



Building and Sustaining a Culture of Collaboration

by Matthew Isble

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Collaborate: To work jointly with others or together, especially in an intellectual endeavor.

When did you last do this?

Consider these two facts. First, in the past 10 years no art exhibition has won the American Association of Museums' *Excellence in Exhibition Competition*. Second, generally speaking, art museums develop exhibitions hierarchically. Perhaps this lack of field-wide recognition is related to art museums' lack of interdepartmental collaboration when developing exhibitions. The amount of work and expertise required to produce multilayered, multisensory, and multicontextual exhibition environments cannot be done by one person alone.

The big questions are: What is the best way to move from a hierarchical system of exhibition development to a team or collaborative model, and will moving to this model produce more interesting exhibitions for visitors? In this article I investigate these questions and argue for an approach to art museum exhibition development that pays closer attention to constructivist learning theory. I cite three notable examples of constructivist art museum exhibitions that have been created using the collaborative model.

Achieving Constructivism

If you tell me, I will listen. If you show me, I will see. If you let me experience, I will learn.

—Lao Tzu (6th Century BC)

Development approaches grounded in constructivist philosophy are well suited to make exhibitions more accessible and

meaningful for visitors, but require intimate knowledge of human learning. Constructivism in the museum context holds two main tenets. The first holds that museums ought to shift their focus away from object-centricity, objects shown without context, toward making objects more accessible by displaying them in context and in ways that connect to visitors' prior knowledge. By focusing on making information accessible, the museum is essentially considering learners and their experiences, and not objects as an end in and of themselves. This focus requires museums to address a variety of learning styles. The second tenet is that knowledge cannot be constructed by learners without their participation (Hein, 2005). An activity that does not motivate learners to participate mentally will not initiate an internal formation of knowledge. George Hein, one of the foremost proponents of constructivist approaches in museums, states that this is mental activity, which may or may not be stimulated by physical activity; the two are certainly not synonymous. Monotonous repetitive physical activity, or 'mindless' actions are not particularly conducive to mental changes associated with this form of learning, and recent literature has stressed the need for "minds-on" as well as "hands-on" engagement by learners (Hein, 2005, p.31).

In other words, if a museum cannot offer mindful experiences that motivate or engage the learner, information will be difficult to convey.

Yet the learning model that typically informs an art museum exhibition is the transmission-absorption model, similar to formal education, which generally translates into didactic object labels and wall text. This approach is

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favored by many art curators who are faced with the difficult task of conveying dense and often provocative information through the choice of art works coupled with words about them (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994). I would like to propose that achieving minds-on exhibitions that engage visitors is not possible with a hierarchical or top-down approach to exhibition development. Rather, it requires teamwork and expertise from many departments within the museum. The remainder of this article will provide examples of the links that I believe exist between collaborative exhibition development and the creation of more visitor-friendly exhibitions.

So what techniques have been used to help initiate, build, and sustain the collaborative approach? In 2009, I interviewed 27 art museum professionals from administration, curatorial, education, evaluation, exhibition, and collections departments along with several independent consultants. I wanted to gain a broader understanding of the collaborative exhibition development process. Additionally I surveyed 83 art museum professionals in the same departments from museums across the country. The observations and advice I received centered on four successful strategies: 1) building trust; 2) compromise; 3) patience; and 4) creating sustainable systems.

Building Trust as You Build a Team
Trust: Assured reliance on the character, ability, strength, or truth of someone or something.

Is this happening around you?

Nearly every person interviewed and surveyed emphasized the word “trust” in team building.

This was true for administrators, curators, designers, educators, and evaluators; the key to creating a collaborative work environment is to build inter-personal relationships through trust. First and foremost, each exhibition team member needs to understand how the other defines scholarship, and nowhere is this need more apparent than between the curatorial and education departments. According to JoAnne Northrup, Chief Curator of the San José Museum of Art, a high degree of scholarship comes from giving an artist’s work “a serious art historical evaluation and suggesting ways that [their] work might be contextualized within contemporary art. The exhibition itself [is] scholarly because it [presents] a comprehensive view of [the artist’s] artistic production.” (personal communication, April 2, 2009).

Some curators have argued against collaborating with educators because they fear it will “dumb-down” an exhibition. This claim, however, does not align with educational scholarship. The educators I have interviewed and spoken with are all striving to increase the visitor’s understanding of objects, emphasizing the contextual study of objects through links with everyday experience. Achieving a constructivist exhibition demands a high degree of expertise from today’s educators who are acting on behalf of the audience, making an exhibition clearer for audiences, and using an understanding of learning research to engage visitors. According to Lauren Silver, former Associate Curator for Education at the Cantor Center for Visual Arts (Cantor), educators are “bringing art and visitors together.” Constructivist approaches can make the curator’s dense information clearer for the visitors while, according to Margie Maynard,

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former Director of Education at the San José Museum of Art, creating “bigger audience[s] for [the curator], opening it up and inviting people in.” (personal communication, April 27, 2009). Many education staff interviewed stated that identifying this way of supporting and opening up the exhibition has been the conduit through which they have begun a collaborative relationship with curatorial staff.

Compromise: Something intermediate between or blending qualities of two different things.

Does this happen in your museum?

My interviews and surveys suggest a clear need for all sides to identify differences in scholarship and present solutions that address these differences throughout the exhibition development process. Maynard believes the relationship will not be strengthened “if you get strong-armed into decisions; you... become more guarded. If a two-way street is established, then compromise is easier.”

Respondents identified compromise not only as a key to initiating collaboration, but also as essential to the success of team development projects because no single individual will have all the best ideas. The San José Museum of Art’s associate curator Kristen Evangelista says that “It helps to have multiple perspectives; otherwise [the exhibition] comes across flat. Collaboration gives it a roundness that it wouldn’t otherwise have from a single perspective,” and that collaboration “takes advantage of everyone’s strengths and knowledge.” (personal communication, April 18, 2009). Thus, being open and prepared to compromise not only helps build trust in a relationship, but yields the best exhibitions by

allowing the expertise from each department to influence the final exhibition product. For example, when the staff at the Dallas Museum of Art (DMA) set out to design the exhibition ***Materials & Meanings*** in their Center for Creative Connections (C3) they called on multiple DMA curators to collaborate on the project. Despite being under the same roof, the C3 and greater DMA staff operate in very different ways; the C3 staff tends towards constructivism while the greater DMA staff leans towards traditional transmission-absorption exhibitions. ***Materials & Meanings*** brought together masterworks in the DMA’s collection from various cultures and time periods with highly interactive components that were accessible to all ages. During development each side had to give up an idea or solution to move the process forward, but the upside to the collaboration was the presence of multiple sets of expertise. The curators were able to suggest works of which C3 education staff were unaware, while education staff enhanced the objects with constructivist techniques that were not apparent to the curators. This multiplicity of perspective and expertise seems to be one of the most important elements in creating exhibitions that are rich and appealing to visitors of differing ages, experiences, and learning styles.

Patience: The capacity, habit, or fact of accepting trials without complaint.

Are you? Are others? When does it run out?

Advancing collaborative exhibition development requires patience in the process of building relationships and an understanding that collaboration takes more time compared to the hierarchical model. For example, the Cantor

Museum mounted an exhibition in 2004 called **Question** that presented artwork in the context of questions rather than providing answers or facts. The purpose was to “encourage people to engage with art in a whole new way, focusing on the process of inquiry rather than the search for answers” (Cantor, 2009). This take on the art museum exhibition was as unusual for visitors as it was for those who developed the exhibition. Director Tom Seligman involved every department in the development process, including the store and security departments, giving all staff input and stake in the exhibition. While the many voices did make for a fresh and robust exhibition experience it placed new strain on the staff who had become accustomed to development with fewer voices. Seligman was looking to break up this stagnant development style and knew it would require enduring patience from the staff who would work in new roles with new expectations. Fellow staff members needed to exercise patience for the new process and in dealing with the team members who were learning on the fly. They also needed the forbearance to establish and build on these new relationships if they were to be productive and finish the exhibition on time. The exhibition did open on time, and evaluation from Randi Korn & Associates confirmed that the “process of inquiry” was met with enthusiasm by visitors (Randi Korn & Associates, 2005).

The Cantor did not continue to develop exhibitions in this manner, but the experience did leave a legacy of greater collaborative work between departments and systems that has made subsequent exhibition projects run more smoothly. Interview and survey respondents indicate that patience is required for even the most established exhibition teams, but more so

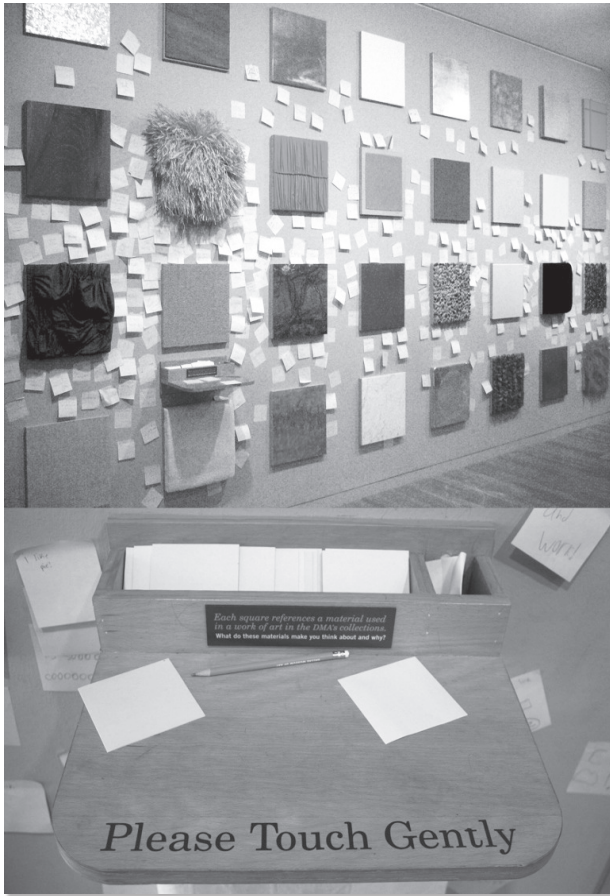


*In this area of the exhibition **Question** the Cantor asked “How is the value of a work determined?” and a visitor reads one of several criteria for determining the value of a 17th c. Netherlandish print. Photo courtesy of the Cantor.*

for museums looking to initiate the process.

Departments and individuals will need to understand that the collaborative process will require substantial lead time, and adjustments to the development calendar will need to be made. But a sustained collaborative system will result in a lasting positive effect on exhibitions. Susan Diachisin, director of the Dallas Museum of Art’s Center for Creative Connections, says that collaboration with DMA curators and designers “has had an impact on the entire staff [and] went beyond the physical space. It changed the way staff viewed the development of exhibitions and programs [throughout the museum].” (personal communication, March 7, 2009). She indicated that this process has taken some time to achieve—that the ripple effects from the Center are still making their way through the museum at large. As curators and educators begin to have successful collaborative projects, no matter what size, the tide can turn and these successes can be built upon in future exhibitions. Positive visitor evaluations from the C3 space have demonstrated to DMA staff that patience for the process will yield positive results.

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In Materials and Meanings visitors are encouraged to touch and respond to the materials, post their response on the wall, and spend time reading other responses. Photo courtesy of Matthew Isble.

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Sustainable Systems:

Sustainable: Of, relating to, or being a method of harvesting or using a resource so that the resource is not depleted or permanently damaged. System: A group of interacting bodies under the influence of related forces.

What systems are in place at your museum?

Collaborating on one exhibition will not necessarily yield future collaborations. The process is not immediately self-sustaining; it will take time and effort to create continued sustained buy-in for the process. Without department-wide agreement that this method is worthwhile, the process will be short-lived. In some cases, continued success depends not only on initial buy-in, but the introduction of protocols for future exhibitions and continued evaluation to guide future collaborative efforts.

Experience with the collaborative process will lead to new ideas and guidelines for future

collaborations, but these will be different for every institution due to differences in mission, audience, and staff culture. For example, a by-product of the collaborative process at the Cantor was the production of the Exhibition Development Planning Document (EDPD) that includes, among other worksheets and timelines, a guiding questions checklist allowing curators to succinctly clarify for other departments the learning goals for future exhibitions:

1. What excites you as the curator about this material/exhibition?
2. Who are the people you want to reach?
3. What is the basic message of the show?
4. What are three major points that you want the show to get across?
5. How will these come through to the visitor?
6. How will the installation support this?
7. How will programs and activities (in the broadest sense) support this?
8. What do you, as the curator, hope to learn from this exhibition?

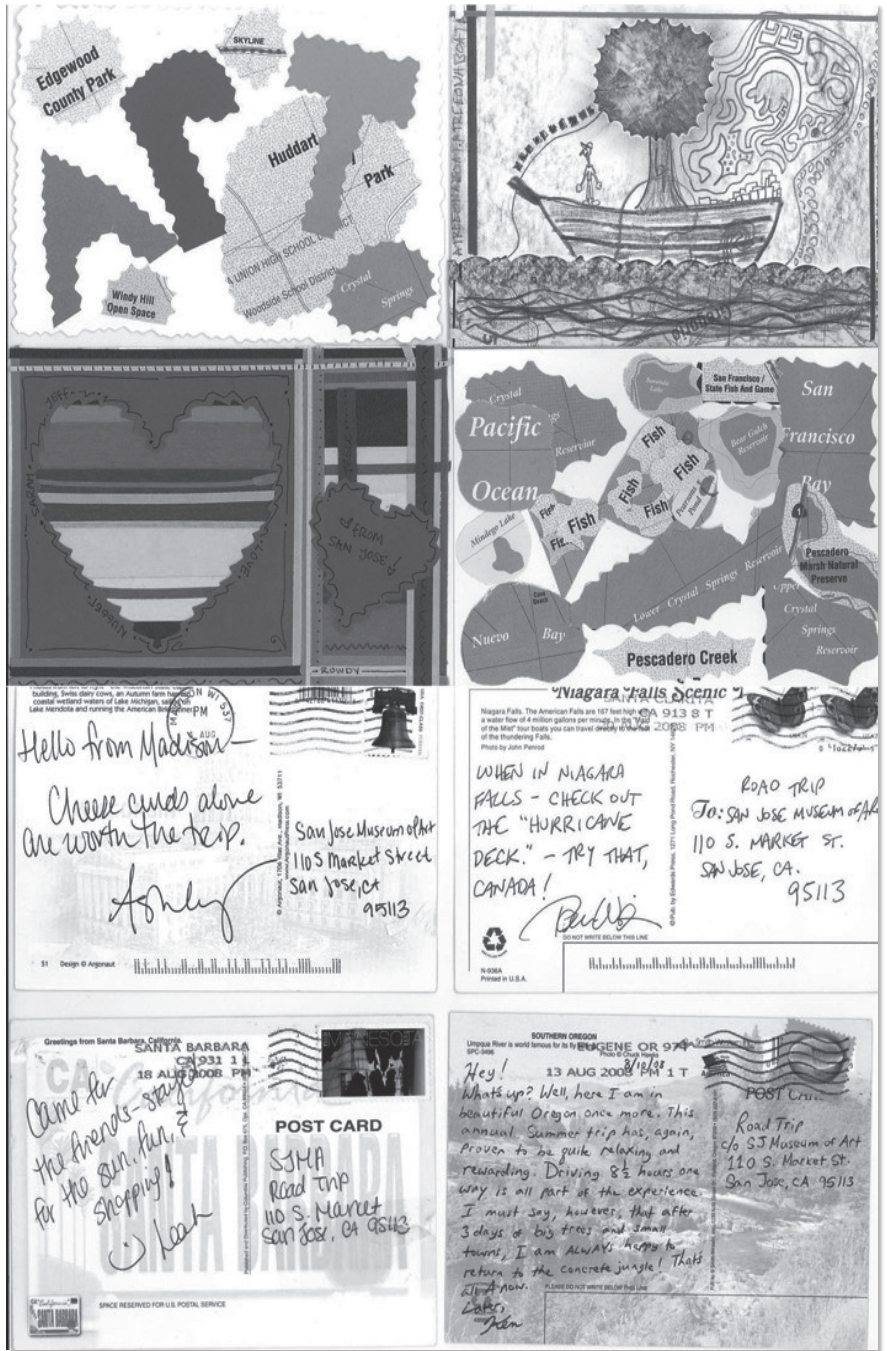
Processes, guidelines, and guiding questions like the Cantor's EDPD make collaboration easier by developing a common language for team members, giving other departments a roadmap for the content of the show. This type of interdepartmental communication tool is generally developed by administration staff or by a collaborative group in larger museums.

In smaller museums, like the San José Museum of Art (SJMA), the process of collaboration has been institutionalized by successfully maintaining much of the staff that initially established the collaborative process. Margie Maynard was instrumental in introducing the team approach in early 2001. Maynard patiently waited for the exhibitions that seemed right for collaboration. Two recent examples

of naturally collaborative exhibitions were SJMA's *Robots: Evolution of a Cultural Icon* in 2008 and *Road Trip* in 2009. These exhibitions were ripe with educational possibilities, and by extension collaboration, due to the prior knowledge most visitors have of robots and road trips. The education department was able to enhance the curator's content, creating an immersive environment accessible to a variety of learning styles. *Road Trip*, for example, not only allowed visitors to create and send their own post cards from the museum floor, but SJMA also created a video asking visitors to send in post cards from their own road trips. Maynard built upon the trust garnered from initial collaborations in subsequent exhibitions until it became a regular part of the exhibition process.

SJMA's exhibition development process was not formalized, but longstanding staff leaders from curatorial, education, and exhibition departments continue to collaborate on exhibitions. The system therefore is merely an established line of communication between trusted colleagues that allows for and synchronizes the contributions from each department; a system that trickles down to the staff in each department. No matter which system a museum chooses to guide its exhibition development, a majority of respondents indicated that staff buy-in and retention are essential to the success and sustainability of the system.

Another system that is invaluable in sustaining the collaborative process is visitor evaluations. This tool is used to ascertain the current state of success of an exhibition and the ways in which it can be improved. According to Bonnie Pitman, Executive Director of the



Postcards made and sent from the museum floor (top) and postcards sent to the exhibition *Road Trip* from visitors (bottom). Courtesy of the San José Museum of Art.

Dallas Museum of Art, evaluation has been beneficial for the C3 by helping “guide what we do and do not do—there was a great deal of learning in the design of the C3 exhibition *Materials & Meaning*—that was improved by the responses we had from visitors.”(personal communication, March 5, 2009).

Evaluation can be expensive, but Sharisse Butler, Manager of Visitor Studies and Evaluation at the Dallas Museum of Art,

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Visitors to **Materials and Meanings** can both view prints on the wall (top), and touch or make rubbings from the actual wood blocks used to make the prints (bottom). Photo courtesy of Matthew Isble.

believes the return can be extremely valuable to the museum's culture because it has "touched and involved numerous staff [and] created a heightened sensitivity to the visitor across departments. This reflective practice has contributed to a cultural shift in our institution." (personal communication, May 28, 2009).

The evaluative process has not only improved the exhibitions within the C3, but has increased awareness of the audience in all departments. Evaluation therefore affects the development process by changing the emphasis from object centrality to a more holistic view of the exhibition which includes the visitor experience.

How Do You Make the Future?
The Future: An expectation of advancement or progressive development.

Moving forward, the collaborative process may find its greatest ally in the future museum workers coming out of museological graduate programs across the country. When Lauren Silver first entered the field, she talked with an experienced colleague about collaboration. He recalled his initial passion and drive to create a collaborative environment, but said he had lost the will to keep trying. He was happy to hear that Silver would be continuing his efforts and that the torch had been passed to her. She has come to view graduate programs in museum studies that require teamwork as part of the curriculum as bearers of the collaborative torch. (personal communication, April 13, 2009). As a result, students are entering the work force expecting to find collaboration, an approach that is becoming more and more prevalent with positive potential both for the museum profession and museum audiences. ✨