

**Abstract:** A recent survey of professional practice among museum educators suggests that a clearly defined set of best practices in museum educator professional development is needed to aid in the professionalization of the field. Further, the leaders of museum educators must be better prepared to foster professional learning communities among the educators in their department(s). Survey results are summarized and recommendations for the field are considered.

## **Introduction**

What began as an earnest call to action for museums to increase their public value has led to an identity crisis for museum educators. In 1992 the Education Committee of the American Association of Museums released a groundbreaking report calling for museums of every size and type to “place education in the broadest sense of the word at the center of their public service role.” (Excellence and Equity, 1992)

*Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums*

recommended that educational purpose be embedded within the mission and action of every museum, every department, every staff member, and every board member. With a new charge museums began re-shaping their missions, restructuring their departments, and re-examining their services, programs and exhibits in light of newly defined standards. And in the process, many museum educators were left behind. In the summer 2009 edition of the *Journal of Museum Education*, I described the impact of

*Excellence and Equity* on museum educators this way:

Instead of playing a leadership role in building the capacity of others to do this work, the job of the average museum educator became blurred with customer service. They often became front-line staff instead of highly-valued resources in achieving a new public dimension for their museums. In larger institutions, museum educators handed over the responsibility for

collecting data on visitor learning to other departments or outside consultants – further marginalizing themselves in the process. We are left with well-intentioned museum educators who feel undervalued, unclear of where they fit within the larger museum context, and who come and go from our institutions. (Nolan, 2009)

There is newly emerging research into the dispositions, practice and pedagogy of museum educators which shows that the profession is in the midst of an identity crisis. Christine Castle provided a baseline for this argument in 2001 when she examined the nature and experience of teaching among museum educators. (Castle 2001) Her research in museums, galleries and nature centers in Ontario yielded this conclusion:

“Museum teachers would benefit by a more concerted and thoughtful approach to their training and continuing professional education. This curriculum could strive to bridge the gap between formal theories of the disciplines, museology, education, and what Schon (1981) calls the "phenomenology of practice" (Schon p. 322) through reflection upon and analysis of museum teaching. At the same time, however, training and professional development must respect the current constraints facing museums, galleries, and nature centres.” (Castle, 2001)

Elsa Bailey expanded upon Castle’s work in 2006 when she researched the driving factors that led science museum educators to choose museum education as an occupation and those factors that sustain them in their work. Bailey also examined how museum educators perceive of their role and the knowledge, skills and attitudes museum educators believe are most critical to their work. (Bailey, 2006) Building upon this research, Lynn Tran and Heather King examined the practice of science museum educators who teach lessons to school students on field trips. Their findings concluded that museum educators in such institutions have no common set of practices, knowledge or language, which has inhibited the field of museum education from becoming a recognized profession. (Tran & King 2007)

The last ten years has yielded impassioned recommendations from practicing museum education leaders on directions the field must take to carve-out a new future; from improving the preparation of practitioners in the field to expanding community partnerships, (Blackmon, 1999) to leading the way toward restructuring the museum as education center, (Munley 1999) to expanding the role of museum educator to include contributing to civic engagement. (Henry 2006)

While the majority of this research is qualitative in its methodology or entirely theoretical, there are some researchers who have attempted to quantify certain aspects of the field of museum education. In a recent survey conducted by the Museum Research Associates group examining the impact of museum recessionary layoffs on staff, Ron Kley reported that as much as 60% of the museum staff positions cut in the 2009 American recession came from the ranks of museum education. (Kley, 2009) What does this statistic say about museum education as a profession? Do museum presidents and CEO's believe that their educators are expendable?

### **Purpose/Problem Statement**

The focus of my dissertation will be centered on identifying and documenting the educational practices of current and emerging museum education leaders, the outcome of which will be the creation of a framework on which to design leadership preparation and ongoing PD for current, emerging and aspiring leaders of museum educators. It is widely accepted by education reformers and business executives alike that leaders must possess the ability to foster learning communities among their staff if they are to succeed. Some ways to achieve success include establishing job-embedded

opportunities for staff to reflect upon and improve their practice, implementing mentoring programs for new and veteran staff, and using data to drive decision making. Peter Senge describes how strong leaders foster learning organizations when he writes:

A resonant leader who thinks systemically, understands the culture of their organization, and understands how to change culture is ready to do the work of creating a learning organization, [which is] an organization that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future. For such an organization, it is not enough to merely survive. "Survival learning," or what is more often termed as "adaptive learning," is important--indeed it is necessary. But for a learning organization, "adaptive learning" must be joined by "generative learning," learning that enhances our capacity to create. (Senge, 2007)

As a formative piece of research, I chose to obtain a snapshot of museum educators' current perceptions of their department as seen through the lens of a learning community. Based upon a review of literature about museum educator practice, and based upon my own research into the field of museum education leadership I hypothesized that a majority of the museum educators surveyed would not perceive that their departments operate as learning communities.

## **Method**

### Setting of the Study and Participants

This study was conducted with museum educators who are actively engaged in sharing information via an online list serve. Museum educators from throughout the United States and Canada make-up the majority of its membership. Many of these educators are directly involved in the creation and delivery of educational/interpretive programs for all types of museum audiences.

### Participant Survey

I created an attitudinal survey in which museum educators were asked to rate the degree to which they agree or disagree with a set of best practices in teacher learning and professional development. Respondents were asked to select from a likert five-point scale range of responses indicating whether they 'strongly agreed' to 'strongly disagreed' with a set of statements regarding their own professional development. They were also asked to rate the degree to which they participate in and use data to drive interpretive, program and/or exhibit development. The likert responses around the use of data ranged from 'This is a regular part of my work,' to 'I never do this.' I asked demographic questions to gather information about museum educator titles, years of experience, department size, salary ranges, and museum type. The demographic data enabled me to group respondents into categories for data analysis.

#### Procedure

The survey was created using Survey Monkey and administered via email to the entire Museum-ED list serve on July 21, 2009. A total of 144 surveys (133 completed surveys and 10 partially completed) were returned on or before the deadline of July 28, 2009.

#### Definition of Groupings:

For the purposes of making comparisons between and among groups of respondents, I categorized the respondents into two groupings: the first group organized the respondents by title and the second organized the respondents based on years of experience in museum education.

TABLE 1: Title Groupings

<b>Title Groupings</b>	<b>Specific Titles</b>	<b>N</b>	<b>Total</b>
Entry Level	Educator	49	49
	Explainer	0	
	Interpreter	0	
Mid-Level Professional	Coordinator	23	56
	Supervisor	10	
	Manager	25	
Senior Staff	Curator	13	36
	Director	22	
	Vice-President	1	

TABLE 2: Years Experience Groupings

<b>Years Experience Groupings</b>	<b>Range</b>	<b>N</b>
Entry Level	0-5 years in the field	48
Mid-Career	6-10 years in the field	46
Veteran	16 years or longer	48

### Data Analysis

Data analysis was completed using Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) software version 16.0. I analyzed frequency distributions and ran four sets of ANOVA one-way correlations. Survey variables were divided into two categories for analysis: ‘learning together’ and ‘data use.’ Participants were asked to rate the degree to which they learn together based on a set of commonly held best practices from formal education research and literature:

1. The existence of an established mentoring program for new and veteran educators
2. The amount of collaboration using research-based tools and frameworks to create and improve programs, exhibits and interpretive materials
3. The existence of a professional development plan for the department that provides highly relevant learning opportunities

4. Professional Development opportunities which are on-site, collaborative, and led by educators who know about best practices in teaching and learning in museums
5. The allotment of time built into an educator's work to diagnostically assess the impact of their teaching
6. The degree to which the educators engage on a regular basis with their colleagues in book/article discussion groups on topics related to their work in the museum

Participants were asked to rate the extent to which they collect, utilize and disseminate the results of program, exhibit and interpretive evaluation based on a set of commonly held practices from formal education research and literature:

1. Being directly involved in the evaluation of programs and/or exhibits
2. Working with their colleagues to use the data gathered from program evaluation and/or visitor studies to inform the creation of new programs, exhibits and interpretive materials
3. Meeting on a regular basis with others in their institution who are responsible for evaluation and assessment
4. Writing about the findings from program, exhibit or interpretive evaluation in publications

## **Results**

A frequency distribution of responses shows that a majority of museum educators (N= 99) who completed the survey work in small to medium-sized art or history museums. Educators who work in historic houses or historic sites made up the second-largest sample (N=19). The remaining educators (N=26) stated that they worked in other types of institutions ranging from science centers to children's museums. One-third of the respondents stated that they were senior staff, one-third were mid-level professionals and one-third were entry level museum educators.

Responses to the sum of all the questions around 'learning together' yielded no significant difference between and among the groups. When analyzed by group at the variable level, all the groups fell within the same pattern of response; they felt their

department's professional development opportunities were relevant to their job, and that they collaborated with their colleagues using research-based frameworks and tools to create and improve programs, exhibits, and/or interpretive materials. However, upon examination of the responses to the statements that probed more deeply into professional development practices the mean response between and among the groups was 'undecided.' For example, when asked whether they utilized best practices in professional development their response was 'undecided,' and their responses about diagnostically assessing their teaching, the existence of mentoring programs and the types of professional dialogue they engaged in (all forms of professional development in and of themselves) the mean response within and between groups was 'undecided.' But further examination of the frequency distribution of individual responses (as opposed to group responses) shows a much different picture about the extent to which museum educators believe they learn together.

61% of responses indicate that museum educators do not have an established mentoring program at their institution, and 49% of responses indicate that museum educators do not have time built into their work to diagnostically assess the impact of their teaching. 51.4% of respondents indicated that they do not engage on a regular basis with their colleagues in book/article discussion groups on topics related to their work in museums. On the flip side, a full 70.4% of respondents indicated that they collaborate with their colleagues using research-based frameworks and tools to create and improve exhibits, programs, and/or interpretive materials. In a few cases, the responses fell almost evenly between those who 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' with statements, and those who 'disagreed' or 'strongly disagreed' with statements.



TABLE 3: Frequency Distribution of Scores\_ Learning Together

Percentage of Respondents			Statement
SA or A	U	D or SD	
23.2	8.5	61.2	There is an established mentoring program in place for new and veteran educators in my department.
38	20.4	34.5	The professional development plan for my department provides learning experiences that are highly relevant to my job.
70.4	9.2	13.4	I collaborate with my colleagues using research-based frameworks and tools to create and improve programs, exhibits, and/or interpretive materials.
33.1	16.2	43.7	The professional development opportunities offered for my department are mostly on-site, job-embedded, and led by educators who know about best practices in teaching and learning.
23.2	19.0	49.3	There is time built into my work to diagnostically assess the impact of my teaching practice.
29.6	12.0	51.4	I engage on a regular basis with my colleagues in book/article discussion groups on topics related to my work in the museum

TABLE 4: ANOVA One Way Analysis by Group\_ Title and Learning Together

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Mentoring	1	33	3.36	1.365	.238
	2	53	3.85	1.063	.146
	3	46	3.48	1.260	.186
	Total	132	3.60	1.222	.106
Research Based Collaboration	1	33	2.12	.893	.155
	2	53	2.23	1.050	.144
	3	46	2.17	1.018	.150
	Total	132	2.18	.995	.087
PD Plan	1	33	2.85	1.326	.231
	2	53	3.06	1.277	.175
	3	46	2.93	1.340	.198
	Total	132	2.96	1.304	.114
PD Best	1	33	3.18	1.261	.220

Practices	2	53	3.13	1.161	.159
	3	46	3.28	1.186	.175
	Total	132	3.20	1.188	.103
Diagnostic	1	33	3.41	1.316	.233
	2	53	3.40	1.071	.149
	3	46	3.35	1.079	.159
	Total	132	3.38	1.130	.099
Professional Dialogue	1	33	3.18	1.310	.228
	2	53	3.43	1.435	.197
	3	46	3.37	1.199	.177
	Total	132	3.35	1.319	.115

TABLE 5: ANOVA One Way Analysis by Group\_ Years Experience and Learning Together

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Mentoring	1	44	3.77	1.179	.178
	2	43	3.65	1.044	.159
	3	45	3.38	1.403	.209
	Total	132	3.60	1.222	.106
Research Based Collab	1	44	2.07	1.087	.164
	2	43	2.30	.887	.135
	3	45	2.18	1.007	.150
	Total		2.18	.995	.087
PD Plan	1	44	3.23	1.379	.208
	2	43	2.91	1.171	.179
	3	45	2.76	1.334	.199
	Total		2.96	1.304	.114
PD Best Practice	1	44	3.43	1.169	.176
	2	43	3.23	1.088	.166
	3	45	2.93	1.268	.189
	Total		3.20	1.188	.103
Diagnostic	1	44	3.44	1.119	.171
	2	43	3.47	.984	.150
	3	45	3.25	1.278	.193
	Total		3.38	1.130	.099
Professional Dialogue	1	44	3.39	1.418	.214
	2	43	3.30	1.264	.193
	3	45	3.36	1.300	.194
	Total		3.35	1.319	.115

Responses to questions about the extent to which museum educators felt they use data to drive program, interpretive and/or exhibit development yielded no significant difference between the groups. However, there was slightly more variability between groups among specific variables. For example, veteran, mid-career, and entry-level museum educators all agreed with the statement about being directly involved in evaluating programs and/or exhibits, but mid-career museum educators agreed with the statement to a slightly lesser extent. Also interesting to note is that a majority of the respondents, regardless of years of experience, disagreed with the statement about writing about the findings from their evaluation in journals, papers or books.

TABLE 6: Data-Based Decision Making \_ Years Experience

		N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error
Directly Involved	1	44	1.64	.892	.134
	2	43	2.19	1.139	.174
	3	45	1.91	1.062	.158
	Total	132	1.91	1.052	.092
Data Decisions	1	44	2.14	1.193	.180
	2	43	2.49	1.279	.195
	3	45	2.09	1.062	.158
	Total	132	2.23	1.184	.103
Meet With Others	1	44	3.07	1.336	.201
	2	43	3.23	1.411	.215
	3	45	2.95	1.363	.206
	Total	132	3.08	1.365	.119
Write	1	44	4.41	.923	.139
	2	43	4.26	.954	.145
	3	45	3.87	1.236	.184
	Total	132	4.17	1.066	.093

Much like the ‘learning together’ findings, further examination of the frequency distribution of individual responses (as opposed to group responses) shows a much different picture about the extent to which museum educators engage in data-based decision making: 77.4% of all respondents indicated that they are involved in evaluating programs and/or exhibits, and 76.9% of the respondents indicated that they work with data gathered to inform the creation of new programs, exhibits, and interpretive materials. 76.8% of all respondents indicated that they do not write about the findings from program evaluation in publications, and more than half of the respondents (51.4%) indicated that they ‘rarely’ or ‘never’ meet on a regular basis with others in their institution about evaluation and assessment.

TABLE 7: Frequency Distribution of Scores \_ Using Data

Percentage of Respondents			Statement
SA or A	U	D or SD	
77.4	2.8	12.7	I am directly involved in evaluating programs and/or exhibits
76.9	6.3	19.7	I work with my colleagues to use the data gathered from program evaluation and/or visitor studies to inform the creation of new programs, exhibits, and interpretive materials
37.3	14.1	40.8	I meet on a regular basis with others in my institution who are responsible for evaluation and assessment
10.5	5.6	76.8	I write about the findings from our evaluation in publications such as the museum newsletter, peer-reviewed journals, papers for my graduate program, in books, or for museum association publications

## Conclusions:

The findings from this formative survey indicate that museum educators are highly collaborative in their work and they base their program development on data received from program evaluation. However, probing more deeply into the responses, it is clear that more study is needed to ascertain exactly what the best practices are or should be for ongoing professional development of museum educators. I came away with an understanding that sets of best practices around educator professional development in non-school settings may not yet exist. The best practices identified in the school-based literature do not all apply to the museum culture, and more study is needed in this area. Further, more research needs to be conducted into the types of data used to drive decision-making. What data do museum educators collect, and how do they collect it? Who is responsible for disseminating results to their colleagues, and what do they do with those results?

I was not surprised to find that a majority of museum educators do not read the museum-related literature as part of their regular practice, nor was I surprised that they do not write about their work in peer-reviewed journals or other publications. These findings are reflected in the current research about museum educator practice, as conducted by Castle, Bailey, Tran, and others.

But what does this research say about the leaders of museum educators? Looking at the ANOVA results by group, the mean response to both sets of questions yielded an 'undecided' answer. It would seem that more research is needed to identify whether or not museum education departments operate as learning communities, which leads me back to the question posed earlier: What are the best practices in museum educator professional development? I believe this question cannot be answered

without examining the leadership of museum educators. A baseline of leadership practices needs to be established for the field. Out of this baseline can emerge recommendations for educational leaders in museum settings to foster learning communities within their departments or among the wider institution(s).

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