

# The Professional Training of Museum Educators in Canada<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** A review of museum training programs was undertaken to assess the current state of professional museum education training in Canada. Out of 18 post-secondary museum studies programs, four programs include one museum education course and two programs include two courses. We found no evidence of museum education content in any of the eight Canadian curatorial practice programs. In terms of specialized programs, a Masters of Museum Education program has existed at UBC since 2012. Another Canadian university is currently examining the possibility of setting up a program. We conclude that the offer of professional museum education training in Canada is slowly improving.

**Keywords:** Museum Education; Museum Education Training; Post-secondary Professional Education; professionalization of Museum Education.

As a professional practice, museum education addresses all the resources and activities that museums put at the disposal of the public in order to foster a better understanding and appreciation of the objects the museum collects and displays. These resources and activities certainly include guided visits, studio activities, outreach programs, and teacher-orientation programs, but they also comprise the creation and use of gallery signage, labels, audio guides, handouts, educational websites and publications. Underlying all this educational activity in the museum is an understanding of education in this specific context as a form of active free-choice learning that unfolds as a distinctive participatory experience within a museum's unique environment.

This conception of learning has elevated experience (as distinct from codified information contained in books) to a more important place in the effort to educate. Museums focus on the 'stuff' of the world. They specialize in the objects representing both culture and nature and, therefore, become central to any educational effort when the focus shifts from the written word to learners' active participation through interaction with objects. (Hein, 1998, p. 6)

Museum educators are the professionals that generally oversee all this learning activity in the museum. As a profession, museum education has a relatively short history, as it is a rather recently developed specialization within the broader field of education. In this article, we examine the current state of the specialist training of museum educators in Canada. We have done so keeping in mind the process of professionalization, that is the

course of action by which occupations, like that of museum educator, eventually acquire the status of a profession.

In Canadian law, the regulation of the professions in the workplace was initially adopted from the British tradition of self-regulated occupations. The legal and medical professions, the military and the civil service, for example, all possessed traits and practices that defined them as recognized professions. By the middle of the nineteenth century, three characteristics—specialized knowledge and skills, an obligation to duty above all else, and the occupation's self-government—defined what it meant to be a bona fide profession. Later in the same century, two other factors came into prominence: the professional body's right to the exclusive use of a title and its control over who could practice the profession (Schultze, 2007, pp. 41-42). For aspiring professionals, access to the profession became possible only through the successful completion of a prescribed and profession-approved curriculum of studies offered, in most cases, by universities.

Starting in the 1960s and continuing well into the next decade, several Canadian provinces re-examined and, then re-confirmed the self-regulating model of several professional organizations (Schultze, 2007, p. 42). In Quebec, the authors' province of residence, the adoption in July 1973 of the *Professional Code* signaled the Quebec government's desire to take "a more active role in regulating what are termed 'professional' activities" (Office des professions du Québec, 1976, p. 9). Among other factors, Quebec identified and confirmed four attributes that are "integral" to a profession: the "knowledge and skills required"; "the nature of the professional activity"; "the quality of the relationship between the professional and his (*sic*) client"; and "autonomy of the professional" (pp. 22-23). In 1989, the Government of Quebec adopted and published official standards for the professional training of *museum educators*, thereby defining the profession and determining minimum training standards for its practitioners (Gouvernement du Québec, Devis de formation professionnelle : Édicateur de musée, 1989). Not surprisingly, the recommended standards include undergraduate university training in a subject matter directly related to the collections and specialty of a museum (i.e. archaeology, art history, sciences and technology, etc.) along with additional university training, at the level of a certificate, in museum pedagogy, arts education or the equivalent (pp. 37-38).

In 1991, the Canadian professional association of museum educators known as Canadian Art Gallery/Museum Educators (CAGE) published its own standards for the practice of art gallery and fine art museum education and for the professional training of fine art museum educators. CAGE's "Formal Education Requirements" for art gallery and museum educators includes a "university degree in Education and a university degree in Fine Art" or an "equivalent combination" of these two programs of study (CAGE, 1991, pp. 8). In 2008, ICOM (International Council of Museums) adopted slightly different standards for the initial training of museum educators: a first cycle Bachelor's degree "in a subject related to the museum collections and/or education and/or communication" (ICOM, 2008, p. 25). However, ICOM goes one step further by requiring a Masters' degree "in a subject related to the museum collections and in museology or education" for museum educators in managerial positions (p. 24).

According to Elliot Freidson, a prominent scholar on matters of professionalism, "the two most general ideas underlying professionalism are the belief that certain work is so specialized as to be inaccessible to those lacking the required training and experience, and the belief that it cannot be standardized [or] rationalized" (Freidson, 2001, p. 17). Furthermore, "the knowledge and skill of a particular specialization requires a foundation

in abstract concepts and formal learning and necessitates the exercise of discretion" (p. 35). Finally, Freidson notes that in all developed nations tertiary educational systems have been developed mainly for the purposes of dispensing required professional training (p. 86). Leicht and Fennell (2001) concur that university-based training is one of the "defining characteristics of professions" (p. 26).

In 1986, Eisner and Dobbs published a seminal publication on professional museum education as practiced in American art museums at the time. Regarding the availability of professional training in museum education, they lamented the severe limitations in pre-service and in-service training for museum educators. "At the root of the problem of professional preparation is the lack of sufficient pre-service training opportunities in the universities, which do provide such preparation for other museum professionals such as curators" (p. 43). Eisner and Dobbs criticize universities for their "reluctance" to "enter this field of professional training". In addition, they comment: "it is primarily through the commitment and investment of a university to developing the field (of museum education) that those in the field will attain legitimacy and maturation" (pp. 43-44).

In the next section of this paper, we consider to what extent earlier assessments of the state of professional museum education training still describe the current situation regarding museum education training in Canada. Is the present Canadian context any different, any better or worse in this regard? Is there any basis for an optimistic outlook for the future? To lay the ground required for answering these questions, we began by conducting a general survey of Canadian museum training programs with the aim of identifying what components of existing programs specifically address museum education and whether the amount of current training in the subject area of museum education, both in terms of the number of programs and the number of courses included in these programs, is adequate.

### **Method and research objectives**

The data collection conducted in preparation for this publication was informed by a qualitative research approach. More specifically, we collected data about Canadian museum training programs by visiting selected post-secondary educational institutions' websites<sup>2</sup>. From these websites, we located and documented curriculum and course descriptions for programs that offered museum-related training. We did not limit our review strictly to museum education curriculums; instead, we cast a much broader net with the objective of identifying and investigating both specialized and non-specialized museum training programs, whether or not their curriculums included museum education components. In summary, our objective in scrutinizing the availability of museum training programs in Canadian post-secondary institutions was to produce an inventory of the museum-related training currently available to students. We also wanted to determine which programs included training specifically in museum education and to assess whether or not the current availability of post-secondary museum education training is adequate. Furthermore, we did not set out to critique existing programs, nor did we intend to propose ways in which the programs should be improved.

### **Findings: Museum training programs in Canada**

According to the results of our online search, current post-secondary Canadian museum training programs can be grouped into four categories: 1) museology and

museum studies programs; 2) programs focusing on curatorial practice; 3) programs specialized in conservation; and 4) programs specialized in museum education.

Museology programs and museum studies programs teach about museum practice using a general approach that considers three important functions of the museum: the collection, conservation, and exhibition of artworks, artifacts, or specimens. The main focus of these programs is without question the museum object. Curatorial practice programs emphasize the work of the independent or museum affiliated curator, while minimizing considerations of the contributions of other professionals in exhibition preparation and museum practices. These programs often emphasize an historical approach to the study, collection, and exhibition of museum objects. University-based museum conservation programs are designed to provide advanced training to future professionals specialized in the conservation and restoration of works of art, artifacts, and other museum specimens. Museum education programs constitute a unique category in terms of professional museum training in that they emphasize not only the study of the museum object but also the study of museum visitors' cognitive and affective learning related to the museum object. The focus of museum education training rests predominantly on the visitor's museum experience and the various educational strategies that museums can use to teach, enhance, and promote positive and memorable outcomes for visitors to exhibitions.

#### Museums studies programs.

Within the category of museology or museum studies training, we have identified a total of three college-level and 15 university-level programs. At the college level, three Canadian colleges offer post-secondary programs in museum studies. In Ontario, students typically complete their secondary school studies with Grade 12. Following their graduation from high school, students decide whether to pursue post-secondary studies at the college or at university level. College programs emphasize a more technical and skills-based training, while university programs offer training with a more academic and professional orientation. At Algonquin College (Ottawa), students may earn an Advanced Diploma in Applied Museum Studies by completing three years of study. The program includes a 45-hour course called *Educational Programming* (Applied Museum Studies, 2018). At Fleming College, whose main campus is in Peterborough, Ontario, students undertake a three-term certificate that includes two courses in *Educational and Interpretive Programming* (Museum Management and Curatorship Program, 2018). Finally, at Collège Montmorency in the province of Québec, students at the CEGEP<sup>3</sup> level may complete a program in museum techniques. The program emphasizes the protection, conservation and presentation of museum objects. It does not include any training in education (Techniques de muséologie, 2018).

In addition to these three college programs, we found a total of 15 university-level programs in museology or museum studies: nine of those are undergraduate programs and six are graduate programs. The availability of programs at the undergraduate level includes two certificates, four minors and three majors. UQAM (Université du Québec à Montréal) offers a certificate program called Museology and Dissemination of the Arts (*Muséologie et diffusion des arts*). While its program description mentions, as a content area, "mediation"—a term widely used in Québec to include education along with other visitor relational strategies—none of the certificate courses actually include the term in its title (Muséologie et diffusion des arts, 2018). The University of Victoria's Department of Art History and Visual Studies offers a minor in *Museum Studies*. The program

description mentions public programming<sup>4</sup> as a subject area, but there is no clear indication that the program includes content on museum education (Minor in Museum Studies Victoria, 2018). Both the University of Calgary and the University of Guelph offer minor programs at the undergraduate level. Calgary's *Museum and Heritage Studies* program mentions "interpretation" as a study area, but the term is not included in any of the course titles (Museum and Heritage Studies, 2018). The description of Guelph's *Minor in Museum Studies* makes no mention of museum education and no courses in museum education are listed in the program (Minor of Museum Studies Guelph, 2018). Of the three majors in museology, the University of Lethbridge in Alberta offers two: the *Native American Art/Museum Studies* and the *Art History/Museum Studies* programs. Both programs emphasize an art historical approach to museum studies. The description of the Art History/Museum Studies program mentions public programs but not museum education. Neither term appears in any course titles (Native American Art/Museum Studies, 2018; Art History/Museum Studies, 2018). UQO (Université du Québec en Outaouais) offers the third undergraduate program with a major in museology in Canada. A museum education course—*Musées : éducation et publics*—is a required course in the program in the second semester (Majeure en muséologie et patrimoines, 2018). This program is also offered in two other undergraduate curriculums cross-listed with the major: a 30-credit minor and a 30-credit certificate (Mineure en muséologie et patrimoines, 2018; Certificat en muséologie et patrimoines, 2018).

Of the six programs in museum studies at the graduate level, one is a graduate certificate, four are masters programs and one is a doctoral program. The University of Victoria's Division of Continuing Studies offers a *Professional Specialization Certificate in Collections Management* at the graduate level. "Visitor Experiences" is the title of an elective course in the program that considers museum visits from the point of view of visitor studies and public programming. There is no mention of education in the content description of this course (Professional Specialization Certificate in Collections Management, 2018). Université de Montréal offers a *Masters in Museum Studies* that includes one elective course in adult museum education titled "Le musée et l'éducation des adultes" (Maîtrise en muséologie UdeM, 2018). UQO (Université du Québec en Outaouais) also offers an *MA program in museology and art* that emphasizes study of the museum object and the exhibition process. The program description and courses include no mention of museum education (Maîtrise en muséologie et pratiques des arts, 2018). Exceptionally, UQAM (Université du Québec à Montréal) offers an *MA in Museum Studies* that includes two education-related courses: The Museum and Adult Education ("Le musée et l'éducation des adultes") and School Programs and Museums ("Les programmes scolaires et les musées") (Maîtrise en muséologie UQAM, 2018). UQAM is the only Canadian university to offer a museum-related program at the doctoral level, the *Doctorate in Museology, Mediation, and Heritage*. The title of this program clearly identifies "mediation" as one of the three fields of study addressed within the program and, in turn, the program literature identifies museum education as one of areas of research supported by the program (Doctorat en muséologie, médiation & patrimoine, 2018). While the theory and practice of cultural mediation has gradually taken hold in Québec, it is still largely unknown in English-speaking parts of the country. As mentioned earlier, proponents of cultural mediation seek to combine the practices of art education with community-based education strategies to encourage participation in cultural activities and to promote a culture of participation (Lafortune & Racine, 2012, p. 10). Finally, the University of Toronto mentions "museum education and

programming" as an aspect of its M.M.ST. program, and the program does indeed include a course titled "Public Programs and Education" (Masters of Museum Studies, 2018).

#### Curatorial programs

At the current time in Canada, there are four undergraduate and four graduate university programs providing training specialized in display culture and curatorial practice. At the undergraduate level, Ryerson University offers a minor in Curatorial Studies (Minor in Curatorial Studies, 2018). The University of Regina and its affiliate, Luther College, offer a Bachelor of Arts with a concentration in Cultures of Display that is "designed for students interested in curatorial work" (B.A. Media, Art, and Performance—Cultures of Display, 2018). The University of Western Ontario offers two undergraduate programs in curatorial studies: a B.A. Major in Museum and Curatorial Studies and a B.A. Specialization in Art History and Museum Studies (Honors Specialization in Art History and Museum Studies, 2018; Major in Museum and Curatorial Studies, 2018). Finally, OCAD University offers a B.A. degree in Criticism & Curatorial Practice. The program overview for this degree mentions "arts education" as a potential area of employment following graduation, but the program itself includes no courses in arts education or museum education. (B.A. Criticism and Curatorial Practice, 2018). Of the other three undergraduate programs mentioned above, the University of Western Ontario's B.A. Major in Museum and Curatorial Studies also mentions educational programs as an area of study. However, once again, we were not able to locate any courses in that program that focused wholly or in part on the subject area of museum education (Major in Museum and Curatorial Studies, 2018).

In terms of graduate programs, York University offers a Graduate Diploma in Curatorial Studies in Visual Culture, while Carleton University offers a Graduate Diploma in Curatorial Studies that can be taken in conjunction with a graduate degree or as a stand-alone program (Graduate Diploma in Curatorial Studies in Visual Culture, 2018; Graduate Diploma in Curatorial Studies, 2018). The University of Winnipeg offers a course-based M.A. in Cultural Studies with a Specialization in Curatorial Practice, while OCAD University offers an M.F.A. in Criticism and Curatorial Practice (M.A. Cultural Studies Specialization in Curatorial Practice, 2018; M.F.A. Criticism and Curatorial Practice, 2018). We have found no evidence, in any of these four programs, of course content related to the field of museum education.

#### Conservation programs

Queen's University is the only post-secondary educational institution in Canada to offer professional training in the conservation and restoration of objects of cultural, historic and artistic significance. While completing the Master of Art Conservation (MAC) degree program, students either specialize in the conservation of artifacts, paintings, or paper documents or elect to acquire expertise in research into the science of conservation. Given the highly specialized nature of this program, we would not expect it to include course content on the functions of the museum that have little relationship to the conservation of objects. The MAC program and course descriptions include no mention of curatorial practice, museum education, or public programming (Master of Art Conservation, 2018).

#### Museum education programs

At this point in time, there is only one program in Canada offering specialized training in museum education: the Master of Museum Education (MMEd) program offered in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia. This fairly new program was officially inaugurated in September 2012. Its focus is "the study of education and learning that occurs in museums and other informal learning contexts (such as art galleries, science centres, parks, historic sites, etc.)" (Master of Museum Education, 2018). The MMEd program was designed mainly for full-time museum educators and, as well, for in-service classroom teachers with a keen interest in using museums as a complement to their classroom teaching. This explains why this Masters degree is offered solely as a part-time, 30-credit program that can be completed in just over two years (7 terms). This further explains why the curriculum is offered 90% online and consists mainly of assigned readings. Students can complete most of the coursework while studying online from any location. One course, however, ANTH 518 *Museum Methods*, requires that students attend lectures on campus in Vancouver, B.C.; it is currently offered as an intensive 8-day course in the spring. Finally, students complement their coursework with a practicum in a museum and the production of a graduating paper (Master of Museum Education, 2018).

### **Overview of current museum education training**

How prevalent is professional museum education training in Canada? The short answer is that such training is not very widespread. While many *museum studies programs* in Canada mention museum education as a content area, the reality is that, in most of these programs, few course hours are actually devoted to the study of education as a professional practice in the museum. Museum education sometimes merits a mention in a program description, but not always. When it is, education is rarely reflected in actual course titles suggesting that museum education is not considered a priority in these programs. The orientation of a majority of museology programs focuses to a large extent on the study and exhibition of the museum object (i.e. the work of art or the artifact), not on the visitors' experience while in the museum. The visitor is simply not the focus of museum studies programs. This reality is further demonstrated by the fact that, in a majority of programs in this category (11 out of 17), there are no courses that specifically mention museum education. The exceptions in this regard are the programs offered by Algonquin college, Université du Québec en Outaouais, Université de Montreal, and the University of Toronto: all these programs include one course on museum education. However, in programs that include the mention of education in a course, the designated course focusing on museum visitors is often designed in such a way as to also include visitor studies (i.e. marketing-related activities), public programming (activities such as concerts designed to attract visitors), in addition to museum education (promotion of actual learning about the exhibits). The result is that, in these courses, only a minimum of museum education content is taught and that educational practice in the museum is rarely addressed in a significant way. However, there are two exceptions to this general observation: Fleming College's certificate program and UQAM Master's program each include two courses on education in the museum. Finally, UQAM's doctoral program is clearly research focused. According to the program literature, the program provides graduate students with an opportunity to conduct extensive research in the areas of museum mediation or museum education, if they so choose. However, students accepted into this program should have a strong foundation in museum education acquired during

previous studies or actual work experience. Most of the courses in this doctoral program focus on research-related matters, not professional practice.

Many of the eight undergraduate and graduate programs in *Curatorial Practice* offered in Canadian Universities mention museum education as a potential area of employment following completion of these programs. The reality, however, is that none of the programs include museum education as the content of a course. Students interested in museum education would be poorly served if they enrolled in one of these programs. Not surprisingly, Queen's University's Master of *Art Conservation* program is not a good option either for pursuing graduate studies if one's personal interest and professional objectives are not clearly related to art conservation.

At the present time, the best option for pursuing museum education studies in Canada is the Master of Museum Education (MMEd) program at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, B.C. This on-line program is entirely focused on museum education and it also provides the flexibility of enrolling in and completing a program from any location in Canada (or elsewhere) without having to actually move to Vancouver. (See earlier in this article for a more complete description of this program.) However, this graduate program would not be suitable for students who do not already have a strong foundation in both museums and education. It is not meant as an introduction to the field of museum education. And, successful completion of this program requires the ability to work and study independently without the need for ongoing supervision. In this regard, it may not be suitable for all personality types.

### Looking ahead

A new option for professional training in museum education may become available in Canada in the future. Concordia University's Faculty of Fine Arts has been working on an 18-credit graduate certificate to be offered in consort with the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts, the McCord Museum, and Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. The curricular design of this one-year program in museum education is based on an experiential learning model where students will acquire the fundamentals of professional practice by engaging in course activities and practicums that feature an interaction of theoretical and hands-on learning. At this moment in time, the Executive Summary, a formal proposal describing the new program, is about halfway through the University's approval process. It is still too early to tell whether or not the program will receive final endorsement from the University (Department of Art Education, 2017).

In conclusion, while not exactly reflecting the paucity of American museum education training reported by Eisner and Dobbs in 1986, this survey of Canadian museum training programs focusing on museum education describes a situation that still leaves much to be desired. A great deal of work still needs to be done in order to establish museum education as a fully accepted profession within the Canadian museum community. According to Leicht and Fennell (2001), it is "the actions of organized professionals themselves" that leads to the eventual professionalization of an occupation (p. 95). Early setbacks should not deter aspiring professional groups from this endeavor. "Research on the history of professions is replete with [the] stumbles and pitfalls of professional groups that aren't sure how to organize or rationalize professional identities" (p. 95). A first step is surely to address the need for professional training. With the 2012 implementation of the University of British Columbia's Master of Museum Education program and the possibility of a new Graduate Certificate in Museum Education at Concordia University in Montreal, prospects for the future of museum education training



are improving. There is reason to be optimistic about the future of museum education as a profession in Canada.

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<sup>2</sup> We conducted our initial searches during the fall of 2016. In many cases, during the writing of this article, we returned to the websites in 2017 or 2018 to gather additional or more precise information. In a few cases, we contacted the universities directly by email in an attempt to clarify certain points about their programs.

<sup>3</sup> In Québec, students complete their secondary level education at the end of Grade 11 (*Secondaire V*). Then, they must successfully undertake a three-year CEGEP college program in order to qualify for admission to a university.

<sup>4</sup> In museums, the term "public programming" is most often used to designate activities that are intended to attract visitors to the museum. Examples include films and musical performances. The term is rarely used to denote educational activities such as lectures, guided visits, studio workshops, etc.