

# Learning تعلم Lernen

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## Dimensions of Learning in Museums

Although the term *learning* is not explicitly mentioned in the International Council of Museums' (ICOM) definition, it is embedded in the mission. According to ICOM, museums are “open to the public, accessible and inclusive, fostering diversity, ethically, professionally, and with the participation of communities, offering varied experiences for education, enjoyment, reflection, and knowledge sharing.” This definition implies various forms of learning—from knowledge acquisition and critical reflection to social interaction and personal growth. By prioritizing inclusivity, accessibility, and community participation, museums create spaces for diverse learning experiences tailored to different needs.

In the museum context, *learning* is often discussed alongside terms like *education*, *upbringing*, and *mediation*, each carrying distinct purposes. Over time, museum education departments have shifted their focus from merely transmitting knowledge to fostering engagement and personal connection. While museums once centered on factual information, today the emphasis is on mediation, which prioritizes interaction and accessibility.

The terms *learning*, *education*, *upbringing*, and *mediation* provide a framework for understanding museum learning. In German, *Lernen* (learning; Arabic: تعلم – *ta'allum*) broadly refers to knowledge, skill, and behavior acquisition. *Bildung* (education; Arabic: تعليم – *ta'leem*) encompasses personal growth and intellectual development, while *Erziehung* (upbringing; Arabic: تربية – *tarbiyah*) emphasizes values and social norms, shaping ethical and social identity.

*Mediation*, or *Vermittlung* in German and in Arabic توسط (*Tawassut*), adds a unique layer to museum learning, facilitating understanding and engagement. Unlike traditional education,

mediation is dialogic, encouraging exploration and personal connections with exhibits. As a bridge between visitors and content, mediation uses tools like guided tours, interactive displays, and participatory programs to make information accessible and meaningful. Rather than merely conveying facts, mediation supports visitors in interpreting exhibits for themselves, creating an engaging and inclusive learning environment.

For museum visitors, learning is multi-dimensional, encompassing cognitive, emotional, social and skill-based experiences. Cognitive learning includes engaging with exhibits, descriptive texts, and guided tours, which deepen visitors' understanding of history, science, and art. Mediation is essential here, as it encourages visitors to interpret and question what they encounter. For example, the biodiversity-focused Khor Kalba Mangrove Centre we visited in the SAWA Journey may inspire curiosity about ecosystems, while a social-justice-themed exhibit in the exhibition *Parallel Histories* in the Sharjah Art Museum prompts reflection on contemporary issues.



*Outdoor Classroom at Khor Kalba Mangrove Center (10/24)*



*Maray Al-Tellis: Stone Revolution in the Sharjah Art Museum (10/24)*

Skill-based learning supports the preservation of tangible and intangible heritage, as workshops allow visitors to practice traditional crafts, fostering hands-on connections to cultural heritage. This form of learning was part of the Arabic coffeemaking workshop and the *majlis* discussion we attended at Bait Al Naboodah, where we explored family traditions and cultural values in a community setting.



*Traditional arabic  
coffeemaking workshop at  
Bait Al Naboodah (10/24)*

Some museums have recognized the importance of play for all ages, adding play areas that make learning engaging and accessible. The Archaeological Museum in Sharjah, for example, offers playful learning experiences that allow visitors to step into the role of an archaeologist. In specially designed spaces, children and adults alike can put on archaeologist attire, dig for “artifacts,” and document their discoveries, simulating the real processes of archaeological research. The interactive, hands-on design encourages exploration and curiosity, inviting visitors to actively engage with history rather than passively observe it. In this way, museums extend beyond factual learning to support social, emotional, and experiential engagement.



*Journey of Discoveries exhibition in the Archaeology Museum, Sharjah (11/24)*

The social dimension of museum learning is also essential. Museums are communal spaces where group interactions and discussions broaden individual perspectives. Visitors—family members, friends, or school groups—bring diverse viewpoints, enriching the experience. Mediation supports this learning by providing frameworks for discussions, workshops, and interactive programs. The Jugend Museum in Berlin, for instance, uses theater performances to explore themes, much like the Diversity Training in the SAWA program, where participants creatively presented objects with songs or poems.

Learning in museums also includes peer interaction. Visitors can learn by observing each other's reactions and interpretations, creating a participatory environment that fosters community and accessibility. This intergenerational learning was evident at the Berlin Museum of Technology, where grandparents shared insights from the past, while grandchildren introduced new technologies. Different cultural and generational backgrounds bring unique perspectives, making museums dynamic spaces for social learning. Mediation facilitates this by structuring spaces for shared exploration, such as participatory workshops or prompts for collaborative inquiry, empowering visitors as both learners and contributors.

Museums themselves should also be learners. Feedback, observation, and implementing participatory programs alone are not enough to adapt to audience needs. Many museums carry a heavy "backpack" of historical legacies, and learning is essential not only for the public but also for museums and their staff. Often perceived as static, museums can be slow to implement critical concepts like decolonization, restitution, and diversity, leading to frustration among staff who see recurring challenges. Our museum exchange project SAWA Museum Studies Program addressed these difficulties and explored potential strategies for improvement. Real change requires continuous professional development for staff and a flexible, adaptive institutional structure. In many German museums, structural changes are needed to create an environment that supports ongoing learning and responsiveness. Programs like the SAWA Journey foster intercultural learning by engaging participants as both learners and contributors. Participants critically examine how museums promote dialogue and reflection, gaining insight into museum work and the role of mediation in educational design. This program highlights how mediation helps visitors reflect on their cultural perspectives and integrate diverse insights, positioning museums as spaces for intercultural growth and development.

Collaboration between museums enhances learning by enabling knowledge exchange and sharing best practices. Partnerships—through exhibit loans, joint projects, and conferences—allow museums to expand perspectives, adopt diverse curatorial methods, and tailor content to varied audiences.

Intercultural learning in museums fosters empathy and understanding. Exhibits on global histories, indigenous knowledge, and diverse narratives help visitors challenge stereotypes and appreciate cultural diversity. Programs that support intercultural dialogue—like discussions, workshops, and exchanges—promote inclusivity, with mediation facilitating respectful dialogue, guiding visitors through complex cultural themes, and fostering meaningful connections.

The dimensions of learning in museums are extensive; museum learning goes far beyond simply transmitting information to an audience. It is not only marked by progress but also by the process of unlearning, requiring constant attention and reflection. Museums are intended to be social spaces for exchange, dialogue, and active engagement. Learning is not only relevant for the

audience but also essential for museums as institutions. Learning is a process that inevitably involves making mistakes, which are necessary for growth and are part of the learning journey.

For museums to remain dynamic, they must continuously reflect on their own practices and foster a culture that values learning from mistakes. A positive approach to mistakes and learning should be implemented, encouraging ongoing knowledge exchange within museum teams and through interdisciplinary collaboration. Programs like SAWA highlight the power of dialogue with colleagues from diverse fields, offering fresh insights and perspectives that enrich museum work and expand understanding.