

Networked Museums In The Learning Age

By [David Anderson](#) - October 2000

David Anderson, Director of Learning and Visitor Services at the *Victoria and Albert Museum* in London, talks about how museums can contribute to the Learning Age by taking on a user-focussed approach. This article was first given as a presentation to the EVA Conference, Edinburgh, as part of the 'Open Access to Cultural Heritage Using Information Systems' Programme.

To link the word "museums" with "learning" is itself an act of optimism, when only half of UK museums appear to make any structured provision for learning, and the number who do so seriously and in a consistent and integrated way throughout the whole institution is really very small. One of the difficulties – philosophically and practically - is the sector's persistence in believing that its role is to provide information, to an information society, in an information age. The economy of developed societies today is about as dependent upon information as that of Switzerland is dependent upon cuckoo clocks. Successful societies in the current century rely upon the added value provided by learning and creativity, and upon clear understanding of the difference between (in ascending order) data, information, knowledge, learning and wisdom – each of which implies a different role for citizens/users. When we hear the words "information society" or "information age" when referring to culture, we should reach (metaphorically) for our revolvers.

We live now in a time of changing paradigms : from communicating to [that is, at] the public, to inviting their contribution; from a concept of excellence that is focussed on product [that is, the object] to excellence of process and experience as well as product; from giving prominence to "cool", intellectual spaces to mixing "hot" lived as well as "cool" spaces; from directing to enabling; from linearity to multiplicity; from concern with the profession to concern with the public; from what's wanted to what's needed; from site to network; from the conceived to the experienced; from public passivity to public creativity; from data and information to learning.

For museums, the change of paradigm can be summarised as a switch from the **object-focussed** institution to one that is **user-focussed**. In the object-focussed museum, knowledge and expertise is perceived to be "in here", and the audience "out there". In a user-focussed museum, the expertise of professional staff (such as curators) is only a small part of – and dependent upon – the wider expertise of the whole community; the audience therefore must be "in here" as well as "out there" if the institution is to develop successfully. And in a user-focussed museum, there is a need for expertise of many kinds – for example, about how people can learn, create, make meanings for themselves and enjoy, as well as about objects. The user-focussed approach really does represent a very different philosophy of knowledge, and its implications for museums are significant.

It is often said that the new digital technologies are, or could be, a force for democratic change in society. But it is not the technologies themselves, or information, that will do this, but the development of the skills and opportunities that people need if they are to participate in cultural life of communities, that will provide the democratic foundations for use of new media. Our society does not, and will not, need more information. What it does need is to learn to use digital cultural resources creatively, and to ensure that this opportunity is open to groups that the market alone cannot reach. It is here that the real responsibilities of any publicly-funded museum lie. This is a much more demanding - and intellectually challenging – task than simply churning out existing object data. It is also a function that museums – like flightless birds on remote islands, isolated from evolutionary change – are currently ill-equipped, as a result of their neglect of their educational responsibilities, to deliver.

For this is the learning age. Over 90% of adults say they believe they learn every day of their lives. They say they mainly learn through the cultural sector – the media broadcasting, libraries and museums – rather than formal educational institutions such as colleges. Most say they prefer to learn independently and self-directly, pursuing areas of their own interest, often socially, with like minded people, rather than formally in a

classroom where they are taught. And the great majority say they enjoy learning. So why does the museums sector have such difficulty in saying that its primary purpose is public learning? Where is the democratic accountability in this? It is what our users want and expect.

This is also the creative age, and museums should contribute to the development of the creative society in a variety of ways. We can be centres for public creativity, encouraging all of our visitors to experiment with being creative. Projects such as Going Graphic at the V&A [1] – where everyone visiting the museum over a two week period was encouraged to borrow a digital camera and use images they took in the galleries to design posters for the museum – demonstrate that when given the chance anyone can produce exhilarating creative ideas. Learning is our purpose and creativity – informal, social, pleasurable – is our medium.

The future, undoubtedly, is distributed. The BBC's new corporate strategy is based on the concept of the "learning journey" – that is, the reality that people will move from the screen to the internet to the college to the community centre to the local society to the library to the museum, and back. It is us in museums who often still work in relatively isolated "sectors", not the public. What we have to do is to help them join up the bits. It is not a new idea. Back in the 19th century museums, through the Government's Department of Science and Art, were an integral part of the education system. Now technology – as well as government policy – is joining again what neglect, and lack of vision and direction on the part of museums, had left separated. Local and regional cultural policies are forcing museums to see themselves as part of the bigger picture. Hybrid institutions – part museums, part library, part media centre, part arts centre – will become more common.

The age of the monodisciplinary institution – and the monodisciplinary specialist – is over. In future the key to success will be integration and ambiguity – within a local community for a local museum, at a UK and international level for major regional and national museums – that is, a presence, with partners, everywhere that people are. Networked systems, such as those the BBC is already developing – and secure identification - will mean that we will soon no longer need to carry out technology with us as we move. Provided we can prove who we are – now a relatively easy matter – we can become largely independent of individual bits of equipment. All users will need to carry is their identity, perhaps literally on the tips of their fingers, or in their eyes, in order to continue to use museum and other resources, wherever they happen to be. The museum will always be only one click away.

References

1. *Victoria and Albert Museum Web site*
URL : <http://www.vam.ac.uk/> EXTERNAL

Author Details

David Anderson

Director of Learning and Visitor Services
Victoria and Albert Museum
Cromwell Road
South Kensington
London
SW7 2RL

d.anderson@vam.ac.uk EXTERNAL

Phone: (44) 20 – 7942 2188

Fax: (44) 20 – 7942 2193

David Anderson is Director of Learning and Visitor Services at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London. Born in Belfast, Northern Ireland he studied Irish history at the University of Edinburgh before training as a teacher and teaching history in a state comprehensive school in Sussex. In 1979 was appointed Education Officer at the Royal Pavilion, Art Gallery and Museums, Brighton, then moved in 1985 the National Maritime Museum in Greenwich, where he developed interactive history exhibitions, Armada Discovery and Bounty Discovery, associated with major temporary exhibitions, and was author of two children's books.

Since 1990 when, as Head of Education, he moved to the Victoria and Albert Museum, the Education Department has expanded its services to include a wide range of adult and community programmes and schools services, and has been actively involved in

development of the new British Galleries, to open in November 2001.

David Anderson has written extensively on museology and museum education. He served on the Content Working Group for the Library and Information Report, Building the New Library Network, Library and Information Commission (1998) and is co-author of A Netful of Jewels : New Museums in the Learning Age Conference of National Museum Directors (1999) on development of the digital dimension of museums. He is also author of the national report for Government on museum education, A Common Wealth: Museums and Learning in the United Kingdom (Department of National Heritage, 1997) republished by DCMS in a second edition as A Common Wealth: Museums in the Learning Age (The Stationery Office, London, 1999). He was awarded an OBE for services to museums and education in 1999.

For citation purposes:

Anderson, D. "Networked Museums In The Learning Age", Cultivate Interactive, issue 2, 16 October 2000

URL: <<http://www.cultivate-int.org/issue2/networked/>>

Date of Article: 16 October 2000



[spacer](#) [Copyright](#) ©2000 - 2006 University of Bath | Published by [UKOLN](#) | Design by [JLRT](#) | [Contact Us](#)