Students as Knowledge Curators: An Apt Metaphor for Today's Learner
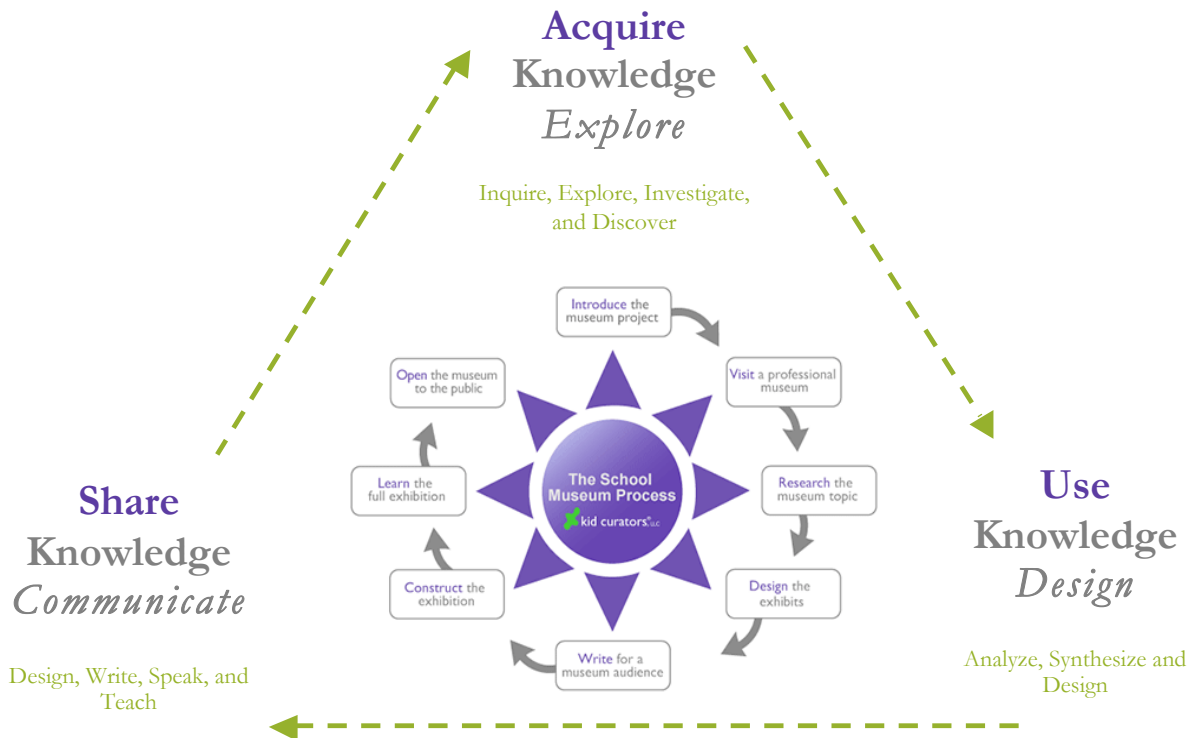
Linda D'Acquisto

To thrive in today's complex, global, technology-rich world, acquisition of knowledge is not enough. Students must also be proficient using and communicating knowledge creatively. To do so students' need to know how to ask and investigate questions, find and manage information, analyze and synthesize ideas, create valuable products, solve problems, collaborate, and communicate effectively in writing, orally, and visually. In our 21st century world, effective learners are not just consumers of information but also constructors and even *curators* of information and knowledge.

Kid as curators is an apt learning metaphor in today's information age. Curators and exhibit designers make deliberate decisions about what to display to the visiting public, how to display it and for what purpose. They first determine what they want to say—the simple but important story—and then use artifacts, text panels, and other interactives to tell that story. Similarly, today's students must navigate a vast amount of information to reach their purposes. Just as a museum curator selects artifacts for display from among their collections, "student curators" organize information into a compelling storylines that convey simple, but important points. They must do so selectively and with clear purpose in order to reach their audience.

kid curators® LLC
kid-created exhibits that teach

Acquire
Knowledge
Explore

Inquire, Explore, Investigate,
and Discover

Share
Knowledge
Communicate

Design, Write, Speak, and
Teach

Use
Knowledge
Design

Analyze, Synthesize and
Design

Introduce the museum project

Visit a professional museum

Research the museum topic

Design the exhibits

Write for a museum audience

Construct the exhibition

Learn the full exhibition

Open the museum to the public

The School Museum Process
kid curators® LLC

Curating as Purposeful Work

The Kid Curators® model (above) operationalizes the metaphor of kids as curators. In this process, students learn with a clear purpose in mind—to create an original school museum that will be of interest to a visiting audience. In school museum projects, content is reframed as an information "design" problem where students create an exhibition about the curricular topic they are studying. First, students conduct research using primary source materials, books, people, places, organizations, and the Internet as sources of information. Students search the vast array of accessible information to locate, analyze, and synthesize what is relevant to their focus question--they find the story worth telling. Next, they design displays to show what they've learned, translating their storyline into a visual exhibit. Finally, students host an opening event where, as museum "professionals", they interact with visitors.

The school museum process offers a complete learning cycle where students *acquire, use,* and *communicate* disciplinary knowledge.

Creating A Valued Product for a Real Audience

Student-created school museums are not culminating events for student learning; instead they present an *organizing framework* for classroom curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Rather than have students study a topic and then create a display depicting what they've learned, students *approach* their study knowing they are to create an intriguing museum that will educate and perhaps even provoke their visitors. This purpose heightens student interest in the topic and encourages them to explore questions at a deeper level.

Shorewood High Spanish Film and Current Events students in Shorewood, WI, created a school museum exhibition about the book and film, The Motorcycle Diaries. Students read the diary of a young Ernesto Che Guevara, which described his 1951 motorcycle trip through South America with friend, Alberto Granado.

After reading the book and viewing the film, students saw Che as a passionate young man concerned with the injustice that he witnessed in his travels. When teacher, Mary Pat Clasen, invited students to create a bi-lingual exhibition about The Motorcycle Diaries, they were excited. The overarching message of the story—the transformative power of travel—became the theme of their exhibition. As small teams of students engaged in research they learned of Che's work as a revolutionary, a topic not addressed in the book or movie. Quickly students learned that this controversial man was, and still is, admired by some and denounced by others. Students wondered how the actions of one person could be interpreted so differently.

Students critically examined the life of Guevara, and told his story in two "galleries"—one section focused on the motorcycle trip of young Che, and the other on Che the revolutionary. Students created a visual device—a river, which was a symbol in the book and film—to separate the two segments of the museum. Their exhibition was put on display at Shorewood High School before traveling to the Walker Point Center for the Arts, in Milwaukee, WI, where student docents interpreted their exhibition for an audience of Spanish-speaking peers from a neighboring high school.

Tiffany Gurholt, a teacher at Kewaskum High School in Kewaskum, WI, facilitated a school museum project with her English students. She used the project to reframe her Shakespeare unit, providing students with an opportunity to learn about Elizabethan England and enrich their understanding of Shakespeare's plays. The student-created museum about Elizabethan England included exhibits about different aspects of culture such as: social classes interactions; the use of clothing as a sign of status; sports and games typical of the era; the ways in which society dealt with criminals; the impact of the Black Death; and the life of William Shakespeare.

Visit kidcurators.com to see a video about the Shakespeare Museum.

Like any well-designed project, the school museum provides a **complete learning experience**. Although the following learning activities are distinct from one another, they are also interrelated; it is the relationship among the activities that makes a school museum project so compelling.

Students:

- Help define what they will learn.

- Acquire new knowledge by summarizing, analyzing, and synthesizing information from various sources to answer questions.

- Learn skills such as research, writing, and design to acquire and represent their knowledge.

- Collaborate with their peers, teachers, and community as they learn.

- Use their knowledge to create a product--a visual and written representation of what they have learned.

- Communicate what they have learned to an audience other than their classroom teacher.

Source: D'Acquisto, L. (2006), Learning on Display: Student Created Museums that Build Understanding,ASCD, Alexandria, VA. (Page 6)

Exhibits in the Kewaskum High School Shakespeare Museum.

The school museum process puts the acquisition of new knowledge into a meaningful context for students. They become content experts that made decisions about how to organize and creatively display their new knowledge using visuals, interactive devices, and text.

For example, in the Kewaskum project the Black Death exhibit team wanted visitors to understand the prevalence of The Plague during that time. In addition to listing these statistics, students created an interactive display where visitors selected one card from among those in a deck of cards. In proportions that reflected the likelihood of contracting the plague, some cards had a black dot on them and some did not. Visitors that selected cards with the black dots represented people who contracted the Black Death. This dramatic interactive device enhanced visitor understanding of the exhibit's message.

Kewaskum High School student opening a flip panel interactive at the Shakespeare Museum.

Kids as curators is a metaphor that describes the **active** role of today's learner.

Student curators:
- acquire information,
- organize it to tell a story, and
- communicate their new knowledge visually, in print, and verbally.

This **meaning-making** experience is accomplished through project work that is characterized by:

- purpose,
- action,
- and the creation of a valuable product.

An Effective Learning Environment

In both the Kewaskum and Shorewood examples, students learned academic content through project work that was characterized by *purpose, action, and product.* Well-designed instruction unfolded in an effective learning environment where students *made meaning* of new information, *connected* it to what they already knew, *organized* it to expand their current understanding, and did all of this in a *social* context heavy with collaboration. This is the kind of learning environment typical in school museum projects.

In How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School (National Academy Press, 1999), researchers describe an effective learning environment where "learner-centered", "knowledge-centered", "assessment-centered" and "community centered" practices intersect. This combination of features makes for a dynamic learning environment and one where students are more likely to practice contemporary skills and aptitudes. School museum projects provide a learning environment where learner-, knowledge-, assessment-, and community-centered practices naturally merge.

Learner-centered environments recognize that students construct their own meaning as they learn, based in part, on their beliefs, understandings and cultural practices. For this reason it is important that teachers, "get a sense of what students know and can do as well as their interests and passions—what each student knows, cares about, is able to do, and wants to do". (National Academy Press, 1999, Page 124) Paying attention to students' prior knowledge, interests, abilities and passions is important throughout the school museum project, but it is especially critical early on, when learner information can shape the design of the project.

Before the school museum project begins teachers ask students what they know and wonder about the museum topic. This activity not only piques student interest in the topic, it provides teachers with important information about students' prior knowledge, unique perspectives, and emerging questions. This information is integrated into the selection of focus questions or specific learning activities. Student teams study one focus question in depth in order to create a unique exhibit for the museum. Together, the completed exhibits tell the larger story of the full exhibition.

While learner-centered environments encourage students to develop their passions and interests, knowledge-centered environments help students make sense of their discoveries and of the academic content that they are learning. Both are important. In The Courage to Teach (Palmer, 1998), Parker Palmer describes the false dichotomy between choosing a teacher-centered or student-centered classroom. In an effort to promote active learning, a heavily student-centered environment may rely too much on the students themselves as "the reservoir of knowledge to be tapped". On the other hand, in an effort to uphold academic rigor, in a heavily teacher-centered environment the instructor "delivers conclusions to students".

With obvious shortcomings to an overemphasis on either approach, Palmer instead suggests a subject-centered classroom—an environment where the prior knowledge, interests, abilities, and passions of students are considered so that students understand important content at the heart of the discipline. In the Kewaskum project, student exploration of high-interest questions about Elizabethan England enhanced their understanding of the culture and times of Shakespeare's work.

A subject-centered classroom is not one in which students are ignored. Such a classroom honors one of the most vital needs our students have: to be introduced to a world larger than their own experience and egos, a world that expands their personal boundaries and enlarges their sense of community. (Palmer, Page 120)

Knowledge-centered classrooms are characterized by an emphasis on sense-making—that is, "helping students become meta-cognitive by expecting new information to make sense and asking for clarification when it doesn't" (National Academy Press, 1999.) Students learn a lot when they pursue their interests and passions and actively make sense of new information.

In assessment-centered environments student learning is monitored and supported. Throughout the school museum project, teachers and students make use of summative assessments (that measure what the student *has* learned) and formative assessments (that measure what the student *is* learning, in time to use the results to improve.). These effective assessment practices do more than measure student learning—they provide useful feedback to students and teachers and promote continued improvement.

In the Kewaskum museum project, students periodically examined one another's exhibits as they were being developed for the purpose of providing useful feedback to the exhibit team. In these peer evaluation sessions, students edited exhibit text and gave feedback to one another as if they were museum visitors. Rubrics for label copy and exhibit design helped students provide specific suggestions for improvement. This exercise gave students an opportunity to improve work in progress. This, and other authentic, formative assessment practices teach students crucial skills such as appropriately dealing with constructive criticism and incorporating useful feedback into their emerging work. These skills are useful in many contexts, and are especially important when working in a community-centered environment.

In a community-centered environment, people learn from each other and are continually improving (National Academy Press, 1999, page 132). This is true throughout the school museum process, making collaboration and communication very important skills. In many instances students develop these skills throughout the project, which is a great challenge and a great reward for teachers facilitating school museum projects.

> This (project) helped me, well, all of us...develop creative thinking by making us get out of our comfort zone, and (think about) how are we going to make people want to come to our exhibit.
>
> - Kewaskum High School Student

Communication skills are crucial throughout the exhibit development process. Students brainstorm ideas, incorporate the best ideas into a single plan, and implement that plan. Along the way, students inevitably adjust, revise and adapt their plans, as ideas "on paper" rarely translate to what students' imagined. Flexibilty and adaptability are crucial skills, as the following school museum student discovered.

> "I had to teach myself more flexibility because when we've had to change plans for our exhibits its been sort of tough for me...A nice surprise for me is how much work I am actually able to get done without just giving up."

In order to be successful, students must learn how to communicate their ideas and listen to one another. In the Kewaskum project, Ms. Gurholt found that different points of view among team members provided an opportunity for students to improve their communication skills:

> "As a teacher, you have to be a facilitator...Kids have disagreed with one another about their exhibit—how to do or make something. I tell them that they have to state their case to one another and explain. With this (new) information they tend to work it out together, by learning how to communicate."

Students need one another throughout this process if they are to create an engaging exhibition. Because each team's display contributes to the full storyline of the exhibition, students take an interest in one another's work. This promotes a sense of community within and among exhibit teams.

When the work of "kid curators" unfolds in an effective learner-, assessment-, knowledge-, and community-centered learning environment, class work is meaningful and students are motivated to learn. In this context it is not only possible to merge the teaching of academic standards with the practice of contemporary skills, doing so is a practical and meaningful way for students to develop both.

But there is another important benefit to putting kid curators' learning on display--the community gains a window into the amazing potential of students when they are inspired and challenged to learn.

For more information about the school museum process, including assessment strategies, rubrics, instructional ideas, and project examples, see D'Acquisto, L. (2006) <u>Learning on Display: Student-Created Museums that Build Understanding,</u> ASCD, Alexandria, VA.
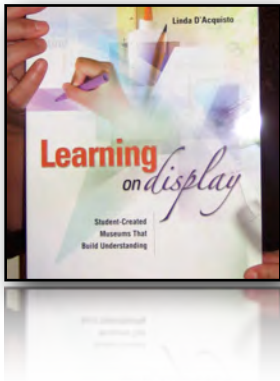
An ASCD study guide is available for this book.

For video examples of school museum projects, a downloadable overview of the planning and instructional processes, and other useful information visit www.kidcurators.com.

References

- Bransford, et al. editors, (2000), <u>How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School,</u> National Academy of Sciences, National Academy Press, Washington, D.C.
- D'Acquisto, Linda, (2006) <u>Learning on Display: Student-Created Museums that Build Understanding,</u> ASCD, Alexandria, VA.
- Palmer, Parker J., (1998), <u>The Courage to Teach: Exploring The Inner Landscape of A Teacher's Life,</u> Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, CA.
- Daniel Pink, (2005), <u>A Whole New Mind: Moving From the Information Age to the Conceptual Age,</u> Riverhead Books Penguin Publishers, New York, New York.