Advocacy for museum educators and the power of words: a comparison between New York City and Barcelona realities

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Introduction

In 2019, ICOM launched a proposal to cooperatively generate an up-to-date definition of "museum". Crucial words like participation, community and critical dialogue were added to the new definition, in keeping with the current vision of the museum as a social and cultural institution aimed at engaging in dialogue with citizens. However, the word "education", included in the ICOM definition since the 1970's as one of the main functions of museums, was removed in the new definition. This absence caused great concern for many of us, as museum education professionals, and was protested by ICOM members during the discussions. As a consequence, a new period has been opened to reflect on the revised definition, with the educational function of our institutions being one of the most controversial aspects to discuss.

In light of this, we would like to thank CECA for pursuing this special issue, contributing to and enhancing the debate among museum professionals. The creation of the CECA international vocabulary resource (ICOM, 2018), outlining the terms that different countries employ to define our roles makes evident that our differences are not only linguistic in nature but also conceptual. It reflects dissimilar professional realities and contrasting conceptions about the museum's functions, but also the heterogeneity of words to define the same conceptions, and the inconsistency of some nomenclatures' meanings. For instance, the term "museum educator", still the most common one among the participants when it comes to describing our profession according to the CECA Vocabulary (ICOM, 2018), could refer to different functions depending on the country, and even within the same country.

The same can be said of "cultural mediation" and its multiple variations. The spread of this term in particular seems inspired by several intersecting factors, the first being the negative connotations that "education" still bears in many Latin-languages-spoken countries. In these nations, many people still associate the word "education" to hierarchical and discursive teaching practices, to activities exclusively aimed at children and/or to a moral component. On the contrary, "cultural mediation" usually relates to the defense of a more horizontal and participative way of facilitating learning and social transformation through our heritage, a vision that also corresponds to the concepts of critical pedagogies (Freire, 2005; Giroux, 2011) or transformative education (Jackson, 1986). Without playing down the importance of the terminological debate, we believe that rethinking our conception of education while promoting this dialogical and critical practice, should be key factors to discuss when reformulating the new definition of museum.

In order to contribute to that debate, we analyze in this article the practice of museum education in the two cities where we have been working as museum educators and teachers of museum education and cultural mediation for over fifteen years: New York City (NYC) and Barcelona (Catalonia). Given the heterogeneous use of the different terms and the space limitations of an article, we have decided to base our analysis on our personal experiences in these two cities, though some of the ideas also reflect the two respective national realities. While the situations of NYC and Barcelona vary, due in great part to the differences between our government support systems and the predominance of public or private museums, some common traits emerge, which demonstrate a general neglect for educational investment in museums and a specific disregard for our profession.

The idea of this article was born during a recent research stay by Myriam at Teachers College, Columbia University, where Ashley was a doctoral candidate and instructor of museum education. After discovering the parallelism in our careers, research interests and our common work to defend our profession amid tenuous circumstances, we joined together to write this article. We hope that comparing the differences and similarities of the precarious professional situation of museum educators in both cities might contribute to an ongoing exchange of ideas in the service of improving our respective realities and further advancing our field.

Describing the two realities

New York City: Ashley

I have worked in art museums for almost fifteen years, initially as a teaching artist and educator, then later, as a full-time museum education manager, and finally, education director. Since leaving full-time work in the field to pursue my doctoral studies in 2013, I have been an instructor of museum education courses at Teachers College, Columbia University and a freelance museum educator at two encyclopedic museums in NYC. This is my professional background; the countless museum education experiences that make it up, as well as related research from the field, constitute the analysis that follows.

Picture 1 – Ashley Mask teaching in art museum exhibition, 2019
Photograph: Julia Zubrovich

Historically, the term “museum educator” has been used in direct contrast to the term “docent” or “volunteer docent” in U.S. art museums (“guide” is another term that is used, both for paid and volunteer positions, depending on the institution; however, its use is not as widespread). “Museum educators” refer to both museum staff members and contractual, or freelance, educators – the terms “contractual” and “freelance” are used interchangeably. While they do not necessarily carry out exactly the same functions in museums, museum educators and volunteer docents often overlap in their roles; for example, one-time school visits might be led by a museum educator or a volunteer docent in many U.S. art museums. The term “cultural mediator” is not in common use at this point in the U.S.

The term “museum educator” connotes education and training beyond that of a volunteer, though many U.S. museums provide extensive introductory training (sometimes as much as two years worth) for new volunteer docents, as well as ongoing training for docents once they are on board. In addition, the terms hold a distinction regarding being paid (educator) vs. unpaid (docent). These terms hold a great deal of meaning when negotiating contractual/freelance positions in museums in NYC. In addition to the expectation that museum educators have completed a certain amount of related education and/or training (though that “certain amount” is far from certain, with no universal qualifications identified for the field in the U.S.), freelance educators are also expected to engage in their work with visitors with little to no support from the institutions where they work. For example, as a freelance educator at two encyclopedic museums in NYC, I have experienced the following:

In the US:
Museum educators: either staff or contractual/freelance, with education and/or training, paid.
Volunteer docents: volunteers, i.e. not paid and usually less training.

- One of the museums I work for offers occasional (once or twice annually) professional development (PD) sessions for contractual educators, covering topics as diverse as “cultural sensitivity” and multimodal learning for visitors. These PD sessions are optional, though, and while they are paid, the rate is less than 25% of the normal hourly rate I am paid for teaching programs. The museum also provides access to extensive resources about its exhibitions, including advanced access to exhibition catalogs and artwork information.
- The other museum does not offer regular PD sessions for its contractual educators, though it does make available extensive resources on its exhibitions, including advanced access to exhibition catalogs, artwork information, and additional research shared in an open-access format for staff members and freelance educators.

In general, freelance museum educators are not paid for designing the curriculum that they teach; though, there are some exceptions, depending on the program. For instance, at one of the museums where I work, I am paid for occasional planning meetings, at 50% of my teaching rate. And while some support by museum staff is provided in the form of preparing materials (depending on the program), all other preparatory work must be completed by the freelance educator prior to the program. This includes reaching out to teachers/organizers to find out what curricular connections they want to make with their visit and learning about any additional needs the group may have. In fact, based on my experience, it is groups with particularly complicated requests for curricular connections that are designated for the freelance educators, as the implicit assumption is that volunteer docents will either be uninterested or will be unable to meet those requests

effectively. Lastly, contractual educators are not involved in the formal evaluation or feedback (other than occasional informal conversations with staff members) about the programs they facilitate, nor do they typically receive feedback on their facilitation.

In essence, the expectation in being a paid freelance museum educator is that you will arrive completely prepared and without the need to draw on staff time or energy in order to lead a high-quality program for visitors. This is what we are being paid for. And I understand the thinking on this, having been a managing education staff member in other art museums prior to becoming a freelance educator. I can say with confidence that what museum staff members rely on in contractual educators is not having to worry about them. They are competent and self-sufficient, and will do a good job without bothering you.

On the positive side, as a freelance museum educator, I have a high degree of autonomy and creative control over what and how I teach, the staff members at the institutions where I work trust in my abilities, and I don't have to deal with the inevitable bureaucracy of working full-time for an institution. In fact, I can work for multiple institutions, each with their own outstanding art collections.

That said, this autonomy comes at cost. The pay for contractual work varies greatly depending on the institution (I am lucky enough to be a freelancer at two institutions who pay contractual educators adequately for the work), and because we are paid "per-diem" (meaning, per program), if a program is cancelled or we have to cancel because we are sick, etc., then we are not paid at all. This relates to the biggest concern for many contractual educators in NYC (and elsewhere in the U.S., I'd imagine), which is that we are not provided with any employee benefits normally afforded to full-time educators in museums. This means, for instance, that we are responsible for paying for our own healthcare costs, which can be incredibly expensive.

Finally, and this brings me back to the dichotomy I mentioned earlier regarding paid vs. volunteer work in museum education departments, job security for contractual/freelance educators is anything but secure. Most art museums use a combination of museum education staff and/or freelance museum educators along with volunteer docents to handle their gallery teaching programs. However, some museums have chosen to eliminate paid educators for these programs, minimally trimming their budgets by opting for the "free labor" of volunteer docents, and in doing so, sacrificing the talent, knowledge, experience, and commitment of professional museum educators (Letran, 2002; Malesevic, 2015; Steinhauer, 2012). This isn't to say that excellent, qualified docents don't exist. I have worked with many in my career. But it is not a guarantee, and at the end of the day, docents are not professional museum workers; they are volunteers. Therefore, they are not, nor should they be, held to the same standards in general, nor expected to teach and implement programs at the same level as professional museum educators. In essence, some museums are choosing to undermine their own public missions for a relatively small budgetary gain.

> Freelance museum educators: high qualification, high autonomy, low security, seldom adequate pay.

This situation means that, notwithstanding having made great advances as a profession in the last fifty years (Dobbs & Eisner, 1987; Munley & Roberts, 2006), our work as museum educators is still undervalued, and at risk. A legacy of the work that museum educators have done in previous decades is the existence of several thriving professional associations that support, sustain, and advocate for the work of museum educators (Kai-Kee, 2012). These national non-profit associations bring together and galvanize professional museum

educators through conferences, PD opportunities, research initiatives, and publications. In NYC, we have a local professional organization, called New York City Museum Educators Roundtable (NYCMER), founded in 1979, which even organizes a peer group specifically for freelance museum educators, who are described by NYCMER as "*the backbone of museum work nowadays*" (NYCMER peer groups, n.d.).

A recent position paper published by the National Art Education Association (NAEA) (2012; revised 2015), titled *Excellence in Art Museum Teaching*, stated that "*excellent teaching is necessary to foster profound and memorable learning experiences in the museum environment*" and went on to outline a substantial list of goals for art museum teaching, including but not limited to:

> *Create a learning environment where people feel welcome, comfortable, safe and respected* […] *employ a variety of teaching approaches and strategies to connect effectively with diverse learners* […] *connect art to people's lives by choosing objects that reflect the complexity and diversity of human cultures and experiences* […] *collaborate with and support Pre K-16* [school-based] *educators and other community partners to create meaningful museum experiences that support and intensify learning in and beyond the classroom.* (NAEA, 2015, p. 1)

The expertise and dedication of professional museum educators is a crucial component toward achieving such considerable goals, and as the existence of this position paper makes evident, we cannot assume that museums understand the importance of this work. Even the hopeful tone that Elsa Bailey strikes in describing our profession in the *CECA Vocabulary* hints at work yet to be done:

> Expertise and dedication of museum educators is crucial to achieve excellence in museum teaching and thus to fulfill the museum's mission

> *Early on in US museums, offices of education departments were housed in the building's basement – a testimony to its low status in the organisation. However, over time, education has 'moved upstairs.' And yet, there is still a range of attitudes across US museums as to the importance and influence of education in their organisations.* (ICOM, 2018, p. 37)

Barcelona: Myriam

After working as a heritage educator in Barcelona from 2003 and as an instructor of museum education and mediation since 2017, I am currently researching and teaching at the Teachers College, University of Barcelona, aiming to complete my doctoral dissertation on museum education in the next few months. In these 17 years, two goals have driven my career: to grow as an educator and to advocate for the recognition of our profession. During a recent research stay at Columbia University, these aims led me to focus on the similarities and differences of Barcelona with regard to NYC's landscape, which I outline below.

One of the most significant findings from my stay in the U.S. was that our profession is homogeneously defined there by the term "museum educator". It surprised me because, as Hervás, Tiburcio and Tudela (2018) explained in the issue 28 of this journal, in Spain we are currently discussing what to call ourselves. Many names are used to refer to us, including *educador* (educator), *monitor* (monitor), *guía* (guide) and *tallerista* (workshop facilitator). On the contrary, "teacher" or "docent" are very seldom applied to us, given that they remain associated with formal, classroom-based education.

This heterogeneity of nomenclatures has gotten even more complicated with the irruption of the word *mediador cultural* (cultural mediator) and its variations in the last fifteen years. Largely, because in our language a mediator is traditionally someone who helps people to overcome a conflict but also because of its proximity to the term *mediador intercultural* (intercultural mediator), which describes another profession. Unfortunately, the terms “museum or heritage mediator” are not frequently used, though they could be helpful options to disambiguate the concept. Nonetheless, Spanish professionals should agree first on what mediation means for them, as it is being used simultaneously in different ways. Is “mediation” a broader term than “museum education”, including not only the children's activities but all the programs organized by the museums’ Departments of Education and Public Programs (DEAC)? Is it a more specific concept defining only a horizontal and dialogical practice addressed to adults, like in the Reina Sofia museum? Is it a substitute to “heritage or museum educator” aimed to overcome the aforementioned connotations of education? Or are they being used as synonyms, like in the Picasso Museum of Barcelona and the National Museum of Art of Catalonia, where educators are conceived as mediators because museum education is understood as a dialogical process that facilitates participants to create connections and make their own meanings (Hubard, 2015)?

In Spain:
Many terms to designate the profession, covering different nuances: educator, monitor, guide, workshop facilitator, cultural mediator…

While waiting for a national debate about the meaning and uses of that term and its pertinence over museum education, the names of our regional professional associations (there is no national federation yet) show our discrepancies. In Catalonia, the discussion has emerged in all the meetings to create our association, as well as in the professional PD courses on education and mediation in museums that I have conducted since 2017. It was also a core issue in *Hyperlink. Mediation Lab* (see picture 2), a participatory project conceived by Maria Sellarès at the Antoni Tàpies Foundation (2017-18), which I collaborated with.

Picture 2 – Brochure published by the Antoni Tàpies Foundation
with photography of Sophie Koehler.

Undoubtedly, under the terminological conundrum demonstrated by these examples lies a more important urge: to review and reach an agreement about the functions of twenty-first century museums and our roles and strategies within them. And yet, the linguistic debate is significant, since agreeing upon terminology is an essential step for

the recognition of any profession. We need to reach a sectoral consensus to avoid the ambiguities and misuses that can aggravate our professional recognition. Especially in Spain, where there is no specific labor agreement establishing our job category and many workers are not being paid as much as their qualifications and tasks should warrant. We should also agree on what type of job position is being described when we employ the term *educador de museos* (museum educator), given the inconsistencies.

For instance, many Spanish authors use this nomenclature only in reference to those who execute the educational activities in the galleries, which are normally external temporary workers (outsourced or freelance). In contrast, other national writers (Fundación Daniel y Nina Carasso, 2019) employ the word only when referring to the *técnicos de Educación* (Education Officer), who are usually public officers working directly for the museums. This more permanent position corresponds to the term and the tasks of the U.S. "staff educator", more oriented to manage the relationship with schools and social institutions and to create, supervise and evaluate school and public programs.

Regarding the work conditions, the current situation in Barcelona is still similar to the one described by López (2009) and Vozmediano (2015) at a national level. As Lola Álvarez perfectly synthesizes in the *CECA Vocabulary*:

> *One of the current challenges is to improve the professionalization of the sector because a minimum percentage of the workers are staff and most of them suffer job insecurity and are in an underrated position. This may be a result of considering educative practice as an external service usually subcontracted to services companies, which are not necessarily specialised in education.* (ICOM, 2018, p. 33)

This diagnosis also connects to the mapping of the professional situation made by the Association of Cultural Mediators of Madrid (AMECUM) (2018) and the report *Foto fija* (Fundación Daniel y Nina Carasso, 2019). Luckily, the Spanish legislation forbids the use of volunteers to substitute any job position in public services, preventing the worsening of this already dramatic landscape. There are no registered cases in public institutions in Barcelona so far, but *Foto fija* (Fundació Daniel y Nina Carasso, 2019) laments that volunteers are replacing education professionals in other cities' museums.

In contrast to NYC, in Barcelona and the biggest cities in Spain, but also more and more in medium-sized ones with several museums like Málaga, most of the educators are working for museums through private outsourcing companies. These firms, which do not exist in the U.S., normally demand of their future employees an extensive education, including a pedagogical degree. I completely agree with Vozmediano (2015) and the report from the Fundación Daniel y Nina Carasso (2019) when they explain that there are meaningful differences among these companies regarding job conditions, how they treat their workers and whether they act on the basis of qualitative or quantitative criteria. For instance, in one of my positions as an educator with an outsourcing company in Barcelona, I was paid for PD activities and tour preparation time. With another outsourcing firm, I received a lot of great pedagogical training but those hours were paid less or not even paid at all, which is quite usual in our city. In a nutshell, although there are exceptions, most of these companies concur in offering low salaries, temporary or part-time contracts and schedules that change all the time, making it very difficult for the educator/mediator to earn a living and keep a personal life.

Most of the museum educators are working for museums through private outsourcing companies, the latter responding to the museums' bids.

Additionally, we can also find a similar figure to the U.S. “contractual educator”: a freelance professional selected by the museum’s DEAC and trusted to design or co-design activities, as well as execute them. However, their level of autonomy and collaboration with the staff can vary tremendously depending on the institutions. Although this freelance figure is more frequent in small cities with just a few museums, it is getting more and more popular in alternative institutions or contemporary art museums like the Museum of Contemporary Art of Barcelona. Under the concept of “artist educator”, professionals with a creative degree (Fine Arts, Photography, Dance…) are hired to create and execute programs with a similar autonomy to the one described by Ashley in NYC. On the contrary, many outsourced educators do not get to design activities, being only executors who must follow the instructions of their outsourcing companies and report directly to them. Consequently, a certain hierarchy can be sensed when freelance and outsourced educators coexist in the same center.

This hierarchical distinction between staff and external educators and between freelancers and outsourced ones is another key factor for the debate: particularly in regard to those museums whose public and school programs are externalized. According to the Spanish law, outsourced employees are not allowed to communicate directly with their museum staff colleagues. This prohibition – created to avoid any evidence that proves the external worker linked to the institution – hinders collaboration between *técnicos* (education officers) and educators, which should be a single team. By following these rules, outsourced educators can neither convey their feedback directly to the staff members nor establish dialogues with them to reformulate programs. In my opinion, this hierarchical outsourced model has no place in museums who want to offer a more inclusive and accessible experience to their visitors. How could outsourced educators adapt the galleries’ sessions to the special needs and interests of every school or social institution if previous communication with the teachers or the group leaders is also forbidden for them or outsourced to a second different company in charge of reservations?

> Outsourced educators are not at the same (hierarchical) level as the other freelance/contractual museum educators or as staff.

Some of the suggestions gathered in the First Professional Meeting of Cultural Mediation (Cogul, 2017, see picture 3) and in the *Foto fija* report (2019) are to establish new professional associations and a national federation to fight for a more suitable labor agreement and to prioritize quality over economics when it comes to the museum's bidding process for hiring outsourcing companies (our public museums usually hire these companies through public processes called competitive bids, being chosen by the proposal that aligns better with the given criteria). Another interesting strategy would be to create cooperatives of external educators, which could defend the concept of an external museum educator that is not a freelancer and yet is entitled to create, evaluate and reformulate programs hand in hand with the staff members. Without being a final solution to our precariousness, this could be a temporary strategy to win the museum's bidding process, defying the expansion of outsourcing companies that are not specialized in education/mediation, and do not focus on qualitative criteria nor put their workers at the center. In Barcelona, that is the case of the cooperative of educators which is doing excellent work at the Natural Sciences Museum of Barcelona. Its creation was encouraged by the museum’s DEAC – an inspiring example for other museums – to improve the precarious

conditions of their external educators, as those conditions were detrimental to the quality long-term projects which the museum aspired to.

Picture 3 – Lines to improve our labor conditions.
First Professional Meeting of Cultural Mediation in Cogul, Catalonia, 2017.
Photograph Maria Sellarès.

The COVID-19 pandemic's effects on our profession.

While we submitted the initial draft of this article for review just prior to the coronavirus outbreak, thanks to the editors, we have been able to add some brief reflections on the current situation. Unfortunately, the pandemic offers a prime example of the precariousness of working as museum educators and cultural mediators in our cities. The tenuous circumstances that surround our professional status in both NYC and Barcelona, as described above, are all the more evident now that museums have had to temporarily close their doors.

Many art museums in NYC have placed staff educators on furlough – a kind of pause on one's employment, including salary, though benefits such as healthcare coverage continue – or let part-time and freelance educators go entirely (Artforum, 2020; McCarthy & Siegel, 2020). As part of a national economic stimulus program, called the CARES Act, freelancers in the U.S. are now eligible for unemployment benefits, where they were not before. The amount allocated, though, depends on the state. For freelance museum educators in NYC, that means an approximately 50% decrease in income. The CARES Act also provided some additional funds, but these are not always available and require a lengthy application process.

> The pandemic crisis outlined the difference between staff, with lower income but a bit of security, and freelancers, too often put out of contract – and thus with no income at all.

In Barcelona, staff educators of public museums are working remotely counting on their income regardless of the pandemic's effect. On the contrary, some private institutions have placed all their staff on an ERTE (a similar solution to a furlough, but where the government pays 70% of the normal salaries). As for external educators, both outsourced and freelance, who make up the majority in our profession, a few are still working remotely, but most of them have been placed on an ERTE or unemployed status. Many outsourcing companies have

declared an ERTE, either because some museums have suspended contracts with their outsourced education companies (Departament de Cultura de Catalunya, 2020), or because paid programs in museums are not taking place. In the specific case of the freelance educators, most of them have been let go, and they now depend on the approval of an extraordinary government aid to survive through the pandemic.

Conclusion.

In closing, we are acutely aware that while our realities are distinct and have evolved out of decidedly different histories, our profession suffers from inferiority, both in how institutions view us as well as in how well we are able to represent ourselves as a profession. Both of our cities are metropolises with a great number of museums that need many people to cover the wide array of public and school programs, and yet their private or public budgets never seem sufficient to hire as many educators as they need or to pay all of them according to their functions. And while we are only two people, we sense that for museum educators on both sides of the Atlantic, and elsewhere, there is a greater need for attention to the issue of sustainability and advocacy in our field. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic further highlights the significance of these issues and inspires a sense of urgency.

As alluded to in the previous sections, the context of our cities, and by extension, our countries, greatly influences the circumstances for our work. The most influential of these contextual differences lies in the fact that most museums in NYC are private, where in Barcelona, they are public. This means that many museums in Barcelona, along with their staff educators, are supported financially by the government whereas in NYC, staffing depends on the fluctuating amount of income that is generated by visitor admissions, program fees, and private donations. Another remarkable divergence that results from this dichotomy is the aforementioned prevalence in U.S. museums of volunteer docents doing the work of educators for free, and in contrast, their scarce presence in Spain. Moreover, all Spanish workers receive healthcare coverage in exchange for their taxes whereas freelance museum educators in the U.S. must pay for their healthcare separately. In spite of this, the situation of outsourced educators in Spanish public institutions is far from ideal, as most of them are hired through companies chosen based on economic and not qualitative criteria. Also, many of them do not enjoy the autonomy and recognition as intellectuals and creators that their NYC's counterparts do, being reduced to mere executors of other professionals' programs.

While more research is warranted regarding the specific needs and challenges facing professional museum educators in both Spain and the U.S., the additional layer of terminology as a potent force also deserves attention. Words hold great power, and the words that are used to define our work can either help or hurt our chances for a better future. Obviously, in an ideal world, institutions would invest financially in their education departments, allotting sufficient funds to have enough educators on staff to meet the needs of the visiting public. In advocating for that future, the comparison between our two landscapes has helped us to realize that there are steps in between that can benefit our profession in the meantime.

We both feel that it is only appropriate for educators of every kind, freelance or outsourced, to be in direct communication with museum staff members and considered

part of the education team, included in the design, execution and evaluation aspects of education programs. In addition, for professionals working in the field currently, as well as those that will come into the field in the future, coming together and collectively organizing as cooperatives or professional associations to support and advocate for our work can help sustain positive progress for the profession. Finally, it only makes sense for institutions to establish working conditions that support and sustain professionals, whether they are external educators or staff members. These conditions include adequate pay, at the very least, as well as professional PD opportunities to keep abreast of current pedagogical advancements and cultural needs. We also urge those Spanish museum employees and public administration officers who disagree with the outsourcing model to make possible the success of cooperatives and small companies by adjusting their museum competitive biddings' criteria accordingly. Until museums set a real priority for education, placing it alongside acquisitions and collections care, upholding external professionals as crucial contributors to the intellectual life of the museum is absolutely essential. Otherwise, our institutions, as well as our visitors, suffer.

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