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Disrupting Notions of Collaboration: An Alternative Approach to Educational Engagements in Museum Settings

Abstract

This presentation outlines an ongoing doctoral investigation into relationships between art museums and art education. Previous research by the author has identified problematic relations between museums and schools that, from a school-based art educational perspective, inhibit the realization of museum-based learning opportunities. In particular, the author's analysis of recent research exposes a disjunction between the school-based pedagogical role of secondary school-based educators and their educational engagements with museums. Using extant research from the museum and education fields and drawing on the sociological theories of Bourdieu, different conceptions of how interactions between museums and schools construct, enable and constrain educational opportunities are examined to develop a framework that explains the practices of art educators in relation to museums. What is concealed within public discourse is particularly investigated through an exploration of how implicit forms of power operate to create, maintain and silence barriers to engagement. Based on this analysis, the author presents an alternative model for engagement that, in exposing and challenging misrecognitions, aims to undermine processes of domination. The model embraces the notion of a critical museum pedagogy, conceives of art educators as active agents of change and provides a secondary school-based perspective.

Biography

Donna Mathewson is a doctoral candidate at the School of Art Education, NSW. Her research is concerned with the relationship between museum-based learning opportunities and school-based art education. These doctoral investigations arose from her experiences as a Visual Arts teacher most recently working in regional New South Wales.

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The Importance of Engagement Between Museums and Art Education

It is generally assumed that as public institutions with a common educational orientation, museums and schools have a natural association that is educationally beneficial. However, emerging research suggests that from a school-based perspective, the educational value of engagement is questionable. In this paper I will explore this issue through an analysis of practices that are characteristic of engagements between museums and schools. The body of research informing the analysis has been drawn from both the museum and school-based education fields and reflects both a general educational focus and a specific secondary art educational perspective that is focused on secondary school aged audiences in the context of NSW syllabus reforms. Based on information gained from this analysis I will present the foundations of a developing model for learning in the museum setting.

The term 'museum' is used to encompass all types of museums and art galleries.

In New South Wales, recent curriculum reforms in the Visual Arts recognize that the visual arts exist within a network of relations that incorporate the artwork, the artist, the audience and the artworld (NSW Board Of Studies 1999, 2002). These reforms reinforce changes within the wider art education field and further recognize that the provision of skills, knowledge and experience related to participation as audiences contributes to the capacity for students to engage in autonomous cultural practice beyond the school context. Such developments validate a link between art education and art museums and provide a compelling argument for the utilization of art museums within art education programs.

For museums, a significant aspect of their educational activity involves facilitating the participation of school audiences. This has particular significance in terms of the development of future audiences (Macdonald and Alford 1991, Anderson 1997, Adams 1980). Throughout the Western world, museum audiences, particularly those of art museums, have been consistently shown to be more highly educated and of a higher social status than the general population (Bourdieu and Darbel 1991, Merriman 1990, Dimaggio

and Useem 1978, Bennett 1994, Bennett and Frow 1991). Museological literature indicates that the field has shown particular concern with addressing such social inequalities and this remains a dilemma that has yet to be resolved.

The Contradiction Between Theory and Practice

While it is undisputed that school-based educators value and utilize museums, studies indicate that they have been unable to exploit the opportunities provided by museums in optimal ways (Commission on Museums for a New Century 1984, Grindler and McCoy 1985, Eisner and Dobbs 1986, Griffin 1999, Harrison and Naef 1985, Stone 1992a, 1992b, 1993, Berry 1998, Hooper-Greenhill 1991, Mathewson 1994, National Research Center for the Arts 1975, Newsom and Silver 1978). The nature of engagement is evident in research that suggests that museum utilization by school-based educators is characterized by:

a minimal investment of effort

- general use that is not specifically tailored to curricular needs
- an inability to integrate museum experiences into classroom learning
- focus on the acquisition of information
- ill-defined educational objectives
- a concentration on enrichment and social interaction
- incidental learning
- a 'consumer like' stance
- passivity
- lack of mutuality and an absence of dialogue
- a lack of self-recognition

The practices identified suggest a relationship between museums and schools in which museums appear to control and determine the nature of engagement. Analysis of the characteristics of museum utilization exposes a number of underlying assumptions held by school-based educators:

- that museums will initiate and maintain relationships with schools
- that the museum environment will provide conditions necessary for learning
- that the museum experience will be inherently of value
- that their actions to have minimal impact on the realization or value of museum experiences

These assumptions and the passive, uncritical approach revealed in the research appears contradictory to the professional practice of art educators, challenges the publicly declared narratives of art education and suggests adherence to traditional child-centred notions of creativity within the museum setting. In addition this approach challenges policy and discourse within the museum field that encourages the active involvement of school-based educators and museological research that consistently shows the potential of school-based educators to enhance learning in museums to be considerable (Newsom and Silver 1978, Stone 1986, Housen and Duke 1998, Griffin 1999).

A Theoretical Framework for Understanding the Social Basis of Practices

The contradiction between theory and practice that is evident in the ways in which school-based educators use museums highlights a disjunction between the school-based pedagogical role of teachers and their educational engagements with museums. The reasons for this disjunction have not been explored and approaches evident in current literature have been judged theoretically insufficient. In attempting to address a lacuna in the research, this investigation is strategically applying selected sociological concepts drawn from the theories of Pierre Bourdieu to interrogate the social basis of actions evident in museum/school engagements. For the sake of brevity those concepts will be outlined briefly.

Bourdieu's theory of practice opposes conceptualizations that view human action as a direct, unmediated response to external factors or attribute action to internal factors such as conscious intention or calculation, and asserts that agency and structure are connected in a dialectical relationship. To illustrate how his concepts relate to explain practice Bourdieu offers this formula: [(habitus)(capital)] + field = practice (1984: 101).

The term 'capital' refers to the possession and accumulation of resources. The most significant aspect of Bourdieu's conception of capital, in relation to this research, is the acknowledgment that power can be non-materialist in form. Specific forms of capital are produced, invested, exchanged and accumulated within the array of autonomous but structurally homologous 'fields' that Bourdieu conceptualizes as constituting social space. The distribution of capital within particular fields and the dominance of specific forms of capital reflects a hierarchical set of power relations among individuals within respective fields. By engaging in action and contestation within a field individuals 'play the game' associated with that field. Playing the game presupposes and produces a particular type of 'illusion', which is defined as a belief or acceptance in the worth of the game of a field (Bourdieu 1990: 76-78).

The idea that actors are practical strategists is linked to social structure through the concept of the 'habitus'. The habitus can be understood as the generally durable and transposable values and dispositions, which develop through formative contexts such as family and education. The habitus functions below the level of consciousness such that individuals normally think that the possibilities from which they choose are necessities that stem from commonsense or are natural and inevitable. The logic of specific fields is established in the form of a specific habitus that can be viewed as an embodied and intuitive sense of the game that enables agents to feel "like a fish in water" (Bourdieu 1992: 127). This takes place gradually and for the most part unnoticed, and is practically never explicitly set out or imposed.

In his analyses of power and legitimation Bourdieu emphasizes the role of symbolic forms of domination. He asserts that the degree of domination agents experience significantly affects their ability to act or represent themselves within a given field. The more dominated a group or individual may be, the less likely that they will feel able, or in fact be able, to participate robustly in the field in which they are dominated. Bourdieu employs the term 'doxa' to explain how people from dominated groups often just accept that the way things are is the way they should be or have always been, even when it causes suffering or oppression (1984: 471). The 'doxic attitude' means a form of bodily, unconscious submission to the relations of order that makes certain courses of action unthinkable. 'Misrecognition' is conceived as a necessary condition for the exercise of power that enables the reproduction of essentially oppressive hierarchies of domination. It is a form of forgetting about the socially determined nature of practices (Bourdieu 2000:142-143).

Understanding the Practices of Art Educators in Relation to Art Museums

Applying Bourdieu's theories to the analysis of research findings enables a number of explanatory possibilities in relation to the characteristic practices of art educators to be identified and explored.

Field analysis shows that school-based education and museums are sub-fields that exist as part of the larger education field and broader cultural field, respectively. As such they can be considered as distinctive fields co-existing within social space. Considering this, the differences between the classroom practices of art educators and their practices in relation to museums can be attributed to their position in relation to the two fields. Art educators operate within the school field and can be conceived as visitors in the museum field when they engage in museum utilization. In participating in activities in the museum field, art educators attempt to play the museum 'game', but do so at a distinct disadvantage because they are in a dominated position in the hierarchy of the museum field and are experiencing the displacement effects of crossing fields. Further analysis will show that this domination is the result of a lack of familiarity with the museum field, a lack of recognized capital in the museum field and the absence of a specific habitus that would enable school-based educators to effectively play the game.

The capital deficiency of school-based educators in the museum field is clearly demonstrated in the 'consumer-like' stance that has been identified. This characteristic suggests that the strategies of art educators are based on a belief that they have little of value to offer to museums. While this appears perplexing given the declarations and museum policies that support the active involvement of schools and express a belief that art educators have much to offer, recent research by Liu (2000) demonstrates that it may be influenced by implicit attitudes communicated in the museum setting. Liu's research demonstrated that a reluctance in practice, among art museum educators, to enable the more active involvement of art educators was based on a fundamental belief in the superiority of their own expertise and a desire to maintain power and status.

The implicit communication of this belief constitutes an act of symbolic violence, which is made possible by the higher placement of museum educators in the museum field and indicative of the competitive nature of fields. Museum educators, who are engaged in internal struggles within the museum field to maintain or advance their status, have a stake in protecting and emphasizing the symbolic power of their capital in the museum field. Actions that advance their own self-interests are also concerned with the collective interests of the museum field itself, the sub-field of museum education and the individual institution in which they are employed, in relation to the overall field of power.

The concept of habitus further demonstrates how the actions of school-based educators are a product of particular social conditions and social conditioning. In this case, experiences with the traditional museum structure are evident in practices that reinforce the unquestionable authority of museums and adhere to subjective notions of aesthetic experience. While such practices contradict and undermine the more contemporary concerns of school-based education and often contradict expressed intentions and beliefs, they continue because the action of the habitus is below the level of consciousness. The habitus functions such that school-based educators think that their action is necessary, common sense, natural or inevitable.

Museums would argue that contemporary museum experiences challenge the traditional perceptions outlined. However, the habitus that most current school-based educators have developed were formed from experiences with the more traditional museum structure. The durability of the habitus and its ability to reject the contradictory information that contemporary museums may offer is explained by Swartz (1997: 212). He reports that Bourdieu (1990: 60-61) speaks of “avoidance strategies” generated by the habitus “to protect itself from crises and critical challenges” by “rejecting information capable of calling into question its accumulated information” and by “avoiding exposure to such information” by tending to “favour experiences likely to reinforce it”. In addition, conceptual change is field specific and thus the transformations that have occurred within in the museum field have not necessarily permeated other fields. This introduces the notion of a ‘time lag’ between the conceptual change within a field and the perception of that change within another.

Analysis thus far has shown that the engagement of school-based educators occurs within hierarchical relationships that are dominated by the museum field and agents positioned within it. While this relation of power is not overtly recognized or manipulated in practice, it has become accepted as the natural and logical order and the agents involved communicate an acceptance of their positions in their practical compliance with that order. In adopting practices that accept and legitimate their own domination, school-based educators have adopted a doxic attitude that is based on misrecognition of the oppressive basis of the symbolic power exercised by museums.

The internalized tension caused by misrecognition is evident in the contradictory and pedagogically problematic practices identified. It is also evident in recent research that advances collaboration between museums and schools and the training of school-based educators in museum utilization, as a means of developing museum/school relationships. Both the preceding analysis and the rarity of successful instances, provide a clear indication of the misguided nature of such research. In assuming that museums and schools are equal partners, predisposed to cohesive and co-operative relations, literature advocating collaboration misrecognises the hierarchical and polarised positions of the agents involved. Likewise, those who propose instruction as a means of empowerment misrecognise the competitive nature of social relations. While school-based educators may concede that they lack knowledge, confidence and skill in the museum setting, and in theory, support the notion of training, because of their misrecognition of agency and doxic attitude, they ultimately see these inadequacies as natural, inevitable and inconsequential. Participation would further acknowledge systems of stratification, legitimate the authority of the museum field and force school-based educators into an unfamiliar field in which the worth of their capital is unacknowledged and in which they are unable to maintain or improve their social position. They are therefore understandably reluctant to enter into this aspect of the game.

The Beginnings of An Alternative Model for Optimizing Educational Engagements

The ongoing research, of which this study is a part, is attempting to develop a model for learning in the museum setting that enables art educators to optimally utilize museums to provide a foundation for cultural

practice. Conceptualization of the model is very much a 'work in progress' and is yet to be fully resolved. However, some initial propositions for change can be advanced.

Bourdieu has been widely criticized for providing a deterministic view of social structure. However, this investigation asserts that, while there are constraints placed on change, the dynamic and contestable nature of fields and the formative influence of education on the habitus provides art education with possibilities to initiate transformations. Bourdieu himself addresses implications for change within his theories and asserts that any attempt to create opportunities for transformation must first render explicit what is taken for granted and provide an objective sociological account of relationships. In this case, achieving this objective requires a raising of consciousness that enables art educators to critically reflect on the relation between social structure and conventional practices to expose the misrecognitions operating. It is proposed that such action will empower art educators to identify the spaces in which change is possible and draw on the existing processes, possibilities and constraints.

This research identifies strategies, emerging from Bourdieu's analyses, that applied to museum/school relationships can advance the collective position and interests of art educators. These strategies provide art educators with the means for reconceptualising their capacities for action to develop a more dynamic concept of active and creative agency in their engagements with museums.

- the development of a self reflexive understanding of the position and resources of art educators within the museum field
- the development of a cognitive awareness of the ways in which the museum 'game' operates -the rules, regulations, values and cultural capital which are in play
- the development of an ability to negotiate within and exploit the structure and actions of the museum field

It is proposed that strategy number three might involve art educators in :

- establishing strategic alliances with agents within the art education field, other educational sub-fields and other fields to advance marginal interests to challenge current mainstream practices in relation to the museum field
- increasing their involvement in the museum field in ways that assert the uniqueness and value of their capital
- gaining capital from the museum field to advance their position in that field. This could be achieved through professional development programs specifically developed for that purpose

The research further recognizes that the cultural practice of museum visiting requires a degree of cultural capital that students are unequally provided with from their primary habitus (family). Analysis thus far suggests that this unequal endowment is maintained and reinforced through educational experiences with museums that assume students to be autonomous in the museum setting and disregard the intentional role of art educators. It is proposed that art education can provide articulated experiences that extend the primary habitus of students and provide opportunities for the development of the cultural capital necessary to engage in the museum field within and beyond the school years.

While it will not be presented in detail in this forum, the model in development provides a foundation for a 'critical art museum pedagogy' that is designed to facilitate the development of critical reflective individuals with the meta-capacities and cultural competence to strategically negotiate the art museum field in an autonomous manner. This notion embraces Bourdieu's conception of the critical individual who can undermine symbolic violence and processes of domination by questioning perceptions of certainty and inevitability, thus allowing for social change and the advancement of previously dominated social groups. Informed by theories of art education and recent research originating within the museum field, the model is attempting to traverse the divide between the two fields in ways that authentically represent and engage the perspectives of secondary-school aged audiences.

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