

Community Participation and Museums

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Museums have evolved their outreach to audiences through a growing range of community engagement programs that allow for visitor participation. Anne Kershaw takes us through some of the goals and benefits of participation programs in museums.

The value of museums is commonly understood in terms of collections, research, preservation, exhibitions and education programs. However the last decade has seen increasing interest in the social value of museums. Museums provide social impact through their programs and services as well as opportunities for community participation.

Benefits of museum programs and services

The programs and services that museums provide to visitors and their publics result in social benefits. The social impact of museums may take many forms. For example, research conducted by the Victorian State Government in 2006 found that the arts and culture strengthen local communities by:

- engaging the 'hard-to-reach', such as young people and disadvantaged communities;
- providing a creative focus to explore local issues and aspirations;
- creating new and diverse cultural experiences;
- developing confidence, pride and a sense of belonging in participants; and
- providing participants with new skills and work opportunities.

A common criticism of a focus on the social impact of museums is the emphasis it places on the instrumental use of culture. 'Instrumental' refers to the use of culture to achieve some other outcome, such as social connections between people or engaging young people in learning. However the state government research referred to above identified that the intrinsic value of



museums (use of culture in and of itself) also has social value. For example the identification and celebration of an area's distinctive character and local stories plays a role in community strengthening.

Unfortunately the benefits offered by museums aren't readily available to everyone. Museum audiences are generally white, middle class, well educated, financially secure and female. New and more diverse museum audiences face a number of barriers (both physical and perceptual) in accessing museum programs and services. Physical access, attitudes of staff, ability to interpret and comprehend displays, familiarity with museum behaviour and etiquette, language and cultural barriers are but a few of the obstacles faced by first time or infrequent museum attenders. When museums do attract or engage new audiences, issues of respect and duty of care are critical to building an ongoing relationship with these visitors.

Community participation in museums

As well as providing exhibitions and public programs for visitors, museums offer opportunities for community participation. The importance of working with communities is highlighted in the *ICOM Code of Ethics for Museums*, which mandates community participation in museums by requiring 'museums work in close collaboration with the communities from which their collections originate as well as those they serve'.

Community participation in museums can take many forms. The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) spectrum of community participation provides a useful guide to this work.

Below: The Women's Weaving Program at Shepparton Art Museum, (l-r): Skye Crowe, Eva Ponting and Aunty Cynthia Harding. The plants needed for this program are grown in a purpose built garden at the Shepparton Australian Botanic Gardens. Find out more about the garden project at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u859bVrtu28>
Photo by Amina Barolli, Shepparton Art Museum.

For information about upcoming exhibitions and programs at SAM visit: www.sheppartonartmuseum.com.au

Within this spectrum community participation ranges from 'inform' through to 'empower'.

Form of community participation:

Inform: To provide the public with balanced and objective information

Consult: To obtain community feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions

Involve: To work directly with communities throughout the process to ensure their aspirations and concerns are understood and considered

Collaborate: To partner with communities in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and identifying the preferred approach

Empower: To place final decision making in the hands of the community

The Town Hall Gallery (see page 6) is a great example of a museum ensuring community participation in terms of 'inform' during the development of its new facility. Volunteer run museums, such as the Jewish Holocaust Centre (see opposite) which are managed by communities exemplify the concept of 'empower'.

Community participation also offers challenges to museums. Working with communities requires specific resources and skills within a museum. The mission of a museum, its business plan and leadership team need to be committed to this type of work, understand its complexity and ensure it is properly resourced and supported. Community participation requires organisations to have excellent relationship building skills. Particularly higher order forms of participation—such as collaboration and empowerment—require a museum to build respect and trust within a community.

Anne Kershaw, is a lecturer in Arts and Entertainment Management at Deakin University and has fifteen years experience in the design and management of community creative processes.

For those interested in community engagement and participation, Deakin University's Managing Arts in Community Settings course, developed by Anne, trains arts and cultural managers in the design of projects and initiatives that engage diverse audiences and deliver social value.
<http://www.deakin.edu.au/buslaw/courses/pdfs/arts-man-community.pdf>