museums providing access to their behind-the-scene collections using digital media and online resources? Finally, are museums involving teachers in the experience and resource development process as partners vs. looking at the education sector as mere ‘users’? The Smithsonian Institution, Metropolitan Museum of Art, National Constitution Center, Colonial Williamsburg, The Henry Ford and others are already addressing these questions in order to more actively increase the engagement of teachers with their educational assets. However, museums must ascertain if the majority of history teachers know about these new teaching and learning resources and must evaluate if they are being used effectively.

Apart from the traditional ‘field trip experience’ as a tool to enhance history education, another museum asset yet to be tapped is the intellectual expertise of its curators. Museum curators possess immense knowledge that can be used to bring history to life by unveiling the complex yet interesting ‘back-stories’ about artifacts, people and places. Involving curators in teacher education not only deepens historical content and knowledge for students but can make connections to relevant authentic material culture of a time, place or person. Support for increased utilization of curatorial resources was made by one teacher’s assessment of her curator-led tour of an exhibition at the Henry Ford, “In the museum, there was always a section I tended to avoid - it was the ‘dark towers of evil’ in my mind. I had no idea how it connected or why it was there. There never seemed to be anybody around to explain them on the many times I was here. So, when we had these amazing curator tours, this area came to life! It has now become my favorite place to visit, the gothic machines; dark purveyors of little light have awakened from their slumber in my mind and shed much more light. It was truly an ‘aha’ moment.”

The NEH Summer Workshops for Teachers, accessed by hundreds of teachers each year, offer an exemplary model. These workshops deliver content using a mix of presentations by university scholars coupled with immersive learning experiences with curators and museum-based educators. Traditionally for most Teaching American History grants, the historical content training is offered primarily by associated University scholars. Site visits to museums are sometimes included in many of these TAH teacher training programs but it is not very clear if all the visited historic sites offer, or are asked to offer the in-depth contextual training by curators, and access to primary resources in addition to the access to scholars. These two training and empowerment tools are undoubtedly the strongest content asset that should be shared with teachers in any sort of history education professional development.

This view is underscored in **The Future of Museums and Libraries: A Discussion Guide**, recently released by the federal Institute of Museum & Library Services. “**Museums and libraries offer rich and authentic content, dedicated and knowledgeable staff with deep expertise, and safe, trusted settings for individuals and families, all of which invite and support effective learning.** The collections in libraries and museums—books, artwork, scientific specimens, and other cultural artifacts—connect people to the full spectrum of human experience: culture, science, history, and art. By preserving and conserving our material and

digital artifacts, libraries and museums link us with humankind's history. These institutions operate as places of social inclusion that promote curiosity, learning by doing, and discovery. In them, we learn about ourselves and others, and enhance the skills that contribute to empathy, tolerance, and understanding.”

This union of scholars, teachers and museum professionals transforms value-driven and integrated theory into a practice partnership where teachers are equipped and authorized by immersive encounters with deeper content and contextual knowledge. If you know of other exemplary museum teacher education programs or extraordinary field trips that benefit both the school and museum sectors, please write to me so that I can share your experiences with others. Together we can make a difference in enhancing history education by connecting students with the authentic treasures held by our nation's museums.

