

**Teachers, Museums and Worksheets:
A Closer Look at a Learning Experience**

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The Unique Contexts of Museum Learning

Although many people may perceive the four-walled classroom as the principal place for learning, it is by no means restricted to that environment. For instance, most teachers would agree that a visit to a museum, science center, zoo or other informal science learning institution provides a valuable experience for their students. More and more, educational researchers have turned to informal settings to examine learning in these and other non-school environments. One area that has received growing attention within the past decade is the investigation of visitor learning in museums, science centers, zoos and similar public institutions. In their examination of the museum experience, Falk and Dierking (2000) have developed a model for learning that addresses the importance of the personal, social and physical contexts, all of which interact to influence learning in a museum or "free-choice learning" environment. This Contextual Model of Learning consists of eight factors, within the three different contexts, which can influence the learner in a museum (or other similar situation.) Falk and Dierking suggest that each of these factors should be considered when trying to understand (and improve) the learning experience:

1. **Motivation and Expectations.** People visit museums for different reasons and what they want to do or expect to see will certainly affect their overall experience.
2. **Prior Knowledge, Interests and Beliefs.** A visitor's interests and existing knowledge will influence choice of exhibits or programs for participation.
3. **Choice and Control.** Learning is optimized when the learner is in control and can choose what is intrinsically interesting.
4. **Within-group Sociocultural Mediation.** Museums are uniquely suited for social learning; visitors in groups utilize each other as vehicles for reinforcing beliefs and making meaning.
5. **Facilitated Mediation by Others.** Museum staff and other visitors can impact individual learning.
6. **Orientation and Advance Organizers.** Learning is more likely when visitors are familiar with their surroundings and their expected behaviors.
7. **Design.** Exhibit design can help or hinder an individual's interest and understanding.
8. **Reinforcing Experiences Outside the Museum.** Events and situations that occur beyond the museum itself can ultimately influence what is learned from a museum experience.