

Useful Friction in the Classroom: the Student Mindset

by Dottie Miles

Dottie Miles is the Exhibition Manager at Longwood Gardens and a Lecturer at The University of the Arts in Philadelphia where she received a MFA in Museum Exhibition Planning and Design. She may be contacted at dmiles@longwoodgardens.org.

As museum professionals, we shouldn't be surprised that seeking new ideas, retaining a sense of play, and challenging ourselves intellectually are invaluable to our professional development and the advancement of our field. When I was asked to write this article, I was encouraged to compare my graduate school experiences in Museum Exhibition Planning and Design at The University of the Arts to those working as a professional in museums. So I ask, what can we learn from the collaborative and creative approaches of museum studies programs that might elevate and enrich our practice as museum professionals? What can we utilize from the classroom to energize our field?

My graduate experience provided a forum for risk taking and exploration—a fertile playground for creativity and ideas. I had access to critical reviews and met a number of creative, skilled, and diverse collaborators. Our ideas were challenged, tested, and in turn we produced better projects. This is the kind of useful friction that I want to explore. I am not advocating conflict for its own sake. Rather I am saying that the give and take, the spirit of criticism and collaboration that is part of our student days, can have an important role to play in the field at large.

See the Value of Mid-Process Peer Review

Critiques were a staple in my art school experience. At the end of every week we would gather in the same room and pin up all of our ideas. In rough form, a wall would be full of concepts, sketches, look and feel imagery—you name it. Everyone had an equal voice and investment. We'd review several projects at

a time—it was inspiring to hear about other projects and listen to the challenges we all shared. This was vital in helping us all brainstorm and evaluate our work before it was final.

Peer review should be a fundamental part of how we work. I believe that we can create more opportunities for this type of review in our professional process. There are a handful of formal opportunities if budgeting and schedule provide, but these are often final reviews at the end of a project when it is too late to change. As professionals, when do we get to pin up our rough ideas for outsiders to review? How might we begin to incorporate more informal review into our process?

- Invite peers from other museums or from your own to your review to get a fresh perspective on the project. As graduate students our review sessions included groupings of students, working professionals, and professors. The diversity of these views can cause sparks to fly, but also can encourage interesting new discussions.
- Make sure that ideas filter up and down. Critical review should happen on all levels—from museum security to leadership. Those experiences where I've been able to exchange ideas informally with a variety of staff have been invaluable to my professional learning process.
- Walk around your museum on a busy day, or if you don't work in a museum, visit one where you are responsible for a project or program. Observe visitors at play—they offer great insight that we often overlook while buried in project details. Of course, visitor participation and/or

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feedback at any stage during a project is essential to its success.

Collaborate—Learn from One Another

A large percentage of my graduate work was spent in groups of individuals with diverse backgrounds. Projects depended upon the intellectual capital of the entire team—the group chemistry, interests and expertise. Professionally, exhibition teams vary depending upon one's institution and its size—some do not have design, evaluation or other resources available in-house. Not every professional has a team to challenge and collaborate with.

Therefore, it is important that our field encourage the exchange of ideas in a non-competitive way. Resources such as Exhibitfiles (www.exhibitfiles.org), NAME, and blogs or listservs like Museum 2.0 and Museum-L exist to connect one to individuals in the field and to promote the free exchange of ideas. What would happen if we all worked in the same classroom so to speak? Blogs and listservs are excellent examples of the breaking down of barriers, allowing for more collaboration in our field. Are there other ways to encourage this endeavor?

- Who else does your job? Reach out and meet others in your community who do what you do. Share ideas, informally and formally. Build a trust that might turn into a future project partnership.
- Take on an intern. It will enlighten your work and bring a fresh perspective to your team. Or, if you have the time, intern or volunteer at another museum. Think of it as “free” professional development with the opportunity to expand your professional contacts, providing

insight into another museum's planning and procedures. As students we were expected to build our resume and enrich our perspective through these types of experiences.

- Look to your local museum studies program for help. In graduate school, I participated in several charrettes for museum projects where our ideas turned into actual exhibitions. Many of these projects dedicated a day to a fast-paced workshop where several viable ideas were presented and prepared for our museum clients. It was creative, energized, and full of momentum. Brainstorming and collaboration on this level cannot happen too often.

You Should Take it Personally

Most students expend a great deal of time and resources selecting where they want to spend their future. A part of that is program research, resume building, and reaching out to individuals to seek advice. For me it also included a risky move across the country to a completely new city. In turn, I felt a strong connection to my education and how the work represented me professionally. It was personal.

Over the course of my career, I've had several conversations with professional peers about passion and personal attachment to the work we produced. Leadership may not be ideal, team members do not always share the same enthusiasm for projects, and resources may be limited. We can be overworked, underappreciated, or poorly compensated for our contributions. I was recently told that my job would be easier if I were not as passionate. Though this may be true, I believe the

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commitment to what we do challenges our work and makes it better—without it our exhibition projects suffer. Given these obstacles, how can we retain our passion?

- Don't stay somewhere that doesn't engage you or your talents. You are still paying for your professional education in a round about way even though you receive a paycheck. Students are expected to have a vision or aspirations, and to fully apply their talents toward that goal. They are also expected to plan—to mold their career.
- Contact individuals filling the positions that you aspire to have. It is an aggressive concept that a colleague recently challenged me to do, but students do this all of the time. Mentor relationships have helped to provide insight and steer my long-term goals as a professional. Over the years I've looked to these individuals for brainstorming and criticism. You cannot always rely upon the people you work with to push you in this way.
- Stay energized. I'll never forget a statement made by one of my most memorable professors in the middle of a painting demonstration. Mid brush stroke he stopped and confided, "to be successful in your work you must remain

a student. Read, seek out amusement, this will all feed you; it is the most important thing you can do to grow." As students we are expected to learn and advance ourselves intellectually—that is how one succeeds. I believe my professor was asking more, to retain the student mindset throughout our careers.

So—where is your fertile playground for creativity and ideas? Where is your forum for risk taking and exploration? How can we insert more of these ideals into our field to challenge what we do and make it better? All of these lessons have been invaluable to my career—leading me to seek out opportunities that provide useful creative exploration and growth as a museum professional.

To quote John Robinson from the Madison Children's Museum, we should be "learning alongside our visitors," from the success of our museum experiences, from evolving processes, and from one another. Seek out opportunities to expand the creativity and innovation in what we do. Museums are learning environments, and we should be cultivating a process that embraces the student mindset in our growth as professionals. 