

Activities to Consider

'We are only restricted in subject by our collections and exhibitions (and time!).'
Education Manager, Reading Museum Service

'... the room itself is a "blank canvas" – access is facilitated by the activities themselves.'
Assistant Community History Curator, Walsall Museum

A learning space has to accommodate the activities you want to offer users. Such 'fitness for purpose' must be a constant theme when rethinking your space, and throughout the design and fitting-out phases of a refurbishment or new build. You need to consider the areas of the curriculum and the types of activity to be covered. Additional factors to address include age ranges and the size of groups you want to cater for. For example, early years groups and adult groups require different approaches in terms of activities and facilities.

Our survey of national and non-national sites shows that many find their learning space restricts, and sometimes prevents, the development of certain activities and areas of the curriculum. When asked what they can offer and what they find difficult, or even impossible, to provide, sites said that the more practical the activity, the harder it is to accommodate that activity in the space. Such areas include art & design, design & technology, and science. Similarly, the greater the need for specialist equipment or fittings, the less likely it is that a curriculum area can be provided – for example, ICT, PE, dance, and music.

It is not that such activities cannot or should not therefore be offered: rather, that during the development process for a rethought, refurbished or new space, the education team should identify – and, for any new build, discuss with the project team and the architect – those activities and areas of the curriculum they intend to offer and the design and fitting-out requirements for doing so.

One vital consideration is how well a learning space can accommodate different learning styles. From our survey, it seems that sites can successfully support both formal and informal learning, but practical learning is more difficult. More problematic still is providing for the individual, self-directed learner or researcher. The facilities of a space largely determine the success or otherwise of catering for diverse learning styles. However, just as crucial are the look, feel and culture of the learning space. Is it a comfortable or sympathetic place to be for encouraging each kind of learning?

'The title "Lecture Room" on the door provokes negative comments and feelings from older children, although the paintings in the room incite the curiosity of all children. Carpeting and paintings on the walls limit capacity for messy activities.'
Museum Educator, Anon

The areas of the curriculum covered by a site depend in part on the nature of its collection(s) or activities, and its level of specialisation – for example, if it is a science or environmental centre. Few sites are able to offer all areas of the curriculum, nor would many wish to. It is important therefore to agree priorities for what to provide, and to ensure that there is sufficient flexibility in the physical elements of the learning space to introduce new themes and activities in the future.

The limiting factors relate mainly to the learning space itself, such as size, location and equipment. In addition, a site must assess the number, resources and expertise of its education and support staff who will be expected to provide and manage the range of activities and subject-matter.

'There has been a restructure of the Museum and more staff given to the education team. A priority is to develop new activities.'
Head of Learning, Natural History Museum, London

'We are only restricted in subject by our collections and exhibitions (and time!).'

Education Manager, Reading Museum Service



- | | |
|---|---|
| 1
The Horniman
Museum | 6
Dyrham Park |
| 2
The Women's Library | 9
Bolton Museum &
Art Gallery |
| 3 & 11
@Bristol | 10
The Horniman
Museum |
| 4,5,7 & 8
The River & Rowing
Museum | 12
Ulster Folk &
Transport Museum |

'... the room itself is a "blank canvas" – access is facilitated by the activities themselves.'

Assistant Community History Curator, Walsall Museum

Demand from schools also determines what a site sets out to offer. This is confirmed by our survey, which shows a common spread of curriculum areas being offered by both generalist and specialist sites. For example, history – including social, local and living history – art & design, and science are most frequently offered. Some way behind, but still common, are areas like architecture, citizenship, craft, creativity or creative development, design & technology, English and literacy, environmental studies and education for sustainable development, and geography.

However, few sites explore the potential of such key areas as maths, numeracy and modern foreign languages. These require no specialist equipment – merely a fresh approach. Even supposedly hard-to-accommodate activities like video, dance and music might be introduced more widely if related to the site's collections in exciting ways. Such activities may appeal to schools seeking new approaches to key areas of an expanding curriculum.

'I do not feel I am unable to do anything totally because of the room – though art and craft work is quite a hassle as a result. But the carpets are really good (and the underfloor heating) and many of the little children really like sitting on it – creating a really good informal non-school atmosphere.'

Education Officer, National Wetlands Centre, Llanelli, Wales

