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## Transitions to a New Museum: An Examination of the Factors that Lead Museums Toward Education as an Institution Priority

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Transitions to a New Museum: An Examination of the Factors  
that Lead Museums Toward Education as an Institution<sup>a</sup> Priority

by

Tanya Tobias-Tomis

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THE MASTER OF ARTS PROGRAM IN LIBERAL STUDIES  
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**Abstract**

This essay discusses how changes to state and federal funding, increasing competition from non-museum arts organizations and a desire to strengthen, build and diversify audiences encouraged museums to position education as an institutional priority. These factors combined with an intensifying frustration about a lack of professional standards and growing criticism of the field, encouraged museum educators to develop and adopt new, more effective ways of engaging audiences. This essay also explores how and why museums universally adopted Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) to better position themselves to compete for participation and funding. This essay concludes with several suggestions, or a plan, for museums based on the experiences and struggles they have faced over the past few decades and can expect to face in the future.

## **Introduction**

My earliest memory of a museum field trip is vague. I remember my peers and I being corralled onto big yellow buses, being read a litany of rules; “do not touch,” “do not chew gum,” “stay with your group,” “listen to your chaperone,” and ushered into the museum with reminders to “be quiet” and not to touch anything. I have no memories of any of the artwork I saw, or of the museum. As a high school student, the experience prior to our arrival was the same, buses, rules and reminders of the rules, but the experience at the museum was different. No longer was it my teacher or chaperone talking to us about the art we were seeing, all of a sudden, it was a representative from the museum, talking about the whole collection, the collectors and the art and why art was important. I do have memories of these later visits, perhaps because I was older, but perhaps because the way museums were engaging and creating memorable experiences for visitors was changing.

Now, as a thirty-something visitor and professional in the field, I do not know a museum experience that does not include label text, docents, audio-tours, and/or a plethora of exhibition- or collection-related pamphlets, brochures and catalogues; in preparing to write this paper, I wondered...why don't I remember anything from those early visits? Why did I retain so little of the information from these early visits? Having so many questions and no real answers about my own personal museum experiences encouraged my graduate student study of accessibility, museum experiences and visitor engagement. How did, and how do, museums engage visitors, especially school children? What information or experiences do

museums want visitors to walk away with? How have museums changed since my earliest visits?

Museums play a unique role in society. They are the keepers, caretakers and exhibitors of history. Their visual and meditative nature is appealing to individuals across a broad spectrum, from a five year old, first time visitor, to an eighty-five year old experienced visitor. A museum experience is partly what the visitor makes it and wants it to be and partly the responsibility of the museum itself. Early program offerings suggest museums have always recognized that educating the public about its collections, and about art in general, was important; the problem lay more in the approach. Museums, more often than not, approached this education of the public as an informal, almost intuitive process where visitors were responsible for their own learning. This lackadaisical approach was not an intentional disregard, but was rather the byproduct of a decades-old belief system about who visits museums, what they want and what a museum should be doing. Evolution of the field was stifled even further by the lack of fundamental museum education standards to guide museum staff and few university or college programs that had developed programs in museum studies or museum education to properly train and educate them (Dobbs and Eisner 76-77).

Further preventing the professionalization of the field was the practice of assigning museum curators the daunting task of visitor engagement and education-based program development. The limited offerings and almost complete lack of professional research about museum education-related issues prior to 1989 suggest it was a task curators neither wanted nor one their education and/or experience

had prepared them for. By assigning curators the task of educating the public, museums, in essence, were creating programs based in art historical study. A Curators' primary responsibility in a museum is research, or the research-based selection and presentation of artwork, and while a background in art history and art historical research works well for these tasks, they do not work well for education. Visitor engagement was unsystematic, resource dependant and based on what an individual organization felt was important and necessary. Some museums created labels to inform visitors of basic information about works of art. Some devised dynamic, thought-provoking exhibitions of work rarely seen by the general public. Some provided "public" lectures to teach about collections, artwork and exhibitions (Newsom 13).

Curiously enough, at the core of these initiatives is education, but an examination of museum hiring practices, expenditures and salaries between 1969-1978 suggest museum education was hardly a priority. In a 1978 study, 317 museums reported a total of 232 paid education staff versus 389 paid curatorial staff. Of those, only 11% of the curatorial staff was hired as "part time" versus nearly 25% of the total number of education staff (Cahalan 569). Another survey, this one comparing museum personnel, doesn't even include a category for educators and instead designates the top five paid staff as directors, curators, administrators, conservators, and exhibit preparators.<sup>1</sup> A salary survey conducted by the American Association of Museums in 1978 which does include educators

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<sup>1</sup> Between 1971-1981, The American Association of Museums and (what was then) The New England Museum Association published multiple surveys tracking the salaries of the same five positions. See Cahalan et.al. *A Sourcebook for Arts Statistics*, 568.



found on average, museum educators made between \$10,000-\$12,000 less than curators.<sup>2</sup> That same year, the National Center for Education Statistics analyzed total program-related expenses and found museums spent nearly \$300 on curatorial related expenses for every \$100 they spent on education-related expenses (Cahalan 473). This is not to say museums completely discounted the role of, or need for, educators. This same study also found that after curatorial related expenses, general administration and building maintenance, education-related expenses were the highest reported operating expense.<sup>3</sup> But the priority of curatorial departments was clear.

Museum educators were frustrated. They were being paid less; their role, status and responsibilities were unclear. The internal strife between curators, directors and educators caused a lack of progress in the establishment and growth of education and the disagreements and uncertainty about education's role in plans for the future caused a general disgust among educators.<sup>4</sup> In the first formal study of the field, Dobbs and Eisner (1987) found when asked to rate their job satisfaction, most museum educators rated theirs at average or below average and when asked how long they planned on spending in the field, the most popular response was less than five years. The results also suggested museum educators found much higher

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<sup>2</sup> Salaries were reported as follows: 25<sup>th</sup> percentile - \$30,000 for curators vs. \$22,000 for educators; median salary - \$37,597 for curators vs. \$27,000 for educators; 75<sup>th</sup> percentile - \$54,750 for curators vs. \$36,496 for educators; highest salary - \$100,000 for curators vs. \$85,000 for educators (Cahalan 570).

<sup>3</sup> Education expenses were listed as 11% of the total expenditures

<sup>4</sup> This discord between curators and educators is referenced frequently in text about museum education including the Dobbs and Eisner study, Barbara Newsom's, *The Art Museum as Educator* (pg 37), on page 255 of Eileen Hooper-Greenhill's book, *The Educational Role of the Museum* (1994), and Philip Yenawine also mentions it in our interview.

levels of job satisfaction outside of museums, even in non art-related fields (Dobbs and Eisner 78-80).

Around the same time the results of the Eisner and Dobbs study were published, federal agencies and philanthropic groups began reevaluating their own funding priorities, allocating less money for general operating expenses and curatorial programs and allocating substantial amounts of money to more education-based initiatives. Rather than fund or support general operating expenses, collections or research, they wanted to support programs that would have a lasting and profound impact on participants. Large federal agencies, such as the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) were beginning to focus on supporting smaller, more rural arts organizations, leading to a massive increase in the number of non-museum arts organizations outside of metro areas (Zakaras 2). This increase in the number of arts organizations led to an increase in competition for an already aging and dwindling arts audience and the convergence of economic and industry changes would have a major impact on how museum education departments would be formed, the role of education in a museum and perhaps most importantly, how museums would engage the public and plan for the future. Rather than being an afterthought, developing and maintaining quality education programs became a way of ensuring fundability, and in turn, sustainability.

These factors, combined with frustration over a growing criticism of the field, encouraged museum educators to develop and adopt new, more effective ways of engaging audiences. Rather than rely on traditional education-based programming, which for the most part were considered informal learning experiences, museum

educators began to look toward developing more formal teaching and learning experiences for staff and visitors. The most widely accepted of these new initiatives was Visual Thinking Strategies (or VTS). Visual Thinking Strategies provided a solution to many of the problems museums were facing; it was new, it was education-based, it facilitated new community-based collaborations, it brought new visitors into the museum, and its ability to appeal to a broad range of public and private funders who were interested in supporting valuable learning experiences in museums, especially for schoolchildren. Museum educators with no formal background could easily be trained to facilitate VTS-based tours, public school teachers could learn important pre-visit information and strategies to incorporate VTS into classroom discussions in just a few hours and the formality and proven effectiveness of VTS-based programs gave museum professionals, especially educators, a formal education program they could argue as being beneficial, both to the museum and to visitors.

Of course, Visual Thinking Strategies alone, did not professionalize the field of museum education nor did it solve every museum's problems, but there is a casual link between what was happening outside the field, the development and incorporation of VTS and documented shifts in program and funding priorities around the same time. In understanding what caused the transition toward education as an institutional priority and realizing just how contingent success is on adapting to major, and even seemingly inconsequential changes taking place outside the field, museums may be better able to predict what kinds of changes they will have to make in the future. By being able to better predict and make the necessary

changes to staff structures, program and funding priorities and visitor engagement practices, museums will guarantee they remain relevant and valuable, no matter what.

### **Causes of Shifting Attitudes: Transitions to a New Museum**

The transition to a “new museum” was a slow and deliberate change brought about by changes being made outside, as much, as inside the field. Museums have existed in the United States since the late eighteenth century, but only 15% of museums surveyed in 1932 offered formal educational programs (Ellenbogen). Education programs in museums during the early part of the twentieth century were basic and (depending on the museum) could include any combination of lecture programs, scheduled public tours, label text describing artwork in the collection, hands-on activities and arts-based demonstrations.<sup>5</sup> When comparing the wide variety of programs museums currently offer, these early education initiatives can be considered archaic. In the early part of the twentieth century, it seems many museums felt opening the doors was education enough and, as suggested by early studies examining museum fiscal priorities, devoted little time or money into developing education departments. It is not to say these education priorities were standard practice for all museums. Some museums, for example The Museum of Modern Art in New York, had well-developed education departments and included the funding and development of their education-based programs into their long-term planning goals. The ability to do this was due in part to support from the General Education Board and Rockefeller Foundation in 1937 to develop

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<sup>5</sup> Less popular programs included film screenings, study classes, hobby workshops, drama, and even dance recitals (Hicks 20-21).

an education department and programs based on secondary education (Rindge 133).

A series of policy changes in the education system, such as the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act* of 1965, which provided funding to low-income schools, inner city schools; in tax and employment law with *The Tax Reform Act of 1969*, which recognized museums as educational institutions and allowed private donations to be claimed on federal and state taxes; and *The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act of 1973* (CETA), which encouraged artists to start careers in museum education, accelerated the process (Ebitz 153). Then, perhaps as a reaction to changes taking place outside the industry, in 1973, The American Association of Museums created the first professional committee on education, The Standing Professional Committee on Education (EdCom). EdCom was assigned the general task of promoting professional standards for museum educators, advocating for the support of museum education programs, and “promoting excellence in museum learning.”<sup>6</sup>

Adding to the internal and external policy changes were two major industry reports/studies published around the same time. The first was a report entitled *Museums for a New Century* (1984), published by The American Association of Museums. The report, written by a commission of executive directors representing a broad range of art and non-art museums, was the first to formally recognize the importance of museum education, even noting it was a source of pride and

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<sup>6</sup> For more information about EdCom’s *Standards and Best Practice in Museum Education* you can visit [www.izea.net/education/guidelines\\_ed\\_museums.htm](http://www.izea.net/education/guidelines_ed_museums.htm) or the American Association of Museums website: [www.aam-us.org/](http://www.aam-us.org/)

justification for museums. The report states, “many consider public education to be the most significant contribution this country has made to the evolution of the museum concept... education is a primary purpose of American Museums.”<sup>7</sup> Their recognition of museum education as vital and valuable did not come without a warning for museums; the report also adds “the proliferation of departments designed specifically to plan and carry out the museum’s educational program can have a deleterious side effect-the intellectual isolation of the learning function from exhibitions, research and other museum activities with which it should be inextricably joined.”<sup>8</sup>

Two years later, in 1986, Stephen Dobbs and Elliot Eisner, published the first comprehensive study of museum education, “The Uncertain Profession: Educators in the American Art Museum.” This study, funded by the Getty Center for Education in the Arts, focused on middle to large sized museums and compiled interviews with dozens of executive directors and museum educators. The study found museum educators and even museum directors were unclear about, and had contradictory opinions about, the role of educators in a museum. Educators felt that their status in the museum was undefined, that they were low in the staff hierarchy, there were few incentives to work hard or develop new programming, too few professional development or advancement opportunities in the field, and that there were no real standards of practice for what a museum educator should be doing. Executive Directors felt that educators “worried too much about their status” and educators should naturally rank below curators when the collection, preservation and display

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<sup>7</sup> David Ebitz quoting *Museums for a New Century* (1984), 55, 63.

<sup>8</sup> David Ebitz quoting *Museums for a New Century* (1984), 60-61.

of art are the primary function of a museum. The study also found an overwhelming number of professionals recognized the need to develop meaningful, education-based programs for public schools, but noted few had the experience or knowledge to establish such programs (Dobbs and Eisner 80-81).

It would be impossible to trace which of these policy changes or reports had the most profound impact on the field of museum education. *The Elementary and Secondary Education Act* encouraged teachers to collaborate with museums to build new, arts-based, curricula, by recognizing museums as educational institutions. By designating museums as educational institutions, *The Tax Reform Act* qualified museums for a wider variety of funding opportunities. CETA provided training to low income workers, preparing them for work in educational and non-profit institutions, and the Institute of Museum Services gave further public affirmation and support for education in museums (Ebitz 153-154). Likewise, the American Association of Museums and the Dobbs and Eisner studies did not, on their own, dramatically change the landscape of the field. More importantly, by publishing the results and a set of standards of practice (whether museum educators chose to use them or not), they were acknowledging the field of museum education as viable, and worthy of study in its own right.

### **Changes to State and Federal Funding**

Arts-based federal funding programs began in 1935, when under President Franklin Roosevelt; the first real strategy to support the arts and artists was introduced (Davis 249). The Federal Arts Project (FAP), a sub-program of the Works Progress Administration (WPA) was created to provide job opportunities for

artists and to create community arts centers in urban and rural areas. The creation of the WPA and FAP had an impact far beyond their role as job/income providers for out of work artists, they changed public perception of the arts, created an awareness of the arts, and introduced the arts to an immeasurable number of adults and children who may not otherwise have an opportunity to see or experience it. According to Jerry Wilkinson, prior to the establishment of the FAP, community arts centers were rare, but by the time the FAP was dissolved around the beginning of World War II, the program had created over one hundred community arts centers, located in all forty-eight states. These community arts centers, often considered the most influential of all of the FAP outreach programs, were created to function as places of arts education.<sup>9</sup> At these arts centers visitors could see local and regional artwork by children and adults and could take a variety of art classes taught by professional artists. In the end, artists hired by the WPA created nearly four hundred thousand works of art for non-federal public buildings, community centers and art collections and loaned thousands of paintings, sculptures and prints to schools, libraries, galleries and other institutions (Margaret Bullock).

Less than two decades later the shift from providing general operating, special event and program support, to providing support as a way of changing internal structures and priorities began with the Ford Foundation. Established in the 1930's, by 1950, The Ford Foundation was the largest philanthropic organization in the world, having already given over one hundred million dollars to

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<sup>9</sup> Arts centers were established primarily in rural areas and were collaborative efforts between the Federal Arts Project and the communities they were located in. The FAP supplied funds and teachers and the community provided a building and funds to cover general operating expenses.



arts and non-arts projects all over the United States. What made The Ford Foundation unique was not what it funded, but rather how it funded. Instead of just gifting an organization money, the Ford Foundation offered grants which required organizations to match the funds given, sometimes by as much as 3 to 1. Providing matching grants vs. non-matching grants shifts the responsibility of fiscal sustainability to the museum and away from the granting organization. In order to fulfill this responsibly, museums and arts-organizations needed to create programs that would appeal to a wide-variety of audiences, funding agencies and philanthropic groups. As a by-product of this strategy, museums also needed to focus on individual giving as a part of its financial plan for the future. Even as late as 1979, museums were only receiving about 15% of their general operating and program support from private funding sources.<sup>10</sup> Following the lead of the Ford Foundation, other philanthropic groups such as the National Trust for Historic Preservation also began requiring grant recipients to match funds.<sup>11</sup>

Then in the 1980's two major arts organizations, the National Endowment for the Arts and the Getty Center for Arts Education, published studies whose results indicated "widespread cultural illiteracy" among young people. Understandably disheartened by this, both organizations suggested a massive overhaul of funding guidelines and began encouraging collaboration between public schools and

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<sup>10</sup> In 1972, income generated from private sources was documented at 21%, in 1976, it had decreased to 16% and in 1979 income from private sources had decreased again, to 14% (Cahalan 533).

<sup>11</sup> The Ford Foundation began its matching grants program in the late 1940's and its Program-Related Investments (PRI's) program in 1968 (<http://www.fordfound.org/grants/supporttypes>). The National Trust awarded its first matching grants in 1969 through their Preservation Services Fund (<http://www.preservationnation.org/about-us/history.html>).

museums. During Nancy Hanks' term as Chair of the National Endowment for the Arts (1969-1977) funding priorities had shifted, from a strategy of supporting popular established arts groups and organizations to an "art for all Americans" approach, focusing more on rural arts initiatives, increasing participation in the arts and introducing the arts to new audiences. During her term, the NEA awarded their first grants to build and develop artist-in-residency programs in public schools, offered project grants to support the work of rural and/or disadvantaged artists, recognized photography as an artistic medium and added it to the *Visual Arts Program*, and created the *Arts and Artifacts Indemnity Act*, which secured insurance would be available for major works of art travelling to the United States for exhibition (Bauerlein 3-15). Each of these, in their own way, increased awareness of the arts, broadened the spectrum of what the public identified as "art" and reaffirmed the arts as important and relevant. The establishment of the artist-in-residency program, in particular, was the first real indication funding priorities were beginning to shift toward a practice of funding programs and projects beneficial to schoolchildren. By establishing new, education-based programs, Nancy Hicks made significant strides in instituting arts-education as a funding priority, opening the door for her successor Frank Hodsoll (1981-1989), to use his experiences and knowledge to take the next step. Throughout the course of his seven-year term, he advocated for cultural literacy among children and developed initiatives to ensure arts-education was included and "basic" in the curriculum for students in grades K-12 (Michaelson 1). In May of 1988, Chairman Hodsoll also oversaw one of the most widely read and distributed publications of the

Endowment, *Toward Civilization*, a study of how America's schools are teaching art. In its conclusion, the Endowment warns, "the artistic heritage that is ours, and the opportunities to contribute significantly to its evolution, are being lost to our young people" (Koostra 43).

In the 1980's, the NEA made another major change; the group modified the way it allocated funds to the numerous programs it managed. Rather than funding larger, well-established arts organizations, the focus shifted to establishing support programs that would benefit, smaller, community-based and/or rural art programs and organizations. By doing this, the NEA would fulfill several pieces of its mission; supporting rural or community-based arts would increase accessibility to a broader range of people and would help local arts organizations develop new audiences. The first of these programs, the LOCALS program, was created to support the arts at the state and local level. Rather than manage the funds and awards for this program itself, the NEA oversaw LOCALS offices around the country, which were responsible for distributing a portion of the NEA's funds. The LOCALS program was charged with professionally directing community-based arts activities and providing matching grants to individuals and organizations. Other initiatives, such as the *Advancement Program* (designed to assist developing arts organizations) and the *Expansion Arts Program* (which would eventually establish the *Rural Arts Program*) also provided funds on the local level, but focused more on funding the creation and establishment of art galleries, arts centers and small museums and securing new, private funds to support their development (Koostra 45-48).

### **The Push to Build a New, Sustainable Audience Through Education**

All of the changes taking place to state and federal funding programs and the changing attitudes about the role and/or function of the arts placed museums in an interesting predicament. Museums knew arts participation had been waning since the early 1980's. Adding to the situation, the success of the LOCALS, Expansion Arts and Rural ARTS Initiatives programs had created a new arts environment where supply was now exceeding demand.<sup>12</sup> With more museums, arts centers and galleries, museums for perhaps the first time were in a situation where they were forced to compete for audiences with non-museum arts organizations. Competition for for-profit organizations is commonplace, but for a non-profit museum that maybe always assumed there would be an audience for their collection, this would have been a unique challenge. Adding to the problem, the same organizations with which museums were competing for audiences, were also competing with them for funding. Museums quickly they needed to think about more long-term issues such as sustainability and audience development.

It is no surprise museums looked to education as a way of addressing both issues. Museums, of any type of arts organization, have the longest history of commitment to education (Zakaras 43). Most museums already had education departments and staff, had a new set of standards and guidelines (proposed by Eisner and Dobbs), and museum education and museum studies programs were growing in colleges and universities, providing museums with a new, enthusiastic group of professionals eager to build and develop new, engaging programs.

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<sup>12</sup> During the period between 1982-2002, arts organizations grew by approx 9% per year (Zakaras 3).

Now that museums knew what to do, they had to figure out how to do it. First, to help secure education-based arts funding museums needed to develop strong programs that would appeal to a variety of donors, philanthropic groups, state arts agencies (SAA's), and federal funding organizations. Second, museums needed to build upon their existing relationships with teachers, administrators and community organizers to create lasting collaborative programs that would be capable of building and sustaining new audiences. One of the biggest obstacles museums faced in this new endeavor was their reputation as an informal place of learning. Regardless of whether *The Tax Reform Act* designated museums as educational institutions, museums had (in some cases) a hundred year old belief system to change. Their history of relying on volunteers, curators, and inadequately trained educators to present and provide learning experiences only furthered that reputation.<sup>13</sup> To contradict their lackluster reputation, museums needed to dedicate all of the necessary resources, build and properly train education departments and focus on education as an institutional priority. If museums were going to succeed in establishing themselves as necessary and worthwhile places of learning, they would also need to develop programs capable of providing quantifiable evidence proving they were effective and valuable learning experiences.

### **Visual Thinking Strategies: From Informal to Formal Museum Learning**

In order to understand just how different Visual Thinking Strategies is from earlier museum education programs, you need to understand the depth and study

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<sup>13</sup> Between 1975-75, 58% of tours at The Museum of Natural history were given by volunteer tour guides (Cahalan 560) and in 1963 the most popular task assigned to volunteers at surveyed museums were tours (Hicks 21).

that went into its development and exactly how the program is structured. When Philip Yenawine and Abigail Housen devised Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), they did not just develop a program to teach school children about art, they created a working paradigm for museum education. Even at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), where education had long been a fundamental element of its mission, educators were not immune to the growing internal and external pressure on museums to develop and improve programming. Admittedly annoyed by the Dobbs and Eisner's' sweeping criticism of museum educators as unprofessional, untrained, and aimless, MOMA's Director of Education Philip Yenawine sought to develop a new model for museum education.<sup>14</sup> In his thirty years as a museum educator, Yenawine also recognized there some was truth in the Dobbs and Eisner report. Eager to destroy the stereotype of amateurish education programs, he wanted to develop a program founded in research and based in scientific fact.

During an interview I conducted with Yenawine, he describes his motivation; "We did a great deal of research regarding our audiences when I was director of education at MOMA—from 1983-93. When we discovered that none of our teaching had any lasting impact, I decided to ask Abigail Housen if we could work together, using her findings and methodology, to design new ways of teaching that might stick. I believe that art is essential in people's lives; I wanted to find a way to teach visual literacy that worked."<sup>15</sup> He and Housen collaborated to develop VTS because of a shared desire to develop an active method to teach and challenge individuals

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<sup>14</sup> Yenawine, *Theory into Practice* (1999).

<sup>15</sup> Yenawine, *Interview* (2009).

based on their level of thinking, not on a predetermined set of assumptions about the viewer.

These levels of thinking, or viewing, as defined by Abigail Housen's 1983 doctoral dissertation, prescribed all museum visitors one of five stages of aesthetic development. Contrary to early theories of learning development, Housen's stages are not age dependant and are based solely on how many and what types of art viewing experiences that individual has had (Johnson 3). According to Housen, all viewers progress through these stages in order and stages cannot be skipped. To summarize, Stage 1 viewers make personal connections to the art they see; Stage 2 viewers have developed a basic, personal vocabulary of definitions and look for these styles, processes and mediums when viewing art; Stage 3 viewers have had multiple experiences with art, can identify major artists work and styles and have a general understanding of the sequence and progression of art history; Stage 4 viewers have extensive experience in the arts, more than likely spending time each day viewing art and may be an arts professional; Stage 5, the highest stage in aesthetic development, viewers have spent the majority of his or her lifetime studying and interacting with art and developed a vast knowledge of, and a personal connection with, works of art (Johnson 3).

After finding nearly all of the students and teachers participating in education programs at the Museum of Modern Art were Stage 1 viewers, Yenawine and Housen knew, for VTS to work, it must easily identify levels of learning in museum visitors and work within those assigned stages to create more meaningful museum experiences. In its simplest form, Visual Thinking Strategies uses art to

teach thinking, communication and visual literacy. The method itself is not a complex one. Designed for elementary students and to be incorporated into classroom curricula, VTS encourages object-based learning, a personal connection to art, confidence, active discussions and group problem solving, all directed toward transferring these learned skills to other subjects.<sup>16</sup> Rather than present information in a lecture style, Visual Thinking Strategies encourages educators to create a dialogue with the viewer.

Shortly after VTS was developed, Abigail Housen and her research associate, Karin DeSantis, conducted numerous field studies (using experimental and control groups) to measure the successes and failures of the program. The findings of these studies compliment each other and corroborate what Yenawine and Housen theorized: Visual Thinking Strategies worked. These early studies found that students who participated in Visual Thinking Strategies-based programs demonstrate significantly greater academic growth versus control groups. Visual Thinking Strategies helps build critical thinking skills students are then able to transfer to other settings and subjects, including math, social studies and science and VTS produces measurable academic growth in students with varying ethnicities, income levels, and school achievement, including those with limited English skills and poor prior standardized test performance (Housen & DeSantis).

The model of Visual Thinking Strategies has been adopted, in some form, by most museums in the United States. The extent of its incorporation into a museum's education practice varies by organization, budget and oftentimes the experience of

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<sup>16</sup> "Other subjects" as mentioned before, include math, science, social studies, and English.



the education department staff. For instance, a museum whose education department is substantial, both in staff size, staff experience/education, and financial support, may send staff to study directly with Visual Thinking Strategies founders, develop collections-based lessons for use in regional schools, host Visual Thinking Strategies professional development sessions for area teachers, and visit classrooms to evaluate the successes of the program. An organization who adopts the model in its most basic form may choose to use the conversational guidelines when giving public and school tours, but may not participate in or offer any formal training in the method.

The widespread use of any one method of teaching about art in museums was new to the field, and regardless of how it was used museums immediately recognized its value. Philip Yenawine is open to museums incorporating adapted versions (without the structured follow-up conversation in the classroom for example) of VTS, but finds it frustrating when components of the program are used in combination with other methods of teaching:

I have no problem with museums using VTS in a range of programs. It makes sense to me; research has shown growth (aesthetic stage change) as result of VTS experience in schools in a relatively short amount of time. Why not use it with beginning viewers in museums, especially given multi-visit programs? What I don't like is "hybrids"—teaching that attempts to combine VTS with providing information; my reasons stem from the research at MOMA. We had a great staff—knowledgeable, personable, interactive, articulate and so forth—but information based teaching, even when interactive, didn't produce growth. This is a complicated topic but suffice it to say that I feel it inappropriate to use techniques for which there is no data of significant impact and which at least at MOMA proved to do nothing. We have too little time with our audiences in museums to waste any of it.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Full interview page 36

In retrospect, Visual Thinking Strategies was exactly what museums were looking for, and needed, to compete for audiences and funding. Separately, Housen's work in aesthetic development changed the way museums study visitors and Yenawine's work changed the way museums engage them. Together, their collaboration, and successful incorporation of VTS gave a new face to the field of museum education by offering a (proven) successful alternative to the archaic program structures museums had adopted for decades, by enlightening public school administrators to the value of incorporating arts-education in their curricula and by educating museum professionals about the importance and benefits of providing administrative and financial support for education programs. In New York State alone, VTS-based programs are supported by the New York State Council on the Arts, the New York Department of Cultural Affairs, the New York Community Trust, the Aggie Gund Foundation, and the Hilo Foundation and are presented to thousands of students in grades K-12.. Nationally, VTS-based programs in schools and museums are supported by organizations such as the NEA, the Eisner Foundation, the Fifth Floor Foundation, and the Jewish Community Foundation and serve tens of thousands of students in hundreds of participating museums and schools.<sup>18</sup>

### **The VTS Effect: Education as an Institutional Strategy**

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<sup>18</sup> From the Visual Thinking Strategies website:  
<http://www.vtshome.org/pages/major-supporters>.

After early studies proved incorporating Visual Thinking Strategies into school tour programs provided tangible, measurable results, it became not only a working teaching strategy for museums to use, but also a highly fundable venture for state, federal and philanthropic groups who were primarily interested in funding education programs. In less than a decade, over three hundred museum educators in the United States had been formally trained in Visual Thinking Strategies and training programs were being offered in over fifteen countries.<sup>19</sup> The creation of Visual Thinking Strategies provided museums a method that was attractive to donors and granting organizations for its ability to positively impact students and build new audiences, but was also appealing to school administrators and teachers who were seeing an increase in the push for standardized arts-education in the classroom.

Museum education programs, schools and participants were not the only beneficiaries. Museums as a whole saw Visual Thinking Strategies as a way to diversify and build a sustainable audience. Arts participation had been on the decline for the past two decades and audiences were aging faster than museums and arts organizations could build new ones.<sup>20</sup> By incorporating Visual Thinking Strategies and building formal, collaborative school tour programs, museums could reach out to a whole new audience, school children. Strategically, the benefits of focusing on school children and school tour programs as a form of audience development is a wise one, for a multitude of reasons.

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<sup>19</sup> [www.vue.org](http://www.vue.org)

<sup>20</sup> According to Laura Zakaras, fewer young adults (ages 18-24) have been visiting museums since the early 1990's and the median age for arts audiences has been steadily rising faster than the median age of the population (3).

First, by collaborating with schools and developing curriculum-based programs museums created community-based committed partnerships. Schools, that were eager to fulfill learning standards and offer engaging and informative art programs for elementary and high school students, would schedule multiple visits per year. For museums, these scheduled visits increased student attendance and awareness of the museum for both the students visiting and the community. Community groups that may not have been aware of a museum's program offerings may then, in turn, schedule their own visits through the museums outreach program.

Second, by developing a strong, school-aged audience, museums could increase participation and attendance by families and younger adults. Here, museums can argue that by developing awareness among younger visitors, you also develop awareness in their parents, family and friends. A museum that is able to connect to a school aged-child is accessible and family-friendly, contrary to the long-held belief that museums are for the wealthy and art-educated.

Third, by diversifying / increasing audiences and collaborating with schools on arts-based program initiatives, museums became eligible for more regional, state and federal grants and new programs appealed to private donors who were interested in supporting the arts.

The increase in attendance, creation of new programs, shift toward education as a part of long term programming strategies, and new opportunities for program-specific funding encouraged museums to hire new education department staff. By 2003, the median number of education department staff in the 98 museums who

completed the *Museums Education Survey* was five, suggesting remarkable growth in the field from earlier museum administration studies (Wetterlund and Sayre 4).

Between 1989, when Visual Thinking Strategies was introduced and 2008, museum education programs grew exponentially. By 2009, 99% of museums offered educational programs. In 2010 most museums can also claim a wide variety of educational programs categorized in one of seven different areas, tours, informal gallery learning, community, adult and family programs, classes and other programs, partnerships with other organizations, school programs and online educational resources.<sup>21</sup>

While the past fifty years have seen significant growth in museum education, the field is still relatively new and subject to economic and social change. In March 2010, Kris Wetterlund and Scott Sayre, founders of Museum-Ed.org published *The 2009 Art Museum Education Programs Survey*. This survey collected data about museum education departments and programs from ninety-eight museums with varying staff sizes (ranging from one part-time educator to sixty-five full time educators), various sized facilities (ranging from 5,300 sq. feet to five city blocks), various sized collections (ranging from one hundred objects to six million objects), various operating budgets (ranging from \$200,000 per year to \$35,000,000 per year), and varying attendance (ranging from 6,000 thousand to 4.5 million visitors annually) (4).

Wetterlund and Sayre found the most significant program changes between 2003-2009 were in the areas of technology. There was a decrease in the number of

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<sup>21</sup> The program categories defined by Wetterlund and Sayre (4)

museums offering group tours (from 100% of museums surveyed to 90%); multiple visits for schools (from 80% in 2003 to 40% in 2009), docent/tour guide programs (a decrease from 100% to 60% in 2009). During that same time, museums recorded substantial growth in the use of social media (non-existent in 2003), the use of online resources, tours utilizing cell-phones and other hand-held devices, as well as a significant increase in the number of museums who offer “other” online educational programming (Wetterlund and Sayre 8).<sup>22</sup>

Adapting to new technologies and incorporating them into programs and offerings is going to be crucial for museums as they try to stay relevant in a world where technology-dependence has become the norm. While working on this paper, I surveyed museum educators through the Museums Association of New York email list and Facebook page, as well as the Museum-Ed listserv. The responses to the questions I posed were as diverse as the experiences and institutions of the respondents, but there was one common response when asked how museum education has changed since they began their careers and when asked what the future holds for museum education: technology. Educators, across the board, who had ten or more years experience answered technology and the wide variety of ways it has been incorporated into programming was the most obvious change. Educators also suggested that technology has permeated every aspect of their department’s offerings, from the actual programming to the reservation process, to the way educators communicate with teachers.

### **What’s Next for Museum Education & Suggestions for the Future**

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<sup>22</sup> See table 3

Having been no model, or seemingly no real effort, to collect data about museums prior to 1979, it is virtually impossible to track institutional or program-related trends in the first three quarters of the twentieth century. What we do know is changes to philanthropic, state and federal funding drastically changed the landscape of arts participation, in turn, changing how museums situated themselves. In turning to education as an institutional priority, museums were proactively shaping their own future. Museums were able to react to changing trends in funding and create participation-based programs able to compete with new, non-museum arts organizations. In developing and incorporating formal learning programs, such as Visual Thinking Strategies, museums established themselves as valuable, necessary places of learning and experiencing the arts, history and culture.

Even in the twenty-first century, museums have been able to adapt to rapidly changing technologies, and the new competition for audiences with technological entertainment, by adopting and incorporating technology-based learning programs into their strategies for visitor engagement. In 2009, all museums surveyed by Wetterlund and Sayre had some form of technology-based programming.<sup>23</sup> Smaller museums, had websites and online information about education programs, while the majority of larger museums had those, as well as opportunities for online tour scheduling, online activities or lessons, and online collections. Museums with the necessary resources have also adopted virtual collections, cell phone and iPod tours, video conferencing programs and e-learning opportunities.<sup>24</sup> Many, according to the 2009 Museum Programs Survey have also begun to use social media

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<sup>23</sup> See Table 1 – 100% of museums surveyed had at least a website

<sup>24</sup> See Table 2

applications, like Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, blog sites, and podcasts to promote and distribute education programs (Wetterlund and Sayre 20). In their summary, Wetterlund and Sayre suggest the widespread adoption of these new technologies seem to be impacting the ways museums, and particularly the ways museum educators interface with their audiences, even implying these same technologies may be slowly transforming the mission, organization and scope of museums.

So, what's next for museum education? That is not as easy to predict. When Wetterlund and Sayre suggest technology may be slowly "transforming the mission" of museums, I think they may be using the term a little too loosely. Do I think new museums will adopt mission statements that will make reference to education or technology as an institutional focus or priority, yes, probably. Do I think established museums will formally change their missions (or mission statements), no. An organization's mission is a driving mechanism. Institutional priorities and programs are created with this mission in mind. But, missions are also purposely vague. For instance, if a mission includes a statement like, "...to ensure accessibility to the arts..." an organization can interpret that statement how it sees fit. The organization can offer a popular exhibition, say a Picasso exhibition, with no related educational programming, but that attracts thousands of visitors. Or, the organization can offer an exhibition of a lesser known artist, perhaps with complementary programs, like an online gallery, curriculum-based school tours related to the exhibition, a cell phone tour component, and public lectures about the art and artist, but maybe only attract one hundred visitors. Both examples fulfill the organization's mission by ensuring accessibility; they just do it in different ways.



Now, if you change that statement to, as Wetterlund and Sayre theorize might happen, “...to ensure accessibility through the use of technology-based education programs,” the organization would always be subject to developing programs more along the lines of the latter. As far as technology transforming the scope of a museum, I agree with Wetterlund and Sayre. The results of their 2009 survey suggest it is happening already, in some form or another. And with technology evolving and changing at a dizzying rate, it has firmly rooted itself as a key consideration when museums plan for the future.

In some ways, technology the 21<sup>st</sup> century way of delivering VTS-based education. When museums needed to maintain their relevancy, when they needed a mechanism to compete for and build new audiences and when they needed to secure new funding streams, they prioritized education and incorporated aspects of VTS. Now, museums are doing the same thing with technology. Even the smallest museums have websites, just like by 2003; even the smallest museums had developed and incorporated specialized school tours into their program offerings. In a world where individuals are becoming more and more dependant on technology and e-mail lists are becoming ore popular than mailing lists, museums who don't, or are unable to, utilize technology are in serious danger of becoming irrelevant. Over the past three decades, museums have realized they cannot be complacent. To succeed and thrive, they have to adapt to changes taking place around them. Where once museums could rely on being pretty much the only places to see and experience quality art, they no longer have that luxury.

So, what should museums do? The best advice I believe anybody could give would be to learn from the past. When museums were unable to predict the shift toward arts education in state and federal funding or the increased competition from non-museum arts organizations this shift would cause, they were forced to scramble for a solution to increase participation and develop a sustainable audience. By focusing on education and incorporating strategies for teaching and learning founded in research and proven to be beneficial, museums saw a surge in participation by school aged children and were able to appeal to a whole new generation of public and private donors and visitors.

Now, in 2010, museums are facing a whole new set of challenges. Rather than dealing with an influx of money earmarked for arts-education, they are dealing with a decrease. Schools, that are extremely sensitive to changes in the economy, are experiencing their own decreases in arts funding and are cutting field trips and laying off art teachers. Budget cuts aside, schools are also under increasing pressure to perform well on standardized tests that do not include arts-components and meet national graduation rate standards, pushing the arts even lower on the list of priorities. During the recent economic downturn, granting organizations are also facing budgetary cuts and have more applicants applying for less money. More concerning, individuals and businesses have less money for museum memberships, sponsorships, major gifts, and even exhibition fees.

Considering how sensitive museums are to the social and fiscal changes taking place in other sectors, museums need a new strategy to plan for the future. History has proven museums are adaptable. They have been able to shift

programming priorities, construct new support models and have become adept at incorporating new strategies to engage visitors. What museums seem to have the most difficulty with is predicting these changes. Maybe it is because for decades, even centuries, museums have been subject to their own ideal. A museum is a museum and nothing else can provide the cultural experience a museum can. While that may be true, and may have been enough at some point, when someone can visit the Louvre from their living room or visit a free exhibition at their regional arts center, museums cannot rely on that claim of exclusivity alone. Museums need to be aware, relevant and proactive if they hope to survive.

Awareness comes in many forms. What happened in the 1970's and 80's proves museums are subject to forces beyond their control. By being aware of what's happening in the financial and education sectors museums will be able to better predict funding and participation outcomes and adjust programs and priorities accordingly. Instead of being reactive, museums should focus on becoming proactive in programming. For instance, when economic forecasts predict a recession or when indicators suggest we are already in a recession: assume school and general visitor participation will decrease. Then, instead of bracing for the impact, adapt programs accordingly. This could mean shifting an education department's focus to more off-site outreach programs or in-class visits, or even restructuring admission or program participation fees to remain competitive. If arts education funding is on the decline, develop more curriculum-based tours based in subjects schools are focusing on, like math and science. Museums would also benefit from teaming up with regional and state arts advocacy

groups charged with raising awareness about the importance of the arts. Advocacy groups are able to provide quantifiable evidence about why the arts are important, why art is necessary for social sustainability and often lobby for arts funding at the state and federal level.

The past three decades have also proven museums are not immune to the problems for-profit businesses often struggle with. So, why don't museums start to think more like for-profits? For-profit businesses are acutely aware of their competition, know the importance of studying and understanding regional and community demographics and know the benefits of promoting and marketing to those audiences. Museums could also learn from for-profit hiring practices. Retail business (for example) don't only employ staff with "retail-related" degrees or experiences. They have a variety of staff with varying degrees related to their job descriptions. So why then do museums so often hire individuals with a background in art or experience in non-profit management? A degree in art doesn't promise a passion for or commitment to the organization, creating a healthy and supportive work environment can foster those. And while the days where museums only hired individuals with a degree in art or art history have long since passed, museums could benefit from employing staff with backgrounds in business, technology or for-profit management.

### **Will Museums Become Obsolete?**

Museums will always play an important role in society, whether they continue to act as stations of cultural education and whether they choose to adapt to changing technologies or not. History proves that museums are able to adapt to

changing economies by shifting programming priorities, can transition from a more solitary practice of program development to a collaborative and inclusive practice establishing program and organizational goals, and can adapt to changing technologies and in turn, can create new, modern methods of visitor engagement. Museums are also in a unique position in that they are the only venues charged with the collection, preservation and exhibition of history. As long as museums continue to adapt to changing technologies, continue to focus on audience development and remain relevant, they will continue to thrive. Now, perhaps more than ever, the sustainability of museums is being tested by increased competition from museum and non-museum related attractions, an increasing online entertainment industry and a decrease in the focus on art as an educational priority.

I also posed this question to museum educators in my informal survey. Responses to the question of whether museums would become obsolete varied. Two of the twenty-two educators responded with a simple “no”, suggesting no explanation was needed, they just wouldn’t. Others, such as Juline Chevalier, The Curator of Education at the Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University, responded that for those that understand the value of viewing objects in real life and realize the experience of viewing an object in person is quite different than viewing it online or in a book, museums would never become obsolete, but cautions, for some it will. She said, “For some people yes....those that think seeing something online is just as good as seeing it in person. Overall, no, if people continue to value the actual/real

objects over reproductions/facsimiles.”<sup>25</sup> She does not worry about the increasing availability of online collections becoming a threat to museums, adding, “From what I’ve learned, it seems like online technology does not replace visits to museums for those who live nearby, but instead, extends the reach of the museum to those who are not able to visit because they live too far away.”<sup>26</sup> Most of the respondents agreed. Rich Strum, Director of Interpretation and Education at Fort Ticonderoga adds, “...Nothing can replace the real thing or the real place. Watching a documentary on the Grand Canyon doesn’t mean you don’t have to go there. Likewise, looking at images on a computer screen can’t replace the experience of seeing a painting in person, looking at an artifact, or walking across a historic landscape.”<sup>27</sup>

Not all of the responses I received were so definite; some came with added warnings and suggestions for future audience development. Cheryl O’Donnell warns, museums “...need to continue to evolve with the public’s needs and personal interests/curiosities and thirst for knowledge. We (museums) need to become more accessible, family friendly, less stuffy and more connected to our local communities/resources to remain relevant and special.”<sup>28</sup>

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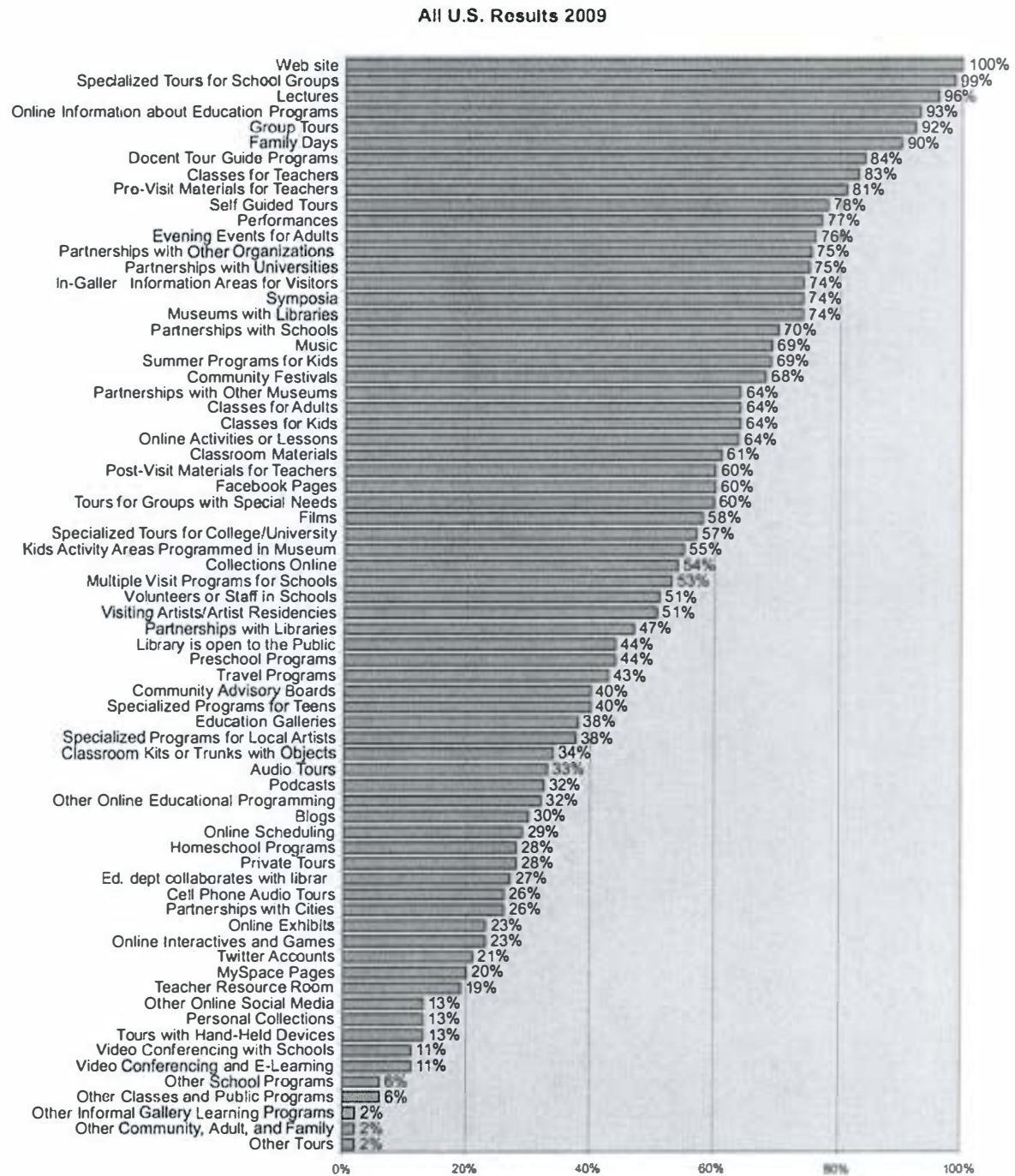
<sup>25</sup> Response received from a survey of Museum-Ed listserve members, April 20, 2010.

<sup>26</sup> Response received from a survey of Museum-Ed listserve members, April 20, 2010.

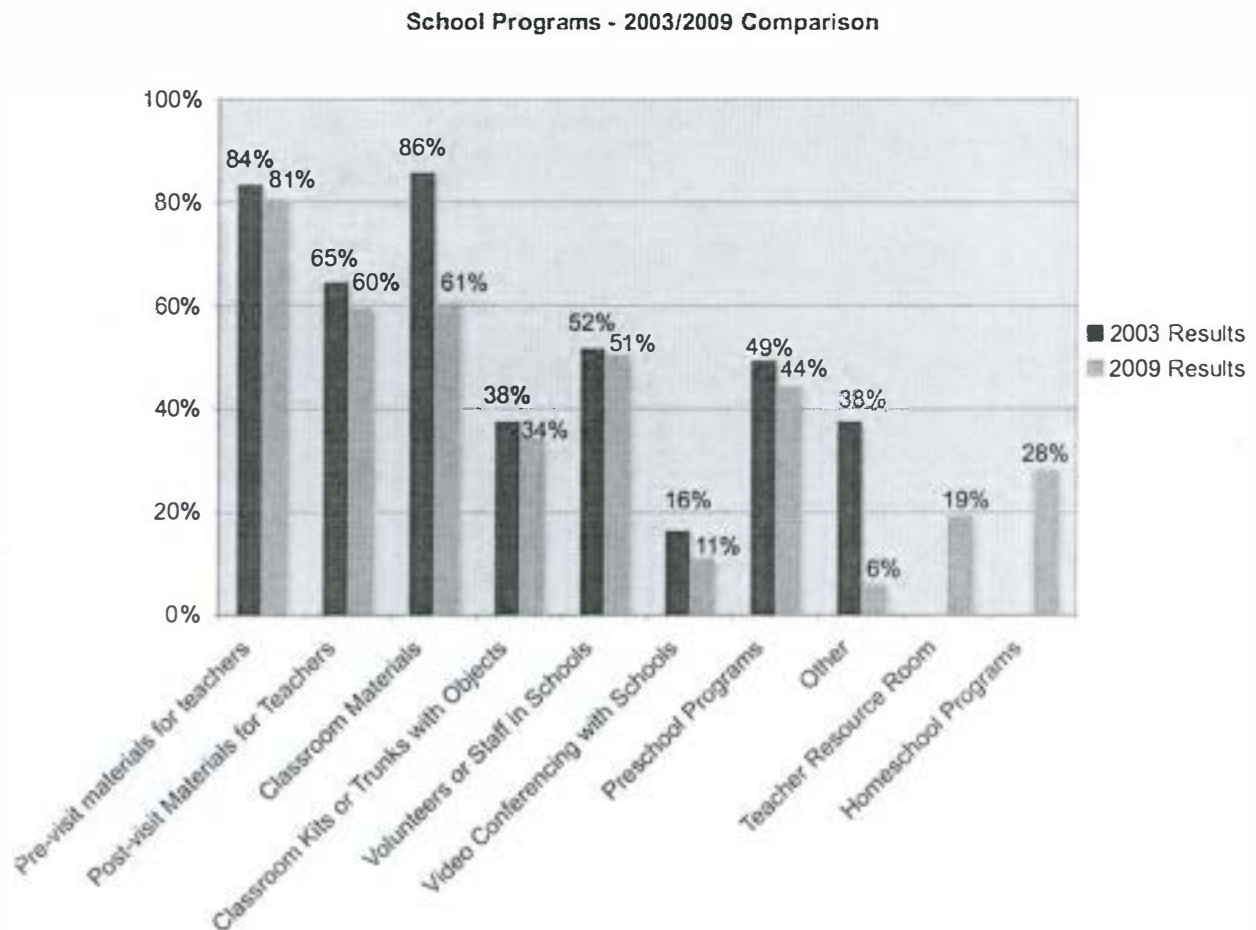
<sup>27</sup> Response received from a survey of Museum-Ed listserve members, April 20, 2010.

<sup>28</sup> Program Director, Olana Partnership, received April 21, 2010

**Table 1: All Museum Education Programs/ U.S. Results 2009**



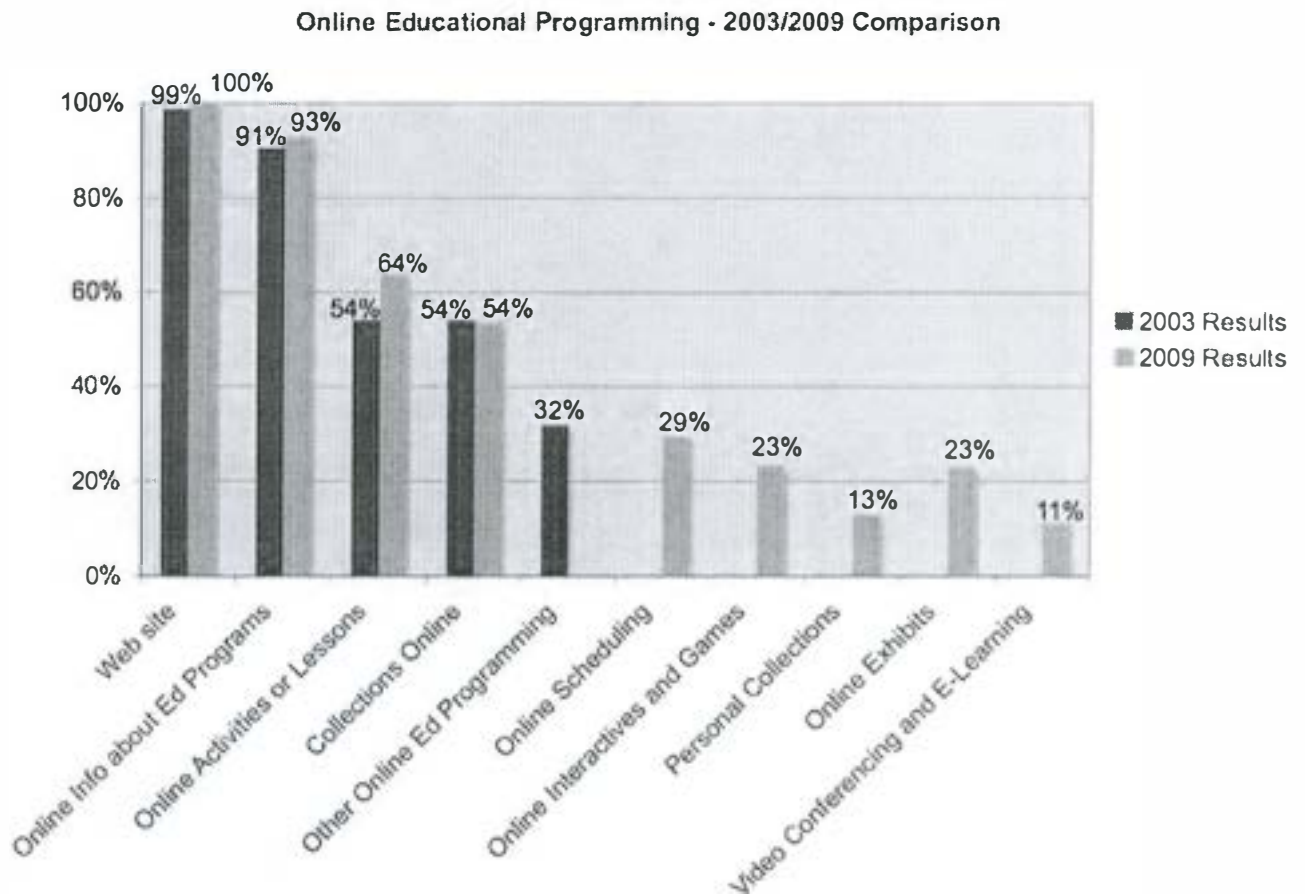
From the *2009 Museum Education Programs Survey*, published by Kris Wetterlund and Scott Sayre (2010), pg 21.

**Table 2: School Programs 2003/2009 Comparison**

From the *2009 Museum Education Programs Survey*, published by Kris Wetterlund and Scott Sayre (2010), pg 17.



**Table 3: Online Educational Programming - 2003/2009 Comparison**



From the *2009 Museum Education Programs Survey*, published by Kris Wetterlund and Scott Sayre (2010), pg 19.

### Full Interview with Philip Yenawine

*In January of 2009, I e-mailed Philip Yenawine, Co-Founder of Visual Understanding in Education, and asked him about his experiences in creating Visual Thinking Strategies.*

**Tanya Tobias:** Why did you develop Visual Thinking Strategies?

**Philip Yenawine:** We did a great deal of research regarding our audiences when I was director of education at MOMA—from 1983-93. When we discovered that none of our teaching had any lasting impact, I decided to ask Abigail Housen if we could work together, using her findings and methodology, to design new ways of teaching that might stick. I believe that art is essential in people's lives; I wanted to find a way to teach visual literacy that worked.

**Tanya Tobias:** Why did you choose to design a model for primary school teachers vs. a model for museum educators?

**Philip Yenawine:** We didn't. Our intention was always to have a method that could be used in museums. But it's hard to do research in museums if looking for development over time, something we knew was going to be necessary to see real change. In reasonably stable schools, you can get enough subjects to have valid sample from which to generalize and you can expect that you'll have enough of those you start with still in the study several years later. In schools, you can create an experimental treatment (eg, lessons) and study the effects; by agreement with the school, you can control other interventions that might influence outcomes. You can find a control audience: students in schools like the experimental ones but who do not participate in the experimental teaching; they simply submit to identical data collection. And so forth. In all of our research studies we collaborated with museums whose staff and docents agreed to apply VTS in visits by our experimental kids. Most of them began to use VTS with other groups, appreciating what happens with their beginning viewers. What was surprising wasn't that VTS worked in gallery teaching but that classroom teachers saw advantages beyond aesthetic growth/visual literacy in terms of thinking and writing.

**Tanya Tobias:** How do you feel about museums incorporating adapted versions (say without the structured follow-up conversation in the classroom) of VTS?

**Philip Yenawine:** I have no problem with museums using VTS in a range of programs. It makes sense to me; research has shown growth (aesthetic stage change) as result of VTS experience in schools in a relatively short amount of time. Why not use it with beginning viewers in museums, especially given multi visit programs? What I don't like is "hybrids"—teaching that attempts to combine VTS with providing information; my reasons stem from the research at MOMA. We had a great staff—knowledgeable, personable, interactive, articulate and so forth—but information based teaching, even when interactive, didn't produce growth. This is a

complicated topic but suffice it to say that I feel it inappropriate to use techniques for which there is no data of significant impact and which at least at MOMA proved to do nothing. We have too little time with our audiences in museums to waste any of it.

**Tanya Tobias:** How would you describe the field of museum education prior to your development of VTS and after?

**Philip Yenawine:** Museum education usually provides the impetus and means to address the needs and desires of the public within art museums. The field is full of well-intentioned, generous, hardworking, dedicated people. It's been that way since I entered the profession in 1969. Museum educators often work in contexts where they have an uphill fight to do the job assigned to them, often encountering resistance and misunderstanding from administrations and curatorial people. Ironically, I think of VTS as creating a real audience for what curators do best: display objects to their best advantage. VTS teaches people how to examine and consider various meanings contained in objects, and in my view that's the most useful kind of education museums can provide.

**Tanya Tobias:** What external factors played a role in the development of this method?

**Philip Yenawine:** The influence of constructivist education--the research and theories of Rudolf Arnheim and Lev Vygotsky and the ideas of Jerome Bruner.

**Tanya Tobias:** How do you see museums engaging visitors 10 years from now?

**Philip Yenawine:** I expect that museum education in ten years will resemble what we find today: museums will offer a range of programs and employ many tools and technologies, some in galleries, some in studios, and some via new media.

*In March of 2010 I emailed an informal survey to museum educators to gauge their thoughts about the past, present and future of museum education. I asked them the following questions:*

- 1. How has the field of museum education changed since you began your career?*
- 2. What do you think the future holds for museum education?*
- 3. How do you think museums will engage visitors in the future?*
- 4. Do you think museums will become obsolete?*

*The survey was sent to an estimated 700 Museum-Ed listserve members, approximately 200 subscribers to the Museum Association of New York (MANY) email list and nearly 300 MANY Facebook page fans.*

Informal Museum Educator Survey Respondents:

1. Cheryl L. O'Donnell, Program Director, The Olana Partnership
2. Deborah Duke, Educator, Roosevelt National Historic Site
3. Ed LaVarnway, Executive Director, the Frederic Remington Art Museum
4. Juline Chevalier, Curator of Education, Nasher Museum of Art at Duke University
5. Lynette Morse, Educator, New York Transit Museum
6. Marianne Howard, Collections Manager, Planting Fields Foundation
7. Mary Ann Taormina, Educator, Southeast Museum
8. Rich Strum, Director of Interpretation and Education, Fort Ticonderoga

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