



## Museums at School

Linda D'Acquisto

**When students design in-school museums, they enhance their knowledge and their creativity.**

Recently, I spoke with two well-informed, creative students who each eagerly shared with me exhibitions that they'd produced in school:

*At Milwaukee's Arts @ Large gallery, a teenage docent named Neosha guided me through March to Equality, an exhibit on civil rights in Milwaukee created by students from NOVA High School. In a part of the exhibit called "Segregated Milwaukee," Neosha explained unfair housing practices common in the 1960s and showed me a copy of a restrictive covenant from that period. An enlarged map outlined the city's "core"—an area in which black residents had to live before fair housing legislation was enacted. Neosha read aloud a poem she'd written about a black family who was denied housing in this core area and then led me to a display about protest marches. She joined her peers who were assembling for the hourly performance in which students reenacted key moments in Milwaukee's civil rights struggle.*

At the Bethesda Elementary School opening of the exhibition *Forever Strong*, developed by kindergartners, I visited exhibits on the importance of exercise, healthy eating, and hygiene. A gallery of self-portraits depicted students engaged in their favorite physical activities, and a family-in-motion photo display included images of students and their families biking, swimming, playing soccer, skiing, and so on. Student docents spoke with me at an interactive "My Plate" exhibit that challenged visitors to assemble a healthy breakfast, lunch, and dinner based on the USDA recommendations; at a toy and game area of activities that encourage stretching, strength-building, or aerobic exercise; at a flossing exhibit utilizing an egg-carton converted to an oversized set of teeth; and many more such exhibits.

### Bethesda Elementary School's Forever Strong Health Exhibition



Photo courtesy of Linda D'Acquisto

Five-year-old Mason spoke to me as I approached his exhibit. He asked whether I knew why water is a better beverage choice

than fruit juice. Mason pointed to a bottle of each and held up a jar of sugar, roughly equivalent to that contained in the fruit juice. He explained the health problems that might result from consuming so much sugar—and encouraged me to read the text panels behind his exhibit.

Both Neosha and Mason gained important knowledge through creating a museum exhibition. On the surface, their two projects are very different—one urban, the other suburban; one involving high schoolers, the other created by kindergartners; one produced by a single class, the other an entire grade-level project. But both the kindergartners and the older teens engaged in a months-long integrated classroom project in which they conducted research, designed exhibits, wrote labels, and became docents for their completed exhibition.

## Becoming Creative Experts

As a consultant with many years of experience guiding student-created museum projects, I've seen that such projects can work in any school, with students of all ages. Students can successfully address many topics of importance to a school and community, anything from an intriguing facet of local history to alternative energy sources. Such projects provide opportunities for students to construct and showcase their knowledge as they call forth creativity.

Students from Northwest Opportunities Vocational Academy (NOVA), an alternative Milwaukee high school, created the *March to Equality* exhibition with guidance from teacher Kelly Di Giacinto and in collaboration with Arts @ Large, a nonprofit arts education organization. Arts @ Large assisted in assembling community collaborators for the project, offered a public venue for student work, and supported the semiprofessional production of exhibits.

Through their research, students became content experts about the Milwaukee civil rights movement. In addition to reading about the movement, they analyzed primary source materials and interviewed activists. They synthesized their findings, created an exhibition plan, and designed displays to tell different aspects of the story: the impact of fair housing marches, the role of youth activists, and the contributions of movement leaders.

**Students made this display about civil rights in Milwaukee for the *March to Equality* exhibition.**



Photo courtesy of Linda D'Acquisto

Students were inspired by the courage and persistence of the activists they met—and were challenged to use their own lives to make a difference. In one display, students presented their personal promises to improve the community, such as, "I promise to go to college so I can be an example of a well-educated African American woman" or "I promise to become a tutor and mentor for the younger generation in Milwaukee." They challenged visitors to do the same. One student, Alex, noted:

*I learned that it takes more than one person to make something happen in the world. Through the hard work and dedication of hundreds of people, the Milwaukee civil rights movement changed something that no one ever thought could be changed.*

Mason and his peers at Bethesda Elementary School in Waukesha, Wisconsin, were part of a schoolwide initiative in which each

grade level created a museum exhibition. Each project focused on an important curricular topic for that grade level, such as forces and motion, world cultures, and important Wisconsinites. Principal Randy Kunkel led the initiative, each teacher led a museum project in his or her classroom, and every student was a "kid curator" for one school museum. Museum openings occurred throughout the year.

Although the research process varied for students of different grade levels, all students asked questions and found answers by exploring artifacts, consulting knowledgeable people, and reading nonfiction material and related literature.

## Key Features of School Museums

The NOVA and Bethesda school projects included three features typical of school museums.

### 1. School museums combine academic and creative learning.

Academic and creative learning can coexist in classroom work; when they do, students learn more. As educators, we've seen this. We recall the student who wrote and delivered a speech, published a book, or designed an invention. Those students conveyed important messages knowledgeably and aesthetically—and they had to know their content!

In the best school museum projects, academic rigor and innovative thinking are integrated into one robust learning process. Teachers frame the project around a "big idea," a statement that describes the central message of the exhibition. The big idea for the *March to Equality* exhibition was, "Activists take a stand for social justice and make a difference." Focus questions further defined this idea and asked students to explore fair housing issues, leaders in the movement, protest strategies, outcomes, and continued struggles. Together, the big idea and focus questions make up the project plan, which guides student research.

Bethesda teachers developed project plans that not only reflected standards, but also incorporated student questions. For example, 5th grade teachers presented students with this big idea: "Light, sound, and color affect how people experience the world." Teachers asked students what they knew and what they wondered about light, sound, and color. Their questions shaped the project plan for the science museum the 5th graders built. For example, exhibits in the sound gallery were about sound waves, the ear, sound reflection and absorption, electronic sound, and more.

Student teams investigated particular areas of interest and created displays. As exhibit designers, they considered questions like these: What is our exhibit's key message? How will we show what we know visually? What interactive components might we include? What should we write in our short text panels?

Thinking like an exhibit designer is challenging. Translating academic content knowledge into engaging displays raises the bar for student learning; students must learn research, writing, design, teamwork, and oral communication skills. This process results in displays unlike the typical school bulletin board, science fair poster, or even art show creation.

Developing an assessment plan that includes important student learning targets increases a project's rigor. As Bethesda's 2nd graders created a museum on cultural traditions in four countries, teachers used formative and summative assessments to chart student progress. They assessed learners on standards in reading, information technology, writing, oral language, social studies, art, and music. When appropriate, district learning targets were translated to "I can" statements (such as "I can revise my label copy so that it matches my storyline and informs visitors in a creative and interesting way") and infused into rubrics related to the project.

### 2. School museums connect students with the community.

Just as museum curators select relevant artifacts to display, student curators organize the information they acquire into compelling storylines that convey simple but important points. They must do so selectively, with a clear purpose, to reach their audience. This meaning-making experience is done in and with the community.

In school museum projects, students often need information beyond what exists in school libraries and textbooks. Individuals, local museums, cultural institutions, and community organizations have much to contribute. The *March to Equality* project tapped community expertise in many ways. A team of local collaborators—artists, activists, and university professors—examined the project plan, assisted with research, reviewed text panels for accuracy, helped students create their displays, and worked directly with students when appropriate.

Students met with an archivist at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee library, who taught them how to use library resources and analyze primary source materials from the university's digital archive on civil rights in Milwaukee. These rich resources introduced students to political leaders and activists central to the civil rights movement, and students actually interviewed several of them.

Following the well-attended public opening of *March to Equality*, students led exhibit tours for individuals and groups, including a class of university students, a group of social studies teachers, and members of a local history association. Their work became a resource to the community.

The support of Arts @ Large enhanced the NOVA project, but even without such a partnership, teachers and students in school museum efforts often collaborate with the community. Bethesda's 2nd graders, for instance, invited families from their community to participate in the research phase of their *World Cultures* museum project. Several families from India and Mexico contributed their knowledge and loaned artifacts, and a cartographer helped students create maps of the featured countries. Teachers and students even reached across the globe to request exhibit artifacts from their sister school in Kenya.

Every museum project includes at least one visit to a professional museum to study exhibit design. This experience is an eye-opener for many students and teachers. Although they may have visited museums before, most students haven't studied exhibits to learn the elements of good design. A museum visit also illuminates the many ways in which museums serve the community.

Sometimes teachers arrange for students to meet curators or educators while at the museum. For example, Bethesda students worked with museum educators at the Waukesha County Museum to conduct research, study displays, and examine artifacts. The students borrowed several artifacts from the museum, which they situated within the life-sized murals of historical scenes that they had created for their exhibit. NOVA students visited the Jewish Museum in Milwaukee and met museum educators, who not only modeled good docenting skills, but also pointed out design elements in their exhibits. When these museum professionals learned about the *March to Equality* project, they offered an artifact on loan—a medical bag from a local Jewish doctor who had provided care for injured marchers.

Museum projects lead to changes in how students and teachers "do school"—experiences that can transform teaching and learning. Consider this insight from Kelly Di Giacinto, who led the *March to Equality* project:

*I am not just a teacher anymore; I'm a community builder now. I work much more on being that bridge to bringing other people into the classroom and into my school. ... I have a large list of (community) people who were so touched by this experience ... that they're more than willing to come into the classroom.*

Designing and building school museums also provide rich opportunities for students to access the larger network of learning resources that goes far beyond school-based resources. Today's successful learners access a vast learning infrastructure—including museums, libraries, cultural organizations, the workplace, the Internet, and people with whom they interact—to meet their learning needs anytime and anywhere.<sup>1</sup>

The Knowledge Works Foundation<sup>2</sup> describes what it calls a "new world of learning" in which learners collaborate and cocreate with experts, make an impact on their community through immersive and authentic experiences, and engage in continuous learning. The Knowledge Works Foundation suggests ways of thinking and acting that educators will need to adopt in the future—for example, "amplify their ability to serve 'the whole student' by creating connections with their immediate communities and with experts and resources around the world." To equip students to fully participate in this new world, we need to put in place innovations that reshape the learning experiences students engage in in school.

School museum projects could be a micro-redesign of school-based learning spaces and experiences that takes our students closer to this new kind of learning. Such projects provide an organizing framework through which teachers can experiment with personalized, student-centered, curriculum-based strategies.

### 3. Museums take students through a complete learning cycle.

In most real-world contexts, accomplishment is characterized by putting knowledge to use, not just by acquiring it. Real-world achievement also involves thinking imaginatively, in a way that leads to innovation; communicating an important message persuasively; and working skillfully in a team. It's useful to adopt this broad view of achievement in the classroom, especially if we want our students to succeed in the knowledge-saturated, technology-enhanced, global environment in which they will soon find themselves. School museum projects engage students in a complete learning cycle. In this cycle, students not only acquire new information and understandings, but also synthesize and analyze that knowledge and use it to design a compelling product that they share with others.

The process of making a school museum integrates academics, 21st century skills, and the arts. Such projects propel students to meet high standards and to persist at their schoolwork. When students are charged with creating a beautiful product that tells a simple, important story, they face a creative challenge. And they love it, as James's words show:

*The best part of this experience is that I learned this information firsthand through meeting people who lived through the Milwaukee civil rights movement. I love that I got to take that knowledge, along with my own ideas, and make a gallery exhibit that tons of people will see and learn from.*

*Author's note:* For more information about the school museum process, see my book *Learning on Display: Student-Created Museums that Build Understanding*, (ASCD, 2006). Visit Kid Curators [www.kidcurators.com](http://www.kidcurators.com) to see videos about these and other school museum projects and Arts @ Large [www.artsatlargeinc.org](http://www.artsatlargeinc.org) to learn more about their work.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Falk, J. (2011). *Learning science outside the classroom* [Edweek webinar]. Retrieved from [www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWaTh4ecoFw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SWaTh4ecoFw)

<sup>2</sup> Knowledge Works Foundation. (2011). *2020 Forecast: Creating a world of learning*. Retrieved from author at <http://futureofed.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/2020-Forecast-Update.pdf>

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