CHANGING PRACTICES, CHANGING IDENTITIES AS MUSEUM EDUCATORS

From Didactic Telling to Scaffolding in the zpd

INTRODUCTION

The main goal of this chapter is to describe how research findings on a scaffolding-focused, reflection-oriented community of practice transformed museum educators’ identities as educators. A second goal is to describe the theory, the multiple methodologies drawing on that theory, and the layered analysis that accompanied this research. Our theoretical lens is sociocultural, placing great emphasis on community building, dialogic negotiation, and ongoing reflection and research on practice.

Our research represents the confluence of shifting teaching practices for museum educators, such as noticing what learners do and responding to those new understandings, new language (such as scaffolding), collectively negotiated practices as well as new ways of thinking that redefined the community and its members. We argue that these shifting practices and ways of thinking and talking resulted in a fundamental change in identity from didactic teller to museum educator scaffolding in the zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1987). We situate these changes within a new community of practice (CoP) (Lave & Wenger, 1991). We present in this chapter the many different markers of change in functioning of both the community and the individuals in it.

Like most of our contemporaries, our research efforts are founded upon and reflect the relevance of constructivist theories and methodologies, advancing the idea that children and adults learn most effectively through personal inquiry experiences with others, rather than didactic teaching and telling. Unlike many of our contemporaries, however, we combine these ideas with the powerful, socioculturally-based theories of Vygotsky (1987) (zones of proximal development and social constructivist view of learning and teaching), Bruner (scaffolding, social learning), communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998) and cultural historical activity theory (Engeström, 1998, 2001; Wells, 1999). We discuss in this chapter how such theoretical insights can translate to transformative museum educator practices.

In the research reported here we have found that embedding reflective practices into a changing community of practice (Ash et al., 2009) has transformed museum educator practices and identities by helping them to think in new ways about...
themselves and their roles as educators. We have also noticed that museum educators trained in this way become more effective teachers of diverse audiences in a science museum setting. Sandy serves as a good example. She began her teacher research by saying:

Sometimes it’s hard to think on the spot, [knowing] what to do and later, when you ruminate over the interaction you see it differently every time; with a video you’re not adding in any weird details or thinking you missed something, it’s all right there. You are free to reflect and go back and watch specific segments over and over again and you notice more and more every time.

In this statement we see a museum educator reflecting on the value of ‘reflective practice’ and how this reflection informs how she thinks about her own work. By reflection on practice (Schön, 1987) we mean engaging in thoughtful discussion and introspection, individually, within small groups, and through large group dialogue, focusing on what has been observed, what is being learned about the learners who are being observed, and what the museum educator learned about their own role within the interaction.

Even though museum educators like Sandy (docents, interActors, explainers, etc.) represent their institution as front line interpreters, they rarely have such opportunities to re-define their own practice by reflecting on it in formalized ways. We have known for some time that video reflection on teaching practices in the classroom can be quite effective (Fredericksen et al., 1998; Sherin & van Es 2003, 2005). With some exceptions however, (Ash & Lombana, in press; DeGregoria Kelly, 2009; Seig & Bupf, 2008; Tran, 2008; Tran & King, 2007), it is still unusual to invite museum educators to regularly reflect on their own practice, even though reflective practice has become more commonly discussed in museum circles.

Our own research suggests that reflective practice, while quite effective in helping practitioners to ‘see’ more clearly what they do, is an insufficient foundation, in and of itself, for transforming practice and identities. In this chapter we argue that reflective practice, combined with ongoing teacher research, has led directly to empowering museum educators to appropriate new identities as mediators rather than didactic tellers. We have found that museum educators who learn to focus on ‘working in zone of proximal development’ (zpd) (Vygotsky, 1987) have been able to enter into an entirely new relationship with their own practices and with the learners with whom they collaborated. Vygotsky’s ‘zone of proximal development’ defines the “distance between learners’ actual and potential developmental level during problem solving, given the aid of more knowledgeable others” (Brown et al., 1993, p. 153). This ‘work in the zpd’ is termed scaffolding, and this paper describes the process of scaffolding these museum educators now aspire to provide.

Like Wells (1999), we view the zpd, using an emphasis on mediation through tools and symbols (such as exhibits, language, educators, signs, etc.), as the place where scaffolding is operationalized and concretized. Scaffolding has been likened to a temporary support system (Wood, Bruner & Ross, 1976), enabling members of a social group (ensemble in Granott’s terminology (2006) “to perform at a level