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A series of 29 booklets  
documenting workshops  
held at the Fifth  
International Conference  
on Adult Education

## 7b Cultural heritage

Museums, libraries and cultural heritage:  
democratising culture, creating knowledge and  
building bridges



This publication has been produced by the UNESCO Institute for Education within the context of the follow-up to the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education (CONFINTEA V), held in Hamburg in 1997.

Readers are reminded that the points of view, selection of facts, and the opinions expressed in the booklets are those that were raised by panellists, speakers and participants during the workshop sessions and therefore do not necessarily coincide with official positions of the UNESCO or of the UNESCO Institute for Education Hamburg. The designations employed and the presentation of the material in this publication do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the UNESCO Secretariat concerning the legal status of any country or territory, or its authorities, or concerning the delimitations of the frontiers of any country or territory.

## Theme 7: Adult learning, media and culture

Booklets under this theme:

7a New information technologies: a key for adult learning?

7b Museums, libraries and cultural heritage:

democratising culture, creating knowledge and building bridges

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## Foreword

In July 1997 the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education was held in Hamburg, organised by UNESCO and in particular the UNESCO Institute for Education, the agency's specialist centre on adult learning policy and research. Approximately 1500 delegates attended from all regions of the world, with representatives of 140 member states and some 400 NGOs. In addition to the work of the commissions and plenary which debated the official documents of the Conference **The Hamburg Declaration** and **The Agenda for the Future**, there were 33 workshops organised around the themes and sub-themes of the Conference.

As part of its CONFINTEA follow-up strategy, the UNESCO Institute for Education has produced this series of 29 booklets based on the presentations and discussions held during the Conference. The recordings of all the workshops were transcribed and synthesized over one year, edited, and then formatted and designed. A tremendous amount of work has gone into this process. Linda King, coordinator of the monitoring and information strategy for CONFINTEA, was responsible for overseeing the whole process. Madhu Singh, senior research specialist at UIE, undertook the mammoth task of writing almost all the booklets based on an analysis of the sessions. She was helped in the later stages by Gonzalo Retamal, Uta Papen and Linda King. Christopher McIntosh was technical editor, Matthew Partridge designed the layout and Janna Lowrey was both transcriber and translator.

The booklets are intended to draw out the central issues and concerns of each of the CONFINTEA workshops. They are the memory of an event that marked an important watershed in the field of adult learning. We hope that they will be of use both to those who were able to attend CONFINTEA V and those who were not. We look forward to your comments, feedback and continuing collaboration with the UNESCO Institute for Education.

Paul Bélanger,  
Director, UNESCO Institute for Education, Hamburg  
and Secretary General of CONFINTEA

# Museums, libraries and cultural heritage: democratising culture, creating knowledge, building bridges between cultures

## Introduction

Over the past few decades the adult education sector has experienced enormous growth and diversification. Today adult education is being provided not only by educational institutions, both private and official, but also by cultural institutions, such as libraries and museums. Cultural institutions provide both informal individual learning as well as structured learning activities for groups of learners.

The workshop on the role of culture and cultural institutions in adult education at the Fifth International Conference on Adult Education, held in Hamburg in 1997, provided an opportunity to recognise the importance of these institutions for lifelong learning. It synthesised examples of good practice in this field and underlined the importance and the role of cultural education with respect to intercultural understanding, global developments and peace.

The workshop, chaired by Peter Krug from the Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Further Education in Germany, featured the following panel of speakers: Roberto Hernáiz Landáez, Fundación ESARTE Venezuela, Jutta Thinesse-Demel, Adult Education and Museums in Europe, Arlette Thys, International Library Association; a representative from the Dhaka Asania Mission in Bangladesh, and Brian Martin, Heriot-Watt University, Scotland.

The workshop proposed the development of a comprehensive adult learning concept within and among cultural institutions and the revision of inflexible structures and approaches.

## Adult learning in museums: an overview

One might say the collection, conservation and exhibition of artefacts is the museum's primary task. But in fact all museums are first of all learning places. Most museums have pedagogical programmes. School programmes are the most common type of educational service offered by museums, followed by lectures and courses for adults.

Museums offer different types of education/learning opportunities for adults. Most museums have formal services such as gallery talks, lectures, guided tours and publications for distribution, providing structured learning opportunities. At the same time, visitors who go through a collection or an exhibition may experience some individual and informal learning. Many educational institutions use museums as an additional teaching and curriculum resource. In other programmes, the museum is not an adjunct but at the centre of a learning programme. An adult education course can, for example, be structured around an exhibition. Another example is when a museum develops a programme for a specific group of adults. The Museum of the Moving Image in London had a programme for older people to compile oral histories. Such programmes help to make museums more attractive and interactive. Other initiatives try to take the museum out into the community. The aim of such activities is to make museums more accessible to various parts of the population, and more responsive to the visitors' needs and interests. Such initiatives are sometimes developed through a collaborative effort between a museum and an adult education institution.

Learning around museum objects can be an effective way to provide education to people who do not have easy access to the written word or do not speak the dominant language. Museums can also be used for language teaching programmes.

## Are museums in a crisis?

Despite the many new initiatives by modern museums to make their exhibitions more attractive and to democratise access to the museums, a sense of 'crisis' was reflected in several interventions made during the workshop. It was felt that museums are increasingly being taken over by modern theme parks, television and the Internet, and that the number of visitors to the permanent collections is steadily decreasing.

Museums play a marginal role in current adult education practice. The role of cultural education, and the contribution of museums as sites of cultural learning, is not well recognised. The relationship between the museum educators and curators and the adult educators is not always without conflict. Whereas much of adult education is concerned with process-oriented non-formal teaching and pays specific attention to the learning styles and the prior experiences of adults, education programmes offered by museums tend to be structured, using teaching models drawn from the classroom.

Museums often perceive their public as passive recipients who need to be told how a collection has to be interpreted. Collections provide guidance for the individual or the group as to how to "read" an exhibit. Museum collection are often arranged according to someone's interpretation and therefore entail a "programme of learning".

The collaboration between museum educators and adult educators is rendered difficult by the fact that the museums have remained largely separated from the developments in adult education. Museum education has sometimes been criticised by adult educators for not being in touch with the teaching practices and principles of current adult education. Many museums educators, however, see the need for acquainting themselves with new teaching methods and believe that they have much to learn from adult education theory.

## New initiatives

At the same time this “crisis” seems to have actually generated many innovative and creative initiatives. Many museums have successfully restyled their traditional and somewhat out-dated exhibitions. Other museums offer a range of interesting and experimental exhibition projects. Objects are presented in vivid and tangible ways and become integrated in topical relationships and scenarios. Exhibitions are designed to stimulate the imagination and creativity of their viewers.

### The Museum Cristobal Rochas in Venezuela

The museum Cristobal Rochas, a museum of visual arts, founded by the **Foundation Estade** in Los Tecques, Venezuela, is not a conventional museum. The founders placed education as a main task alongside the collection and exhibition. Their aim was to use the arts to contribute to the integral, holistic education of the adult. Recognising the fact that the traditional dynamic between museums and the public is not always satisfying, Cristobal Rochas was not conceived as a museum which the public visits, but as one which visits the public. **Foundation Estade** tried to create an active museum which could attract new audiences and make the museum accessible to a wide range of people. It believed that the arts needed to be presented in a way that would bring them closer to people’s own experiences. Art needed to be understood not as something exotic, but as part of how everybody experiences and expresses life.

Thus, Cristobal Rochas goes to the schools, the offices and the streets. One of the museum’s most innovative projects is an initiative in the local prisons. The prison population is a public which has seldom or never been in a museum. Because of the lack of prior experience with this type of public, the **Foundation Estade** began its work with a very small pilot project in one prison, ►

New partnerships between adult educators and museums can emerge from this search for new ideas and concepts in museum work. Adult education with its specific approach to learning can help make the museum a more accessible and attractive place. Museums and museum education have the potential for reform and innovation allowing them to extend their traditional functions and to take on new roles as learning institutions. The example here from Venezuela is a particularly interesting case; it demonstrates that museums can reach beyond the confines of their own buildings and their traditional public.

► involving only 9 inmates out of the total prison population of 433. This prison already has a programme of theatre and drawing workshops for its inmates. Awakening an interest in the arts was the main aim the Foundation pursued with this experimental workshop. The project started with a sensitising workshop. The success of this initiative was immediate. The participants had an unusual interest in artistic expression. Even those who were often supposed to have little interest or sensibility for the arts, immediately took hold of this new form of self-expression. Drawing and painting materials were then provided and practical courses in drawing or woodcarving were offered. Participants received a certificate after finishing the course. After 2 1/2 months of work in the prison, the group had expanded to 32 prisoners.

The work in prisons has now developed into one of the most important educational activities of Cristobal Rochas. The project helps inmates to develop their own 'free' personality and to counteract the experience of prison in oppressing mind and soul. Art also helps the prisoners to feel useful in their society. With this project, one of the Foundation's other aims was to convince the community involved with the penitentiary system that activities like these can help improve and reform the situation in prisons.

## Partnerships between museums and adult educators

Museums have a unique contribution to make in partnership with adult education, namely by providing the resources and methods for learning from objects. Museums and their staff have considerable experience in this field. While in schools and adult education classrooms teaching mainly works around 'second hand' sources, in museums the objects of learning can be seen and possibly even touched. In this sense, the museum can be a place for autonomous learning, can encourage enquiry and critical analysis and thus be empowering. Informal learning takes place while visitors have the pleasure and amusement of looking at an exhibit. After all, such pleasure may be the main reason why people go to a museum.

The Munich Adult Education Centre's "Museumswerkstatt", a programme of experimental activities in museums

This programme, starting as a pilot initiative in 1984, was aimed at migrant workers and their families who attend language and professional skills training classes at the Munich Adult Education Centre (*Volkshochschule*). After the end of its experimental phase, in 1988, the project was extended. Since then it has also opened for Germans and includes a programme for disabled people. The project aims to reach people who do not normally visit museums or art galleries. It tries to help them discover and enjoy the worlds of art and science.

A course for teaching German has been developed which includes working with the foreign students in a museum. Language is seen as a form of cultural expression and so language teaching in the museums has the advantage of providing an environment which reflects culture, in this case German culture. Students can explore language and culture in a different way and they are encouraged to develop their own impressions. The overall aim of the project is to develop new models of language learning.

Many adult and museum educators see the need for more research, documentation and dissemination in this area, and the possibility of replicating such approaches in other contexts. One example of how the demand for more collaboration and exchange of information at the international levels can be responded to is the project “Adult Education and Museums” (AEM). The project, funded by the European Union under the Socrates programme, promotes the role of museums in adult education. It identifies and analyses innovative projects with museums and adult education institutions in the 15 member states of the European community. The main features of these initiatives, along with the obstacles and difficulties faced, are identified and analysed and a case study produced. The projects show a great variety of approach and involve a range of different people. Examples include:

- early retirement programmes with senior adults;
- reintegration programmes for unemployed adults;
- activities with disabled people;
- language learning in museums;
- occupational training for younger people;
- apprenticeship qualification courses;
- projects with prisoners.

These examples demonstrate that learning programmes for children and lecture presentations for adults are no longer the only type of activities museums have to offer. Adult education, with its informal and non-formal learning practice, can contribute significantly to museum learning. The final report of the project highlighted the need for new forms of advocacy and training opportunities for museum personnel.

# The place of libraries in adult learning

Libraries are a natural resource of formal and non-formal learning for all those who seek information and knowledge or come for the pleasure of reading.

Education has always been accepted by public libraries as one of their most important tasks. In recent years, many libraries have extended their education services and become involved in open learning schemes. They are acquiring new forms of learning materials, such as multi-media learning materials, and are developing into resource centres. The increasing pressure on many adults to keep up with technological developments, to keep themselves informed and to explore new fields of activity and knowledge are leading to libraries becoming important sites for informal and self-guided learning.

In the present policy context, libraries are receiving renewed attention from governments. Public libraries are regarded as essential partners in many governments' efforts to increase educational standards in the country. However, such policies are not without ambiguity, as many neighbourhood libraries are being closed down because of local budget constraints

Libraries play an important role in individual and community lives. Comparative figures on the attendance at museums and art galleries and libraries in the UK show libraries to be the most popular form of public cultural provision. Figures also show that libraries are used by a wider section of the public than other cultural institutions; visitors include people from all social classes and all generations.

## Broadening access to information through libraries

The role of libraries in the promotion of reading was given particular attention by the workshop. A main concern was to find ways to broaden the accessibility of libraries and to consider how to adapt them to the new demands of the information society.

The project "The Library and the Public" started in November 1996, when the Florentine public library Isolotto brought together a group of public libraries from Catalonia, Flanders, Denmark and Italy. These

libraries shared one characteristic: they all made considerable efforts to break out of the confines of the library building and its traditional public and to reach those adults who normally do not visit libraries. The librarians who attended the meeting in Florence developed a joint project on the promotion of reading through the work of libraries. This project, which received a grant from the European Commission's Socrates programme, tries to improve cooperation between libraries among European countries. It was later tutored by a team from the University of Florence. The overriding aim is to enhance the exchange of experiences and provide a forum for the comparison of new methods. It facilitates links between libraries and provides support with the introduction of new approaches including training for library staff.

The focus is on new ways to promote reading and to disseminate information beyond the library buildings. Particular emphasis was placed by the librarians in this project on promoting the role of libraries with respect to new information technologies. The development of the information society and the increasing use of new media in communication and business creates new forms of exclusion. The ability to participate in these new communicative practices depends not only on access to technical means but also on having access to the required skills. It was felt that those who already experience difficulties with traditional literacy are the most disadvantaged with regard to computer literacy.

The project highlighted the urgent need for public institutions to develop new policies in order to address these inequalities. Governments need to take into account the demands of its population for information and skills acquisition. Access to new skills needs to be guaranteed. Increasing the number of training courses alone would not resolve the problem: training and information services need to be adapted to the interests and reading abilities, skills level and language.

Libraries can be important partners in such new strategies, provided their functions are revised and adapted to meet the new demands. They can help provide access to the new communicative media, in much the same way as they have always disseminated the traditional print media. In order to fulfil their new roles, libraries should join forces with other educational and cultural institutions, in particular with adult education centres. The Socrates Project has demonstrated that libraries can be effective in ventures, even without additional financial means being granted.

## The role of village libraries

Village libraries are one of the more common forms of post-literacy provision in many literacy programmes in developing countries where learning opportunities are extremely scarce and there are hardly any reading materials. Their main goal is to help learners retain their literacy skills and to provide opportunities for further reading and studying in other areas of interest for themselves and their communities. Post-literacy does not take place in structured courses, but learning is self-directed and autonomous. Improving learners' self-learning skills is an important aim of the village libraries.

The Asania Mission in Bangladesh has set up village libraries in about 55 communities throughout the country. Approximately 5500 learners are involved in the Mission's continuing education programme. This is particularly relevant for a country such as Bangladesh with a very low literacy rate, and where only 25% of the women are literate.

Post-literacy education through libraries consists of a 12 month continuing education programme. In addition to further literacy learning, participants receive training in other skill areas. They can form development groups and receive micro credits in order to set up small enterprises. The neo-literates achieve autonomy of learning and improve their skills.

The village libraries are linked to a mobile library which in turn is connected to the central library. The mobile library provides new books and materials to the village library once or twice every month. At the central level, the Mission's Material Development Division produces new materials which are then circulated through the mobile library system. In this way a very large number of materials can be distributed without the need to produce large quantities of each booklet or text and so production costs can be kept relatively low. A large variety of materials are produced by the Asania Mission, including easy-to-read magazines, newsletters, wall magazines, posters, books and guides, on topics such as health, nutrition, law and environment.

## The Kerala Village Libraries

The Kerala Village Libraries in India is part of a library movement that started in the 19th century. This movement grew out of the Kerala Library Association, formed in 1943, and which with the support of the state government set up village libraries throughout the state. In the 1970s, the Kerala Library Association launched a functional literacy campaign.

Although the village libraries are mostly used by those who are comparatively well educated, it is believed that the village libraries and the reading rooms have contributed to the high literacy rate in Kerala (above 90% in 1990). The fact that so many people can read and write generates in turn a demand for these libraries.

Like the example from Bangladesh, many countries have set up local libraries as a component of an education programme and to function as learning centres which have a facilitator role and a set curriculum. In many cases the library is managed by a local person or facilitator with little or no specific training. In some cases, participants have to pay for the use of materials in the library.

Although several countries are now trying to develop the local libraries into 'local learning centres' with trained staff, as in Namibia, or into 'continuing education centres' as in India, in many other contexts these libraries remain underdeveloped. They often consist of little more than a box with a few books and documents.

Many practitioners and planners involved in post-literacy activities regard the local libraries as a failure. In practice the libraries have encountered a range of problems and they have often not led to the development of sustainable reading programmes. Distribution is a serious problem. Even if the materials reach the local centres, they are not distributed to the learners. In some cases the materials are rarely used because they are not relevant to local concerns, culturally inappropriate, written in the wrong language or just uninteresting. Many adults with low literacy skills are also uncomfortable with self-learning. Access is a further problem. Materials may not reach those they were meant for, as local libraries can be dominated by users from the more educated population or by schoolchildren.

## Environmental and cultural heritage

Places of cultural heritage provide the viewer with an almost direct access to historical events. Critical interaction with such objects can help to develop awareness of one's own culture and historical background. This can foster an understanding of the complex web of national and international relations and circumstances which shape local developments and events.

Environmental heritage can be regarded as an extension of cultural heritage. It can mean a variety of things, from a person's knowledge of her natural environment to the development of a critical awareness of the links between man and nature.

For the purpose of educational activities, however, environmental and cultural heritage need not be treated separately. Cultural and educational tourism programmes can include both learning about the culture and about the natural environment of the region in question. Such an approach allows for a better understanding of the interrelationship between developments in human society and changes in the natural environment. Places of cultural heritage as well as natural sites can be used as objects for such kinds of learning. By exploring the significance of such sites, learners can also develop their own sense of belonging to and being part of the history of their communities.

Environmental and cultural learning can be part of an education project which examines current social and political issues as well as future-oriented ones. At the University of Naples, such education projects have been developed. They focus on the immediate environment of the participants. The Region of Tuscany is involved in a similar project together with the Greek ministry of education and the generality of Catalan. This joint initiative is entitled "Mediterranean routes for the environmental and cultural education of the European citizen".

## The relevance of cultural learning in the context of current challenges

In view of the many challenges contemporary societies are facing, in terms of poverty, unemployment, racism, migration and civil war, cultural education may seem to have little relevance or be a luxury for the minority of well-off and well-educated citizens. Frequently, people argue that culture, in the form of art or literature, has few links with the problems and experiences of individual people and the challenges of everyday life. But experiences such as those presented during the workshop, demonstrate the significant contribution cultural learning can make and its relevance with regard to contemporary societal issues.

Cultural learning is crucial for both personal and social development. Consequently, there must be a right to cultural education for each citizen. Adult education through cultural institutions can contribute to the development of personal and collective identity, while at the same time fostering an understanding of different cultures.

Museums, libraries and other cultural institutions can address intercultural issues because they have audiences from different cultural backgrounds. The scientific, cultural and technical collections of museums and libraries are able to make world-wide developments and structural relations visible, showing the connections between local events and global conditions. Museums can allow the visitor to compare different times and different cultures, and thus to discover both the diversity and the uniqueness of humanity as it is found in different cultures and populations. Similarly, libraries with their books, magazines, videos, tapes and Internet facilities can help promote knowledge and understanding of different cultures and situations.

The workshop underlined the social and political significance of cultural education. Participants shared a view on culture which goes beyond the conventional elitist notions of high culture. Fostering the knowledge and understanding of the languages and cultures of other populations, of political systems and economic developments in other countries is an essential component of all future-oriented and socially engaged adult education. The aim is to improve the international dimension of adult education and to encourage it to see its responsibility to contribute to more tolerance and peace. However, the question raised was what kind of educational facilities museums and cultural institutions should offer in order to be able to address these issues.

## Conclusion

Museums are more than auxiliaries to teaching. Libraries are more than places to borrow books from and cultural heritage can mean more than visiting war monuments or touring through wildlife parks. All are special sites of learning and offer 'open-ended' learning situations which can provide a range of meaningful experiences for adults.

These new experiences in adult education activities with and by museums, libraries and other cultural institutions, some of which have been illustrated on the previous pages, demonstrate the particular and unique contribution cultural institutions can make. Yet, this contribution is not always recognised. Cultural education is not a priority in the new adult education policies in many countries.

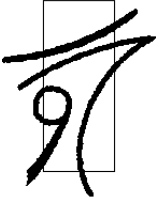
But there are positive developments. The importance of informal learning, its contribution to success in formal education and its part in the well-being of individuals and societies is now increasingly being recognised. This trend has a positive impact on the cultural sector as more attention will be paid to the contribution of museums, public libraries and other cultural institutions to such informal learning.

That cultural education has a significant and unique contribution to make in the overall field of adult education and with respect to lifelong learning is without question. However, as one speaker said, what this contribution of museums, libraries and other cultural institutions consists of needs to be made much more explicit. It is the task of the educators in this field to make their contribution more transparent and to convince policy-makers of the importance of cultural education.

In order for cultural education to make its contribution to adult education, the workshop endorsed two further recommendations:

- 1 As cultural institutions are an essential part of adult learning, libraries, museums, theatres, ecological parks and other such institutions need to be strengthened and appropriate funds should be allocated in order to develop these as adult learning resources.
- 2 The conservation and use of cultural heritage as a lifelong learning resource needs to be promoted and methods and techniques for strengthening heritage and cultural learning be developed.

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The CONFINTEA logo, designed by Michael Smitheram of Australia, represents the lines on the palm of a hand. These lines are universal and yet different for each subject. They celebrate cultural diversity and the joy of learning.

## Theme 7

### Adult learning, media and culture

Booklets under this theme:

- a New information technologies: a key for adult learning?
- b Museums, libraries and cultural heritage:  
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