

Children, teenagers and adults in museums: a developmental perspective

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A developmental perspective based on the work of Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson is used to describe the different needs of children, teenagers and adults in museum learning. Common to all is the tenet that our perceptions are based on our individual and unique histories and experiences. None the less, there are broad similarities in the ways in which people of different life-stages view the world. Knowledge of these can help with programme planning.

This chapter is based on the panel 'Museum audiences: the educator's perspective', presented at the 1981 American Association of Museums (AAM) Annual Meeting. The panellists, museum educators who have applied developmental theory to their work with museum audiences, were Peggy Cole, director of the Fieldston Lower School, Riverdale, NY, and formerly on the faculty of the Bank Street College of Education, New York, NY, who spoke on elementary-school children; Kathryne Andrews, manager of School and Youth Services at the Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn, NY, who spoke on teenagers; Adrienne Horn, museum consultant in adult education and programme co-ordinator for the Center for Museum Studies, John F. Kennedy University, San Francisco, CA, who spoke on adults; and Theodore Katz, chief of the Division of Education at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, Philadelphia, PA, who spoke on creativity and motivation. The panel was co-chaired by Nina Jensen, acting director of the Museum Education Program at the Bank Street College of Education, and Susan Reichman, former director of the programme. This chapter has been a collaborative effort of the panellists and was edited by Nina Jensen.

Museum programmes must relate to the life-experiences of the audiences they seek to motivate and engage. As museum staff members come to understand their audiences in greater depth, they can create programmes more directly relevant to them.

Traditionally, museum audiences have been considered demographically – by age, ethnicity, occupation, and so forth. There is, however, another perspective – that of developmental theory. The term 'development' refers to the sequential changes in circumstance and perspective that all people experience over time. Loosely linked to chronological age, developmental growth is organized in distinct stages or eras through which all people pass, pushed by a combination of physiological maturation and increased understandings, abilities and knowledge. Developmental theorists whose work has important implications for museum programming include Jean Piaget and Erik Erikson. While their ideas have played a crucial role in shaping current educational theories in schools, their impact has been much less widely felt in museums.

An important tenet of developmental psychology is that all experiences are a unique function of our individual past. Since everyone has a different history and a different way of looking at the world, no two individuals, even of the same age, family, or socio-economic background, have identical perceptions. On the other hand, our experiences also have some important elements of commonality. There are broad descriptors of how infants are different from 5-year-olds, 5-year-olds from 20-year-olds and 20-year-olds from 50-year-olds. These descriptors are useful to educators.

This article will examine the characteristics of three major age-groups – elementary-school children, teenagers and adults – and their implications for museum programming. Issues of creativity and motivation that cut across developmental lines will also be considered.

ELEMENTARY-SCHOOL CHILDREN

Because the experiences of adults in museums are qualitatively different from those of children, it is often difficult for adults to understand the museum visit from the perspective of the child. An important idea from developmental psychology, with implications for children's programming in museums, is that children bring their own experiences and conceptions of the world with them. These conceptions determine how they receive what is presented to them and what they will learn from it. For example, Michael, an 8-year-old intensely interested in the Middle Ages, was taken to see the armour at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. A week later he asked if people had metal in the Middle Ages. When reminded about the armour he had seen in the museum, he replied, 'Yes, but what does that have to do with the Middle Ages?'

This question suggests that children have only the vaguest ideas about how an object gets into a museum and why it is there and even what a museum is. It illustrates how our life-experiences limit our ability to understand objects in the context of a museum. It also suggests the errors in adults' assumptions about what children experience. Despite his interest and background Michael did not understand that the objects in a museum come from another historical period. He has been in the world only eight years, and the armour has been there a lot longer. His experience tells him that something old is dirty, whereas the armour at the Metropolitan is polished and shiny – attributes he associates with new things. Michael's confusion illustrates a phenomenon described by Jean Piaget – that perception is shaped and limited by experience.

Another important idea from developmental psychology is that interaction is the most powerful mode of learning. Interaction is the opposite of passivity. We do not simply bring experiences to the world, nor do we perceive what is there in pure form. We impose our experiences on the world, be it an object or another person. In terms of Kantian epistemology, the basis of Piagetian theory, 'The mind gives the law to nature'. Knowledge is acquired in a continuous process of accommodating prior expectations and beliefs to new realities learned through interactive experiences.

Learning involves conflict between a person's conception of reality and new encounters with the real. This conflict or dissonance leads to what Piaget calls 'accommodation'. Children (and adults also) are constantly restructuring their ideas about the world as new information is received. This dynamic process between the learner and his or her experiences is basic to what happens in museums.

Words are confusing to children who do not have experiences to back them up. Piagetian theory suggests that ideas are formed first, words second – not the other

way around. But words have a special seduction for children because their language acquisition is at an all-time high. Most children who have heard Peter Rabbit stories have chamomile tea in their vocabulary, but their ideas of what it is are often confused, even humorous, because they have no experience with it. One can find out about chamomile tea only by drinking it; it has a particular colour, smell and taste. Because children can recite words by rote without understanding their meanings, they may seem to know more than they do. Learning moves from the concrete to the abstract more slowly than many educators care to admit. Because their thinking is so concrete, children often are confused about what is real and what is representational. They can become frightened by images of things; the distinction between reality and fantasy is not always clear. A costumed mannequin in the Brooklyn Museum's eighteenth-century period rooms magically came to life for a fourth grader as he exclaimed, 'Look! I saw her move!'

Elementary-school children have trouble dealing with the past because their understanding of time-periods is incomplete. Since many museum programmes and collections require an understanding of the context of historical periods, and since most children have not got this understanding worked out yet, they make the most amazing connections between things that have no relationship. For example, a group of 10-year-olds had just completed a detailed study of how Christopher Columbus had preserved food during his voyage to the New World. They had learned that the food was hung over the side of the ship to dry in the air. When the teacher asked the children what the sailors used for containers, some children thought they used baggies.

Children experience a sense of powerlessness in museums, as they do in many aspects of their lives. Unlike other age-groups, they are rarely in museums by free choice. For the most part adults tell children what to do; adults have control, while children wish that *they* did. By offering children choices during museum visits, such as allowing them to choose a work of art on which to focus, educators can give them some feeling of power and command over their museum experience.

In addition, museum programmes for children should focus on only a few objects of interest to them and present ideas about those objects that are graspable and relevant. Otherwise the artefacts in museums will be for children like so many other things in their lives – simply there, without explanation and outside their control. A selective and limited focus will foster in children a sense of mastery and command in a potentially strange and overwhelming setting and will increase the chances of their really understanding the ideas behind the words and objects to which they are introduced.

TEENAGERS

Developmental theory plays an important role in understanding the museum experiences of teenagers as well as children. These experiences are necessarily modified by the cultural setting in which US teenagers find themselves, a setting shaped by their families, their peers and the larger aspects of American society in the late twentieth century. The reasons teenagers visit museums less often than younger children or adults are suggested by a study of teenagers and museums done at the Brooklyn Museum.¹ The teen years are a volatile point in emotional development. Teenagers are especially sensitive to condescension, and museum staff who act in patronizing ways merely confirm their opinion that museums are 'not for them'. Preoccupied with their own independence and coming separation from their families, they often reject museum visits because of their close association with family values.

Teenagers are, physically speaking, adults. Capable of giving birth or carrying a gun to war, they are, at the same time, financially and intellectually dependent on their families. They live with the continual contradiction that while they have the capacity to be on their own, apart from their families, most in fact do live at home. Required to comply with family viewpoints and roles in exchange for financial support, teenagers often feel conflicts of allegiance.

It is in their groups that teenagers develop a sense of themselves as individuals. Thus, for most teenagers a vital aspect of their school life is social as well as academic. Museums are also viewed as places in which to socialize with friends. In fact, visiting museums without friends holds little interest for them. Over two-thirds of the teenagers interviewed in the Brooklyn Museum study were significantly more interested in museum visits when they could attend with friends.

Because non-academic clubs and interest groups are voluntary, they serve important social needs for teenagers. Groups play a very large role in teenagers' lives, and teenagers devote enormous amounts of time to them. In seeking teenage audiences, museums might productively turn to these groups, both within and beyond the school setting. Teenagers for the Brooklyn Museum study, for instance, came from voluntarily attended youth and community groups. Interest groups can be formed by the museum itself. In conjunction with an exhibition of documentary photographs, the Brooklyn Museum invited photography students from several high schools to create their own exhibition. One of the most important aspects of the programme was simply the opportunity for these teenagers to meet and talk shop with peers from other schools.

Today's teenagers have a practical outlook on life. School is often perceived as a means to an end – getting into college and getting a good job in the face of high unemployment and economic instability. The Brooklyn Museum study found teenagers to be singularly lacking in curiosity and without access to an aesthetic, humanistic, or historical framework to help them appreciate the objects in a museum. Their life-experience is necessarily narrow. Museum educators are thus challenged to present programmes that focus on universal human experiences and that teach the tools or frames with which to think and perceive. We need to help teenagers understand, for instance, that art and history can connect them to the thoughts and feelings of others. As they learn how artists have expressed feelings about power, conflict, war, justice and love, they may be helped to understand these and other issues in relationship to their own lives.

Despite their lack of curiosity, teenagers have the capacity to be imaginative and thoughtful and to extend themselves into the lives of others. They need opportunities for self-expression and creative learning. When asked what they did like about museums, teenagers in the study stated that museums gave them opportunities to 'have conversations about important issues' and to 'absorb ideas about other cultures into our own thoughts'. One 16-year-old girl commented that 'seeing a painting is like reading a poem'.

Perhaps most of all, teenagers want and need opportunities to learn in ways that support their self-esteem and growing independence. Having developed the ability to think at least somewhat analytically and abstractly, they need to know that their ideas will be listened to and respected in the museum setting.

ADULTS

Over the years attention to human growth, learning and development has focused on childhood and adolescence. Recent changes in our society and its values, however,

together with an ageing population, have created a greater awareness of learning and development in adult life.

Adult learning is different from that of children. Malcolm Knowles, a scholar widely respected in the field of adult education, has explained the characteristics of adult learners that make them different.² To children experience is external, something that happens to them; to adults personal experience has defined their individual identity. Because adults have a richer foundation of experience than children, new material they learn takes on heightened meaning as it relates to past experiences. For example, because middle-aged and older people have a personal sense of history – they have lived through events – they relate to history in a way that few youngsters can. Adults see how various social problems have recurred during their lifetime; they see vital movements and issues with an insight that children cannot have.

For children, learning tends to be teacher-directed; children learn what is taught by parents and teachers. Adults, on the other hand, are independent learners and search for education programmes that answer their own questions instead of those of someone else. They seek learning experiences related to their changing roles as workers, parents, spouses and leisure-time users. Adults enrol in classes or participate in programmes related to their personal interests or to acquire skills and understandings that will help them answer immediate questions. Children, by contrast, view education as something to be used in the future. For adults education is an independent and personal choice. Since they take responsibility for their own learning, they expect excellence in education programmes.

While adult learning ability may remain relatively stable throughout adult life, there is still substantial growth and development. The popular conception of adulthood as a time of little change over the course of many years has been challenged by the findings of developmental psychology. Knowles points out that adults have a 'readiness to learn' which, at its peak, presents a 'teachable moment'. Just as a child cannot walk until it has crawled and its leg muscles are strong enough, so adults, too, have their phases of growth and development, their teachable moments. The development of adults, however, is not primarily physiological; it is related to their changing social roles.

Adults experience developing patterns of interest as they move through the life-cycle. Generally speaking, vocational life and family life are the primary concerns of young adults (ages 18–35) as they seek to establish themselves in work and at home. In middle adulthood (ages 35–55) these concerns decrease in favour of interests in health and civic and social activities. As they near retirement adults become occupied with interpreting culture and life, with the health problems of advancing age.

The unique perspectives of adulthood have implications for museum programme themes and topics. Themes from the humanities can be of particular interest to adults who, because of their own experiences, may identify personally with the subjects presented. The Toledo Museum of Art's programme 'The new American scene' examined various aspects of the life-styles and art of contemporary American society. Some natural history museums have used the humanities to link their collections with life-related issues. The Carnegie Museum of Natural History in Pittsburgh has used the theme 'Becoming human' to explain the influence of biological and cultural forces on the processes of human development.³ Relating museum programmes and collections to the broad threads of human experience is one means of bringing objects to life in a way that is emotionally stimulating and meaningful to a broad spectrum of adult audiences.

In considering the stages of adult development, it is important to recognize that the adult population is not homogeneous. Obviously many variables, such as occupation, sex, social class, income level, educational background and ethnicity, further define adult groups. In programming for its exhibition 'Manifestations of Shiva', the Seattle Art Museum appealed to adults with various interests and at different stages of their lives. Elements of the programme, which dealt with the culture of India – its music, literature, history, religions, art and daily life – were adapted to different segments of the public, such as families, senior citizens and scholars. Museums can conduct 'needs assessments' in order to determine what programmes are of interest to their potential adult audiences.

Regardless of the motivation – the particular reason for the 'teachable moment' – it is important for museums to capitalize on the readiness of adults to learn. Adults bring their own expectations, goals and experiences to museums, and museum programmes should recognize and accommodate them.

PROGRAMMING FOR CHILDREN, TEENAGERS AND ADULTS

Accepting the implications of developmental theory as it pertains to potential participants in museum programmes, we face the challenge of providing rich encounters for diverse audiences from our equally diverse collections. Is the ultimate implication of developmental theory that there should be separate exhibitions or programmes for separate audiences? Can a single programme reach all three groups?

This is what the Division of Education of the Philadelphia Museum of Art set out to discover through a programme entitled 'Art as a reflection of human concerns'.⁴ As the basic goal was to produce a programme that would make possible significant and interesting experiences for visitors of all ages, the subject had to be broad. Seven themes were selected – family, humour, religion, ageing, death, birth and love – each to be considered for a period of one month. Topics focused on the vital importance of these themes, not only in subject-matter but as inspiration for human creativity. Consideration of developmental theory helped staff members to design specific activities introducing the monthly theme to various age-groups. Gallery talks, films, workshops, concerts, plays and lectures were planned and presented specifically for children, teenagers, adults and family groups. These related the monthly theme to selected objects from the museum's collections. Information sheets as guides to independent study were available as well as other handout material that visitors could pick up around the museum each month. Staff members developed these 'pick-me-ups', each of which presented a brief, humanistic interpretation of a work of art selected from the collection.

For elementary-school children, programmes combined education with entertainment so children would want to participate instead of feeling their visit was one more activity forced upon them by adults. During the Family month children viewed such films as *The Red Balloon* and *The Golden Fish*; during Humour, they participated in a live mime presentation. Peter Pan came to life in a performance during the month on Ageing. Even the programme concerning Death – a theme that might be expected only to frighten youngsters – became an enjoyable learning experience through an afternoon of story-telling and folk songs.

For teenagers, pre-eminently concerned with asserting their own identities and independence, programmes were designed to consider what the world looks like when coloured by the strong private visions of artists. Teen activities were not structured

around group sessions with their atmosphere of authority. Instead young people were given printed programme material and directed to the galleries on their own. One programme appealed to their interest in personal identity by asking them to match self-portraits in the galleries with written passages either by or about the portrait subjects. The 'detective work' aspect of the activity further appealed to their sense of challenge and gamesmanship.

For adults, programmes aimed to cut across divisions of social class, cultural interests and race. Lectures by visiting scholars on topics such as 'Are pictures to be smashed or worshipped?', 'Ageing: East and West' and 'Family: fragmented or whole?' further reinforced programme themes, as did gallery talks like 'Humour in oriental art' and 'Ageing and agelessness in the painting of Thomas Eakins'. *Beauty and the Beast*, *The Clowns* and *Ulysses* were among the films shown during the course of the programme. A visitor survey administered at these programmes confirmed that most people attended because of their interest in the topics rather than in specific speakers or works of art. Because topics such as birth, family, ageing and death speak directly to the developmental concerns of all adults, the programme successfully attracted a large and diverse new audience. Over half those attending the programmes were not museum members, and significant numbers were not regular museum-goers. Variations in age, sex, race and level of education were much greater in those attending these programmes than in more traditional museum offerings.

William James said:

Every new experience must be disposed of under some old head. The great point is to find the head which has to be least altered to take it in. . . . The great maxim in pedagogy is to knit every new piece of knowledge on to a preexisting curiosity – i.e., to assimilate its matter in some way to what is already known!⁵

An important implication of developmental theory as it pertains to museum programmes is that the museum environment must reward the individual's attention. The enjoyment of, and learning from, museum collections will vary according to the individual's perception and learning abilities. We must know our audiences, their interests and their abilities, in order to offer programmes and exhibitions with which they will identify. We must respect the value of initial 'engaging' activities; from the immediately attractive and easily accessible, visitors can proceed to consideration of the content of collections in more sophisticated and subtle forms. With attention to developmental theories, exhibitions and programmes can be designed to reveal the richness of museum collections not only as ends and objects of study, but also as beginnings, subjects for wonder and exploration, insights into one's own identity and potential.

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NOTES

- 1 Andrews, Kathryn and Asia, Carolyn, 'Teenagers' attitudes about art museums', *Curator* 23 (1979): 229. This article is a report on a study, funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, on the interests and needs of Brooklyn's teenagers and the development of museum programmes.
- 2 Knowles, Malcolm S., *The Modern Practice of Adult Education*, 8th edn (New York: Association Press, 1977).
- 3 The programmes developed by the Toledo Museum of Art and the Carnegie Museum of Natural History are described in detail in Collins, Zipporah W. (ed.) *Museums, Adults and the Humanities*:

A Guide for Educational Programming (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1981), 177-97, 211-18.

4 'Art as a reflection of human concerns' is described in detail in *ibid.*: 236-56.

5 Quoted in James, William, *Psychology: Briefer Course* (New York: Collier Books, 1966), 332-3.