



Rogers
PUBLISHING

WE THE MUSEUM

VOLUME 4
2021



THEORY & PRACTICE

*A Publication from the
National Emerging Museum
Professionals Network and
The Museum Scholar*

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Theory and Practice: The Emerging Museum Professionals Journal

www.TheMuseumScholar.org

Rogers Publishing Corporation NFP

4131 S. State St, Suite C, Chicago, IL 60609 www.rogerspublishing.org

Cover photo: Clay Leconey

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The National Emerging Museum Professionals Network

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Us Not Other: Co-creating Space for Cooperative Learning

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Keywords dialogue, *conscientização*, collective learning, museum education

Abstract Theories of praxis, *conscientização*, dialogue, and education as collective action are explored within the role that museums play in upholding existing power structures. Using the lens of Paulo Freire's philosophy and experiences of the struggle of the oppressed and the oppressor, this exploration includes what museums need to change in order to move toward a less hierarchical power dynamic with the public, and the role of the museum educator within this shift. This article also considers the theory in relation to the author's own role in the field and their interactions with students and other learners.

About the Author Ashley Frenkel is an educator, teaching artist, believer in questions, and advocate for collaborative, participatory learning. She holds a BA in Art History from New York University, and is currently pursuing her MEd at the Bank Street Graduate School of Education in Museum Leadership. Though her work is heavily focused in the visual arts, she has experience with and a deep passion for science, history, culture, food, storytelling, and all forms of knowledge, and believes that interdisciplinary collective learning best represents our world and the learners in it.

This article was published on November 30, 2021 at www.themuseumscholar.org

As a freelance educator and teaching artist in New York City, I am intimately familiar with the frustration that comes from the conflict between my desire to be a co-creator in learning experiences centered on collective growth, and my formal role as a representative of the institutions I work for. Educator and philosopher Paulo Freire's work speaks to a related duality, in which underlying power imbalances embedded in hierarchical social relationships affect the human ability to learn in social environments. In addition to reflecting on these themes philosophically, Freire actively incorporated his theories of oppressive education, as well as education as a counterforce, into his own pedagogical practice to uplift and shift power to oppressed voices. From this union, praxis (the cyclical process of reflection and action) emerges. This synthesis of theory and practice also applies to my own pedagogy and the educative work of museums, which are institutions of power just as much as they are places of learning. By recognizing the oppressive forces at play including racism, classism, and sexism, and confronting the covert and overt roles museums play in perpetuating them, I believe museums can become active in the struggle for collective empowerment and learning.

I see the struggle between oppressed and oppressor, where “education [is] the exercise of domination” that Freire outlines in his seminal work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, in my museum work far too often.¹ When I am expected to teach with objects with unknown, dubious, or outright problematic provenance, I become further entangled with colonization, capitalism, or often both, as in the case of the Benin bronzes.² When I am expected to create lessons based on exhibitions I had no input on, hierarchical power struggles manifest in a way that reinforces the fact that I am not salaried, sometimes not even considered an employee, and that I am not of the leadership or executive staff. This implies that the degree to which my voice is valued within traditional museum institutions is correlated with formal status. The fact that MoMA’s director Glenn Lowry makes 48 times the salary of an education assistant further reinforces this, a fact known only because of a collective effort by museum professionals to increase salary transparency using a field-wide spreadsheet.³ Alone there is little power, but together change can begin and flourish.

Perhaps a resistance to more equitably distributed power and capital is why so many museums, from the Guggenheim to the New Museum, have fought to suppress the formation of unions, a suppression that has ultimately failed. The Guggenheim’s director Richard Armstrong expressed opposition in an email under the pretense that unions as a third party have “very limited experience in the museum field.”⁴ I would argue that the museum field is inseparable from those who work in it and from the people it serves, making the experience of the field not quite as unknowable and unique as Armstrong might think. Imagine the statement museums would be making if they welcomed unions with open arms and sought to support workers’ rights in order to move toward relationships founded in listening, instead of in assuming to know what’s best.

Relationships as conduits for learning are embedded in active listening, and when these pieces come together, dialogue as an “act of creation” arises.⁵ The self as learner is engaged and challenged and creates a shared understanding with others through dialogue to foster *conscientização*, or a critical consciousness directed at enacting social change.⁶ This critical perception of the self as learner, active participant, and change-maker within the world arises from the dialectic tensions between, but not limited to, the following: teacher/learner, subject/knower, practice/theory, thought/action, communication/ideology, joy/seriousness, and public/private. These tensions are a direct contrast to “banking...assumption[s] of dichotomy,” where a person receives knowledge merely as a receptacle without engagement, as an associate of the world instead of with it.⁷ This can often be didactic lectures, but can also manifest as a well-intentioned lesson or interactive exhibition that assumes to know how a learner will engage or what a learner will receive.

Museums as places of learning are also for many sites of oppression, where these diametric struggles actively play out and are communicated both explicitly and implicitly through actions and positions taken by the institution. Attempts to cling to neutrality create distance between museums and the people they serve, communicating a concern for clout over accountability. Professor of Organization Studies Ann L. Cunliffe goes even further to say that neutrality is essentially a delusion because “there isn’t a social reality that exists independently from people.”⁸ Organizations are not formless entities; rather they are comprised of institutional and public stakeholders who act in relation to one another, responding and reacting in context at all times. The Museums Are Not Neutral movement

created by La Tanya Autry and Mike Murawski in 2017 has been integral in criticizing the myth of museum neutrality and in expressing the potential for museums as sites of change if only museums “dedicate themselves to dismantling racism and oppression.”⁹

Neutrality can also create rifts within museums. Gugulethu Moyo left the Jewish History Museum in Tucson just six months after being appointed the first Jewish person of color to lead an American Jewish museum. She publicly sought accountability and accused the board of racism and sexism, particularly in response to her integrating contemporary social justice issues into the museum. A significant donor, Wayne Gould, went so far as to say that he and his wife “donate to anything that helps educate people about the horrors of the Holocaust as long as it is apolitical.”¹⁰ When museums even entertain such attempts at neutrality, they reinforce the idea that museums are spaces not of the world.

For transparent communication and reciprocal learning between museums and people, museums cannot think of themselves as other, as places that offer creative and intellectual freedom *for* people regardless of everything else. Freire said, “If I consider myself superior to what is different, no matter what it is, I am refusing to listen,” and it is in part with this mindset that museums perpetuate oppression.¹¹ Museums as institutions have historically chosen to align themselves with ideologies of white superiority, patriarchal primacy, and capitalist preeminence. When faced with questions of what they are working toward (goals) and for whom they are working (audience), the answer has often been to maintain the status quo. Now with a combination of museum worker-initiated criticism through Instagram accounts such as @changethemuseum and @museumworkersspeak, and public outcry, forced accountability is causing shifts in programming, exhibitions, and staffing, but the foundations of the museum field that are grounded in dominant ideologies still peek through.

When I look at what art museums choose to collect and display, who is hired or sits on the board, and who is invited in and treated with respect, I see a bifurcation between the institution and the public that hinders learning. When just about 11% of museum acquisitions are of works by women artists and 89.3% of surveyed museum board members are white, there is no mistaking who holds power and value in the eyes of the institution.¹² The core of institutional oppression in museums is elitism rooted in race, gender, and class. Freire makes a very valid criticism, saying that “it is rare, for example, that we perceive the aggressive incoherence that exists between our progressive statements and our disastrously elitist style of being intellectuals.”¹³ Museums may make statements saying that Black Lives Matter, but what are they doing to show it? As curator Kimberly Drew points out, “There is a chasm between institutions issuing newsletters about ‘standing in solidarity’ and those, like the Walker Art Center, that have, for example, stopped contracting their local police force for public events.”¹⁴ Museums will never truly value relationships and the sharing of knowledge and experiences so long as they continue their superficial offerings. The Portland Institute for Contemporary Art recognized that moving beyond lip service means internalizing collective action and embracing praxis. They opened the building to protestors of the 2016 election to use the bathroom, eat a meal, and store signs.¹⁵ This sort of action might not be possible for all museums depending on capacity and need, but any act of humility can be fertilizer for the growth of *conscientização*.¹⁶

Who museums choose to have relationships with, and the dynamics of those relationships, can either reinforce or break the mold of institutionally perpetuated oppression. The standards and expectations we are held to and hold others to, and how we treat and value them, are factors that tie into oppression on an interpersonal level. Sometimes, especially in museum education work, there isn't a lot of time for administrators to develop and sustain relationships, and educators are expected to juggle different kinds of relationships on the spot. For example, a museum might have a relationship with a school's administration or specific teachers at a school, but every year the class that comes to visit the museum will be different. In one- or two-hour visits, students are expected to adapt and abide by rules about touching and volume and moving within a new environment, listen to educators attentively, and ideally forge some connection with the artwork or institution or both. But, "it is not our role to speak...about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue...about their view and ours" by constructing space where students feel comfortable sharing personal experiences and thoughts.¹⁷ To navigate the blurry lines between teacher and student, educators need to listen to what students say with their words and actions, as well as embrace the possibilities housed within limits and freedom, joy and seriousness, and academic rigor and play.

The blurriness of these lines make more sense once we come to see lived experiences as an interwoven tapestry of "...genetic, cultural, social, class, sexual, and historical conditions that mark us profoundly and that constitute for us a center of reference".¹⁸ This "center of reference" is our subjectivity, and critical communication pedagogy researcher Sandra L. Pensoneau-Conway sees "education as a site of subjectivity construction" where we collectively come to "[invest] in personhood".¹⁹ To value people for who they are and engage with them as equals, there needs to be trust and flexibility. People in the United States consider museums more trustworthy and reliable than local papers, researchers, teachers, government, and books, and a resounding 97% believe museums are "educational assets for their communities."²⁰ To honor and nurture this trust, it's important to be mindful of power within the relationships between museums and their staff, between staff and visitors, and between visitors and the museum as institution.

Dialogue is a powerful tool for building trust. Museum educators Rika Burnham and Elliot Kai-Kee refer to it as a process "guided by the spirit of discovery and curiosity" that is distinct from conversation and discussion.²¹ Dialogue creates pathways for the transformation of participants' perspectives. It creates room for the subjectivity that Pensoneau-Conway speaks of, which enables people in the physical museum space to respond to objects, the environment, and others' views. When educators act as "a catalyst for 'an experience'" as opposed to arbiters of knowledge, they fulfill education as philosopher John Dewey envisions it, as a "reconstruction or reorganization of experience which adds to the meaning of experience."²² The experience of learning that takes place within museums and the meaning that is created from this experience can act as powerful implements "in correcting unfair privilege and unfair deprivation."²³

Another powerful tool that applies as much to institutions as it does to individual educators is what artist and organizer Anthony Romero calls "acts of hospitality," where museums

provide space and resources for communities to engage in dialogue and be heard, share a meal together, create art, and any other non-exploitative activity.²⁴ Building in compensation so that board members and decision-makers come directly from the communities that museums learn with, and creating action-oriented community-centered boards are other ways to bridge gaps between the institution and the public. Community groups can have self-direction over exhibition spaces and access to resources to construct meaningful learning experiences in collaboration with curators and educators that the larger public can share in. This allows for different communities to become active stakeholders in the museum while ensuring these communities' stories are told with the integrity they deserve. If museums choose to both leverage the power they have on behalf of others and to give up some of their power, then "the change made by action [can be] reflected back into a change made in us" and make way for a broader conception of learning.²⁵

The Oakland Museum of California embodies this reciprocal approach throughout their work. A community engagement committee helps design internal trainings for trustees on equity and inclusion and in the process becomes a part of the fabric of the institution. Exhibitions like *Queer California: Untold Stories* and *All Power to the People: Black Panthers at 50* and related programming are co-created by museum staff and committees and enable the museum to become a part of various communities.²⁶ The museum becomes an active combatant against Freire's concept of "narration sickness," a systemic phenomenon where content is delivered passively and divorced from experience.²⁷ Instead of perpetuating the idea of the museum as sole authenticator of knowledge, people are uplifted and empowered to share their own experiences, thoughts, and feelings. If museums align their actions with their words and cede power to community members based on their vast experiences and perspectives, not just their ability to give financially or their connections to powerful institutions and people, they can build their capacities to inspire trust. To embody scholar Mary Parker Follett's ideas of "power-with" instead of "power-over" in relation to community members and organizational members, power must come to be seen as a joint creative process, not something held and wielded over others.²⁸ By challenging top-down hierarchies where museums control the distribution and framing of knowledge and resources, and instead positioning institutions as in service and support of a network of communities' needs, museums will begin to conceive of community not as *other* but *us*.

As the museum field slowly opens itself up to more expansive definitions of community, experience, and learning, it is also essential that educators recognize and overcome oppression within themselves. The Inclusion is a blog, project, and space that cultivates dialogue and practice around ideas of justice and inclusion in museums. In a post from 2015, activist nikhil trivedi speaks to the ways that oppression can manifest not only in institutions, but also on a personal level.²⁹ When I doubt the merit of my own voice, thoughts and observations, I am not able to show up as boldly or as freely in my role as educator as I would like to. However, by internalizing the value others see in me, I can come to perceive myself through their lens. In turn, this feeds back into how I engage, communicate, and value others. To counteract internalized oppression directed at others, and myself, I have developed a practice of examining the gaps between my identity and my actions, my thoughts and my actions, and between all three. At this intersection, critical opportunities for the creation of new values, new relationships and new stories arise.

In my work as an educator, I see the space between knowing and not knowing as a space to “stimulate critical curiosity” and creativity.³⁰ As learning takes place, each participant creates a unique narrative. As an educator, I consider myself a facilitator and co-investigator of this generative work, with the ultimate goal being to play a part in the abolition of oppression institutionally, interpersonally, and personally. Freire says that abolition is a radical act that must include reflection.³¹ I need to know who I am, what I believe, and how I convey and project these things onto others before I can even conceive of engaging in abolitionist work. At a job interview, I was asked to speak to my identity, and I recall being filled with hesitation. I did not have the reflective practice or language at that time to articulate the in which I was connected to those around me. After, when I thought about this question further, I noticed that I kept going back to the idea of a shared struggle. The oppression that I and other experience act as points on a map by which I can orient myself and my place within a learning dynamic and within the institutions I work. Likewise, “in order [for museums] to communicate effectively, [they] must understand the structural conditions in which the thought and language of the people are dialectically framed...”.³² Museums and educators need to continually undergo processes of reflection and action with the communities around them. There is strength and reclamation in being able to name oppression as well as name ourselves.

I realize upon reflection what first drew me to museums and the field of education was deeply rooted in elitism. I had experienced learning in and out of museums through hierarchical systems of information transference or banking, not co-creation. As a part of a banking model, I was told to memorize information from a slideshow or a lecture and regurgitate it on a test because good grades were the priority, and those who received good grades were better than those who did not. Group projects were perfunctory state-mandated activities, exercises in how to cram together disparate ideas as opposed to fostering exploration and the collective creation of ideas. In most of my experiences in formal education, I engaged with information disconnected from real world application. For example, geometry wasn’t taught as a tool for building furniture or designing textiles, but as an abstract measurement method.

I didn’t fully conceive that there are other ways to learn things until after graduating from college. It was through learning from fellow museum educators and teaching artists, being invited in as a “critical co-investigators in dialogue,” and being respected as an individual and a member of a community that I started to see value in the process of dialogue and in asking questions and listening.³³ It is also important to recognize the precarious position of the museum educator, as both a part of oppressive institutions but also often—because of factors of race, class, and gender—a member of oppressed communities. If my students are to understand how they relate to the world and how the world relates to them, I and other museum educators need to be critically reflective and intentional in our roles within our institutions and in relation to our students. Actively recognizing the humanity of ourselves and our students requires going through a process of confusion, inquiry, anticipation, and experimentation.³⁴ Engaging in this reflective process before, during, and after learning experiences can help educators understand when to speak up and when to step back. Being an educator means “...embracing the parts of the self that desire and feel,” by making a pathway for students and teachers to engage “as subjects within, rather than objects of, education”.³⁵

In my own interactions with students, I strive to create space where students are not just objects or participants, but decision makers, excavators, and storytellers. The Archive for Research in Archetypal Symbolism, an archive in New York City that uses a Jungian analytical approach to interpreting visual symbols, hosts an annual program called Pioneer Teens where a group of young people engage in a process of reflection and self-discovery during a two-week intensive. During the course of the program, we explore the intersection of archetypal, cultural, and personal symbols using object records from museums around the world. By nurturing creative exploration, self-directed research, and conversation based in non-judgment, personal experience and observation, students and I can work together to uncover symbols in our world, our relationships, and our art practices. By deciding together what we perceive and the power we give the symbols in our lives, we use critical consciousness as a tool to move toward a place of praxis, balancing between theory and practice to guide our reflections and actions.

To create educational experiences and environments that center collective learning and eschew traditional perceptions of power and value, museums as institutions and educators as individuals need to recognize the oppressive forces that act on us, reflect on how we contribute to and respond to oppression, and actively choose counteractive pathways toward communion and abolition. Through Freire's concept of *conscientização*, choosing to act consciously while recognizing our unconscious motivators, we can cultivate change. By connecting intentions with actions, we can start to dismantle systems of oppression and learn as a collective. By bridging the divide between the self and the world, we create space where all perspectives and knowledge have value, where all teachers are students, and all students are teachers.

Notes

¹ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 1970), 78.

² Dan Hicks, "How Did the Benin Bronzes Come to Europe? Here's How Colonial Powers Raced to Loot Them Amid a Program of Imperial Destruction," *artnet*, December 16, 2020, accessed March 10, 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/opinion/benin-bronzes-dan-hicks-1931538>.

³ Hakim Bishara, "Spreadsheet Highlights Major Income Disparities at Cultural Institutions," *Hyperallergic*, April 29, 2020, accessed April 15, 2021, <https://hyperallergic.com/560132/spreadsheet-highlights-major-income-disparities-at-cultural-institutions>.

⁴ Catherine Wagley, "Museum Workers Across the Country Are Unionizing. Here's What's Driving a Movement That's Been Years in the Making," *artnet*, November 25, 2019, accessed April 15, 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/market/union-museum-analysis-1714716>.

⁵ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 89.

⁶ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 109.

⁷ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 75.

⁸ Ann L. Cunliffe, *A Very Short, Fairly Interesting and Reasonably Cheap Book about Management* (London: SAGE, 2014), 4.

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- ⁹ La Tanya S. Autry and Mike Murawski, "Museums Are Not Neutral: We Are Stronger Together," *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art* 5, 2 (Fall 2019): 2, accessed April 17, 2021, <https://doi.org/10.24926/24716839.2277>.
- ¹⁰ Asaf Shalev, "First Jew of color to lead an American Jewish museum resigns, citing prejudice," *The Times of Israel*, May 3, 2021, accessed May 4, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/first-jew-of-color-to-lead-a-us-jewish-museum-resigns-citing-discrimination>.
- ¹¹ Paulo Freire, "Teaching is a Human Act," in *Pedagogy of Freedom, Ethics, Democracy and Civic Courage* (Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield, 1996), 108.
- ¹² Meilan Solly, "Study Shows U.S. Museums Still Lag When It Comes to Acquiring Works by Women Artists," *Smithsonian Magazine*, September 20, 2019, accessed May 4, 2021, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/survey-us-museums-reveals-few-gains-female-artists-past-decade-180973190>; Yaling Jiang, "What It Takes to Make Museum Boards More Diverse," *Artsy*, September 29, 2020, accessed May 4, 2021, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-takes-museum-boards-diverse>.
- ¹³ Freire, "Teaching is a Human Act," 99.
- ¹⁴ Kimberly Drew, "What Should a Museum Look Like in 2020?," *Vanity Fair*, August 24, 2020, Accessed April 20, 2021, <https://www.vanityfair.com/culture/2020/08/what-should-a-museum-look-like-in-2020>.
- ¹⁵ Kristan Kennedy, *As Radical, As Mother, As Salad, As Shelter: What Should Art Institutions Do Now?*, ed. Dushko Petrovich and Roger White (Brooklyn: Paper Monument, 2018), 63-64.
- ¹⁶ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 90.
- ¹⁷ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 96.
- ¹⁸ Freire, "Teaching is a Human Act," 91.
- ¹⁹ Sandra L. Pensoneau-Conway, "Desire and Passion as Foundations For Teaching and Learning: A Pedagogy of the Erotic," *Basic Communication Course Annual* 21, no. 12 (2009): 178, <http://ecommons.udayton.edu/bcca/vol21/iss1/12>.
- ²⁰ "Museum Facts & Data," American Alliance of Museums, accessed April 20, 2021, <https://www.aam-us.org/programs/about-museums/museum-facts-data>.
- ²¹ Rika Burnham and Elliot Kai-Kee, "Conversation, Discussion and Dialogue." In *Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation as Experience* (Los Angeles: Getty, 2011), 87.
- ²² Burnham and Kai-Kee, "Conversation, Discussion and Dialogue," 92; John Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, (Mineola: Dover, 2004), 74.
- ²³ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 115.
- ²⁴ Anthony Romero, "Museum Resolution: Build Social Relations Over Property Relations," *Walker Art Center*, January 8, 2019, Accessed April 20, 2021, <https://walkerart.org/magazine/soundboard-museum-resolutions-anthony-romero>.
- ²⁵ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 134.
- ²⁶ Lori Fogarty, "Our Museum Is Considered a Leader in Equity and Inclusion. Here's What We've Done—and Why We Have a Long, Long Way to Go," *artnet*, June 12, 2020, Accessed May 4, 2021, <https://news.artnet.com/opinion/lori-fogarty-oakland-op-ed-1885446>.
- ²⁷ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 71.
- ²⁸ Cunliffe, *Book about Management*, 11.
- ²⁹ "Oppression: A Museum Primer," The Inluseum, last modified February 4, 2015, <https://inluseum.com/2015/02/04/oppression-a-museum-primer>.

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- ³⁰ Freire, "Teaching is a Human Act," 100.
³¹ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 65.
³² Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 96.
³³ Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 81.
³⁴ Dewey, *Democracy and Education*, 146.
³⁵ Pensoneau-Conway, "Desire and Passion," 181.

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