



Research Centre for  
Museums and Galleries

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**Measuring the Outcomes and  
Impact of Learning in  
Museums, archives and Libraries**

**The Learning Impact Research Project  
End of Project Paper  
07 May 2003**

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# Measuring the Outcomes and Impact of Learning in Museums, archives and Libraries

The Learning Impact Research Project End of Project Paper

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## 1.0 Introduction

Today, museums, archives and libraries are required to demonstrate their social value. Like schools, colleges and other educational institutions, they are asked to give evidence of the learning they facilitate in users.

The establishment of Resource, the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries brought together three diverse domains. They all have different ways of thinking and talking about learning. There is currently little research available about the character of learning in each domain. There is even less research on the learning outcomes of users. With the need for museums, archives and libraries to provide evidence of learning and their impact upon users, Resource has developed the “Inspiring Learning For All” vision. Piloted with organisations across the country, “Inspiring Learning For All” intends to encourage museums, archives and libraries to adapt in order to support and encourage learning more effectively.

The Learning Impact Research Project (LIRP) undertaken by RCMG was commissioned by Resource as part of the “Inspiring Learning For All” vision. The aim was to develop a method of measuring the impact of learning in museums, archives and libraries.

LIRP has created a basic conceptual framework of five Generic Learning Outcomes (GLOs). Successful piloting across fifteen museums, archives and libraries has demonstrated the GLOs’ potential for measuring learning across the sector. They will form the basis of a web-based Toolkit that can be used to help organisations make the measurement of learning a vital part of their practice.

## **2.0 Context for the Learning Impact Research Project (LIRP)**

The establishment of Resource, the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries in 2000 brought together three separate domains. All had different methods, working practices and purposes. One common aspect however is their contribution to public learning.

Resource has developed a powerful learning agenda. The “Inspiring Learning For All” vision has the aim of encouraging museums, archives and libraries to prioritise the learning experiences of their users. LIRP is part of this vision. Its aim is to develop a method for showing the impact that museums, archives and libraries can have upon their users.

Despite their importance as places of learning, little information is known about how museums, archives and libraries impact upon the learning experiences of their users. Not all museums, archives and libraries see themselves as places that should primarily focus on the learning experiences of their users. In many cases the emphasis has been on other service targets. As a result, attitudes towards learning vary enormously across organisations as well as across the sector as a whole. Common concepts of learning and a language to describe the experiences that users have are also lacking.

A broad understanding of the scope of learning across the museums, archives and libraries sector is currently unavailable. There has been little research into the impact or outcomes of learning in museums, archives and libraries. Many organisations are aware of some aspects of the experiences their users have. Data is collected from comments books, interviews and questionnaires for example. However, this is not always analysed, and reliable evidence showing the impact of learning is not easy to obtain.

The launch of “Inspiring Learning For All” is an important development therefore in changing the balance in museums, archives and libraries towards facilitating the learning experiences of their users. The challenge for the Learning Impact Research Project was to develop a method that all museums, archives and libraries could use to measure the outcomes and impact of learning upon their users.

### **3.0 Learning in Museums, Archives and Libraries**

Learning in museums, archives and libraries differs from that in formal education establishments, and users of museums, archives and libraries are different from those in educational institutions. They are not involved in formal learning systems like those of schools or colleges. Museums, archives and libraries do get visits from formal groups such as school groups and adult groups. However, most users are informal users. These can include individuals, family groups or friendship groups. They may be learning as a hobby, or for enjoyment. They may be non-accredited learners. Many users might not even see their visit to a museum, archive or library as a learning experience, although they may be learning whilst enjoying their "day out." Learning is open-ended and self-directed, and museums, archives and libraries may be used for a wide range of purposes.

These learners will have a diverse range of learning styles and learning agendas. People like to learn in different ways whether by reading, interacting with people, or by touching and doing. The range of reasons for learning are also vast. They may be focused and specific e.g. using an archive to research family history. They may be unfocused and unspecific e.g. someone visiting an art gallery in their lunch-break or wandering into a library. On the whole, museums, archives and libraries are unaware of the learning objectives of their users. Learning is not restricted to site visits either. Museums, archives and libraries produce a wealth of information that can be accessed by users including web-sites, books, teacher-packs and leaflets to name a few. How many museums, archives and libraries can say why people use these materials and what they learn from them?

The outcomes of these learning experiences are equally diverse. They may include increased knowledge and understanding, development of new skills and abilities or inspiration to learn more. Often, learners use museums, archives and libraries to reinforce knowledge that they already have. Learning can also be short-term and long-term. A learner might not use their new knowledge or ability until a long time after the actual learning event.

Learning in museums, archives and libraries is therefore a complicated business. It is not surprising that the difficulty of measuring learning in informal environments such as cultural organisations is continually debated. Added to this, many of the learning outcomes from such environments are the so-called "soft" outcomes. These include attitudes, values, emotions and beliefs.

Often these outcomes are not even seen as evidence of learning as the emphasis is on “hard” facts and demonstrable skills.

Also it would be inappropriate for museums, archives and libraries to set specific learning outcomes for learners to achieve. They do not know the prior knowledge of their users and so would be unable to make judgements about how much users had learnt. Users themselves, however, are capable of making such judgements about their own learning. At present there is little evidence from museums, archives and libraries to demonstrate this.

Cultural organisations like museums, archives and libraries, however, want - and need - to be able to describe the learning that occurs. The Government is emphasising the importance of lifelong learning and increased access to learning for everybody. It is important to present funding bodies with evidence of the depth and extent of learning in museums, archives and libraries. Museums, archives and libraries provide unique environments for learning. This has long been recognised. However, the actual evidence of the impact of learning upon users is lacking.

Currently, the learning potential of museums, archives and libraries is not fully realised. Learning processes and potential outcomes are not well understood. By developing the Generic Learning Outcomes (GLOs) LIRP gives museums, archives and libraries a means of understanding, analysing and talking about learning. The development of a conceptual framework and the construction of research tools can enable the collection, interpretation and presentation of the evidence of learning.

## 4.0 Understanding Learning

The focus of "Inspiring Learning For All" is on the users of museums, archives and libraries rather than the organisation. This reflects a wider change in how learning is understood. The emphasis is no longer on "education", which implies a society-wide system with common standards, but on "learning". Learning emphasises individual learners, learning processes and learning outcomes.

Learning is widely seen as a lifelong process of making meaning. It is not limited to formal educational provision. Current government policy recognises lifelong learning and is working towards equality of provision and easier access to learning possibilities for the many. Museums, archives and libraries can clearly contribute to the lifelong learning agenda. Hence the emphasis on the facilitation and measurement of the impact of learning that is the basis of "Inspiring Learning For All".

The traditional view of learning is as a "product" connected to scholarship and knowledge. This way of thinking often sees learning as something that only happens in formal educational establishments. This view is still widely held in many museums, archives and libraries, and many have never had to collect or present evidence of learning in a systematic way before. The focus has been on providing a service for users with little emphasis on the importance of learning within the organisation, or even encouraging learning.

This traditional view of learning does not favour museums, archives and libraries. Learning in cultural organisations is associated with creativity and innovative thinking, and there can also be seen the development of attitudes and values. In this way, learning is not separate from emotions. In fact, emotions can help people to learn more. Enjoyment, amazement or inspiration can provide the motivation to acquire facts and knowledge.

This view of learning is more suitable for museums, archives and libraries. It allows the potential for the out-of-the-ordinary, inspirational and wonderful experiences that are associated with learning in cultural organisations like museums, archives and libraries to be counted as learning. Within the traditional view of learning, these experiences would be ignored. Understanding learning as simply the acquisition of facts and knowledge is not wide enough to include these experiences.

## **4.1 The Challenge for Resource and LIRP**

The challenge for “Inspiring Learning For All” and LIRP is to develop and expand the traditional, narrow view of learning into something much broader.

Firstly, LIRP had to develop an agreed understanding of learning for museums, archives and libraries. At present, there is no common understanding of learning across the sector. Therefore, LIRP adopted the broad definition of learning used by the Campaign for Learning and adopted by Resource for “Inspiring Learning For All”.

Learning is a process of active engagement with experience. It is what people do when they want to make sense of the world. It may involve increase in or deepening of skills, knowledge, understanding, values, feelings, attitudes and the capacity to reflect. Effective learning leads to change, development and the desire to learn more.

This definition follows current government policy. Instead of an emphasis on traditional teacher-centred learning, the emphasis is on learner-centred processes. Learning is a process and an experience rather than a “product” of scholarship and knowledge.

The significant aspects of the learning “theory” adopted by Resource and LIRP is that learning is a lifelong process of making meaning. Individual learning is highly diverse and unpredictable, requiring different modes of attention from wide open to tightly focused. Users in museums, archives and libraries vary in the depth and level of their learning, and these differences can also be seen across the museum, archive and library sector. There is an emphasis on the potential for creativity and innovative thinking, a feature of learning within a cultural context. Learning can be individual or social, as learners may often share their learning experiences and outcomes with family, friends or social groups.

From this theory was developed the system of Generic Learning Outcomes that forms the conceptual framework for measuring learning in museums, archives and libraries. Successful piloting across fifteen museums, archives and libraries have demonstrated their potential for measuring learning across the sector.

## **4.2 Summary of the learning theory behind LIRP**

- A focus on learners and their learning experiences
- Learning is a lifelong process of meaning making
- Learning includes change and development in emotions, skills, behaviour attitudes and values
- Learning as a verb (the act of learning) rather than a noun (learning / scholarship)
- Enjoyment, amazement or inspiration can provide the motivation to acquire facts and knowledge
- Learning is a process of identity-building
- Learning is both individual and social

### **4.3 What are Learning Outcomes?**

Learning outcomes are the results of a learning experience. Outcomes are understood in relation to individuals and may be short-term or long-term.

In the formal education sector, learning outcomes are a well-developed concept. They are used to describe what the learner will learn from a programme of study and can be used to make judgements about a learner's progress.

Learning outcomes are distinguished from learning objectives. These describe what a programme will teach. For example, the learning objective of a library IT programme may be to teach people how to search the Internet or to use email. The learning outcome might be for the learner to develop the confidence to use a computer more regularly.

### **4.4 Specific and Generic Learning Outcomes**

Learning outcomes can also be defined as specific or generic. Specific learning outcomes are related to specific programmes of study and are more tightly focused than generic learning outcomes which consist of broader categories. For example, after a programme of study in art history, participants might gain some specific knowledge about the names and styles of different artists. The generic outcomes of this learning would be an increase in knowledge and (possibly) understanding.

Unlike in formal education, museums, archives and libraries will not be able to make judgments about how much their users have learnt or how much progress they have made. However, users themselves will be able to make judgements about their own learning. They will be able to articulate what they found out and if that was what they were looking for. They can say whether they were inspired or had an enjoyable time. Collecting evidence of learning outcomes in museums, archives and libraries therefore must involve asking users how they feel about their own learning.

LIRP recognises that learners will have highly diverse learning outcomes. The Generic Learning Outcomes have been developed so that these individual outcomes can be captured and grouped into categories, thereby giving a rich picture of the impact of learning in museums, archives and libraries. Categorising the learning outcomes described by individual people into five broad generic outcomes enables the breadth of learning across the sector to be presented.

## **5.0 Generic Learning Outcomes in Museums, Archives and Libraries**

LIRP has developed a system of Generic Learning Outcomes (GLOs) to measure the impact of learning in museums, archives and libraries:

- **Increase in knowledge and understanding**
- **Increase in skills**
- **Change in attitudes or values**
- **Evidence of enjoyment, inspiration and creativity**
- **Evidence of activity, behaviour, progression**

During the piloting phase of LIRP, fifteen museums, archives and libraries used the GLOs to carry out different kinds of evaluation and research. Evidence for each GLO was found in each organisation and no additional GLOs were found to be necessary.

Each GLO is described in detail below. Each GLO conveys the richness and depth of learning that is possible in cultural organisations. Alongside are some examples of evidence statements.

## 5.1 Increase in knowledge and understanding

Learning new facts or information, or using prior knowledge in new ways. Coming to a deeper understanding. Knowing “what” or knowing “about”. It includes learning facts or information and grasping meaning more firmly. Well-known information may take on a new relevance or be made meaningful in a new way during a museum, archive or library visit.

Knowledge and understanding might be subject-specific, or might result in making connections between or across subject areas. It also includes learning more about everyday life. Knowledge and understanding includes the development of a more complex view of self, family, neighbourhood, or personal world.

*“I gained an insight into life in major cities and how it is different to my life,”* said one teenage library user in Poole after a reading group discussion at one of the LIRP pilot sites.

Knowledge and understanding can include finding out more information about how museums, archives or libraries operate: *“We thoroughly enjoyed our visit and learnt a lot of what you do and how we can benefit if we want to research anything ourselves”* wrote one user of Somerset Record Office.

## 5.2 Increase in skills

Having a skill means knowing “how to” to do something. There are many different ways that skills are described.

- Intellectual skills (reading, thinking critically and analytically, being able to present a reasoned point of view, weighing up different forms of evidence)
- Key skills (numeracy, communication, use of ICT, learning how to learn)
- Information management skills (locating information, using information management systems, evaluating information)
- Social skills (meeting people, being friendly, introducing others, remembering names, showing an interest in the concerns of others, team working)
- Emotional skills (managing intense feelings such as anger, channelling energy into productive outcomes, recognising the feelings of others)
- Communication skills (writing, speaking, listening, giving a presentation, making a TV programme)
- Physical skills (running, dancing, manipulating materials to make things)

Following Essex Libraries Big Summer Read a parent wrote: *“It does have an effect on reading, certainly with my son, it maintains his fluency and familiarity with words.”*

A 13-14 year-old school student wrote after a visit to the Imperial War Museum: *“I have learnt to look at the exhibits and reflect on why they are there and their importance.”*

A teacher’s school visit evaluation form at Prescott Museum stated: *“Literacy, design and speaking and listening skills were all enhanced in a practical way.”*

### 5.3 Change in attitudes and values

Change in feelings, perceptions, or opinions about self, other people and things, and the wider world. Being able to give reasons for actions and personal viewpoints. Increase in empathy, capacity for tolerance. Increased motivation. Values and attitudes are an integral part of learning. New experiences and information change or reinforce perceptions and feelings. Values underpin actions and behaviour, even though they are frequently unexamined. Attitudes and values that are especially relevant within museums, archives and libraries include:

- Attitudes towards self
- Attitudes towards others
- Attitudes towards the organisation

Use of MAL can result in more positive attitudes to learning. *"I feel much happier about requesting and getting hold of information,"* said a distance learning postgraduate student after information management skills training at the University of Leicester library).

Empathy makes an important contribution to the development of values and attitudes. *"It was really scary and it felt like you were in a real Victorian classroom,"* a child said after a visit to a Victorian classroom reconstruction at St. John's Museum in Warwick.

## 5.4 Evidence of enjoyment, inspiration, creativity

Evidence of having fun, or being surprised while using a library, archive or museum. Evidence of innovative thoughts, actions or things. Evidence of exploration, experimentation and making.

Enjoyment adds to the quality of life: *"I'm retired and I read for pleasure as a hobby"*, said one library user. Enjoyment in learning leads to motivation. A young visitor to the Women's Library drew herself in the archive and wrote: *"I loved the dewey numbers and I learned a lot."* Motivation facilitates success, creativity, invention and innovative ways of thinking and doing.

Visiting a museum, archive or library may result in feeling inspired. A young teenager visiting the Holocaust exhibition at the Imperial War Museum, London was inspired by: *"Martin Luther King and how he was brave enough to stand up to America."*

A visitor to Wolverhampton Museum and Art Gallery used the gallery to lift her out of her everyday routine:

*"...I think you spend most of your life living from one day to the next, thinking about bills, thinking about going to work, driving up and down the motorway or something – you go to an art gallery and you are living and experiencing art. It's a higher form of living."*

The experience of museums, archives and libraries can result in creativity. A teacher wrote after a visit to Warwickshire Museums: *"Almost without exception the children thoroughly enjoyed the day – one particularly hard to please pupil claiming it was the best trip he has ever been on! It inspired some excellent recounts of the day prompting some to write more than ever achieved in class!"*

A parent wrote after the Big Summer Read at Essex Libraries: *"Rachel and Nathan enjoyed the Reading Planet very much. Rachel made her own paper and took a sample of it into the library."*

## 5.5 Evidence of activity, behaviour, progression

What people do, intend to do or have done. The way people balance and manage their lives, including their work, study or family contexts. Actions can be observed or people may report what they did.

A visitor to the Soundtrack exhibition at Leeds Art Gallery, which used sound to accompany artworks, described how this changed their behaviour in the gallery: *"I think the sound makes the viewer use all the senses. I found myself more involved in actually stopping and looking..."*

One outcome of learning may be the intention to act. An email to Essex Record Office stated: *"Thank you for your excellent reply. I am thoroughly impressed by the speed, depth and clarity of your response. The information is wonderful and I will be following up on all your suggestions."*

Sometimes learning can result in profound change in the way people manage their lives. A comment card in Leamington Library read as follows: *"I come here to practise. I am just learning to use the computers. The computer is now an accessory for living."*

## **6.0 Piloting the Generic Learning Outcomes**

The GLO system was piloted in fifteen museums, archives and libraries between September 2002 and February 2003. These were chosen from the organisations piloting “Inspiring Learning For All”. They were chosen to give the best coverage of museums, archives and libraries in terms of size, mission of organisation and geographical location.

Training was given prior to the LIRP Pilot phase and support was given from LIRP team members during the pilot process.

### **6.1 Aim of the Pilot Phase**

The aim of the LIRP pilot phase was to test the GLO conceptual framework across a diverse group of organisations. Three types of project were set up. Overall, the GLOs were used to:

- Categorise existing data collected by seven of the organisations e.g. Somerset Archives who looked at a range of material including comments cards, emails, user surveys and comments from talks and activities.
- Improve data collection tools in four of the organisations by asking more focused questions about learning e.g. Warwickshire Libraries asked people using their computer facilities “How has using the computer helped you to “learn” – or furthered your work?”
- Develop new evaluation research projects in four of the organisations that focused more directly on learning and its outcomes e.g. Poole library used video to capture a teenage reading group talking about what they learned from a story that focused on anorexia.
- Confirm that evidence could be categorised, analysed and interpreted in relation to the GLOs
- Structure the reports that discussed and presented evidence of the five learning outcomes

The fifteen organisations developed individual plans for collecting data. This data was then coded using the GLOs. Data could then be analysed in two ways:

- Quantitative – counting the occurrence of each GLO and producing tables or charts for comparisons
- Qualitative – describing the range and depth of evidence from each GLO, often using quotes from users

A final project report presenting their findings was completed by each organisation.

## **6.2 Outcomes of the Pilot Phase**

The piloting process was absolutely vital in both testing the conceptual framework and in bringing to light issues that need to be addressed in regard to the pilots' talking about and analysing learning.

The pilot organisations were able to use the GLOs for analysing data, improving tools for data generation and developing new projects for measuring learning. Even existing data that had not been collected specifically to find evidence of learning could be categorised. Initial scepticism was unfounded and no additional GLOs were needed.

"The outcomes of the data analysis did not justify initial scepticism. Although standard comment and complaints, and user surveys, yielded very little, other more focused sources were surprisingly fruitful. The exercise repaid the work that it demanded and yielded valuable insights both in respect of the most effective ways of collecting rich data and the most effective ways of facilitating learning."

Tom Mayberry and colleagues, Somerset Record Office

Every organisation found a way of using the GLOs. Most participants involved in the pilot process have already enthusiastically incorporated the GLOs into their practice although this was not required as part of the pilot process.

"The Generic Learning Outcomes have given us a language and a framework to demonstrate to more traditional learning providers the unique contribution that museums, archives and libraries make to the learning agenda. This will help us develop local learning partnerships to deliver community learning based on individual learners' needs."

Fiona Williams, Culture and Community Learning, Poole

Some pilot organisations were innovative in their use of the GLOs. Uses included staff training, future planning for the organisation and briefing designers for an exhibition.

Colleagues working on two major projects at IWM Duxford and the Churchill Museum at the Cabinet War Rooms have incorporated the GLOs into their thinking about exhibition development. For the Churchill Museum the results of this thinking has been incorporated into the brief for designers."

Sam Heywood, Imperial War Museum, London.

"The Generic Learning Outcomes approach has already been incorporated into the evaluation plan for the NOF Digitise Project "Windows on Warwickshire." We are very interested to explore how the GLOs can be used to gather evidence about online learning."

Jo Rice, Warwickshire Museums and Archives.

The pilot phase revealed that many of the participants were unused to thinking about or talking about learning. Some organisations were not asking their users about their learning experiences and the focus was on satisfaction with the organisation's provision. The lack of experience in thinking about learning meant that some organisations found it difficult to distinguish between the different outcomes and more general comments. Coding in relation to each GLO was also a problem for some. There were instances of multiple coding and mis-coding and some participants were worried about bias and subjectivity.

Using the Generic Learning Outcomes represented a steep learning curve for many participants. This was demonstrated in the majority of reports submitted by the pilot organisations where no claims were made on the basis of the evidence of learning that was collected. While evidence for learning outcomes were found in all the organisations involved, many lacked the experience to interpret the evidence and to make confident claims based on it.

The general lack of experience in understanding and researching learning and its outcomes suggests that considerable support will be needed to introduce the GLOs to the sector. However, the GLOs gave many of the organisations involved in the pilot process a language and a confidence to begin the process of facilitating and finding evidence of learning.

“I think that the generation of new tools has been one of the most positive outcomes of the pilot process. It has really given a new perspective on how to design evaluation that gives you useful evidence and relevant feedback. It has also ensured that encouraging dialogue with users is at the forefront of all our developments.”

Sue Arnold, Knowsley Museum Service.

## **7.0 Value of the Generic Learning Outcomes**

The breadth and simplicity of the GLOs allows them to be used across museums, archives and libraries. It is not a prescriptive framework. It is intended to facilitate discussion, analysis and the collection of evidence.

The GLOs can be used flexibly. They can be adapted to suit the individual needs of museums, archives and libraries. The pilot phase showed that the GLOs could be used in ways that were not planned as part of LIRP. There is also the potential for the GLOs to be used systematically across the sector to give a national picture of learning impact.

## 8.0 Summary

There are two main ways of using the GLOs in museums, archives and libraries.

First, as a collective way of understanding learning across the sector. The GLOs can be used as a planning tool for auditing, evaluating and improving the opportunities for learning in organisations.

- Establishing a basic framework within which learning outcomes can be identified and described
- Enabling museums, archives and libraries to develop and share a common understanding of learning
- Providing a common language and framework to use when talking about learning to others e.g. colleagues, funders, users, evaluators and policy makers
- Providing a set of categories for auditing existing provision and planning for learning

Second, the GLOs can be used a research framework for generating, interpreting and presenting evidence of learning which has been agreed and tested across the museums, archives and libraries sector.

- Enabling the systematic generation, collection, analysis and interpretation of evidence
- Helping to develop new evaluation research methods, design tools and categorise evidence
- Measuring both the depth and breadth of learning in individual organisations and across / between organisations. This is through quantitative methods e.g. counting the occurrence of each GLO and producing tables or charts (breadth), or by qualitative methods e.g. describing the range of evidence from each GLO using quotes from users (depth).
- Evaluating on-site and on-line learning

The use of the Generic Learning Outcomes is not restricted to museums, archives and libraries. There is the potential to use them in other cultural and educational fields.

## **9.0 The Outcomes of the Learning Impact Research Project**

LIRP has resulted in a powerful conceptual framework which can be used to develop a range of research and evaluation methods and tools. These will measure the impact of learning in museums, archives and libraries.

The main outcome of LIRP will be a web-based Learning Outcomes Toolkit. Launched early 2004 this will include:

- Understanding Learning
- The Generic Learning Outcomes
- Finding evidence of learning

Guidance will be given on:

- Measuring learning at organisational level
- Report-writing

Examples in the Toolkit will be given of:

- Different approaches to measuring learning outcomes
- Specific tools that can be used and adapted by organisations

The GLO system has been carefully developed and tested. It has been reviewed in relation to early and current work on learning outcomes. It has been tested successfully with fifteen organisations from the museums, archives and libraries sector.

The GLO system is easy to understand. Once understood it can be used in a range of flexible approaches. The GLO system is a rich resource for museums, archives and libraries, and is of value beyond the sector.