

Teaching History in Museums

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Museums have the potential to help Canadians remember how and why history matters. They can be places where we not only see evidence of the past and explore how others have interpreted it, but also where we can learn how to “do history” for ourselves. Those of us who work in history museums engage daily in the formal effort of teaching about the past using historical artifacts and reproductions.¹ To do this well we must know history, we must know museums, and we must know why both matter. This article is about Jennifer and Gord and Helen, three historical interpreters, and the meanings they make of history and museums as they teach about the past at the Community History Museum.²

“Historical interpreter” is just one of several names given to those staff, paid and volunteer, who explain and describe exhibits in museums and galleries. Other titles used to describe the same function include tour guide, docent, instructor, museum teacher, and educator.³ The framework for their work is the guided tour or program—a structured or semi-structured activity with an educational intent, designed by the teacher or an educational coordinator for the museum visitor(s), and which focuses upon the museum’s collection.

The first part of this article is a discussion of the importance of a discipline-based understanding of history for museums. I argue that the knowledge of different disciplines offers different ways of knowing our world. The second part of the article is a presentation and analysis of how these understandings are constructed by historical interpreters at the Community History Museum, beginning with observation of a school tour and moving to selections from interviews with the three historical interpreters. I particularly want to explore how the teaching practice of the three historical interpreters is influenced not only by how history is presented to them by the Community History Museum, but also by their own understandings of history and museums as shaped by their personal experiences. If history museums are seen to be model institutions wherein visitors learn the ways of history, then historical interpreters are uniquely placed to be “masters” of the discipline. More than any other museum staff person, these teachers have the opportunity to listen to, support, prod, and negotiate the meanings of history with the

museum's visitors. I conclude with a call for museums to recognize the potential of the role of historical interpreters in history making and to reflect this in their site training and ongoing professional development.

Experience and Education

It has been fashionable to look askance at discipline-based education in museums. In part, this is because contemporary education in Canadian museums is heavily influenced by the Progressive movement of the early twentieth century, particularly the work of John Dewey, a philosopher of education.⁴ Dewey theorized that “personal experience” was a major factor in learning. As he noted, “Anything which can be called a study, whether arithmetic, history, geography, or one of the natural sciences, must be derived from materials which at the outset fall within the scope of ordinary life-experiences.”⁵ Many modern museum exhibits and programs rely heavily on this notion of experience-based learning. However, Dewey went on to say that, by itself, experience had the potential to be non-educative or even *mis*-educative.⁶ For example, childhood experiences tend to form internal representations of history that depict historical events in terms of a simplistic good/bad dichotomy, like that of a *Star Wars* film. Other misconceptions have to do with “presentism,” the tendency to believe that all times are like our own, and “atemporality,” the inability to differentiate events of an earlier time from our own.⁷ These misconceptions, based as they are upon personal experience, can be extremely robust and therefore difficult to alter.

Accordingly, as important as having the experience is what one does with it. As Dewey writes, “. . . there is no intellectual growth without some reconstruction, some remaking, of impulses and desires in the form in which they first show themselves.”⁸ Frequently overlooked by contemporary museum educators is Dewey's conjecture that the next step after experience is the “progressive development of what is already experienced into a fuller and richer and also more organized form, a form that gradually approximates that in which subject-matter is presented to the skilled, mature person.”⁹ According to Dewey and modern educational philosopher Howard Gardner, disciplines such as history, literature, and the sciences offer “the most sophisticated ways yet developed for thinking about and investigating issues that have long fascinated and perplexed thoughtful individuals.”¹⁰ Knowledge of different disciplines offers different ways of knowing our world:

Disciplines lend themselves to different kinds of roles and performances. To read texts critically, in the manner of a historian, is a quite different matter than to design a crucial experiment and

analyze data relevant to competing models of an infectious process. Different disciplines call on different analytic styles, approaches to problem-solving and findings, temperaments, and intelligences.¹¹

Therefore, to know history is to take a certain perspective. To know history is to know not only the facts but also the structures of history, and historical principles of conceptual organization and inquiry. It is to know the important ideas and skills in the domain and how new ideas are added and deficient ones dropped. Ultimately, it is to know “how truth is determined” within the discipline.¹² Accordingly, Fenstermacher maintains, the purpose of teaching history is to make available the knowledge and understanding of history so that the learner can use it to free himself or herself from the constraining forces of dogma, stereotype, and convention. The purpose of teaching history is to increase the learners’ capacity to understand and gain influence over their world.¹³

In terms of helping people to acquire this discipline-based understanding, a museum has the potential to be a “suggestive institution.”¹⁴ This means that not only may the learner’s experiences in a history museum serve to reveal the inadequacies of his or her current conceptions about history, but also that the museum’s exhibits may offer new habits and concepts to replace the old ways of thinking. This “apprenticeship” in thinking about history is immeasurably assisted by the presence of historical interpreters, or others like them, who are able to offer “spirited conversation, proper guidance and scaffolding” so that more appropriate theories may arise.¹⁵ However, in order to guide others in the process of “doing history”, it is not enough for the historical interpreter to know the *content* of the discipline; the interpreter’s manner also imparts to the learner the *nature* of the discipline under study. As Peters says, “To learn [a discipline] is not just to learn facts and to understand theories; it is also to learn to participate in a public form of life governed by such principles of procedure.”¹⁶ If Gardner’s theory is correct, learners may master how to do history by observing and imitating the historical interpreter in the museum setting. Thus, if an introduction to history in museums is seen to be a form of apprenticeship, historical interpreters have the potential to play an important role in the public’s perception of history. How then do historical interpreters think about history and museums?

Methodology

Shortly I will present the tour and sketch Jennifer’s story and those of the two other historical interpreters, Helen and Gord. Before I do that, I will talk about how I approached the task. As part of a larger qualitative study in several non-school settings, I interviewed and observed eight museum teachers, among whom are the three historical

interpreters depicted in this paper. Qualitative, or naturalistic, research utilizes the primarily ethnographic methods of participant-observation, conversational interviews, and reflective practice. This method of research best addresses questions that have to do with understanding practitioners' inferences and developing better methods of describing the kinds of inferences that come from practice. Findings were corroborated through the design of the study itself-- multiple sources of data such as different participants, tours and settings, coupled with multiple methods of research - participant-observation, interviews, and document analysis.

This corroboration was further enriched by the amount of time spent on site and with the historical interpreters. In all, I observed ten tours and conducted eight interviews with the three interpreters in this article. Field notes, interviews, and interpretive accounts were given to the historical interpreters involved to check for errors and plausibility. The rich description that contributes to plausibility for both participants and readers also threatens the anonymity of the historical interpreters, so this reference check was particularly important. Finally, at different points in my research I offered the themes and categories that I developed to my peers in both museum education and schoolteacher development for scrutiny and feedback and have compared them against my own experiences as an historical interpreter. The cases have been truncated for the purposes of this article; nevertheless, I believe they still offer an insight into what it means to teach history in the museum setting --an insight that has been missing from the literature.

The Community History Museum

The Community History Museum is a multifaceted site where "history, art and culture come alive" through the media of an archives, an art gallery, and the museum itself. This broad description suits the Community History Museum, which is defined only as a "community museum" in the provincial museum association's guidebook. In this context it is perhaps unfair to categorize the discipline base of the Community History Museum as history when it may be more truly an interdisciplinary amalgam. However, if not the only one, history is certainly one of the disciplines that comprise the subject matter of a community museum. Geography, political science, psychology, anthropology, sociology, and economics (as components of social studies) could be other disciplines under consideration.

Introduction to documents	5 minutes
Activities	40 minutes (variable)
General Conclusion	5 minutes

The museum thinks that historical interpreters simply implement a program description as written. Yet even a cursory comparison of the foregoing outline with the following tour will show the many ways in which Jennifer and her colleague Grace reinterpret the program description based in part on their own understandings. In the section following the tour, I will explore the ways in which Jennifer constructed meanings based on her understandings of history, museums, and her role as a teacher. For comparison, this will be followed by an exploration of the understandings of two other historical interpreters at the same site, Gord and Helen.

A School Tour

The setting is the Community History Museum on a cold, snowy morning in late winter. The *Titanic* exhibit, a travelling exhibition, has been popular beyond the site's wildest expectations, with an ensuing increase in both booked tours and casual visitors. Today Jennifer and Grace, both experienced historical interpreters, are conducting a tour for forty-five high-school students from a neighbouring community. Beforehand they have decided not to use the informational video suggested in the program description, because the student group plans to go to the movie *Titanic* immediately following the tour. (Ellipsis points indicate where content has been cut from this transcription of the tour.)

Jennifer, an historical interpreter, stands in the lobby of the Community History Museum. She is a slight figure amongst the forty-five high-school students waiting for a tour of the *Titanic* exhibit. The schoolteacher returns from paying and divides the group in two. Jennifer and Grace, her partner-interpreter on this tour, each lead one of the groups upstairs to the exhibit halls.

INTERACTIVE GALLERY

Jennifer stands beside the video monitor at the front of the Interactive Gallery. Most of the students sit down on the floor, some sit on the few available chairs, and some stand at the back.

"Turn this way, please," Jennifer begins. "Does everybody have a worksheet and a pencil? Welcome! My name is Jennifer. Welcome to the museum. It's good to have a group from your part of the community come over here. You're going to see the movie after? . . . How many have seen it? . . . Great. . . . Now we've certainly had other disasters; what is the fascination for the *Titanic*?"

Jennifer and the students discuss the factors. She stands with papers in one arm, her other arm free. She gestures as she speaks and walks back and forth across the gallery.

“What we’re going to do now--there are three different centres around the room. . . . This is the ‘SOS’ centre . . . Refer to the book. Copy that and put it into your worksheet. Over here . . . in this section there are three different folders . . . You’ll be looking through the documents. A number of inquiries were set up after the sinking . . . Take this information and put it in your worksheet. We’ll only spend about five to seven minutes at each station, so everyone will have a chance to try everything . . . Over here--at the table-- there is a map and an instruction sheet . . . Your challenge is to . . . Make sure you follow the doors and passageways. There are four sheets here, so you can work in pairs. Okay, let’s split up into three groups.”

Students move to each area.

“How are you doing?” Jennifer asks the group at the map station. She stands beside their table as the group describes what they have done so far.

“Yeah, we died,” one student at the map station says to the other.

“Can we keep these?” another student asks Jennifer, referring to the maps. She assures him that he can.

Jennifer turns to the group as a whole and asks them to move to the next station.

Four boys walk around the gallery. “Hey guys, have you done this one?” the schoolteacher asks them.

“This is part of the Grade 10 history unit on the turn-of-the-century period,” the schoolteacher explains to Jennifer. “They’ve been doing some role-playing in class already and they’ll be doing a presentation in class on Thursday. We also have a visitor coming on Thursday--with slides and such--and he’ll be talking about the *Titanic*, too. It’ll be a kind of follow-up to this visit. And it’s good timing-- right before March Break! It’s been very popular. There was even a waiting list to come on this trip . . .”

The noise level in the room is rising. . . . Jennifer looks at her watch just as Grace’s group begins to enter the gallery. Jennifer asks her group to tidy up and leads them into the next gallery.

TITANIC GALLERY

The *Titanic* exhibit is in a slightly larger gallery. There are exhibits on the walls, interspersed by glass cases with artifacts in them. There are four platforms with large artifacts on them against the walls--a deck chair, steamer trunk, and table.

Jennifer stands at the far side of the room as the group enters. Most of the students arrange themselves around her in a loose semicircle. A few walk around the room.

“If I could have your attention for a minute, please . . .,” she begins. “Everything here belongs to the collector. You might have seen the newspaper article on him . . . On your workbooks there’s a section called ‘Gallery Observations.’ Look for the answers to those questions.”

“You’re not in history?” Jennifer asks one student.

“No, I was last term,” she replies. “I just came to see the movie today.”

“Look at the watch over here. . . . What time did the ship sink?” Jennifer asks a group standing by the case.

“Where’s the diamond?” another student asks.

“That’s just fiction. That’s the part of the movie that they made up,” Jennifer replies.

Most of the students are walking around while filling in their worksheets. The teacher talks with a few of them. A small group of boys stands by the doorway, talking, listening to a Walkman. Jennifer stands looking around the room. After a few minutes, she moves to the narrow end of the gallery in front of the main exhibit panel and asks the students to gather around her.

“Was everyone able to get everything?” she asks the group, referring to the worksheet. “Fifth Officer Lowe--what do you know about him?” She goes on to talk about the time period of the exhibit and then tells them, “What I want you to do-- just quickly-- is to get into four groups. You’ll each represent one class-- first, second, third class-- and the crew. Look around the gallery for information specific to your group. You might ask where you’re from, where you’re going. Why? What’s the food like? You can make a story about it and then come back and tell us what it was like. I’ll divide you up. . . . I don’t know, guys-- are you first class?” There is general laughter from the group.

Jennifer talks to the first-class group. The schoolteachers talk amongst themselves. The students move around the room in small groups and appear to be discussing the assignment.

“Okay, guys--let’s get back together,” Jennifer calls out. “Okay--quickly. . . . Ssssh. We can get started . . . Grade tens! Let’s start off with the first class. While they’re speaking everyone should be listening.” The groups report back briefly.

A student asks, “What time is it? Doesn’t it take a while to get there?”

“Okay--we’re at eleven o’clock now. Time to head off!” replies Jennifer.

The students leave the gallery quickly. As they are leaving, Jennifer remembers the free admission cards for the students and runs to get them. As they depart, she wishes them all a “great time” at the movies.

Historical Interpreters Talk about History and Museums

In many ways, Jennifer’s thinking about this tour stems from a program description designed to meet the curriculum requirements of the local school board rather than to explore a discipline-based understanding of history. Yet it becomes clear through the in-depth interviews intended to explore the meanings behind the observed tour that Jennifer does bring her own understandings to the tour. Jennifer has been a part-time historical interpreter with the Community History Museum for over a decade. She came to the museum with a background in social work and no formal training in history. On the *Titanic* tour she takes an easy-going and fun approach to the museum visit, acknowledging that it is part of a day-long outing that includes an afternoon at the movies.

At the same time, however, Jennifer sees herself as a mediator between the exhibits and the people on her tour. In her words, she wants to “take the exhibits . . . and exchange this information with the students.” Students need to “get some facts” before they can develop an historical perspective from which to understand the events of the present. For Jennifer, the worksheet structures the acquisition of facts from labels and through artifacts. She hopes these facts will become the raw material for “stories” of the past that she and the students can construct together. Teaching in a history museum is for her a form of “drama” in which both Jennifer and the students participate. She talks about this in relation to the *Titanic* tour:

Today, for instance, when we were talking about passengers on the ship and looking right to somebody and saying, “Okay, now, you *are* this person. *You’re* the third class. *You’re* sitting down there. *You’re* being locked down there. How is that you’re feeling?” So you’re drawing them into the program--that it’s not just passive--that they are actually participating as well.

Jennifer’s understanding of history is grounded in her own first-hand experiences of family and community that have made history “come alive” for her. In her teaching, she draws upon her own childhood experiences of family museum visits. Jennifer was fascinated by the links between the history depicted in the exhibits and her

father's stories: "My father was a veteran, so there was always that talking of his experiences during the war. *That* made history come alive-- when you hear it first-hand." When visiting a museum today, Jennifer takes guided tours or talks to an interpreter because "they have the extra information and the anecdotal stories that . . . you might not get from reading a label." Artifacts should be placed in historical context and be accessible and hands-on, so that the exhibits will tell the "stories" of the community.

In practice, however, Jennifer finds herself conflicted between what she sees as the study of history and what she believes to be the experience of the museum:

I think there's the idea sometimes when [the kids] come into a museum-- [spoken in a low voice] "I know it's going to be boring." . . . I often wonder when the kids are there, what's more important? Is it more important to teach them something--to have them have their heads filled with all this information? Or is it more important for them to have a positive experience at this museum--so that they will want to come back . . . and they won't get turned off? Because there are times when if you have a group and you're constantly yelling at them and telling them to do this-- "You haven't read that! Go back and read that label!"--you're not going to have them reading that information *and* they're going to be turned off from their experience *and* they won't come back.

Gord, the second historical interpreter in the study, comes to his teaching with a B.A. in history and experience as a high-school teacher that affords him a better theoretical grounding in the field of history. His stated aim is to get kids interested in reading and writing history, because he believes that "historical literacy" contributes to the development of the whole person. Gord sees himself accomplishing this end by using the Socratic method of teaching which, through informed questions, encourages the student first to frame historical facts and ideas and then to reason with them. Furthermore, he believes the wealth of artifacts available in a museum allows students to have first-hand access to historical evidence. He deliberately draws attention to artifacts and architectural elements because they are for him a key element of the museum experience. Visitors, he believes, will construct their own links to the artifact because it is a relic of everyday life in the past. He wants the students to "connect" with the artifacts. Such connections promote a sense of shared humanity with historical figures. Much of what Gord believes about teaching history is based on his experiences in the high-school classroom. As he recalls,

"This stuff is real. This stuff is real." . . . History is history and I don't think you create all these warm, fuzzy feelings by running away from the past or what happened. You've got to study the past. You've got to understand the past. And I think the museum is an excellent place to do this. . . . the museum is a *wealth* of this kind of stuff, and I think it's important, too, for us to make sure that we've got plenty of repros . . . so the kids can handle them and play with them and touch and see . . . I think the tactile part of education is just as important as the visual. Kids need to be able to hold things and see things. . . . There's a link there. And I think every kid's got a link with the past. They've brought something with them when they came to this country, or if they were born and raised here they've got something that's a link to the past. So I think it helps them appreciate their *own* links to the past. . . . I think this creates humanity. In other words, we're not just automatons going through this world. . . . And what are the qualities which make us human?

Education is one them. Dare I say, perhaps history is one of the *most* important [chuckles]. You know, if I didn't feel that way I wouldn't have been a history teacher . . .

Yet the purpose of Gord's teaching appears to change when it is applied to his work as an historical interpreter in the museum setting. At the Community History Museum, Gord seeks, first, to demonstrate to the students that there are "a lot of things in our earth that can be discovered and it's *fun* to discover" and, second, to help students experience the museum. Gord believes that museums are something that "most of us should go to" as part of a liberal arts education:

I've always thought that museums really provided . . . "first-hand" experience of . . . seeing life as it was in the past or looking at artifacts . . . You can't really do justice to that in a classroom with a textbook.

In speaking about his own *Titanic* tours, Gord believes

It's the kids' day at the museum and if they want to spend some time in [one gallery] or they want to see the *Titanic* . . . they're *there*, so why not? It doesn't bother me to break it up like that. It's all part of the experience "package" that they'll remember. Even if they only remember one thing about my tour and *two* things about the *Titanic* --that's okay, that's three things that they didn't have before they came.

Like Jennifer, Gord is faced with a dilemma over the choice between achieving his own personal goals to teach historical literacy and having students "experience" the museum. In Gord's case the balance is decided by what he sees to be the needs of the schoolteacher accompanying the group. In the end, Gord opts to follow the program description and the printed worksheet so that the needs of the schoolteacher will be met:

There has to be something more than just "Well, here we are, guys. Let's have a look around." There's got to be some purpose, there's got to be some focus. We don't want to make it so focused that the kids don't have fun! But, on the other hand, there's got to be something purposeful come out of it. So you should value these worksheets and keep them and use them. . . . This is an important part of the tour. This is your record, if you like, of the tour. . . . It is a souvenir, but I think it's more than that. . . . because in order to make the museum worthwhile, it's got to be *perceived* as being worthwhile. . . . I think it's for both--the kids and the teacher. . . . This is a serious exercise--it's not just fun. There's some demands going to be made on you, too.

Helen, the third historical interpreter in the study, takes a different approach to teaching history in the museum setting. She comes to the Community History Museum with a B.A. in psychology and physical anthropology and, as well as working as an historical interpreter, she is supply teaching in local elementary schools. For Helen the "lifeblood" of the museum is its school programs. The primary aim of her teaching is to give schoolchildren "as much information as possible on the topic" because she is "the instructor and they're the learners." Helen has both researched and been given many facts in her training at the Community History Museum

and, because she finds them interesting, she seeks to share them with visitors. In doing this she is sometimes frustrated. As Helen remarks with a laugh about one of her own *Titanic* tours for high-school students,

I was trying to give them something different, some new information. I had to. I was trying to give them some new info but they didn't seem to *want* it. . . . I was trying to give them something they didn't already know, but they seemed to know so much already. I wanted to give them something different.

Like Jennifer, she tries to make her teaching an “enjoyable experience,” “to be light and approachable,” because she wants the children to come back and visit on the museum on their own. Helen wants people to share her delight in the “old stuff” that first attracted her to museums. To focus student attention on these artifacts, like Gord, she chooses to use worksheets extensively on her tours. As she says, “They’re going to see five or six or ten or twenty things that they might not have seen if they had just randomly wandered around the exhibit.”

On the whole, Helen’s personal experiences with museums have been as an adult. Visiting museums and galleries wasn’t something she and her family did when she was a child, nor does she recall organized school trips to the museum. Today she occasionally visits a museum on her own but is more likely to “hit all of the historic places” while on holiday with her husband. They prefer to “just wander around” an historic site until they’ve seen everything they wanted to see. Because her husband has studied history and is, she believes, an expert, she just asks him whenever she has a question. Interestingly, Helen tends to adopt a different stance when working with adult audiences. Here she endeavours to describe how she teaches when she is not in a position to dispense information:

[W]hen it’s an adult group--I don’t know, maybe it’s my perception--but I’m not their elder. I’m not more worldly-wise and all the rest of it. And they’re not really there to learn and they’re not doing a worksheet. . . . they’re there to learn--but they’re not in the same context. I usually make it more informal and I encourage the two-way . . . “Please ask questions. Make your comments.” . . . I guess the dynamics of the group are different. . . . they don’t raise their hands . . . and, in the case of the group I’m talking about, most of them that were talking to me were *older* . . .

She feels her adult tours become more of a dialogue: “. . . we just did a very casual walk-through and brief discussion. . . . And then people broke off and they asked more in-depth, individual questions.” If she doesn’t do this, her experience has been that adults simply leave the tour; as Helen says, “You just notice your audience drifting away.”

From even these limited observations and discussions with Jennifer and Gord and Helen it becomes clear that they know and teach about history and museums in dramatically different ways. The contrasts I have drawn among them suggest the influence not only of their own undergraduate training respectively in social work, history

and psychology/physical anthropology but also of personal experiences of museum-going. In the next section I want to reflect upon how historical interpreters' teaching is guided by their philosophical views of history.

History and History Making

All teachers have philosophical views about the discipline they teach, and these guide their practice. These views may be implicit and unsystematic or they may be well articulated and internally consistent.¹⁷ As teachers in the museum setting, historical interpreters rarely refer to any standard philosophies of history, yet it is clear that underlying their work are what amount to relatively simple practical theories that enable them to order their activities. These straightforward theories of history influence the ways in which historical interpreters view the subject and their role as teachers in that discipline. At their most simple, these theories of history relate to basic theories of learning that I have labelled "objectivist" and "constructivist." In practice, none of the historical interpreters in this study held either of these conceptions of knowledge in a pure form--they taught as if both had some truth. Thus I acknowledge that the following categorization is somewhat arbitrary and describes a tendency on the part of each historical interpreter, rather than an absolute.

In this study Helen represents a traditional or "objectivist" view of history. For Helen, history is all about "the facts." She understands the discipline to be about the expert retrieval of truth, which is recovered through documentable evidence by highly trained individuals.¹⁸ Objectivists conceive of knowledge as existing independently of the people who know it, so Helen's concern is with "giving" students the facts.¹⁹ From this objectivist stance, the products of education are quantifiable, so accountability and efficiency assume importance. In a small way this is reflected in Helen's pride that the worksheet encourages students to note many more artifacts than would have been seen had they "randomly wandered around the exhibit." The quality of their observations is not a factor.

Furthermore, in this orientation teachers are understood to have full responsibility for the learning processes while the learner is assigned a more passive role as "the receptacle of externally transmitted knowledge."²⁰ Based on her personal experience of visiting museums, Helen believes that one needs to be an expert to know history. She asserts that with the students she is "the instructor and they're the learners." An objectivist historical

interpreter like Helen sees herself as a conduit funnelling to the students the truth uncovered by professional historians.²¹ If the museum is seen as a “suggestive institution,” as presented earlier in this article, then it is this stance that she is modelling for the museum’s visitors. The students on her tour “apprentice,” however briefly, in doing history as the expert retrieval of truth that is recovered through documentable evidence by highly trained individuals

On the other hand, those who hold a “constructivist” theory of learning believe that the learner needs to be engaged in purposive reconstruction of the knowledge offered.²² Constructivists believe that learners come with a wealth of knowledge already organized. To learn meaningfully, the learner must choose to integrate new knowledge into that pre-existing structure of knowledge and experiences.²³ For example, Gord and Jennifer both strive to connect learners’ experiences to what is presented in the exhibit. In Jennifer’s case she speaks of the “stories” that are told as links between the theme of the exhibit and the learners’ lives. She wants to make the exhibit “come alive” for the students. Likewise, Gord seeks to engender a visceral response to the artifacts that will connect the learner to the exhibit. When she is working with adults, even Helen’s tour becomes more of this type of dialogue because she acknowledges the importance of their life experiences to the construction of understanding.

Interpretation is not a radical notion for historians. Most contemporary understandings of history view it as an interpretation constructed by the historian. History is seen to be “an interpretive exercise, a sorting out of conflicting perceptions and an appreciation of the narratives that humans have always invented to make sense of their lives.”²⁴ However, a constructivist approach suggests that interpretation of history is not the province of professional historians alone. Interpretation of history by the reader or, in this case, the museum visitors, is seen to take place on an ongoing basis and as it may or may not relate to their prior knowledge. This ongoing dynamic is reflected in David Thelan’s term “history making.”²⁵ As Thelan writes,

The making of history is not something leaders do in remote places that is later described by professional historians. It is something we all do, all the time. Everyone is an historian. A large part of each individual’s life is spent recollecting and reconstructing his or her past. Virtually every American living room is a family museum and every attic an archive.²⁶

In history making, museum curators and other professional historians are expected to share their authority. Thereby, historical interpreters, whose job it is to teach from the exhibits, become not conduits but negotiators between the meanings made from history by professional historians and the meanings made by the museum’s visitors. The historical interpreter is seen to work with the museum’s learners to listen, support, prod, and negotiate the meanings of history.²⁷

Some constructivists believe that there is no such thing as objective reality. Rather, they claim that knowledge exists exclusively in the mind of the learner. All knowledge is therefore equal insofar as it enables a person to live in society. This is known as “radical constructivism.” However, most constructivists believe that there is an objective reality by which many things may be judged. They agree that there is a commonly accepted knowledge base that learners need to understand in order to function in and contribute to society.²⁸ Within this form of constructivism, history museum exhibits are viewed as a means by which to help people make meaning from their own memories within the broader scope of local, national, and world histories:

With our predecessors, the bards and story-tellers and priests, we have therefore this in common: that it is our function, as it was theirs, not to create, but to preserve and perpetuate the social tradition; to harmonize, as well as ignorance and prejudice permit, the actual and the remembered series of events; to enlarge and enrich the specious present common to us all to the end that ‘society’ (the tribe, the nation, or all mankind) may judge of what it is doing in the light of what it has done and hopes to do.²⁹

Historical interpreters Gord and Jennifer are less confident about moving to what Dewey terms this “next step” of relating experience to a structure of discipline-based common knowledge. Although Gord espouses a constructivist approach to history, when faced with a choice between building upon the experiences of the museum’s learners by helping them to develop “into a fuller and richer and also more organized form, a form that gradually approximates that in which subject-matter is presented to the skilled, mature person,”³⁰ Gord chooses instead to take the more objectivist approach of having the students complete the worksheet. He does this because he believes that the worksheet’s retrieval of information is “perceived as worthwhile” by the schoolteacher. Jennifer simply appears unsure of what to do next once the learners have experienced the activities and the artifacts. Not being a professional historian, she does not have the tools needed to build upon or help to reconstruct for themselves the learners’ experiences in either history or museums. In relation to the notion of the museum as a suggestive institution, historical interpreters Gord and Jennifer value a constructivist approach to history but are unable to model history making for the learners in question. Therefore, potential apprentices see how to achieve experience, but they are not be privy to the ways in which experience may be reconstructed and reorganized in order to make discipline-based meaning in history.

Ways of Knowing

The scope of exploration of history making in community museums through one tour observation and several interviews with historical interpreters is obviously limited. My personal experience as a museum educator of longstanding, coupled with reading of the museum literature, allows this study a degree of generalizability, but clearly my findings need to be investigated further in other settings, with other historical interpreters. If it transpired that future studies corroborated my findings at the Community History Museum, then the following considerations would be pertinent.

The first consideration is that teaching history in a museum requires an understanding of history. The historical interpreters in this study share few common understandings of history other than the facts offered by the Community History Museum in “binders and binders of information.” Historical interpreters with no grounding in history struggle to acquire this content foundation and are often unaware of the second, more philosophical foundations of the discipline in which they are working. Only Gord is teaching from the discipline he studied in university, and then only in part. For Helen and Jennifer, their own disciplinary perspectives often act as a sieve through which the new information is filtered.

To learn history entails deliberately examining previously held conceptions of teaching, especially in a setting where historical interpreters bring with them a wide variety of disciplinary backgrounds and personal experiences.³¹ In order to “listen, support, prod, and negotiate” the meanings of history successfully, historical interpreters need to understand how meaning is constructed by all parties: the professional historians, the interpreters themselves, and the museum’s visitors. Although it is not the responsibility of the historical interpreter to write history or design exhibits, it becomes the interpreter’s responsibility to know how and why these processes are undertaken in order that they may be shared with the museum’s visitors. Historical interpreters need to know and share not only how history works as a discipline, but also how they themselves, as historical *interpreters*, construct history:

By making clear to our audiences how we do this, what choices we make along the way, and what alternative constructs are available, and, most important, by providing the intellectual tools and raw materials for the visitor to erect his own construct, we will ultimately and inevitably strengthen ourselves as interpreters; our own view of reality, past and present, will be more dimensional and complex.³²

This transparency of choice and the possibility of alternative interpretations are particularly important to museums, because they are often depicted as learning resources that provide educational opportunities within an

“environment which is ideally suited to the development of divergent thinking and creative intelligence.”³³ Thus it becomes doubly important that historical interpreters working in a museum setting understand ways of knowing in the discipline of history in order to help others understand them. Thereby the museum’s learners may be introduced to the discipline by observing historical interpreters who embody the practice of history. These learners may then go on to look at and create their own exhibitions of the wisdom of history, or may simply encounter the historical concepts, theories, and methods and put them into practice.³⁴

The second consideration is that teaching history in a museum requires an understanding of the nature of museums. Museums are about experience *and* education, instruction *and* enjoyment, yet those responsible for developing tours and programs have often been unwilling or unable to explore the potential of the paradox that such a wide mandate presents, choosing instead to follow the safer path of school-like activities. As Anderson contends,

. . . museums are clinging to pedagogic methods in a context which most visitors tend to use in [a self-directed] manner. . . . An environment which is ideally suited to the development of divergent thinking and creative intelligence is often used instead to promote fact-oriented convergent thinking. . . . By limiting public participation, a museum deprives itself of a large constituency . . . who could have enriched their lives if appropriate educational opportunities had been available and who would have rewarded the institution with their active support.³⁵

This pedagogical thrust is evident in the design of the school tour in which outcomes are tied directly to the external rewards and punishments of the school curriculum. Such an approach is understandable, given the number of schools using the Community History Museum and the money their admissions generate. However, the time and effort required on the part of education staff members to service this major client group have meant that little thought has been given to addressing the puzzle of how to provide both experience and education in the museum setting. Thus historical interpreters are often left to solve this dilemma by themselves, with greater or lesser success.

It is clear that historical interpreters do have knowledge and experience of museum-going. Through stories of their own museum-going experiences, historical interpreters demonstrate the ways in which they use the museum or gallery as a resource when personally engaged in self-directed learning. Yet these stories of personal experience are frequently unrelated to the structure of museum education as a field of practice. As with history, historical interpreters have content knowledge but not the analytical framework that might allow them to focus on the process-oriented aspect of museums expressed by the term *museum literacy*.³⁶ Concepts that are intuitive or implicit are not available to be developed within a disciplinary framework. This is especially problematic when the unique expertise of historical interpreters is understood to be “how best to interpret the museum” and the “language of objects.”³⁷

Historical interpretation requires the integration by the historical interpreter of these paradoxical and sometimes conflicting understandings of history, museums, and teaching. Within the existing framework, it is unreasonable to expect part-time historical interpreters to be knowledgeable to the professional level in both history and museum work. However, one way to help historical interpreters move toward such integration would be for history museums to be more explicit about what they are doing, in terms of both history and museum education, in order to create an *awareness* of an historical way of knowing. Designers of museum exhibitions have long been exhorted to “be clearer about what they are doing and what visitors should expect when they come to a museum or visit individual exhibits” by more clearly defining “the work of historians and the normality of reinterpretations and multiple points of view.”³⁸ Curators and program designers at museums like the Community History Museum need to clarify their own philosophical views of history and its purposes in both the museum and the modern world in order that their staff training may be consistent with them. If historical interpreters like Jennifer and Gord and Helen are to act as negotiators of meaning between exhibits and the museum’s visitors, it is critical that history museums help them become more aware of and use the different ways of knowing, ways that are evident even in this brief examination of personal experience and history making in museums. “History matters, and we forget this truth at our peril.”³⁹

¹ Warren Leon and Roy Rosenzweig, eds., *History Museums in the United States: A Critical Assessment* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1989), xiv.

² The names I use in this article are pseudonyms. The interpreters’ words are excerpts from transcribed interviews or field notes.

³ Alison L. Grindler and E. Sue McCoy, *The Good Guide: A Sourcebook for Interpreters, Docents and Guides* (Scottsdale, Arizona: Ironwood Publishing, 1989), 3.

⁴ Lisa Roberts, *From Knowledge to Narrative: Educators and the Changing Museum* (Washington & London: Smithsonian University Press, 1997), 31. See also Carol B. Stapp, “Defining Museum Literacy,” *Roundtable Reports* 9, 1 (1984), 3-4; Jeremy Roschelle, “Learning in Interactive Environments: Prior Knowledge and New Experience” in J. H. Falk and L. D. Dierking, eds. *Public Institutions for Personal Learning: Establishing a Research Agenda* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1995), 37-51.

⁵ John Dewey, *Experience and Education* (New York: Collier Books, 1938/1963), 73.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁷ Howard Gardner, *The Disciplined Mind* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1999), 122.

⁸ Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 64.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁰ Howard Gardner and Veronica Boix-Mansilla, “Teaching for Understanding--Within and Across the Disciplines,” *Educational Leadership* 51, 5 (1994), 16.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

¹² Lee S. Shulman, “Knowledge and Teaching: Foundations of the New Reform,” *Harvard Educational Review* 57, 1 (1987), 9.

¹³ Gary D. Fenstermacher, “Philosophy of Research on Teaching: Three Aspects” in Merlin C. Wittrock, ed., *Handbook of Research on Teaching* (3rd Edition), (New York: Macmillan, 1986), 47.

¹⁴ Gardner, *The Disciplined Mind*, 126.

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- ¹⁵ Ibid., 127.
- ¹⁶ R. S. Peters, "Aims of education--a conceptual inquiry" in R.S. Peters, ed., *The Philosophy of Education* (London: Oxford University Press, 1973), 25
- ¹⁷ Brent Kilbourn, "Philosophical, Subject Matter and Classroom Understandings: A Case of History Teaching" in T. Russell and H. Munby, eds., *Teachers and Teaching: From Classroom to Reflection* (London: Falmer Press, 1992), 71.
- ¹⁸ Lois Silverman, "Making Meaning Together: Lessons from the Field of American History," *Journal of Museum Education* 18, 3 (1993): 9.
- ¹⁹ Douglas Barnes, "The Significance of Teachers' Frames for Teaching" in T. Russell and H. Munby, eds., *Teachers and Teaching: From Classroom to Reflection* (London: The Falmer Press, 1992), 20.
- ²⁰ Eugene Matusov and Barbara Rogoff, "Evidence of Development from People's Participation in Communities of Learning," in J. H. Falk and L. D. Dierking, eds., *Public Institutions for Personal Learning: Establishing a Research Agenda* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 1995), 99.
- ²¹ M. Christine Castle, "It's Not Just Philanthropic, You Know": The Role of the Volunteer in the Museum Profession," unpublished paper, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Toronto, 1995.
- ²² Barnes, "The Significance of Teachers' Frames," 20.
- ²³ Kodi R. Jeffery, "Constructivism in Museums: How Museums Create Meaningful Learning Environments," in J. S. Hirsch and L. H. Silverman, eds., *Transforming Practice: Selections from the Journal of Museum Education, 1992-1999*, (Washington, D.C.: Museum Education Roundtable, 2000), 212-21.
- ²⁴ T. H. Breen, *Imagining the Past* (Reading, Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley, 1989), 14.
- ²⁵ David Thelan, "History Making in America," *The Historian* 53, 4 (1991): 631-48.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 631.
- ²⁷ Silverman, "Making Meaning Together," 10.
- ²⁸ Jeffrey, "Constructivism," 213-14.
- ²⁹ Carl Becker, "Everyman His Own Historian," *American Historical Review* 37, 2 (1932): 231.
- ³⁰ Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 73.
- ³¹ Suzanne M. Wilson and Samuel S. Wineburg, "Peering at History Through Different Lenses: The Role of Disciplinary Perspectives in Teaching History," *Teachers College Record* 89, 4 (1988): 537.
- ³² Ken Yellis, "Unhanding the Visitor," *Roundtable Reports* 9, 1 (1984): 14.
- ³³ David Anderson, "Gradgrind Driving Queen Mab's Chariot: What Museums Have (and Have Not) Learnt from Adult Education," in A. Chadwick and A. Stannett, eds., *Museums and the Education of Adults* (Leicester: National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, 1995), 23-24.
- ³⁴ Gardner and Boix-Manilla, "Teaching for Understanding."
- ³⁵ Anderson, "Gradgrind Driving Queen Mab's Chariot," 23-24.
- ³⁶ Carol B. Stapp, "Defining Museum Literacy," *Roundtable Reports* 9, 1 (1984): 3-4
- ³⁷ Michael Harrison and Barbara Naef, "Toward a Partnership: Developing the Museum-School Relationship," *Journal of Museum Education* 10, 4 (1985): 11; Beverly Sheppard, ed., *Building Museum-School Partnerships* (Harrisburg, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania Federation of Museums and Historical Organizations, 1993), 2.
- ³⁸ Spencer R. Crew, "How the Future of History Connects with Museums," Occasional Paper (Westlake, Ohio: National Council for History Education, 1995).
- ³⁹ Granatstein, *Who Killed Canadian History?* xvii.