

## Comment

### JCOM — FIVE YEARS IN THE FUTURE

# Reflecting on the role of informal learning and visitor experience in science museums

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*ABSTRACT: This short comment presents a few suggestions for the enrichment of JCOM seen from the perspective of an informal learning expert.*

My field of practice and research is informal learning, whether this means informal learning methodologies, visitors' engagement and experience in museums and science centres, or explainers' and educators' professional development. At the same time, as Head of Education I am also interested in the management of a museum (education) department and staff, that is, in strategy, policy and development issues.

In this position, but also simply as a professional of the museum field, this means a continuous need to reflect on research arguments and on case studies from practice, but also the need to be inspired and to think of the future — including the one we are not able to see clearly yet.

Our world changes fast and this time change means revolution rather than evolution; we perceive it everyday in learning to live with the international economic crisis, in the new technologies, in education, in civic responsibility and participation. We need to be well equipped — in terms of knowledge, competence and strategy — to understand what this means for our institutions, our visitors and ourselves as practitioners.

There are important questions to answer, fast:

- What is today — and what could be tomorrow — our visitors' (learning) agenda in science centres and museums?
- How can museums ensure that they remain the institutions where people go to find answers to their questions (and to raise more), through life-changing experiences?
- Do our professional skills (and consequently our entry training) need to change to assimilate the stimuli from the surrounding world in a creative way?
- How do we balance our mission of fostering creativity and open-endedness in learning with the demand for accountability often tightly linked to funding for survival?

If I am to translate these questions in what I would need from JCOM as a science communication journal, I would say that I would like to find:

- Papers based on research studies in the informal learning and visitor studies fields. I would like to draw particular attention to the importance of publishing qualitative research studies rather than those dealing with visitor satisfaction surveys.
- One keynote paper by a leader of the field in every issue. I understand that JCOM is a refereed journal, however the keynote papers could be upon invitation and would serve to ‘boost’ the professional community reflection.
- We could even push this further by suggesting that JCOM invites comments to the keynote papers via a blog of a community of subscribers.
- A collection of ‘what is new’. The more we go on to exploit the potential of internet and the social media, the more we loose track of the very many interesting things existing online: online publications, science-related blogs, websites of museums and science centres, open access papers etc. If possible, it could be useful to have a ‘short-list’ of the most inspiring or challenging or even controversial among those, at international level, the reading of which could enrich our ideas, practice and understanding of our field or of the world as such. I would suggest that this selection of the case studies is also refereed somehow.

My suggestions appear to be more related to the informal learning field, which, although shares a broad mission with the science communication field, has often diverse objectives or adopts different means for engagement. It is important however that the two are not perceived as separate, but rather as complementary — and this could be one of the tasks of an international journal as JCOM — for the experts, strategies and actions of both contribute to building a rich scientific culture and a lifelong and active relationship between individuals, science and society.

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