A Beginning Urban Educator’s Guide to Understanding the Mindsets and Actions Needed to Harness the Power of Museums and Informal Learning Environments for Meaningful Learning in the Culturally Diverse Classroom

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**Abstract**

This short guide is designed to speak to the novice urban educator that has limited training and experience on how to best meet the needs of a culturally diverse classroom, regardless of subject or grade taught. Through an easy to understand step-by-step guide, new urban educators are illuminated to the power, importance and tenants of culturally relevant and responsive teaching, how informal learning environments, like museums, align and promote culturally responsive and relevant instruction and how to begin to integrate informal learning into their curriculum as a tool to create meaningful, engaging learning in the classroom.

*Key Words:* culturally diverse, culturally responsive, culturally relevant, informal education, museum, urban, teacher guide, meaningful learning

**Introduction**

Teaching is one thing that everyone thinks they know how to do, because they themselves experienced it. Yet, anyone who has taught for even just one day and compared their experiences with the teacher down the hall, at the next school over or on the other side of the world inherently knows that teaching is a contextual, situational, and personal process that is extremely complex, making it hard to have absolutes that transfer across environments and teaching conditions.

Like many other urban educators and scholars, I did not start my schooling in the world of formal education and instead was drawn to urban teaching through my museum education training. When I walked into the classroom for the first time, I expected to be able to easily apply my museum knowledge to urban education. But as a new urban educator, I was not able to effectively integrate museum based learning into my curriculum because I, like Boyer (1999) commonly observed, did not know how to bridge the gap between formal curriculum standards and the meaningful informal learning that normally takes place within museums. I now see that bridging the gap comes from developing a strong knowledge base in both fields and flushing out commonalities, misconceptions and methods for implication.

This guide is designed for novice urban teachers that have large populations of culturally diverse students and follows an easy to understand, theory based framework that works across grade level and subject. Its intention is to uncover the why and how to implement informal and museum-based learning in the classroom and help destroy researcher observations that teachers view visits to museum as an emphasis on enrichment or change of pace rather than an essential connection to the curriculum (Griffin, 2004). By presenting the correlation of informal learning environments and museum education pedagogy’s ability to efficiently fill common pitfalls in most urban education practices, evidence is presented that shows their use in the urban classroom is a valid and meaningful teaching tool.

**The Needs and Issues Facing Urban Students and Teachers**

**Urban Education Barriers**

*Q: Am I going crazy, or is urban education as difficult as it seems?*

Whether you have been in the classroom for a month or 20 years, surely every one of you has felt like screaming at the top of your lungs in frustration about many issues that you, your school, or your students are facing. Do not for one minute think that you are alone. There is nothing simple about planning urban education. Nowhere are the obstacles to success and the existential needs of the students as great as in urban environments. They are the places where there is frequently high classroom population density (Weiner, 2006), extreme socioeconomic stratification and disparity in funding (Anyon, 2005; Kozol, 2005), and a diverse array of racial, ethnic, and religious and language representation that creates pan minority identities and barriers in communication and cohesion (Carter, 2005; Banks, 2006). Urban school districts are often large and laden with bureaucracy and poor business practices that inhibit students’ access the learning materials and resources they really need (Payne, 2010; Anyon, 2005; Kozol, 2005). Not to forget, typical urban school pedagogy still follows a Eurocentric middle-class 19th century model that creates a debilitating sense of alienation to 21st century urban students and their families (Carter, 2005; Howard, 2010; Gay, 2010). These common and well documented issues presented above are not meant to be all-inclusive or one-size-fits-all for every school district and city, but are used as a point of illustration to illuminate an obvious trend of shortcomings to provide a quality, rigorous public education for urban youth. Milner (2010) succinctly calls these disparities *opportunity gaps* and informs that until all opportunity gaps are addressed, achievement gaps between demographic student groups will follow.

Mainstream teacher education provides little insight into these forces that shape urban education environments and very few teachers from White backgrounds understand the power of White culture in shaping common perspectives toward urban schools and urban students (Howard, 2010; Irvine, 2003; Gallego & Cole, 2001; McIntosh, 1990). The problems of urban education do not lie in the community or the students; they lie in inadequate teacher and administrative education and practices that address these complex issues (Brown, 2007; Weiner, 2006; Payne, 2010). As educators, you will never be able to remove all opportunity gaps your students face, no matter what the environment or demographic group, they are far too systemic and would require over haul of many public services and laws that influence and shape our public education system (Milner, 2010; Labaree, 2000; Payne, 2010). But Weiner (2006) warns that there is no substitution for actually teaching in an urban school, and no two are alike, making oversimplified advice problematic for the complex world of teaching and popular negative assumptions like, “all poor minority kids are difficult to teach,” hinder a teacher’s ability to shed-light-on the true barriers and critical self-awareness needed to effectively teach and enjoy urban schools.

**Table 1.** *The Most Powerful Things you can do to Overcome Barriers in Urban Education*

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| * Look at your urban education environment and yourself with a critical lens; become aware of the things you are actively perpetuating. * Stop trying to do it alone, ask for help, inquire how others solved their problems; it might give you great ideas and answers that you were not aware of. * Stop focusing on things you do not have, value and utilize and exploit the great ones that you do (in yourself, the school, and its greater community). * Learn the power structures and who the “go-to” people are that can make things happen; use your social and human capital to make a difference! * Join and communicate with student groups, parent-teacher organizations and school improvement committees to understand issues, voice concerns and best enact the plans for barrier reduction. |

**Understanding the Mindsets needed to Create Successful Urban Education**

*Q: How can I make learning for my students fun and meaningful while still giving them the tools to be successful?*

Trying to solve this question can prove daunting as a beginning teacher, especially if you are not fully aware of the many nuanced, interrelated forces at work that can hinder your culturally diverse students from finding meaning and enjoyment in school, and what it really takes for you to be able to create the climate necessary to have engaging transformational learning happen in your classroom. The bottom line is that the common urban education pitfalls that schools and teachers make all revolve around one word—culture.

James Banks, the grandfather of multicultural education theory, unquestionably awoke the world of education to the all-encompassing power and influence of culture and how it permeates every aspect of education from its invention to the acquisition and dissemination of it in the structures, values and voice/perspective public education uses (Erickson, 2005; Gay, 2010). His fundamental research and theories that started in the 1970’s laid the foundation for understanding how cultural values that are promoted in education cater to specific groups and frequently marginalize others (Banks, 2006).

There is no question that more and more often, urban education requires you to teach diverse groups of students with diverse needs that come from hundreds of cultures and speak many other languages than English (Gallego & Cole 2001; Anyon, 2005). Kids now in urban classrooms do not necessarily have the same exposure and life experiences as each other or as you did when you were their age (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Every thing you as a teacher explicitly cover, implicitly expects kids to know or do and choose to ignore, shapes they way your students engage with the curriculum and what they see is valued and desired (McCutheon, 2002). Take for example, a seemingly culturally benign task of teaching preschool and kindergarten students how to tie their shoes—more likely than not, you can visualize exactly how you would teach it, but did you ever stop and recognize there is more than one way to do it? What if the child’s family at home makes two “rabbit ear” loops then tucks them under each other rather than one loop and tying the other string around it and pulling it tight? If you ignore the cultural capital framework a student brings with them, you discount who they are and how they see and experience life. Is there anything wrong with having a different knowledge base to build and draw from? By taking the time to get to know the cultural capital and “funds of knowledge” that already exist within your students, you are creating a basis of understanding and removing notions that different is a deficit (West-Olatunji, Shure, Garrett, Conwill & Rivera, 2008).After all, is there anything wrong with having multiple ways to get to the same outcome?

Looking at this concept on a larger curriculum scale, how does a young African American or Hispanic child feel when their heritage, values and perspective are not fully represented in a curriculum and instead only get to learn, experience and celebrate the positive and negative aspects about their culture in superficial add-on holidays such as Cinco de Mayo and Black History month (Banks, 2006)? What about when you share pictures of famous artworks but never show your class that has many Black students, famous and influential artworks by African Americans? How is the motivation and positive identification with school affected for the young Hispanic girl when you lower her participation grade on her report card because you feel that she is not as vocal or participatory as you expect of your students without being aware that it is more common that Hispanic parents expect their children to be obedient and quiet in school (Weinstein, Curran & Tomlinson-Clark, 2003)? What if you take race and ethnicity out of it and only look at socioeconomic status? If you expect every kid to have a computer and Internet at home and the ability to hire a private tutor if they are falling behind, you are possibly making huge presumptions that can have severe consequences for the students who might not have access to those luxuries. Every time that only one way is presented as the norm, it gives that specific cultural lens/approach the power and marginalizes and distances your students that do not naturally identify and connect their lives to it (Delpit, 1995; Howard, 2001).

In order to create meaningful learning opportunities that best use the resources you have, as an educator of diverse students, you must be culturally relevant to your students in your curriculum and lesson plan choices, and you must also be culturally responsive in the environment you create and in the ways you give instruction (Ladson-Billings, 2009; Gay, 2010). But how? —There is no exact definition of either of these concepts and there are variances in terminology to stumble over (Brown, 2007).

Looking at the major scholars and research that focuses on urban education, a compilation of general tenets and minds sets that embody culturally relevant and responsive teaching were identified, and are summarized in Table 2.

**Table 2.** *The Enactment of Culturally Responsive and Relevant Teaching*

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| Important Aspects | Culturally responsive/ relevant teachers… |
| Develop Your Cultural Diversity Knowledge Base | * Ask students about and understand the cultural characteristics and contributions of different ethnic groups (Gay, 2002). * Explore your own cultural affiliations and practices (Banks, 2006). * Learn multicultural instructional strategies that embrace cultural values, learning and communication styles of your students. |
| Design Culturally Relevant Curricula and Instruction | * Be able to identify strengths and weaknesses of curriculum and make the necessary changes to make it multicultural (Brown, 2007). * Be aware of the symbology and societal messages the curriculum gives power and emphasis to, make it inclusive and responsive to students needs and interests (Gay, 2002; Ladson Billings, 2010). * Give many examples during instruction that draw from your cultural diversity knowledge base to thoroughly identify main points and give understandable context (Brown, 2007). |
| Develop Intrinsic Motivation Within Students Through Building a Cultural Caring Learning Community | * Use cultural scaffolding and build upon their current experience level to help them reach rigorous standards (Delpit, 2006; Brown, 2007). * Create an inclusive, respectful classroom-learning environment that puts the welfare of whole group above the individual (Gay, 2002). * Develop a positive attitude toward learning by providing student choice and relevant activities and guided opportunities for academic success. * Enhance meaning by creating thoughtful and challenging learning perspectives that match students’ values and points-of-view. * Engender competence through building students’ self-efficacy and self-regulation and authentic assessments that match students’ frames of reference (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 1995). |
| Broaden Cross-Cultural Communication and Navigation for yourself and your students | * Enact your diverse cultural knowledge base to communicate with your students and families from their cultural frame of reference. * Be explicit in communications and explain the *why* in your actions and expectations; show and share the multiple lenses to build value in them. * Explicitly teach your kids the cultures of power and their 5 W’s so that they can increase access strengths and decrease barriers (Carter, 2005). |
| Encourage Collective Action and Change | * Develop their awareness of social action through critical thinking and encouraging transformation of power sharing relationships around culturally relevant issues to your students (Ginwright & James, 2002). |

As you can see from Table 2, the aspects and objectives discussed in urban education research for teachers of culturally diverse urban students are broad and subjective. This makes teaching, measuring and sharing about them in concrete, transferable terms extremely difficult. One thing the summarized collection of research does shed-light-on is the state-of-mind you need to maintain as an educator—that your students’ and your cultural backgrounds and practices matter and should be valued. This frame of mind is difficult to build and assess because no two are alike and it is developed and expressed differently in each person from their life experiences and actions. Though hard to define and give concrete action steps for, there is a beauty in the abstract nature of creating meaningful, culturally responsive and relevant learning. The reality is that it can and needs to be enacted in ways that fit your teaching experience, strengths and also best match the needs of your students. In fact, because it is more a state of mind than a prescribed series of steps, actions or resources; the ways to enact it in your classroom are endless (Ladson-Billings, 2009), making surprisingly overlooked urban resources such as museums and informal learning sites like zoos and historical sites excellent ways to enact authentic and culturally responsive ways to engage urban students (Boyer, 1999).

**Table 3.** *The Most Import Things to Remember for Creating Successful Urban Education*

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| * Culture is in everything and cannot be removed; celebrate its richness and variety. * Mindsets matter and can hugely influence the learning environment; build positive ones. * Set the academic and motivation bar high, accept nothing less and explicitly show and help your students develop the tools to reach it (and it builds their efficacy). * Leave room for student choice and voice in lessons to create engagement and ownership. * Encourage everyone to: see things from multiple perspectives; be cross-cultural navigators and social justice agents to promote a greater common understanding and quality of life. |

**The Possibilities for Museum and Informal Education in Schooling**

**The Nexus of Learning Environments to Learning**

*Q: What are informal learning environments and how do they have anything to do with teaching in a school?*

Informal learning environments are commonly identified as places/ways learning takes place outside a structured classroom that has defined subject content and objectives (Boyer, 1999; Maulucci & Brotman, 2010). When Informal learning and teaching is talked about in the field of education, it most frequently is talked about as how teachers use the facilities that often contain informal learning as additive tools of engagement and enrichment for their curriculum (Boyer, 1999; Adams, 2007), rather than the relationship between the context and the spontaneity of learning (Conner, 1999; Bingham & Conner, 2010). The common places that educators identify as sights of informal learning on are: museums, galleries, historic buildings, libraries, zoos, botanical gardens, arboretums, nature centers/parks, aquariums, science/adventure and discovery centers, planetariums and cultural centers (Wishart & Triggs, 2010; Boyer, 1999). This can be problematic because it creates misconceptions about where and why informal learning occurs at these locations. It also limits full understanding of the contextual nature of learning, and how the majority of learning happens from informal environments through the life long process of daily experience that builds values, skills and attitudes, further, that accidental learning can happen anywhere (Conner, 1999). When looking at the interrelationship between formal and informal learning and unexpectedness versus intentionality, it portrays a clearer picture of their interdependent relationships. Figure 1 visually exemplifies this relationship and provides examples of learning environments and activities and how they fall in relation to formality and intentions.

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| **Figure 1.** The Intersection of defined intentions and learning with examples |

If you think about common teacher recognized informal learning environments, the ways they are typically used still require a significant degree of intentional learning. Very rarely do teachers let their students roam around a museum without agendas like you might with your family on the weekends. Fieldtrips are guided and facilitated by park rangers, zookeepers or museum docents. Having intention in a more informal environment does help facilitate connections and transfer (Wishart & Triggs, 2010; Greiner, 2010), but it is helpful to see that learning can happen in the least predictable situations as well. As an educator, you can and should embrace informal learning in and out of your classroom and reinforce that learning.

**Table 4.** *The Major Concepts about Informal Learning’s Relationship with Schooling*

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| * There are far more opportunities for informal accidental learning in life than formal ones; help students see the bridges between formal and informal learning. * Informal learning happens everywhere, it is not a pre-designated location; commonly used informal sites typically use intentional plans to facilitate greater learning connections. * Informal learning can be incorporated into your formal teaching agenda. |

**How Museums and Informal Learning Maximize Learning in Excellent Ways**

*Q: What makes informal learning worth the effort to include in my teaching?*

An important part to understanding the power of museums and informal learning sites are seeing their potential utilization of learning theories. If you look at the relationship between instruction style and desired teacher outcomes, you will see that to get to higher order thinking skills and deep understanding, students have to be actively engaged in learning (Lord, 2007). Because museums and most other informal learning sites focus around preserving and providing access to unique and interesting collections, the main modes of sharing and learning they use revolve around object-based inquiry (Wishart & Triggs, 2009). This type of inquiry involves authentic learning that is grounded in real experiences and discovery made through looking at and analyzing the objects while drawing from personal “funds of knowledge”. This often creates great starting points for a wide range of conversations related to the object (Cossentino & Burchenal, 1995).

Another valuable aspect to informal learning is that much of it is totally unplanned and happens through everyday life experiences and reflecting and connecting culture to formal learning concepts. Because most formal learning by nature can have no predetermined objectives, it is hard for any one person to be the subject matter expert to disseminate information in passive ways. Active versus passive learning techniques have been thoroughly studied for their ability to promote retention and recall of concepts at later dates (Krathwohl, 2002). The results that the cognitive learning theorists, such as Lord (2007) discovered, are that there is a hierarchical structure to learning and recall—the more active and engaging the learning is the higher the ability to remember and be able to utilize it in more abstract ways forming a “Cone of Learning” that neatly visually sums up the findings and examples related to each method of instruction.

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| **Active Learning Passive Learning**    *dalescone.gif* |
| **Figure 2.** “Cone of Learning” with typical 2-week recall percentages and examples of learning activities and its relation to *Bloom’s Taxonomy* (Krathwohl, 2002). Adapted from Bloomsburg University’s “Principals of Teaching,” Retrieved from http://teacherworld.com/potdale.html. Copyright Raymond S. Pastore, Ph.D., Associate Professor of Education, Bloomsburg University, Bloomsburg, PA. |

**Table 5.** *Things to Remember to Maximize Learning*

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| * High-order and more complex thinking skills come from more engaging learning. * The more authentic and active the learning is, the more your students are going to be able to recall and apply what you want them to know. * Museums, informal learning sites and spontaneous learning consistently provide active, engaging learning that you need to embrace to teach and reinforce main points and concepts. |

**Finding the Cultural Relevance and Responsiveness in Museums and Informal Learning Environments**

*Q: How can museums meet the needs of my urban culturally diverse students?*

It has been shown time and time again that the urban centers that have high concentrations of museums, cultural centers and invaluable informal learning sites, remain under-utilized by the urban schools that surround them, particularly by the schools serving high-poverty youth even though many of them are free for schools (Maulucci & Brotman, 2010; Adams, 2007). This is a shame, because the central mission of every museum is to preserve, educate and relate their subject/collection to the public in the most meaningful and engaging ways possible (Boyer, 1999; Leong, 2005; Floyd, 2002). A large percentage of most informal learning sites’ patronage comes from the youth visitor and what keeps them coming back is how they create and guide authentic object/subject-to-student interactions and engage them in fostering meaning that then creates a bond and a appreciate for the subject and institution (Leong, 2005). This shows that for museums and informal learning sites that require patrons to keep their doors open, there cannot be a divorce between enjoyment, sharing and teaching about their content/collection. Engagement in museums and other similar sites, also draw on intrinsic motivation that comes from finding communication methods that touch the passions of the visitor. Eventually, it helps lead them to deep understandings and a love of learning, which then furthers the cause for keeping and maintaining sites that people feel connected to (Freidus, 2010). These actions and goals of informal learning sites also fulfill major concepts embedded in culturally relevant/responsive teaching, such as, providing learning opportunities that are personally engaging, meaningful and leave room for interpretation and reflection. All of these by products of informal education help to successfully meet your ultimate goal as a teacher—to prepare students to be successful, responsible citizens in this increasingly complex world.

Museum and informal education are relatively young fields, having the majority of their research occur in the last 25 years (Adams, 2007; Conner, 1999). Throughout this time, there has been increased cross-field communication with education and many needed culturally responsive changes are beginning to occur, even though there are still strong divisions between the two fields (Bevan & Dillon, 2010). Informal educators have begun to learn and understand more about cultural perspectives and allowing room for voice and choice, and are breaking down the “colorblind” thinking museums have perpetuated for the last hundred years (e.g. not wanting to talk about difficult racial perspectives for fear of offending ethnic or racial groups) (Freidus, 2010; Chandler, 2007), but even still, not all sites utilized for informal education do it right or do it well.

Have you ever been to a museum or informal learning site that was flawed or you felt was substandard to what it could have been? Though urban areas that have large populations, a long history, rich culture and more public services, amenities, museums and informal learning sites than rural areas (Tolbert & Theobald, 2010), there is nothing that mandates them to have their equal share of well maintained, accurate, accessible and diverse representations. The trick as a teacher is to be able to find the museum educator’s pre-designed programs and activities that are culturally relevant and responsive and to know the aspects and approaches of culturally responsive/relevant teaching well enough to innately see how to tweak a learning environment to become responsive. Sometimes it might even be as simple as leaving room for explicit class conversations about what everyone thought the exhibit/activity did poorly, so the multiple perspectives and full picture can still be built.

**Table 6**.*Summarizing the Fit Between Diverse Classroom Needs and Informal Learning*

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| * Places like museums have the same agenda as culturally responsive classrooms— to create meaningful engaged learning. * You as a teacher can shape any weak informal learning environment/activity into a culturally responsive one, tweaking it to fit the culturally responsive aspects and goals. |

**Bridging the Gap: How to Integrate Museums and Informal Learning into your Formal Curriculum for Meaningful Student Learning**

**Access and Barriers**

*Q: I feel like it is really hard to get a clear picture of how to overcome all the garbage and bureaucracy that gets in the way of creating awesome learning opportunities; where do I even begin to try and integrate informal learning into my classroom?*

There are many direct and indirect factors that can inhibit museums and informal education from being easily integrated into the urban classroom, some relate the difficulties urban schools and teachers face (see initial section on *Urban Education Barriers*), while others are caused by weaknesses in the communication, education and partnerships between informal and formal educators. The negative barriers that come from the lack of education and awareness often come in the form of teacher stereotypes. Teacher interviews and discourse show that teachers who do not have a strong culturally responsive background, frequently emphasize seeing museums as a change of pace and enrichment rather than an essential tool for curriculum connections because they believe “real” learning has to be done in a quiet environment rather than a boisterous hands-on museum (Griffin, 2004; Cox and Barrow, 2000). These stereotypes also implicitly hint at the systemic under-education and under-preparation for novice urban educators, like yourselves, for the demands and nuances of the urban classroom and school structure (Kozol, 2005), and museum educators on the dynamics and needs of culturally diverse urban students (Chandler, 2007).

It is a shame that museums are still thought of as places where artifact after artifact are displayed in glass cases where you can “look but not touch” (Hodges, 1978; Rennie & Williams, 2007). Technology has and continues to reshape the face of museums and break barriers by increasing access, mobility and personal choice (Sung, Hou, Lui & Chang, 2010; Hsi, 2003). The fact is that schools and educators are not fully aware of this and do not readily seek-out museums as a place for optimal learning creating another barrier in the path. Though frustrating and illuminating yet another large hole in the teacher education process, you can overcome and work through these barriers to gain access to the richness of informal learning.

As a novice teacher that is planning to create more culturally responsive learning opportunities through informal education, you must become knowledgeable. To best understand what is in your way, you need to become aware of it. To have the greatest access, you need to find out who controls it and what the access can offer. Once you know what is offered, you need to find the best fit for your needs and limitations. By no means are these steps the only things that you might need to address, but they do show the big picture of how to get to your goal and are given more detailed examples in Table 7.

**Table 7.** *Steps to Cover for Gaining Access to Informal Learning Sites*

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| * Start by finding out school requirements, limitations and funding for fieldtrips and extension learning and who has power over those decisions. Those answers will limit a lot of your options and frame the decisions you make next. * Learn your curriculum and content requirements; look for weakness and ideas to fill them. * Start small, do not bite off more than you can chew; initial integrations will be the most challenging and overwhelming; create a successful environment to build your efficacy. * Do not try to reinvent the wheel, see what other teachers have done at your school and at other schools; and what museum education departments have premade; conduct thorough Internet searches for options and ideas and visit museum websites. * Remember that technology is your friend and provides wonderful informal learning opportunities and can also form an integration point with an informal learning institution that you cannot physically access (it can also save money). * Educate ignorance by sharing examples of powerful informal learning; debunk stereotypes. |

**Partnerships and Degrees of Integration and Suggested Frameworks for them**

*Q: What degree of informal learning opportunities integration is the right level for my class?*

Informal learning partnerships with formal school come in many different forms and depths; some are small lessons and activities to enrich a unit, while at the other end of the spectrum, you can have full integration of the curriculum through the creation of museum and informal learning environment magnet schools that partner across all grades to make museum and informal learning and inquiry part of the daily school routine. Deciding where and how to integrate informal learning into your subject and curriculum is a very personalized adventure and depends greatly on the barriers, assets, needs and access you and your classroom have. To make things easier, review the figures and tables in each section of this guide to help guarantee you are not missing key concepts or undertaking a project that is doomed by too many barriers. Examples and loose frameworks for integration described below start at the lowest level of integration and lead to the most complex.

**The learning expedition.** The field trip is the most common partnership between museums and schools and typically looks like a class spending a day away from the classroom to tour the local natural history museum or zoo in a nonstop, “see everything as quickly as possible” way (Saxman, Gupta & Steinberg, 2010). This method provides a survey of the breadth an informal learning institution has, but provides very little depth, and limits opportunities for connections. This is because the field trip is not frequently connected to formal classroom learning and experiences, and discoveries made during the fieldtrip are not given space for reflection and drawing personal connections (Greiner, 2010). Instead, think of turning a field trip into a learning expedition by incorporating pre and post classroom work and discussion and designated objectives for the field trip that provide space for personalized experiences and connections for your students (Bevan & Dillon, 2010). It will spark their interest, students will know what to expect and draw and engage more from their informal learning this way.

An example of this is presented by Chandler (2007) and his “*Colorquest”* at the Boston Museum of Fine Art*.* He designed a day-long scavenger hunt using facts and information that could be found by reading and looking at the artwork in the museum to discover the possible racial heritage of the artist and the social events and culture that is depicted in the works. By doing this, students do not just get to see artworks and artifacts, they get to explore the subtle meaning behind them, identify with creators/subjects and make new discoveries that might not necessarily be readily obvious at first glance. Further follow-up, discussion and re-enforcement can be completed back in the classroom environment over the proceeding days following the fieldtrip. This culturally responsive adaptation of a field trip is a great way to first introduce the museum-classroom partnership to a curriculum and your class.

**The in-depth thematic unit.** At the next level of integration, you move beyond a small lesson based around a museum excursion to in-depth study over an entire unit or multiple return visits throughout the year. This concept can be mechanically executed on location or remotely through technology. This approach is wonderful for truly building your students’ appreciation for hands-on, object-based inquiry and highlighting how learning experiences can be connected in a multitude of ways, and grow in depth and understanding with reflection and revisiting. By revisiting the same informal institution or visiting multiple places that depict and shed-light-on the theme/unit from several perspectives, you also help your students build a community of learners that value discovery and illuminating connections.

For various reasons not every urban school will be able to access a physical museum multiple times during one unit, and perhaps even if you could, the objects/subjects available might not be useful in helping teach the curriculum. In this case, a virtual museum collection just might meet the needs of your learners such as Christal (2003) did. He shared of a virtual learning partnership with four Native American schools on discovering and documenting artifacts from the students’ heritage that were located around the world. He built his month long distance learning unit off his knowledge that many awesome subjects and artifacts that are discussed in school textbooks have been imaged and are available to view in great detail over the Internet, and the students from each tribe could gain high quality digital photo access to tribal heirlooms that were in collections and on display at locations outside their community, giving them a way to explore their heritage that they had previously been denied access to. Think about it; schools anywhere can have access to the Mona Lisa or watch a baby embryo grow, all through virtual learning environments. Many of these sites also have 3-D video projections and interactive personalized discovery activities that can accommodate a learner’s special needs, all while providing a safe environment that re-enforces learning and enriches cultural awareness and self-identity, making it a wonderful sustainable way to reach your culturally diverse youth (Hsi, 2003; Sung et al., 2010).

**The immersion- partnership model.** Museum related magnets and themed classrooms, that base a subject, whole grade level or entire school around using museums and other similar informal inquiry sites in the daily education are relatively progressive ways to approach traditional formal education, In these classrooms and schools, learning is centered around tangible objects, learning laboratories and making cross-curricular connections.

In Adams’ (2007) study, she followed the partnership between her science museum and a local middle school. In the partnership, the impoverished urban school, with very little known educational resources, created a yearlong thematic curriculum centered on mobile museum objects and activities, and reflective inquiry and discovery. Adams noted that though she had to encourage and direct the teachers how to utilize the resources, a transformation in attitudes and joy for learning, in both the students and the teachers, occurred over the year. When classrooms had the resources and knew of in-depth inquiry based ways to educate, students performed at a higher level and were more enthusiastic about learning. This way of museum education creates active critical thinkers that value museums and discovery and are excellent ways for museums to reach the youth, as well as a way for urban schools to gain access to materials and authentic learning that they might not have been able to accomplish on their own.

When integrating informal education on a large, long-term scale, be sure to create a theme or series of themes and tie learning objectives to it to show how and why the informal learning institution aids in gathering knowledge and developing higher order thinking skills. Think about how you can plan your learning around what the facilities offer and still teach your state mandated objectives. Though it is more difficult to craft highly integrated, authentic partnerships, you will be able to easily create meaningful learning environments that help instill passion and a love of exploration and learning.

**Table 8.** *Key Things to Remember about Informal Education Integration*

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| * Integration is situational dependant; adjust a plausible model/idea as you go. * The more connections, related learning activities and reinforcement a short excursion to an informal learning site has, the more your students will draw from it. * Remember to be culturally relevant and responsive in your integration choices. * Start small, do not expect seamlessness your first time; build to deeper levels of integration. * Not all integration has to happen through site visits; technology is your friend. |

**Conclusion**

Making connections, bringing curriculum to life and allowing diverse urban students with very different lives than most curriculums cater toward, to find meaning and identity in learning, is exactly what the majority of urban schools are lacking (Gallego & Cole, 2001; Floyd, 2002; Kozol, 2005) and what informal learning institutions do best (Griffin, 2004)—illuminating the potential for forming symbiotic relationships. The fields of museum and informal education are young and very little extensive research has been completed on long-term effects of museum-school partnerships. Museum scholars such as: Boyer (1999), Christal (2003), Cox and Barrow (2000) and Griffin (2003), all call for further research in school-based partnerships and greater public awareness of museum education assets and programs. Despite this, over 70 percent of museums have noted an increase in teacher and student patronage over the last five years (Cox and Barrow, 2000), and more museums than ever before are offering P-12 educational programs. This is promising for educators like you because it shows that what is currently being attempted, is just the beginning of potential partnerships between urban schools and informal learning institutions and many new discoveries will be made that will benefit you and your students.

As a new urban educator, you do not have it easy and the initial transition and learning curve in the urban classroom is steep making the need for easy to access teaching tools like this guide, integral to developing curriculum and teaching practices that best met the needs of your culturally diverse students. By creating this guide, it is my intention to help ease some of the frustration and barriers you face by illuminating the mindsets needed to see how the two fields of culturally responsive urban education and informal learning have so many commonalities and skills to offer each other. When they are joined in partnership, they create life-altering experiences that make learning engaging and meaningful for the student, which should be the goal for all forms of education.

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