We don’t need no education: the struggle for museum training
By Eugene Dillenburg

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Reading Whitemeyer’s article, I was struck by two things. First, there’s a basic contradiction. He favors professionalizing exhibit design, arguing it will raise both the profile of the field and the quality of work. But at the same time, he opposes standardizing the profession, fearing it will standardize the product and lead to a loss of vital creativity.

The second thing I noticed was how strongly I agreed with both of these positions. And in researching this response, I discovered that, in the field at large, the tension between these points of view remains unresolved.

The exhibit profession has changed greatly in the nine years since Whitemeyer wrote about it. For one thing, museum studies—a nascent phenomenon he mentions in passing—has exploded. New programs are popping up like mushrooms, churning out more and more graduates. A second change—less obvious, perhaps, but far more profound—is that exhibit design no longer defines exhibit practice. Twenty-five years ago NAME was founded as “the designers group;” today, less than a third of our members are exhibit designers. We have more label writers and project managers. But the largest share of our members, over 70%, claim expertise in exhibit development—a position so new that the same issue of Exhibitionist that carried Whitmyer's piece also ran an article entitled “What is an ‘Exhibit Developer’?,” a question many were then asking.

So, in updating Whitemeyer we must ask: has museum studies had a professionalizing effect on the diverse activities of modern exhibit practice? To answer that question, I spoke with a number of exhibit workers—department chairs, commercial contractors, museum studies professors, and program graduates. While far from a comprehensive survey, our conversations did shed some light on the relationship between the exhibit profession and professional training.

IT’S JUST A THEORY

One of the first things I discovered was a serious disconnect between the academy and the field in what each considers valuable. Over and over, academics stressed the importance of theory and context. For example, Jay Rounds, Professor of Museum
Studies at the University of Missouri, St. Louis said, “A degree gives you a knowledge of the issues, of the history, and ways of thinking about problems.”

Many graduates agreed. Renee Mensing-Solick, an exhibit developer at The Science Museum of Minnesota, notes, “If you work your way up through the field you can get experience, but you won’t have the theory behind it.”

This stands in sharp contrast to the attitude in the field. While not exactly dismissive of museum studies, the professionals I spoke to placed far greater value on experience. “Prior museum experience is the key” says Rachel Hellenga, exhibits director at the Chicago Children’s Museum. “If it’s a choice between a candidate with experience and one with a degree, you go with the experience.” Erich Zuern of Derse Museum Group in Milwaukee concurs: “A degree isn’t a shortcut.”

There was sense among the professionals that museum studies programs offer all class work, but no real work. This perception is particularly strong in the small-museum community. Lisa Mason-Chaney, Assistant Director of the Hammond-Harwood House, Maryland, feels students need to learn that “all the beautiful concepts and theories that one is taught in graduate school do not necessarily hold true.” Another director complained of programs teaching “ivory tower ideals that can’t be afforded in a million years.”

Lynne Robertson, chair of AAM’s Committee on Museum Professional Training, disagreed. “Excellent programs give students lots of hands-on, real work.” Melissa Wraalstad, a 2002 graduate of the Cooperstown program and now an exhibit developer at the Morton Arboretum outside Chicago, insists, “everything we did was real work, not just class assignments.” They built exhibits, wrote curricula, and developed programs, all for real clients. “The projects allow you to apply theory to the real world…. We learned to tweak the ideal to fit the situation.”

Virtually all museum studies programs now require students to complete internships. Whitemyer would approve of this trend; he argued in favor of formalized apprenticeships as an entry into the field. Jim Sims, principal of Threshold Studios in Virginia, draws an analogy to the theater, where “there are well-defined levels of apprentice actor, journeyman, and finally guild member,” based on experience and successful performance. Similar entry requirements for the exhibits field could help raise the bar for us all.

Cliff Abrams of Abrams Associates, Connecticut, worries that this may not be possible. “A graphic designer can cut their teeth on a hundred small jobs,” he notes. “An exhibit designer simply doesn’t have a lot of opportunities to hone their craft.” (As Janet Kamien said about developers, “few of us have the chance to do this often enough to get really good.”)
SEEING THE BIG PICTURE

The debate over theory vs. experience reminds me of the story about the Prussian general. Told that experience is the best teacher, he shouted, “Nonsense! My mule has been through a dozen campaigns with me, and is as ignorant today as when she was foaled!”

The fact is, experience alone isn’t worth much unless you can learn from it. And this is where museum studies gives students an edge. Paul Martin, VP of Exhibits at The Science Museum of Minnesota, explains, “I believe in constructivism, the idea that you learn by building on what you already know. And museum studies graduates enter the field already knowing stuff.” “They learn critical thinking, and to think about the whole museum,” says Marjorie Schwarzer, Professor of Museum Studies at JFK University. Other academics agree. “Students see the bigger picture,” according to Polly McKenna-Cress, Chair of the Museum Studies Department at the University of the Arts, Philadelphia. “They understand their work at a different level, and see how it fits in to the museum as a whole.” This institutional perspective helps them move up in the field.

The students echo these sentiments. “I find I can relate to other departments,” says Mensing-Solick, a recent grad of the Philadelphia program. Wraalstad notes “I gained perspective. Chatting with colleagues at conferences, I realize the program gave me a broader knowledge base.” Rounds related a quote from a graduate, who told him “At the time, I wondered why I had to study all that crap. Now I see the relationship to the work, and it gives me a leg up.”

“Students, unlike busy professionals, have time to read the literature, and to think about the big ideas,” says Kris Morrissey, Director of the Museum Studies program at Michigan State University (where I teach part-time). “If exhibition is to be viewed as a professional field, then practitioners need to know history and theory. Too much professional discourse is simply 'my opinion,' and not based on anything.”

LEADERS OF TOMORROW

This theoretical grounding seems to give museum studies students, though few in number, an outsize impact on the field. As Sims notes, “a graduate program is about creating leaders to change and move the field.” McKenna-Cress, whose program is in its 16th year, finds that many of her early graduates are now serving as deputy directors and VPs. “The museum world is academic,” she notes. “Having an advanced degree can make a difference.”

And trained leadership is sorely needed. Joyce Cheney, a Missouri grad now working as an independent consultant, tells of state-run museums with inexperienced directors hired for political reasons. Robertson notes that museums of all stripes have brought in leaders from outside the field—as if running a large, complex institution requires no special knowledge or experience.
At a symposium on best practices in exhibits a couple years back, I proposed we create a book for museum directors, explaining how exhibition works, how our practice supports mission. The directors in attendance dismissed the idea: they wouldn’t read it. The men and women running museums couldn’t be bothered to learn about the single, defining feature of their institutions.

Perhaps the growth of museum studies will help Boards recognize there is an accumulated body of knowledge in our field—one prospective Directors need to know. And perhaps the growing number of museum studies graduates will mature into a new generation of knowledgeable, capable leaders.

However, their impact may be limited by other factors. Tim Murray, Director of Exhibits at the San Diego Natural History Museum, notes that “degreed students are more in demand, and command a higher price.” While this is good for them—and may be good for the field at large—it does price academically-trained workers out of some markets. Many small museums complained they couldn’t afford them. As one anonymously lamented, “I don’t know if anyone with a museum studies degree would work for under $20K a year.”

This is unfortunate, as a museum studies background is particularly valuable in the small museum setting, where staff wear every imaginable hat. Lin Nelson-Mayson, Director of The Goldstein Museum of Design, St. Paul, notes that students “develop an awareness of resources available…to answer questions, provide expertise and make connections,” all valuable assets at a small institution. “We learned the whole museum, from administration on down,” adds Wraalstad.

MY LACK OF EDUCATION HASN’T HURT ME NONE…

The resistance to museum studies no doubt comes in part from the fact that current professionals have had successful careers without any high-falutin’ degrees. Indeed, despite our commitment to informal learning, it sometimes seems that our field is downright hostile to the idea of professional education.

Whitemyer stressed the need for self-education. Robertson agrees, noting there is “an incredible need” for continuing professional education. “The field is changing so fast. Professionals need to think strategically—both about their own needs, and the future needs of the field.”

Many opportunities for professional training exist: workshops, conferences, symposiums and retreats, in addition to formal classes. But relatively few professionals take advantage of these. Cash-strapped institutions cut travel and training budgets; under-compensated employees can’t afford to pay their own way.

The exhibits profession is at a particular disadvantage. Exhibits are permanent; staffing is not. Many museums only hire designers, developers, project managers, etc. when renovating a gallery. Once the exhibit opens, the staff goes away. The museum has no
incentive to invest in an employee who won’t be around in a year or two. And once that employee “graduates” to freelance or commercial work, bottom-line pressures put a squeeze on funds for training.

But it’s more than economics; it’s attitude, too. I have often seen regional and even national conferences come to town—in one case, literally across the street from my institution—and many of my colleagues didn’t bother to attend. I can’t understand why. As Robertson says, “I always come home from a conference with a bulging suitcase and a million ideas.” But we hear the same old excuses: I don’t have time. I can’t afford it. I won’t learn anything. Until this attitude changes, and exhibit workers become active, engaged learners, “professionalism” will remain an elusive dream.

And this is having a negative effect on the field. Schwarzer says her students find “the best practices they learn are not practiced on the job. Good exhibit theory is often ignored out in the field.” Graduates tell stories of basic standards not being followed—long labels in tiny type, pinch points at gallery exits—or suggestions being ignored. One asked a curator at a major museum for the Main Message of a planned exhibit. After first asking “What’s a main message?,” the curator derisively snorted “That’s irrelevant! We don’t need one of those!”

Karen Pollard, another UArts grad now working in Minnesota, says “People get set in their ways, tied to their favorite school of thought. They need to break out, and expose themselves to multiple approaches.” As Hellenga notes, “field as a whole should be learning more from the body of written knowledge. Staffs become isolated and parochial, and we risk reinventing the wheel.”

Clearly, there is much work to be done. Department managers need to promote ongoing education. Those coming from a museum studies background are more likely to understand the benefit of a well-trained staff.

PROFESSIONALISM, YEA OR NAY?

So, where does this leave us? The type of professionalization Whitemeyer described is nowhere on the horizon, largely because there is no—and can be no—enforcing body. While government has a legitimate role in safeguarding its citizenry, and thus regulates doctors and architects, it has no such interest in regulating exhibits. Whether you see them as aesthetic experiences, didactic discourses, or something in between, exhibits are communication, protected by the First Amendment. If an uncredentialed operator wants to design a museum on creationism, conspiracy, or Jurassic technology, nobody can stop them.

And that, I would argue, is a good thing. The great strength of our profession is its tremendous diversity. As Whitemeyer notes, we come from a variety of backgrounds. A good exhibit team features many types of thinkers and many different voices.
For example, I have a background in advertising. I work with exhibits people who have degrees in history, medicine, theater, radio, poetry, etc. This broad spectrum of knowledge informs our work in many wonderful ways. There is a concern that museum studies, or any kind of standard requirements, will make us all think the same, and lead to “cookie-cutter” exhibits.

Zuern agrees. “The exhibits field is a crazy quilt of backgrounds, a rich compost of different points of view. If we all come through the same mill, will there be fewer good design solutions?” This cross-fertilization is important. Erich has heard me describe label writing in terms of ad copy—a perspective not likely to arise in a classroom.

Schwarzer agrees that diversity is crucial to the field, but turns the issue on its head: “Suppose you had an exhibit team made up of folks from advertising, theater, etc., but there was NO museum grounding. Isn’t that team also lacking something essential?”

Like the theory vs. experience debate, this too seems to be a false dichotomy. Museum studies programs are themselves diverse. At Michigan State, Morrissey notes she currently has students from 26 different undergrad majors; other chairs report similar variety. Rounds actively recruits students from diverse backgrounds, and finds he gets a lot of adult students making career changes. McKenna-Cress also purposefully chooses students from different backgrounds. “Museums are too diverse for there to be a single approach,” she says. “We don’t want cookie-cutter graduates.” (Pollard jokes, “We will never lose the diversity, because only weird people are attracted to this field.”)

There is also diversity in the programs themselves. “All the programs are very different,” says Wraalstad, “and not all programs are created equal.” They may focus on exhibits, or education, museum management, or collections care. Some have a more theoretical bent; others are more practical. And Robertson cautions, “programs are not monolithic…some are good and some are not. It behooves students—and employers—to look at the content and quality of a program.”

Most museum studies programs do not grant degrees, but rather are certificate programs (what people of a certain age would call “a minor”). For example, Sims notes that the Museum Studies program at George Washington University, where he taught for 15 years, “requires students to pursue a traditional academic discipline” such as art or anthropology, “while working with emerging theory and current practice in museums. This gives them one foot in each world.” This model—which again promotes the diversity of people entering the field—is extremely common.

Fresh perspectives are vital, but so too is common understanding. At the 2005 AAM conference, an attendee rhapsodized about bringing outsiders into the exhibit process. This prompted Beverly Serrell to respond, “we have an awful lot of knowledge about what goes into developing exhibits…. When we bring in new people who aren’t familiar with that body of knowledge, it’s important to get them up to speed.”
Hellenga agrees. “For all the diverse talent we have, we still need a basic knowledge of what works. It's so discouraging to see brand new exhibits make the same old mistakes. When the basics become routine, we are free to focus creative energy on the more interesting stuff.”

THE FUTURE IS NOW

So, what does the future hold for museum studies? It's an important question. As Morrissey says, “we're training workers for museum of tomorrow.” It can be quite a challenge. As Rounds asks, “How do you train people to enter a field that is changing rapidly?” (An advisor told him, “don’t provide technical training in obsolescence...we already have enough curators who just want to sit in the basement with the collections and never talk to anyone.”) All of the programs collect feedback from field—from the working professionals teaching courses, from internships, alums, and colleagues. New trends and emerging needs are integrated into the programs, often on an annual basis. “We try to stay ahead of the curve,” says McKenna-Cress.

According to Schwarzer, one important trend in museum studies has been a greater emphasis on the visitor. Robertson of COMPT agrees. “There is a focus today on the psycho-social aspects of exhibits...an emphasis on evaluation and how people interact with the experience.” And museum studies is playing a major role in consolidating and disseminating that knowledge. “Thirty years ago, the field went through a major shift and began to focus on the visitor,” says Martin. “Those of us who lived through it figured it out as we went. Now that the shift has happened, students are learning it in school. They enter the field already hip to what’s going on.”

Hellenga notes another trend in the field which is trickling down to museum studies. “Processes are becoming formalized,” she says. “Process leads to accountability and clear division of labor. And those can be taught.” Rounds, however, worries about standardizing methods and procedures, the emphasis on standards of competence rather than of excellence or creativity. He has written that fields under threat, such as exhibition in fiscally conservative times, retreat to the tried-and-true. “Does the emphasis on process and best practice,” he asks, “actually make it harder for the museum worker to see the visitor point of view?”

An emerging trend, noted by several people, is the need for solid financial training. “Museums are businesses,” says Martin. “They can and have failed.” Small museums and large all wanted students to understand budgets and business—the one area several graduates admitted was a weak point in their programs.

Including these ideas into museum studies will have a dramatic impact on the exhibits field. “Museum studies are not going to go away,” says Wraalstad. It may take years, but the slowly rising tide of educated exhibit workers will lift all our boats to new levels, if not of professionalization, then certainly of professionalism.

(The author would like to thank all the interviewees who contributed to this article.)