



American Association of Museums
Standing Professional Committee on Education

EXCELLENCE

IN PRACTICE:

*Museum
Education
Principles
and
Standards*

*Developed by the
Committee on Education*

AMERICAN  ASSOCIATION OF MUSEUMS

 AAM100

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In 1990 when the Committee on Education (EdCom) first published its *Statement on Professional Standards for Museum Education* it was at the forefront of reexamining issues critical to museum education. The following decade would witness the transformation of the public dimension of museums. AAM's Museum Education Task Force published *Excellence and Equity* in 1992; AAM revised its accreditation criteria and Museum Assessment Program to evaluate individual institutions' interaction with their audiences; and the Institute of Museum and Library Services grant applications required museums to detail education services and the processes in place for assessing learning. Federal agencies and nonprofit foundations, including the Pew Charitable Trusts and the Lila-Wallace Reader's Digest Foundation, came forward with millions of dollars to support new efforts to make museum collections accessible.

Today most museums continue to struggle with the political realities of implementing the primary premise of *Excellence and Equity*: to combine “intellectual rigor with the inclusion of a broader spectrum of our diverse society.” With increased responsibility and scrutiny, the museum educator’s role has been shifted, revised, reformed, and stretched in unimaginable ways. As the Committee on Education releases its revised Principles and Standards, it does so a little older and a little wiser.

For two years a working draft has circulated to members of the museum community, through mailings to EdCom members, discussions at regional and national meetings, and finally at working roundtables during the 2001 Annual Meeting at St. Louis. The final product, *Excellence in Practice: Museum Education Principles and Standards* combines key concepts of the 1990 standards with current directions in best practice. The 2002 document is more descriptive of the complexity of engaging a diverse audience in vital and meaningful learning experiences. It stresses the importance of interdepartmental teamwork in the achievement of the museum’s education mission; the responsible use of new technologies; an emphasis on rigorous planning, implementation, and assessment; and the importance of public advocacy to the future stability and strength of museums.

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This document was developed to help guide and inform the practice of museum education. It is intended for use by museum educators, exhibit developers, curators, directors, board members, peer reviewers, and others who support informal education and teaching with objects, both inside and outside the museum field.

INTRODUCTION

Taken as a whole, museum collections and exhibition materials represent the world's natural and cultural common wealth. As stewards of that wealth, museums are compelled to advance an understanding of all natural forms and of the human experience. It is incumbent on museums to be resources for humankind and in all their activities to foster an informed appreciation of the rich and diverse world we have inherited.

Code of Ethics for Museums,
American Association of Museums, 2000

Museums are committed to sharing their remarkable resources for the advancement of knowledge and the nourishment of the human spirit. All museum trustees, employees, and volunteers should work together to ensure that:

- a museum’s mission articulates its commitment to present its educational resources with accuracy, clarity, and relevance to a wide variety of audiences;
- interpretive programs seek out multiple perspectives in the exchange of ideas and in the collection and presentation of objects;
- information gathering and assessment provide evidence of visitor learning and the museum’s impact;
- appropriate technologies are used to expand access to knowledge and self-directed learning;
- the museum working environment is respectful of different voices as institutional policies, programs, and products are shaped.

Museum educators are specialists who help museums fulfill their educational mission. They recognize that many factors affect the personal, voluntary learning that occurs in museums. They seek to promote the process of individual and group discovery and to document its effect. On museum teams, museum educators serve as audience advocates and work to provide meaningful and lasting learning experiences for a diverse public.

Since there is no single way to fulfill a museum’s educational mission, and museum education includes a broad range of responsibilities, the following principles of best practice for education in museums and professional standards for museum educators provide guidelines for all museum professionals who are concerned with the needs of museum visitors.

These principles and standards are organized into three functional areas related to museum education: accessibility, accountability and advocacy.

Principles of Best Practice for Education in Museums

ACCESSIBILITY

1. ENGAGE THE COMMUNITY AND SERVE THE MUSEUM'S AUDIENCES.

- Develop and maintain sound relationships with community organizations, schools, cultural institutions, universities, other museums, and the general public.
- Reflect the needs and complexities of a changing society.
- Shape content and interpretation toward relevant issues and create a broad dialogue.

2. ADDRESS AND EMPLOY A DIVERSITY OF PERSPECTIVES.

- Acknowledge that a variety of interpretive perspectives—cultural, scientific, historic, and aesthetic—can promote greater understanding and engagement.
- Provide multiple levels and points of entry into content, including intellectual, physical, cultural, individual, group, and intergenerational.
- Engage members of diverse communities to contribute their perspectives to museum collections and interpretation.
- Promote the elimination of physical, socio-economic, and cultural barriers to museums.

ACCOUNTABILITY

3. DEMONSTRATE EXCELLENCE IN CONTENT KNOWLEDGE.

- Master the content related to the museum's collections, exhibitions, and mission.
- Collaborate with scholars and specialists.
- Conduct research to advance and improve the museum profession.
- Provide professional development and training for new and established staff to share current education methods, new media, developments in scholarship related to learning theory and evaluation, and best practices in the field.

4. INCORPORATE LEARNING THEORY AND EDUCATIONAL RESEARCH INTO PRACTICE.

- Base methods and design of interpretation on museum and educational learning theories.
- Apply knowledge of cognitive development, educational theory, and teaching practices to the types of voluntary, personal, and lifelong learning that occur in museums.

5. EMPLOY A VARIETY OF APPROPRIATE EDUCATIONAL TOOLS TO PROMOTE LEARNING.

- Demonstrate a broad understanding of communication strategies and media.
- Use techniques and technology appropriate to educational goals, content, concepts, and audience.
- Involve education staff in the design and use of technology to advance learning.
- Evaluate the educational tools used by the institution.

ADVOCACY

6. PROMOTE EDUCATION AS CENTRAL TO THE MUSEUM'S MISSION.

- Ensure that education is clearly incorporated into the mission, goals, and financial strategy of the museum.
- Include educational considerations in interdepartmental discussions involving planning, development, and implementation from conception to completion.
- Integrate educational expertise into exhibition design and interpretation.
- Contribute museum education expertise to a broad array of institutional efforts to discover and address the needs of the community.
- Share responsibility for the economic health of the institution and demonstrate management skills related to fiscal and human resources.

7. SET GOALS AND MEASURABLE OBJECTIVES AND ADOPT STRATEGIES TO ACHIEVE AND DOCUMENT THEM.

- Develop interpretation with specific educational goals supported by integrating content and learning objectives for targeted audiences.
- Develop interpretation to serve the academic mandates of school, college, and university standards or mandated state education frameworks for schools.

- In an ongoing and ethical manner, collect data from and about visitors to measure learning and document the impact of the museum experience.
- Collect data from visitors and non-visitors to determine the best education services to meet their needs and interests.
- Incorporate evaluation findings into the planning and/or revision of interpretation.
- Distribute research results to the learner, the museum community, relevant academic institutions, funders, and the greater public to strengthen the field of museum education.

8. PROMOTE PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WITHIN THE MUSEUM COMMUNITY.

- Recognize and share the value of continuous learning with colleagues.
- Persistently seek opportunities to expand the knowledge of learning theory, education methods, evaluation, media, management, scholarship related to the museum's collections, and best practices in the field.
- Foster an institutional atmosphere that encourages professional development.
- Disseminate current ideas through publications and other appropriate media.

9. PROMOTE A SPIRIT OF INQUIRY AND OPENNESS TO NEW IDEAS AND APPROACHES.

- Recognize and share the joys of learning with all people.
- Promote the complementary nature of formal and informal learning at every stage of life.

10. INFLUENCE PUBLIC POLICY IN SUPPORT OF MUSEUM LEARNING.

- Work individually and with professional associations to influence public policy at the regional, state, and national levels.
- Demonstrate to public policy decision-makers the importance of museum learning in a pluralistic society.

Professional Standards for Museum Educators

ACCESSIBILITY

1. FOCUS ON AUDIENCES AND COMMUNITY.

Museum educators have knowledge of and respect for the audiences their museums serve. They promote museums' public service role within our changing society.

2. DIVERSITY OF PERSPECTIVES.

Museum educators use interpretive practices that acknowledge the variety of cultural, scientific, and aesthetic points of view that contribute to visitors' understanding. They create opportunities that enable informed viewpoints to receive judicious consideration.

ACCOUNTABILITY

3. EXCELLENCE IN CONTENT AND METHODOLOGY.

Museum educators have a solid grounding in the history, theory, and practice of the disciplines relevant to their institutions. They demonstrate knowledge of human development, educational theories, and teaching practices related to the personal and group learning that takes place in museums.

ADVOCACY

4. ADVOCACY FOR AUDIENCES.

Museum educators facilitate a spirit of teamwork and collaboration within the museum to promote the best interest of audiences.

5. ADVOCACY OF EDUCATION.

Museum educators promote education as central to advancing the mission and goals of the museum.

6. DEDICATION TO LEARNING.

Museum educators possess a love of learning and a commitment to nurture and develop an informed and humane citizenry.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

(adapted from the American Association of Museums National Interpretation Project)

Best Practices:

There is no single “best practice” because one “best” is not best for everyone. Every organization is different in some way—different missions, cultures, environments, and technologies. What is meant by “best” are those practices that have been shown to produce superior results; selected by a systematic process; and judged as exemplary, good, or successfully demonstrated. Best practices are then adapted to fit a particular organization.¹

Community:

A collection of constituencies or stakeholders: 1) audiences, 2) scholars, 3) other public interpreters, e.g., press, interpretive artists, 4) program providers—arts groups, etc., 5) repositories, including libraries, preservation agencies, museums.

Interpretation:

The media/activities through which a museum carries out its mission and educational role:

- Interpretation is a dynamic process of communication between the museum and the audience.
- Interpretation is the means by which the museum delivers its content.
- Interpretation media/activities include, but are not limited to: exhibits, tours, Web sites, classes, school programs, publications, and outreach.

Standards:

Mutually agreed upon statements that help to control an action or product. They help create consistency within a group of organizations. Standards represent professional consensus on best practice. Process by which standards are developed: Knowledgeable practitioners codify a reasonable body of practice based on a wide range of experiences.² Standards are indicative, not prescriptive, with the intent to foster excellence through the development of criteria for evaluating [interpretive] effectiveness.³

¹ American Productivity and Quality Center.

² Getty Information Institute; see www.getty.edu.

³ American Library Association; see www.ala.org

SELECTED RESOURCES

Characteristics of Exemplary Interpretation. National Interpretation Project: An Exploration of Standards and Best Practices for Interpretation. Technical Information Service, American Association of Museums, Washington DC, 2001.

Different Voices: A Social, Cultural, and Historical Framework for Change in the American Art Museum. Association of Art Museum Directors, New York, NY, 1992.

Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums. A Report from the American Association of Museums, Washington DC, 1992.

Insight, Museums, Visitors, Attitudes, Expectations: A Focus Group Report. Getty Center for Education in the Arts, The J. Paul Getty Trust, Los Angeles, CA, 1991.

Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning. Falk, J. H. and Dierking, L. D. American Association of State and Local History, Nashville, TN, 2000.

Museum Education History, Theory, and Practice. Berry, N. and Mayer, S. (eds.), The National Art Education Association, Reston, VA, 1989.

Museums: Places of Learning. Hein, G. and Alexander, M. Committee on Education, American Association of Museums, Washington DC, 1998.

The Museum Experience. Falk, J. H. and Dierking, L. D., Whalesback Books, Washington DC, 1992.

Patterns in Practice: Selections from the Journal of Museum Education. Museum Education Roundtable, Washington DC, 1992.

Presence of Mind: Museums and the Spirit of Learning. Pitman, B. (ed.), American Association of Museums, Washington DC, 1999.

In Principle, In Practice: Perspectives on a Decade of Museum Learning Research (1994-2004). Dierking, L. D., Ellenbogen, K. M., and Falk, J. H. (eds.), Science Education, Volume 88, Supplement One, Wiley Periodicals, Inc., Hoboken, NJ, 2004.

See www.edcom.org for additional resources.

AWARDS

Committee on Education Awards

Since 1983, EdCom has recognized outstanding contributions to museum education by individual practitioners, museums offering distinguished programs, and by individuals whose leadership at the national level has impacted the public dimension of the museum. Judging is based upon the *Excellence in Practice: Museum Education Principles and Standards*.

The Committee encourages nominations throughout the year. The application is available on the Web site (www.edcom.org) under the section “About EdCom.” The awards are presented to recipients at the American Association of Museums Annual Meeting.

Award for Excellence in Practice

Excellence in Practice recognizes an individual who demonstrates exemplary service to the public through the practice of education in a museum. The person’s contributions may be through teaching, program development, community organizing, writing, research and/or professional activities. Awardees meet, establish, and promote the highest professional standards.

Award for Excellence in Programming

Excellence in Programming recognizes exemplary creativity and innovation in museum educational programming. To be eligible, the program must have clearly articulated goals, be designed to achieve the goals with the intended audiences, have concrete evidence of success, and reflect institutional commitment.

Award for Excellence in Published Resources

The award for published resources recognizes outstanding resources developed for educators, families, children, and other audiences in print or multimedia formats. The published materials are reviewed by discipline specialists. The first awards in this category were presented in 2003.

John Cotton Dana Award for Leadership

This award recognizes an individual or organization working within or outside of the museum field who has impacted the public dimension of the museum at the national level. The AAM Education Committee established the award in 1991 in tribute to John Cotton Dana, Founder and Director of the Newark Museum.

Exhibition Competition

EdCom participates with the following AAM standing professional committees in the selection of the AAM Exhibition Awards: the Curators Committee, the Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation, and the National Association for Museum Exhibition. The competition recognizes outstanding achievement in exhibitions. Judging is based on the document *Standards for Museum Exhibitions and Indicators of Excellence* available on-line at the Exhibition Committees Web site www.n-a-m-e.org.

The Committee on Education (EdCom) advances the purposes of museums as places of lifelong learning, serves as an advocate for diverse audiences, and promotes professional standards and excellence in the practice of museum education.

Excellence in Practice: Museum Education Principles and Standards was developed by the EdCom Task Force on Professional Standards: Ann Fortescue, Jim Hakala (Task Force Chair), Karen Kelly, Seonaid McArthur (EdCom Chair), Susan Miner, Barbara Moore, Mary Ellen Munley, Viki Sand, Carol Stapp, Celena Turney, and Susy Watts including review and comment from EdCom members during the AAM annual meeting, spring 2001 and regional association annual meetings, fall 2001, and Standing Professional Committee Chairs and other museum professionals, summer 2001.

AAM

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