Mentor's Introduction

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After Dana Kletchka presented her paper at the graduate research session during the 2006 Chicago NAEA conference, moderator Steve McGuire pointed out that her work offers a critical perspective on art museum education. Isn’t it difficult to take a position that is critical of what you do and who you are professionally, he asked. Dana’s response was direct and to the point: “Yes, it is.”

In some ways this exchange sums up key characteristics of Dana’s dissertation research and her approach to her scholarship. Dana does not shy away from challenging perspectives, whether she is challenging taking-for-granted assumptions in the field or looking critically at her prior professional experiences. Dana does not turn away from difficult projects; rather she embraces the challenge of thorough research, rigorous work and critical thinking.

Initially Dana proposed a historical study of art museum education. Dana points out in her paper that art museum education is typically de-valued within the museum, so too historical research has tended to be de-valued among doctoral students in art education.
Over a quarter-century ago, I was invited to speak at a Canadian university, in part so that my commitment to historical research could help graduate students understand that doing an historical study was not “an easy way out.” At that time, theory was emerging as avant garde research; history seemed hopelessly retrograde in its methods as well as its subjects.

Dana Kletchka’s work is exciting because she is building a thoughtful theoretical framework for her historical re-construction. She is aware that the past does not exist in dusty archives waiting to be discovered, but must be constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed within sound theoretical frameworks. As a feminist scholar, she is also aware that the personal is the political. Power is grounded in relationships of gender, class, and race, in art museums as in the larger society. Her dissertation promises to balance a personal perspective with critical uses of both theory and history. Yes, it will be difficult, challenging work, but all of us stand to benefit from Dana’s critical perspective.