

This is a preprint of an article published in *Visitor Studies Today*:
Gutwill, J. (2002). Review of the Museum Learning Collaborative website. *Visitor Studies Today* V(II):
16-17.

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Website Review

Museum Learning Collaborative Website,
<http://www.museumlearning.com/>

By Josh Gutwill

Introduction

The Museum Learning Collaborative (MLC), formed in 1997, brings together multiple museums for a large scale research effort focusing on learning in informal settings. In their words, the mission of the MLC is to “enable research conducted in [museum] settings to progress beyond a collection of studies (e.g., visitor studies or evaluations of exhibits or galleries) toward a cumulative body of knowledge dealing with learning in the museum setting.”) The Collaborative has designed, and is implementing, a series of related research studies on informal learning.

The Collaborative website has two main goals: First, the site serves as a platform for describing and disseminating the Collaborative’s research studies and results. This includes the philosophy and theoretical framework of the MLC, newsletter, and research reports, chapters and articles. Second, the site provides the museum community with a searchable database that contains annotated articles, reports and dissertations about learning in museums, as well as syllabi from various college courses on “informal learning and learning in museums” as well as links to related websites.

In this review, I will describe and critique each of the main parts of the website. My main focus will be on evaluating the site in terms of its goal of creating a research center that unifies the study of learning in informal settings.

Description of the website

The site consists of seven main sections:

- **MLC** Homepage
- Purpose and Philosophy
- The Collaborative
- Annotated Literature
- University Courses
- News and Related Links
- Research

The Homepage of the site welcomes the reader, provides links to the most current information on the site, and gives an overview of the site's main sections, listed on the left-hand side, providing easy to use navigation bars.

The Purpose and Philosophy pages describe the mission of the MLC to create a broad, theoretically-driven research agenda for learning in informal contexts. The theoretical framework is sociocultural, taking Vygotskian interaction as the core unit of analysis. The MLC participants believe that such a framework best captures the kinds of learning that occur in museums, particularly group or family learning. The research agenda describes three main themes of the work: (1) Learning and Learning Environments, (2) Interpretation, Meaning and Explanation, and (3) Identity, Motivation and Interests. These themes seem to map roughly onto Falk and Dierking's (1992) three "contexts" of Physical, Social and Personal, respectively. The Purpose and Philosophy pages are crucial to understanding the plans and methods of the Collaborative's research. However, I felt that the theoretical framework was not discussed in sufficient detail to be meaningful to a newcomer. I suggest either expanding the discussion of Vygotsky's learning theory and modern socioculturalism or providing references or links to supplementary material. In addition, I suggest elaborating on the research themes and delineating their differences in greater detail.

The Collaborative section presents short biographies of the researchers, links to the museums participating in the MLC, and links to the funding partners underwriting the Collaborative. These pages allow readers who wish to learn more or become more involved to contact the MLC participants directly. The list of funding partners not only acknowledges the funders' contributions to the Collaborative, but also informs non-MLC researchers of potential sources of support for their own museum studies.

The Annotated Literature pages comprise a searchable database of 2,300 articles on research in museums, 500 of which are annotated. This is a powerful resource for museum designers, researchers and educators, and is probably the most useful aspect of the website for the museum community. Hopefully, it will continue to grow. I suggest providing a template form on the site to highlight the fact that non-MLC members may propose additional citations and annotated articles for the database.

In the University Courses pages, the MLC provides syllabi for six college courses-related to learning in museums. These are not limited to courses taught by MLC faculty; any faculty member may send a related course syllabus for posting on the site. This can be a helpful resource for academic faculty looking for ideas in designing new college courses, thus increasing the number of institutions providing such courses. I can also imagine museum educators, designers, evaluators and researchers “auditing” the courses by reading the assigned books, chapters and articles. One suggestion to improve this already potent resource would be to hyperlink papers in the syllabi to the annotated database, so readers could instantly see those papers’ summaries.

The News and Related Links section of the website describes the current state of the MLC research studies (in the form of a quarterly newsletter), and provides an “Editor’s Pick,” a quarterly choice of an interesting article or chapter that was reviewed in the Annotated Literature database. These pages also present links to related websites of museum associations, educational research associations, and informal learning institutes. The purpose of these pages is to keep the community informed of the progress of the MLC. Unfortunately, these pages seem a bit out of date. For example, the Editor’s Pick was last made in the first quarter of 2000, and the latest newsletter appears to be from the summer of 2001 (though it is difficult to be sure because there is no date on the newsletter).

The final section of the site, simply called “Research,” provides downloadable copies of all research reports, articles, chapters and books to come out of MLC studies.

Need for greater interactivity

The MLC website is an excellent resource and offers a clear description of the large-scale MLC research project. The participants argue that they wish to create a theoretical foundation for research in informal settings. They have made an important start, and have provided tools for other researchers to use when building on that foundation. Unfortunately, the website in its current form lacks the interactivity needed for the community to discuss, debate and transform the theoretical foundation proposed by MLC participants.

To truly fulfill its goals of helping the museum-learning community organize itself under a single theoretical framework, I believe the MLC must add features to the site that would allow non-MLC professionals to weigh in on theoretical issues, methodological designs and research results from studies of museum learning. Toward this end, the site could be reorganized into MLC-related information and activities in one section and resources for the community in another. The latter could allow input and additions from community members. Some suggestions include:

- A bulletin board, chat room or listserv for researchers to discuss the tenets of sociocultural learning theory. An interactive forum may encourage non-MLC professionals to grapple with the theory and incorporate it into their own work.

- A bulletin board, chat room or listserv for museum professionals to post questions and have discussions about the research literature more generally, including methodology and results. Perhaps this could be accomplished by directing readers to the listserv operated by the Visitor Studies Association.
- An Editor's Pick that is up-to-date and discusses an article of current significance to the field might draw more seasoned professionals than an historically important one. Perhaps the editor could review the article in terms of the MLC theoretical framework, thereby sparking discussions on the bulletin boards or other media mentioned above.

Even in its current form, however, the MLC website provides an easy-to-navigate tool for museum professionals interested in informal learning. The annotated database and the course syllabi are especially useful resources. In addition, the site provides a comprehensive dissemination center for the project's work.

References

Falk, J., & Dierking, L. (1992). *The Museum Experience*. Washington, D.C.: Whalesback Books.

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