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Issue #77 / Australia \$16.50 / New Zealand \$17.50 / Singapore \$12.95 / U.S. \$21.99

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The 'Knowledge Economy' Issue.

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Fiona Young believes that museums and galleries offer an exciting proposition for future education models. As centres for life-long learning they will help students make sense of complex issues and engage with real world problems.

The Power Of Objects

Words *Fiona Young*

Globalisation and the ubiquity of new technologies have been key drivers behind the knowledge economy – where skills required for success are those that equip learners to think critically, collaborate, communicate and create. These so-called 21st century skills are less about the traditional tenets of industrial models of education, what we know, and more about how we learn. A search of the term ‘learning’ on Ngram viewer (an application using data from Google books to plot the frequency of words used over time) shows an exponential increase in occurrence in its use from the 1980s onwards. At the same time usage of ‘education’ has been trending down.

Coincidentally, the release of the 1984 USA report *Museums for a New Century* advocated that education be considered a primary purpose of museums and it was at this time the role of the museum educator was established. This was a shift from museums as institutions that primarily focused on collection, storage and display of artefacts stemming from their origins as ‘cabinets of curiosities’, or *Wunderkammers*, housing the private collections of the elite.

The shift in emphasis on learning within museums and exhibitions has been evident in my career as an exhibition designer over the past two decades. Exhibition design briefs from the early 2000s contained little if any reference to learning, however in more recent years learning has been a key aspiration for the visitor experience both through exhibitions, and in the increase in the number of dedicated learning spaces being developed by cultural institutions.

The shift from education defined as the process of receiving or giving systematic instruction at a school or university, to more student-centred approaches to learning has influenced the design of alternate school models beyond the traditional classroom. These new learning environments are characterised by larger and more connected spaces with a greater variety of zones ranging in scale and character from large to small groups, and individual settings. Spatial features allow them to be used in multiple ways, with mobile furniture enabling teachers and students to change spaces to suit differing learning needs. The increased size, greater diversity and visibility throughout learning spaces give opportunities for educators to ‘team teach’ multiple class groupings both within and across disciplines. These types of spaces enable both teacher led-instruction and more collaborative modes of learning that empower students in their learning and support the development of 21st century skills.

Other progressive pedagogical approaches include: stage-not-age learning, in which students progress based on where they are at with their learning rather than solely with those of the same year-

group; learning through themes rather than only through subjects; hands-on learning where students explore concepts through making and doing; authentic learning based on real world issues; and using technology for collaborations and connections beyond school with other students and experts globally.

In the knowledge economy, it is critical that learning isn’t limited to schools but is something that continues throughout our lives. As such, there are great opportunities to translate the innovations taking place in the evolution of school design to other building typologies including museum and exhibition design.

Currently, cultural institutions struggle to engage adolescent audiences who have ready access to a multitude of competing options. If we draw upon some of the engaging and empowering initiatives taking place within schools, and translate these to museums, galleries and exhibitions, what might these look like?

As centres for life-long learning, museums and galleries would be dynamic and active hubs for the whole community including those from diverse socio-economic, cultural and educational backgrounds. They would be more accessible with a diversity of offerings, content and spaces reflecting broader and more intergenerational audiences. In partnership with community, curators would collaborate across areas of expertise developing exhibitions from multi-disciplinary perspectives. They would be participatory in nature, allowing visitors to not just passively observe, but to engage with content in a hands-on way to help them make meaning of content and connect to new ideas. Technology would enable visitors to access museum content before, during and after museum visits and allow them to engage in dialogue with other visitors and experts around areas of interest. Real objects would be conduits to explore current local and global issues in which visitors would act as researchers collaborating together and with museum experts to address real world problems.

Cultural institutions would co-locate with other learning institutions such as preschools, schools and universities. Facilities would be designed to enable and encourage students to frequent formal and informal learning and recreational spaces on a daily and weekly basis. They would be open longer so students could visit not only during school hours, but before and after school as well. The familiarity, connection and relationships students develop with museums and galleries will build a sense of belonging and ownership ensuring a future pipeline of visitors and long-term sustainability.

Fiona Young is the Sydney studio director of Hayball.