Measuring Museum Meaning
A Critical Assessment Framework

Douglas Worts

Abstract   Although museums are normally categorized as "cultural" organizations, they rarely plan their foundational activities or judge the success of their public programming according to the cultural health and well being of their communities. A small group of educators, curators, and museologists in Canada has developed an assessment framework that aims to foster dialogue across the museum community on how museums can better address the cultural needs and opportunities of our time.

Isn't it odd that museums—one of society's principal institutions dedicated to culture—do not measure their success or impacts in cultural terms? Attendance, revenue, objects accessioned, exhibits mounted, and publications published are some of the measures that museums use to assess their operations. But, it can be argued, none of these are cultural indicators. They do not reflect on the cultural needs, opportunities, or well being of the community. Nor do they offer insights into the cultural impacts of museum operations on individuals. What these measures do offer is some insight into the activity of museums as institutions—as nonprofit, corporate entities. Exactly what this has to do with the cultural health of individuals or communities is a good question.

In order to explore how well museums position themselves in the cultural landscape of our society, it is important to review what we mean by "culture." Is it a particular class of activities that a certain segment of society engages in during their leisure time? Is it a niche form of entertainment—one that has some particular educational value? Is culture something that refers to the past, is embodied in objects, amassed in public collections, and exhibited by institutions?

In the American Association of Museum's 2002 publication *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums*, Daniel Kertzner offers Edgar Schein's definition of culture for consideration by museum professionals. Schein refers to culture as "a basic pattern of assumptions invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration."[1] Such a definition positions culture within the context of daily life, not as a leisure-time activity, nor as a discipline-based academic specialty. Instead, Schein's notion of culture is seen as a mechanism for human adaptation within a world that is constantly changing, one which requires that the very essence of human worldviews must evolve as the reality of our planetary context shifts. If one approaches culture in this way, it is no wonder that museums can seem disconnected with the mainstream of life and more often than not associated with the planning of vacations in distant places or scheduling how best to spend a Sunday afternoon with friends or family. Few people think of museums as a locus for transforming human attitudes and behavior in an effort to maintain (or re-establish) a balanced existence within an unpredictable world. Perhaps this is an idealistic expectation for museums and other cultural organizations, but one can argue that such a balance is the number one need confronting humanity in our current, globalized environment.

To ask museums to change the way they approach their work, shifting from the traditional discipline-based, object-centered framework of institutionalized activities (including curatorial, education, collections management, conservation, etc.), to one based on the cultural dynamics of people, communities, and their relationships to larger natural systems, is to invite potential destabilization within our sector. And yet, this is what seems to be required—not only of the cultural sector, but also of business, government, education, economics, and so on. The world has changed fundamentally in the past century as a result of technological advances, globalization, urbanization, pluralization, and exponential population growth. Human adaptation to our changing external reality, and the internal integration of those adaptations, lies at the heart of our present cultural challenge. It seems clearer than ever that museums have the potential to play a vital role in this process, but only if there is the will and capacity to examine the core assumptions regarding what museums do and how they measure their impacts in cultural terms.

WORKING GROUP ON MUSEUMS
AND SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITIES

Since 2000, there has been a small group in Canada that has been struggling to pursue this goal of repositioning museums within the evolving cultural landscape of our societies. The Working Group on Museums and Sustainable Communities (WGMSC) was founded with the support of the Canadian Museum of Nature in Ottawa and has been leading workshops and developing resources for museum professionals across Canada over the past five years. It was formed as a collaborative effort, focusing its efforts on engaging the museum community in Canada in a process of awareness, reflection, learning, knowledge-sharing, capacity-building, and action related to their role in creating a "culture of sustainability."

A central goal of the WGMSC has been to better understand how to identify and use cultural indicators to guide the work of museums. One tool, created by the Working Group, is a framework for museum professionals to use as they struggle to ground their practice in the cultural experiences of individuals, communities, as well as museums themselves—specifically related to securing a sustainable future. It is called the Critical Assessment Framework.

The Critical Assessment Framework (CAF) uses three lenses to examine the relationship of a museum program to its community. These are the Individual, the Community, and the Museum. It is most useful as a reference in discussing and assessing the relative merits of various program strategies. We consider this tool to be an intermediate step towards the development of actual performance indicators for cultural programming. There is a fourth lens that ultimately warrants being integrated into the framework in order to address larger questions of sustainability—that of the Global Level. However, the Working Group has decided to focus on the first three levels for now.

The Framework functions best when museum staff members ask themselves a series of questions about the potential outcomes related to any given public program that is being considered. Making detailed notes about the potential public impacts of proposed programs can help staff to reshape their ideas, with specific outcomes in mind. Audience research initiatives are obvious mechanisms for collecting meaningful data related to individual and group experiences of visitors. However, other feedback mechanisms have to be developed in order to collect data about community and institutional dimensions of the CAF. A brief discussion of each lens follows, while a full

version of the CAF is provided at the end of this article for the convenience of readers who want to copy and use this tool.

INDIVIDUAL LEVEL

When considering a public program initiative, the team should ask itself how well the program will:

- Contribute and/or generate insights
- Capture imagination
- Stimulate curiosity
- Encourage personal reflection
- Enhance ability to think critically and creatively
- Provide opportunity to examine and clarify values
- Demonstrate relevance and make connection to daily life
- Affirm, challenge, deepen identity
- Help develop a sense of place
- Help deal with complexity and uncertainty
- Increase responsible action
- Stimulate intrinsic motivation

Part of the value of asking these questions is to force discussion on the issue of how the success of any given proposed initiative will be measured. Will it require that visitors use museum objects to help them engage in reflection about certain issues that are woven into their lives? Is it enough that visitors acquire new information about a particular object or topic, or is it essential that the focus of the program actually leads to a personalization of the new information and integration into how they engage with the world? When families visit museums together, is it important to facilitate cross-generational dialogue about the different ways that groups of different ages and experiences see society? At the individual level, it demands a reconsideration of whether an exhibit or an onsite program is the best vehicle to achieve certain outcomes.

It should be reiterated that, although the CAF provides a tool for generating discussion amongst museum staff, it stops short of providing a set of performance indicators. These will need to be identified separately in relationship to individual programs being considered. Performance indicators should have two characteristics to be useful: (1) each must be measurable and (2) the measured value must be clearly moving towards or away from a desired

goal. In a recent exhibit of artworks created by official war artists, some of the performance indicators developed at the Art Gallery of Ontario were as follows: (1) the rate at which visitors contribute comments or drawings about their reflections on war; (2) the rate at which visitors review the writings and drawings of other visitors; and (3) the rate at which visitors talk to others about the works of art and the issues of war and conflict that are woven into the artworks. There are countless indicators that can be used to provide insight into whether visitors actually engage in reflective and meaningful ways with museum programs, but all too frequently museums do not dedicate the time or resources to collect this essential feedback in order to improve their methods of understanding and engaging audiences.

COMMUNITY LEVEL

The team should ask itself how well the program will:

- Address vital and relevant needs/issues within the community
- Generate information and connection at the personal, community, provincial/territorial, national, and global levels
- Engage a diverse public
- Provide an outlet for the voices of diverse groups
- Encourage social interactions and debate
- Act as a catalyst for action
- Stimulate intergenerational interactions
- Link existing community groups to one another
- Initiate or enhance long term collaborative relationships
- Create partnerships that empower community groups
- Enhance the credibility of all involved
- Result in products/processes that have tangible impacts in the community
- Generate information applicable to museum and community decision-making

It seems obvious that museums should be attempting to create programs that are meaningful to the community, but it is difficult to know how to gauge that meaningfulness. By asking themselves the above questions in relationship to potential programs, museum staff members can help keep their focus on the ultimate purpose for which any museum would presumably

create a public program—to benefit the public. Too often, museums that have developed an identity around a particular set of objects, as opposed to being committed to addressing the shifting cultural needs of community, will find themselves on the horns of a dilemma. Will they assess their "success" in terms of the outputs of exhibits, publications, programs, and such, or in terms of the outcomes on individuals and communities?

MUSEUM LEVEL

The team should ask itself how well the program will:

- Challenge personal and institutional assumptions amongst staff and collaborators
- Be guided by clearly articulated goals, objectives, and outcomes
- Use the most effective vehicle for achieving goals
- Identify and value staff skills and resources
- Empower, transform, and affect all who are involved
- Create a community of learning within staff
- Engage key players/champions/detractors early on in the process (external and internal)
- Include multiple perspectives
- Engage different learning styles
- Integrate different dimensions of sustainability
- Integrate scientific, local, and traditional knowledge
- Act as catalyst for partnering community organizations

One of the most important capacities of any organization is the ability to adapt to the forces that are relevant to that organization. Some of these are internal forces—such as emerging skills, visions, conflicts, resources, etc.; some are external—changing demographics, societal values, new technologies, and so on. Peter Senge has written extensively on the challenges involved if institutions are to be "learning organizations."[2] Because ideally museums are linked to the cultural dynamics and well being of community, it is particularly important for them to be as consciously connected to the evolving needs and opportunities of their cultural context as possible. However, some museums have been created with such narrow internal senses of purpose (e.g., the preservation and promotion of a particular private collection of art) that the institutional mission actually becomes an impediment to its public accountability. To use

the analogy of tossing a pebble into a pond, museum programs are the pebbles, but the goals are actually the ripples sent out across the pond. Of course it is important to be conscious of the pebble being tossed, but it is at least as important to be conscious of the ripples and their impact on the various constituents that make up the culture of the pond.

My personal hope is that museums increasingly will maximize their potential to be culturally relevant by being much more responsive to the needs and realities of their communities and mindful of the impact (or lack of impact) that their work has on those communities. It is hard to conceive of a more pressing issue today than humanity's ability to create a bridge to a sustainable future, particularly in our rapidly changing world. Being responsive to the critical issues of our day in ways that bring history into a vital relationship with the present while engaging citizens in active ways helps justify the public funding of cultural organizations. It also makes sense that museums function as mirrors that enable a society to see itself more clearly and adjust its actions accordingly. But many questions remain regarding how society assesses its cultural needs and what types of mirroring and engagement strategies can be developed. Will collection building and exhibition generation, the traditional mainstays of museum work, continue to consume the bulk of our limited resources? If not, what alternatives can we imagine . . . partnerships with the mass media? . . . increased use of community forums? . . . a more integrated collaboration with the education system?

If museums are fundamentally the "place of the muse," involving creative interactions between people and social/environmental/spiritual/cultural forces that are not fully known and not fully controllable, then museum professionals may want to focus far more attention than they have before on measuring the cultural needs, as well as the impacts of their programs, at individual, community, and institutional levels. The Critical Assessment Framework is a modest attempt by one group of museum folk to broaden the frame of how museums measure their effectiveness in cultural terms.

The Working Group on Museums and Sustainable Communities includes:

- Thérèse Baribeau and Linda Liboiron, The Biosphère, Environment Canada
- Anne Breau and Catherine Dumouchel, Canadian Museum of Nature
- Elizabeth Kilvert, Ecological Monitoring and Assessment Network (EMAN), Environment Canada

- Helen MacDonald-Carlson, Faculty of Education, Thompson Rivers University
- Diane Pruneau, Faculty of Education, Université de Moncton
- Glenn Sutter, Royal Saskatchewan Museum
- Douglas Worts, Art Gallery of Ontario

Notes

1. Daniel Kertzner, "The Lens of Organizational Culture," in *Mastering Civic Engagement: A Challenge to Museums* (Washington, D.C.: American Association of Museums, 2002): 40.
2. Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990).

Douglas Worts is currently an interpretive planner at the Art Gallery of Ontario in Toronto, Canada where he has worked for over 23 years. He is a fellow of Leadership for Environment and Development—a global, cross-disciplinary network of professionals who share a commitment to sustainability—established and funded by the Rockefeller Foundation.

Critical Assessment Framework—Museum Projects and Initiatives

(Rating performance without criteria is subjective. Discussions are useful and will generate criteria.)

When considering a new public program initiative, ask how well the program will:	Poorly to Well 1 2 3 4 5	N/A
Personal Level (members of community)		
Contribute and/or generate new insights		
Capture imagination		
Stimulate curiosity		
Encourage personal reflection		
Enhance ability to think critically and creatively		
Provide opportunity to examine and clarify values		
Demonstrate relevance and make connection to daily life		
Affirm, challenge, deepen identity		
Help develop a sense of place		
Help deal with complexity and uncertainty		
Increase responsible action		
Stimulate intrinsic motivation		
Community Level		
Address vital and relevant needs/issues/opportunities within community		
Generate information and connection at the personal, community, provincial/territorial, national, and global level		
Engage a diverse public		
Provide an outlet for the voices of diverse groups		
Encourage social interactions and debate		
Act as a catalyst for action		
Stimulate intergenerational interactions		
Link existing community groups to one another		
Initiate or enhance long term collaborative relationships		
Create partnerships that empower community groups		
Enhance the credibility of all involved		
Result in products & processes that have tangible impacts in community		
Generate information applicable to museum & community decision making		
Museum Level (employee and institution)		
Challenge personal and institutional assumptions		
Be guided by clearly articulated goals, objectives and outcomes		
Use the most effective vehicle for achieving goals (Note: differentiate between goals, outcomes and strategies.)		
Identify and value staff skills and resources		
Empower, transform and affect all who are involved		
Create a community of learning within staff		
Engage key players/champions/detractors early in process (ext./int.)		
Include multiple perspectives		
Engage different learning styles		
Integrate different dimensions of sustainability		
Integrate scientific, local and traditional knowledge		
Act as a catalyst for partnering community organizations		