

Transforming education: How museum visits revolutionise learning

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Preschoolers' visit at the PHI Foundation for Contemporary Art in Montreal, 2023 Image: © Emily Gan

From enhanced critical thinking to interdisciplinary learning, museums offer tangible educational advantages. This Q&A answers key questions about museum visits, including practical tips for teachers and the impact of sustained museum programs

Museum education

How can museum visits enhance students' learning experiences compared to traditional classroom lessons?

Museum visits offer a unique learning experience that is either completely different or complements and enriches classroom teaching in several ways.

1. Immersive, multi-sensory experience.

Unlike classroom learning, which often relies on textual and visual aids, museums allow students to interact with real objects, works of art, historical artifacts or interactive exhibits. This approach engages several senses and promotes a significant knowledge experience that leads to better retention.

2. Contextualized learning.

Seeing a work or object in its real-life context, or contextualised to represent its authentic context, gives deeper meaning to the knowledge acquired in class. For example, a lesson on the Renaissance becomes more concrete when students can observe real paintings or sculptures from this period in a museum. Another example could be seeing artifacts in their real archaeological environment.

3. Greater commitment and motivation.

A museum environment is often more stimulating than a traditional classroom, but that assertion has to be nuanced if the classroom environment is highly stimulating and offers active pedagogical approaches. In general, getting out of the classroom can make learning more dynamic and motivating for students, enhancing their curiosity and desire to learn more. The learning context that represents museums is in general very stimulating and motivating for children.

4. Developing critical thinking and interpretation.

Museums foster analysis and reflection. Children are often encouraged to ask questions, make connections between works and their own knowledge, and interpret cultural or historical elements based on what they observe. Also, they are often put in a situation of active learning that stimulates observation, question and interpretation.

5. Social interaction and collaborative learning.

As the classroom situation enables collaborative work between the students, museum visits enable collaborative learning, where pupils can discuss, debate and share their observations and newly acquired knowledge. This fosters the development of communication and argumentation skills. Collaborative work between students can also lead to the development of social competencies.

6. Interdisciplinary approach.

A museum can link several disciplines: history, art, science, geography, philosophy and so on. It offers a more global and interconnected perspective of knowledge, unlike the often compartmentalized classroom approach.

7. Autonomy and personal discovery.

Students have the possibility to explore at their own pace, choosing the works or exhibitions that interest them most, and thus, developing their autonomy and initiative in learning, especially when asked to create art works or produce personal works.

In short, museums offer a more concrete, engaging and multidimensional experience than classroom teaching alone, enabling direct interaction with the objects of study and facilitating motivation, critical thinking and interdisciplinary learning.



Grade 3 students' visit at the Insectarium in Montreal, 2023. Image: © Anouska Therrien

How can regular visits to cultural institutions, like museums, benefit students academically and socially?

A visit to a museum enriches students academically, reinforcing knowledge by offering a concrete, interdisciplinary approach, stimulating critical thinking, encouraging curiosity, and even leading to improved language skills. Among other things, it develops specific vocabulary, i.e., artistic vocabulary, in an art museum. Socially, it fosters communication, teamwork, cultural openness, and responsibility.

Taking pupils out of the classroom often motivates them and strengthens their ties with teachers and peers, offering a more engaging and meaningful learning experience. Also, a more profound, significant or even different relationship can develop between people participating jointly in a museum visit. Studies indicate that students who are less motivated in the school setting tend to be more engaged when they are in a different environment from the classroom.

“School at the Museum”

Can you describe the “School at the Museum” program in more detail? What specific strategies are used to integrate museum visits into the school curriculum?

Museum-school projects, also known as “School at the Museum”, aim to integrate regular visits to museums throughout the school year over several consecutive weeks. Research has shown that this sustained museum attendance stimulates student engagement and

promotes educational success (Anderson and Storcksdieck, 2006; Catterall, 2012; Janosz et al., 2013; TRECQ, 2023; Meunier and Bédard Daneau, 2019). Recent work emphasizes the importance of resources outside and complementary to the school in supporting educational success (TRECQ, 2023). Janosz and his collaborators (2013) insist on the need for regular educational actions at a pace conducive to the acquisition of new attitudes, perceptions, and behaviors. The “School at the Museum” program meets precisely these criteria.

More recently, research conducted as part of an update of the literature on museum education (GREM, 2024) and studies on the links between museums and schools (GREM, 2019; Meunier and Bédard Daneau, 2022; Meunier et al., 2022; Meunier and Bélanger, 2025) have identified the very characteristics of museum-school projects. Although these initiatives vary from one school or museum to another, they are based on the following principles:

- Establish a lasting partnership with one or more museums
- Link all or part of the school curriculum with museum resources
- Multiply visits to the museum to make it a regular learning space
- Span on several weeks to reinforce educational continuity
- Mobilise most of museum collections to encourage students to take ownership of their knowledge
- Adopt an interdisciplinary and cultural approach to teaching by mixing science, art, history, math, etc
- Actively involve teaching staff in transmitting content related to museum collections
- Promote students’ work by showcasing their achievements in an exhibition

These projects offer prolonged immersion in a stimulating learning environment, encouraging greater student involvement and better integration of knowledge. The specific strategies used to integrate museum visits into the school curriculum consist mainly of supporting interdisciplinary approaches by linking museum-specific cultural resources that can be thematically organized and related to the collections.

How does the “School at the Museum” program specifically address social inequalities in access to cultural experiences?

Recent research indicates that peripheral and complementary resources to schools actively contribute to children’s educational success. Furthermore, it has been shown that actions aimed at educational success must be carried out regularly and at a pace that facilitates the acquisition of new attitudes, perceptions, or behaviours among the target populations. The “School at the Museum” program, or museum-school projects, corresponds exactly to these characteristics. It aims to schedule repeated periods, days, or half-days during the school year over a prolonged duration – namely, several consecutive weeks.

Researchers have suggested that sustained museum attendance could stimulate engagement, thereby promoting students’ educational success. At the GREM, we conducted this project over a period of three years, measuring the effects on the

engagement (affective, behavioural, and cognitive) of students who visited museums compared to those who did not. Data collection conducted before and after the “School at the Museum” program, aimed to assess the differences in the levels of academic engagement between pupils who visited museums, or not, prior to the program.

The results showed the presence of differences between these two groups, with students visiting museums being more academically engaged than those who did not. However, the results also revealed that sustained museum attendance – with the program – allowed students who did not attend museums prior to participating in the program, to achieve levels of academic engagement similar to those who did. The program seems to contribute to smoothing out social inequalities, particularly in terms of culture.

How might museum visits provide opportunities for students from diverse backgrounds to access cultural knowledge and resources they would not otherwise have?

Museum visits play an essential role in democratizing access to culture, particularly for pupils from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. These visits enable them to discover cultural resources that are often otherwise inaccessible, due to financial, geographical or symbolic (social) barriers. Entry fees to museums can be expensive for some families, restricting access to exhibitions and collections. By conducting school visits, educational establishments offer students the chance to enjoy an enriching cultural experience at little or no cost. Museums enable students to discover works of art, historical artefacts and scientific exhibits that they might never see otherwise. This broader access to heritage enables a better understanding of the world, history and heritage, whether global or local. Children from privileged backgrounds benefit from more opportunities to visit cultural sites with their families. School trips to museums bridge these gaps by offering a shared cultural experience to all, regardless of their social background.

Museums can arouse children’s curiosity and can spark a lifelong interest in art, history or science. This exposure to new knowledge can broaden their academic and professional perspectives and sustain their educational success. Museums often present collections that reflect different cultures and identities. For pupils from immigrant or under-represented backgrounds, seeing elements of their own heritage on display can reinforce their sense of belonging. By exploring works of art and interacting with cultural educators, they enrich their cultural capital, an asset that benefits them both academically and personally.

In short, museum visits play a crucial role in equalizing access to culture by exposing all students, regardless of their background, to enriched formative cultural resources and experiences. The research conducted by the Research Group on Museum Education (GREM) team at Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM) about the program “School at the Museum” has revealed differences in engagement levels between students visiting museums demonstrating higher engagement than those who did not. However, the

findings also indicated that sustained attendance at museums (the program) allowed pupils who did not visit museums prior to participating in the program to achieve levels of academic engagement comparable to those who visit museums.

Challenges and benefits for teachers

Teachers often feel overwhelmed by the prospect of organising a museum visit. What are some of the challenges teachers face in organising these visits, and how can these challenges be addressed?

All museums offer specific educational programs for in-school groups based on their age and level of education. These programs are also generally designed according to the educational intentions of the study programs and the school curriculum. Museum education professionals deploy a rich and relevant offer for teachers. They could start by choosing a museum that interests them or that they have already visited and a museum educational program likely to meet the interests of their students. Following this first museum experience, I am sure that many ideas will flourish for bringing their teaching closer to museums.

[For more information, click here.](#)

A key takeaway of your research is for teachers not to let a lack of experience or personal interest in museums hold students back. Can you elaborate on this point and provide examples of how museum visits benefit both students and teachers?

If teachers have no interest in museums and do not frequent them, they do not have to deprive their students of this opportunity. I suggest that they make this discovery together and have enriching museum experiences as fellow learners. Here is what a science teacher said about having low interest: « I didn't feel that involved in the project because it was about the arts. I experienced it a bit like the students... And it allows you to create pleasant bonds with your students, on a more equal footing. » (High School Teacher) I think it speaks for itself.