

Opinion Piece

“Real” Reality: The Future for Exhibits

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There is a cartoon in which a teenager is asked by a poll-taker, “Which do you prefer, watching television or real life experiences?” And the teenager replies, “I dunno. What time does Real Life Experiences come on?” This points to a problem that will only get worse as children’s lives are increasingly pervaded by video games, computers with “edutainment” software, and virtual reality—all providing experience of a sort, but not with “real” reality. As our culture continues to move in a high-tech, entertainment-oriented direction, the mission for children’s museums—to provide rich, real-life experiences—becomes even more urgent.

Genuine learning is a continuing cycle that starts with our experiences of the physical world, finds consistency and generalities in these, and then checks again with experience to see if these generalities hold. This is the cycle that young children use, unconsciously, as they explore their world, and it is the same process that scientists apply consciously in *their* search for understanding. For both, experience is central. Happily, as we know, museums are wonderful places to foster just this kind of experience-based learning through their exhibits and programs. This contrasts sharply with the information-based learning associated with schools and most of the recent technology applications to education.

What are the challenges, then, to be met if exhibits of the future are to effectively fill their role? My list would include:

- Clarifying exhibit goals based on a philosophy of experience-based education, and finding ways to ensure that the exhibit experience does not remain isolated, but plays its role in a larger learning process.
- Developing exhibits that more fully engage children in working on problems of interest to *them*. I believe these will continue to be low-tech exhibits, although they will become increasingly sophisticated.
- Exploring techniques to facilitate the transition from the unconscious learning cycle of the child to the conscious process of the scientist, which is the essence of science education.
- Modeling the learning process. Children almost never see anyone actually engaged in learning; we tell them what to do rather than show them. Yet skills can be developed only by watching them demonstrated and then practicing them—basically a coaching approach. This is a new area in which children’s museums can take the lead.

Our culture is saturated with entertainment and woefully short of genuine education. If we can avoid the temptation to go with the popular flow and instead follow our own “road less traveled” focused on “real” reality, then children’s museums will continue to make a unique and valuable contribution to their communities and, for that reason, have a viable future.