

ICOM-CECA Conference in Zagreb on 17 September 2011

Laying the foundations for heritage education training

Dr John Stevenson

Director, GEM

I very much appreciate the opportunity to be with so many museum education colleagues here in Zagreb today at the ICOM-CECA conference, and to talk about how GEM has been responding to changes across the heritage sector and about GEM's integrated approach to the training of heritage educators. I should like to thank in particular Zeljka Jelavic for organising such a wonderful conference.

I shall reflect on heritage education as a profession, and also reflect on what we as heritage educators do and how effective we are. I often use the term "heritage" rather than "museum" as one increasing trend is that heritage educators tend to work across the whole heritage sector rather than just in museums.

I'd like to start by asking all of you three questions.

- First: Do you consider yourself to be a museum or heritage education professional?
- Second: Accepting that we may be professional, do you think that museum or heritage education is really a profession?
- Third: What do we have to do to make museum education a proper profession?

My own personal view is that museum education is not yet a proper profession (whatever that word means) – but that we should aim to become more professional.

Obviously, it would be helpful to agree exactly what we mean by a profession. So what do we do in a situation like this? Yes, we head for the internet – Wikipedia was my first call. The article on "Profession" rather worryingly began with a series of warnings:

- "This article has multiple issues."
- "Please help improve it or discuss these issues on the talk page."
- "Its factual accuracy may be compromised due to out-of-date information."
- "It may contain original research or unverifiable claims."

So what is a profession? Here's one suggestion:

- "A profession is a *vocation* founded upon *specialised educational training*, the purpose of which is to *supply disinterested counsel and service to others*, for a *direct and definite compensation*, wholly apart from expectation of other business gain."

I think most of us would agree that our chosen career is vocational (we provide “services” to others – in GEM’s case for the public benefit which is a requirement for UK charities). We are definitely not in it for the money! And we do have some training – although not specialised enough in my view.

Someone else on Wikipedia suggested (rather contentiously I feel) that a profession has all or at least some of the following:

- Skill based on theoretical knowledge
- Professional association
- Extensive period of education
- Testing of competence
- Institutional training
- Licensed practitioners
- Work autonomy:
- Code of professional conduct or ethics
- Self-regulation
- Public service and altruism
- Exclusion, monopoly and legal recognition
- High status and rewards
- Individual clients
- Middle-class occupations
- Male-dominated
- Legitimacy
- Inaccessible body of knowledge
- Indeterminacy of knowledge
- Mobility

Another pointed out that “classically, there were only three professions: divinity, medicine, and law. Now professions include: accountants, actuaries, advocate, architect, dentists, engineers, financial analysts, lawyers, librarians, nursing, pharmacists, philosophers, physicians, pilots, professors, psychologists, quantity surveyors, scientists, veterinarians.”

But there are no museum educators – or even teachers listed. And financial analysts are a profession!

The general view is that a profession:

- is typically regulated by statute
- enforcement delegated to professional bodies responsible for licensing its members
- may set examinations of competence
- enforces adherence to an ethical code of practice.
- has power to control its own members, and also its area of expertise and interests
- tends to dominate, police and protect its area of expertise

- exercises a dominating influence over its entire field which means that professions can act monopolist, rebuffing competition from ancillary trades and occupations, as well as subordinating and controlling lesser but related trades.
- characterised by the power and high prestige it has in society as a whole.

Perhaps most people would not classify museum education as a profession.

And then my research took an interesting turn as I found that the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) was trying to define a new word: “**semiprofession**” and had published a list of twelve checkpoints to help define this neologism.

- Lower in occupational status
- Shorter training periods
- Lack of societal acceptance that the nature of the service and/or the level of expertise justifies the autonomy that is granted to the professions
- A less specialized and less highly developed body of knowledge and skills
- Markedly less emphasis on theoretical and conceptual bases for practice
- A tendency for the individual to identify with the employment institution more and with the profession less
- More subject to administrative and supervisory surveillance and control
- Less autonomy in professional decision making, with accountability to superiors rather than to the profession
- Management by persons who have themselves been prepared and served in that semiprofession
- A preponderance of women
- Absence of the right of privileged communication between client and professional
- Little or no involvement in matters of life and death

Perhaps museum education is more like a “semiprofession”? I think we should leave wrestling with these definitions to another occasion – perhaps the bar!

I should like to move forward on the basis that we should act as professionally as possible – and the meaning of those words has to be defined by what we do rather than what we say.

GEM – advancing learning through heritage

GEM is all about advancing learning through heritage. GEM actually stands for “Group for Education in Museums” – a name which is no longer entirely accurate. Sixty years ago, GEM was just a group with its members drawn solely from museums. Now however, we are a

registered charity and company limited by guarantee with 2,000 members from not only museums but also, libraries, historic houses, cathedrals, archives, science centres, etc. Also we have members from across the world: from Canada to Bermuda and Brazil, from South Africa to South Korea, from the Republics of China and Ireland to Australia and New Zealand, and Japan, Taiwan, South Korea, Malaysia and the Falkland Islands. And not forgetting, of course, many European countries. I could not spot anyone from Croatia, but I have brought some membership leaflets with me!

For most of our life GEM has been entirely run by volunteers but now we have a small professional staff and an office. Voluntary effort is still essential to the running of GEM particularly that of our trustees and area convenors.

Our traditional main activities are:

- Running a large residential conference every year – this year our theme was *Thinking ahead and staying afloat* and we were in Norwich and about 125 delegates attended.
- Arranging a series of one-day events mainly sharing best professional practice
- Maintaining an area network with convenors organising meetings for members in their area
- Publications – annual Journal and two Case Studies and a monthly eNews
- GEM JISCMail – a lively email discussion list sharing information and ideas, and providing an opportunity to debate topical issues
- Networking and sharing best practice

Our main strengths are:

- Our membership
- Our independence (not reliant on external core funding)
- The networking and sharing opportunities we provide.

Our changing world

I started my career in heritage education over 30 years ago by joining the education team at the Science Museum. And over the last 30 years much has changed. In that time, the role of education in museums has become recognised as one of the key roles, if not the *raison d'être* of most museums. However, in the UK and in most other countries of the world, we are facing difficult times. I feel that the position is admirably summed up by John Reeve, who has just retired as chair of GEM after serving six years as a trustee:

“GEM has changed considerably since I rejoined the Board in 2004 and is not surprisingly unrecognisable from the committee I first joined in 1978! It has become much more professional, more ambitious but also more realistic and self-critical. Sadly after a golden age of investment, research and acceptance of learning at the

core of culture and heritage, we have to face a period of uncertainty, under-resourcing and volatility in policy, as the real achievements of the previous government are dismantled in areas such as early years, skills, partnerships, social and cultural inclusion, creativity and cultural policy.

As someone who lived through the Thatcher years I can only say that it is cyclical, it will resolve itself and we are starting from a much higher baseline than we were then when museum education was still seen as a desirable but not essential add-on to the 'real' work of education. There is no room for smugness but neither should we despair. As a profession we have shown ourselves flexible, responsive and resilient."

I would like to highlight:

- the use of the "p"-word – we are "much more professional" ("we" here refers not only to GEM but to heritage professionals in general)
- we are more ambitious but also realistic and self-critical
- acceptance of learning is at the core of culture and heritage
- we do face a period of uncertainty, under-resourcing and volatility in policy
- we can take comfort in the fact that we are flexible, responsive and resilient

Apart from a "few years of plenty" this "facing uncertainty" is not new to me, or to most of you I guess – this is normal!

Education, Learning & Teaching

For the last decade or so in the UK the word "education" has been a bit unfashionable – it has been trendy to use the word "learning" instead. This is now reflected in job titles such as learning & access officer, learning & engagement officer, learning & outreach manager, and learning & visitor services manager. I am secretly pleased to note that education officer still leads learning officer by the ratio of four to one.

The focus on learning has been very helpful in ensuring that our audiences have gained by our programmes. There has been a need to evaluate programmes – particularly those funded by government – to assess the extent to which the agreed learning and other outcomes for the project have been achieved. There have been many positive and encouraging results published. I'd like to quote some of the key findings from just two of these evaluation reports.

Learning through culture is working was an evaluation of England's Department for Education and Skills funded Museums Education Programme 2002-4 conducted by the Centre of Education and Industry at the University of Warwick.

Key Stage One (ages 5-7)

- 95% enjoyed or very much enjoyed their activity
- 89% learnt a lot or something
- 92% were very pleased or satisfied with their work

Key Stages 2-4 (ages 7-16)

- 93% enjoyed or very much enjoyed their activity
- 82% learnt a lot or something
- 90% were very pleased or satisfied with their work
- 58% were very engaged or quite engaged in the activity

The second evaluation, *Inspiration, Identity, Learning: The Value of Museums* was an evaluation of a project funded by England's Department for Culture Media & Sport and Department for Children Schools and Families in 2006-7 conducted by the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries at the University of Leicester.

Powerful learning outcomes for pupils

- 99% of teachers think their pupils enjoyed the museum experience
- 97% of teachers think their pupils are likely to have been inspired to learn more
- 94% of teachers think their pupils will have gained subject-related facts

These results are very encouraging. They are of course based on what pupils and teachers told the researchers either verbally or in writing. I wonder how many of you, like me, have pondered on the word "think" in the above sentences. Do we really know?

Although these two reports are not completely comparable, it is interesting to note the differences between what the pupils and the teachers say about enjoyment and learning. For example, 82% of the pupils aged 7-16 said they learnt something whereas 94% of the teachers thought the pupils had learnt something. There are obviously many reasons why these differences exist.

So how accurate are the teachers in their assessments? Indeed, how accurate are our assessments as heritage educators?

This thought was brought into sharper focus at GEM's annual conference a week ago, when one keynote speaker (Prof Terry Haydn of the University of East Anglia) mentioned some research by Sadler. I'd like to show you one of the findings from Alan Lightman and Philip Sadler's paper *Teacher predictions versus actual student gains* published in *The Physics Teacher* in 1993.

In brief, a group of students were given a test at the beginning of their astronomy course and at the end. The idea was to find out how accurate the teachers were in assessing the students' knowledge at the beginning and predicting the actual gains after the taught session. I'm going to look at just one question:

Which of the following would make you weigh *half* as much as you do right now?

- a) Take away the earth's atmosphere.
- b) Double the distance between the earth and the sun.
- c) Decrease the earth's rate of spin so that one day equals 48 hours instead of 24 hours.
- d) More than one of the above.
- e) None of these.

Before the course started, teachers thought that 22% of pupils would know the correct answer. The actual figure was 29%.

Teachers predicted that after their teaching, the percentage of pupils getting the correct answer would be 66%. The actual figure was 18% - a big reduction!

Teachers were consistently very over optimistic in predicting student gains.

There are two questions we need to address:

- Are heritage educators also making incorrect predictions of gains in their students?
- How effective is the teaching by heritage educators?
- Evaluations tend to show us WHAT happened but HOW or WHY did it happen?

These are not questions I am going to consider now, but they are clearly ones that we as a profession do need to address. We clearly need **more research** into the effectiveness of the teaching which we do. Posing these questions does however help to inform the development of GEM's heritage education training.

Foundations of heritage education training

Currently, most training provision for heritage educators consists on one-day events usually skills-based or on topical issues. There is little joined-up thinking, and much duplication and re-invention of wheels in the delivery of these events by various providers including professional groups, campaign type organisations as well as commercial suppliers.

So what is GEM trying to achieve?

- An integrated approach to the training of heritage educators centred on sharing and networking.

- A suite of CPD opportunities for
 - those just entering the profession
 - those mid-way in their careers and
 - experienced heritage education specialists.
- CPD should be both continuous *professional* development as well as continuous *personal* development (CPD).
- A clear, structured and recognised path for heritage educators to follow.
- An agreed “curriculum” (i.e. what are the basics a heritage educator needs to know?)
- Career progression linked to GEM membership.
- Raise the quality of education provision across the heritage sector.
- The creation of recognised training and professional development standards in heritage education.

GEM’s suite of CPD opportunities is based on providing work-based and reflective activities which will include:

- *Foundation course in heritage education* (entry level)
- A series of courses (intermediate level) for those wishing to develop their professional skills
- In-depth programmes for experienced educators
- One-day training events
- Residential conferences
- Study weekends
- Personal CPD toolkits
- Mentoring
- Preparation of portfolios
- A CPD store on the GEM website

Some of these elements are already in place.

Each element of the suite will form a “module”, and GEM will award certificates to those who reach the required standards.

In 2011-12 GEM will be launching its new work-based foundation course which will be for those:

- in their first year or so of employment in an education position in the heritage sector;
- already working in a different part of the heritage sector but wishing to take up an education position;
- currently volunteering for a significant and continuing period of time.

It is worth noting that due to financial cuts and efficiency savings there is an increase in the number of those managing the provision of heritage education who are not education specialists. Also, GEM has noted an increase in the number of part-time workers, and an increase in the number of multi-skilled roles in the heritage sector in which an employee is responsible for two or more different areas of work. For example, of those attending the recent GEM conference who stated that their role contained an educational remit, only 54% worked full-time on education.

There will be no formal entry qualifications, and there is no expectation that participants will necessarily be graduates or have a teaching qualification. GEM believes that due to the many varied and diverse audiences with which heritage educators work, good heritage educators can come from a wide variety of backgrounds. For example, those using heritage learning to improve the health and well-being of older adults may come from a health or social care background rather than a school background.

Some features of the foundation course are:

- maximum of 20 students over about three months
- students will form a self-help group
- each student will have a mentor
- each student will maintain a work-based reflective journal throughout the course
- about three days of training
- students required to complete work-based assignments
- each student will receive an observation visit from their mentor at their work place to provide an opportunity to reflect on their practice
- a reading list will be provided

Each student will receive an introduction to the basic skills of heritage education and it is expected that this will be centred on the following themes:

- understanding your audiences
- understanding your colleagues
- evaluation and quality assurance

Each student will leave the course with a structure for their personal professional development – a CPD action plan.

Career progression linked to GEM membership

At the moment we have just one category of membership for individual members – personal membership – and we welcome everyone! However, many of our long-standing members would like to be recognised by GEM for their experiences and achievements in heritage

education. So we are seriously considering a range of personal membership options to include the following:

- “associates” – open to everyone interested in learning through museums and heritage
- “full members” – open to experienced heritage educators who can show to their peers that they have the required skills, experiences and relevant training and / or qualifications
- “fellows” – very experienced heritage educators, probably in a position of responsibility, who can show to their peers that they not only meet the requirements of full membership but can also show, for example, that they have made a significant contribution to good practice or the development of heritage education

Conclusion

This has been a rapid tour of what heritage education training means to GEM. I am sure that many of you are working in this area and have much to contribute and share. I should like to conclude by stating that GEM would be delighted to work with training partners across the world. Let's not invent or re-invent too many wheels.

And to avoid the re-invention of a closing paragraph, I shall re-use a paragraph from one of the GEM conference keynote speakers, Vanessa Trevelyan, head of Norfolk Museums & Archaeology Service and president of the UK's Museums Association:

“The stories that can be told through collections, the power of objects and the skills of interpretation have become valuable parts of the pedagogy with which we teach our children. It is not only the transmission of facts and information but the understanding that needs to go with it. Museums can also help develop emotions and attitudes and they have been shown to strengthen well-being, confidence and motivation. Museums can connect people and make them feel rooted, they can encourage tolerance and confidence, skills that are essential to a successful society.”

Thank you.

Dr John Stevenson

Director

GEM, 54 Balmoral Road, Gillingham, Kent, ME7 4PG, UK

Tel/Fax: +44 (0) 1634 853424 Mob: +44 (0) 7917 565 342

Email: john@gem.org.uk www.gem.org.uk