

Seeing Things for Themselves: Jacqueline Palmer, Natural History Educator 1948-1960

Dawn L. Sanders

Dawn L. Sanders (dawn.sanders@gu.se) is an Associate Professor at the Institute för Didaktik och Pedagogisk Profession (IDPP), Göteborgs Universitet, Box 300, 405 30 Göteborg, Sweden, and Scientific Associate of The Angela Marmont Centre for UK Biodiversity, The Natural History Museum, London, UK.

This paper draws attention to the work of the natural history educator Jacqueline Palmer from the years 1948 to 1960. Palmer considered the whole aim of museum collections to be the encouragement of people “to go out and see things for themselves,” thus connecting dead specimens with living organisms. The overall intention of this article is to relate elements of her professional story to those of modern natural history educators.

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London, 1948: a city in recovery. This is the post-war urban landscape in which Jacqueline Palmer began her career as an educator at the renowned Natural History Museum. Her passion in life was to make sure that going to a museum became “an exciting adventure” for children, young people, their teachers and families, not a visit to “dull places full of dust and grey shadows” (Palmer 1954, p. 9). Thus, in her book *Going to Museums* Palmer advises:

“The most important thing to remember is that there is no one way to go round a museum; there are all kinds of different ways, according to what you are going for, who you are, and what the museum is like. And you will find yourself feeling different according to whether you are going alone or with a friend, with your parents, or with a party from your school. So there are only two golden rules, which I think apply to every visit, and they are:

1. Don't try to see everything, unless the museum is small enough to do so in about an hour's time.

2. Stop when you are tired” (Palmer 1954 p. 123).

Jacqueline Palmer studied Geography at Newnham College, Cambridge in 1945; prior to this (1935-1939) she attended the Froebel Education Institute. During the Second World War she taught at three junior schools. In

1948 Palmer, according to a letter written by her in 1956,

“Had an idea to offer myself to this museum in any capacity in order to help the hundreds of children who haunt the place when the schools are shut. I had noticed that the children were apparently unaware of what the museum was for, and had little idea that it could be a source of both information and pleasure in their home environment as well as in the actual galleries” (Palmer archives, DF 5006/81).

And so began her “educational experiment” (Palmer archives, DF 5006/81) in the Natural History Museum, London.

Natural History Museums: Connecting the living with the dead

Natural history museums are, as Palmer believed, extraordinary places filled with a rich range of zoological specimens and objects. However, they struggle with a continual problem:

“When the narrative is the story of life and diversity, the exhibition of natural history specimens is problematic; the one thing that qualifies a specimen to illustrate life is the one thing that they are singularly lacking— life” (Lindsay 2007).

This is not a new problem. Kate Hall, of the now-defunct Whitechapel Museum, London, made apparent museum educators' attempts to connect the living with the dead:

“As far as possible we endeavour to connect living specimens with the dead ones in the cases, that they may not think the study of natural history a study of dead things only” (Hall 1901 p. 43).

Even today, one can find signs headed “faded specimens” adjacent to the “Giant Carnivores” in the Natural History Museum, London, notifying a curious public that the age of taxidermy is over, but that such specimens are, for the time being, still in use in their displays. Modern visitors, however, appear to be drawn to such animals, even in their post-death “afterlives” (Alberti 2005).

Dioramas created from taxidermic specimens have been proven to generate dynamic zoological discussions among visitors (Reiss and Tunnicliffe 2011). But, without appropriate context, such as label information, provision of habitat background, and related specimen presentation, such zoological learning can be problematic (Tunnicliffe and Reiss 2000).

Not all natural history museums have discarded their taxidermy collections nor have all disassembled their dioramas. The American Museum of Natural History Museum is a case in point. Curators in such settings are seen to occupy a pivotal place between the specimen and visitor (Sanders and Hohenstein 2015).

Furthermore, contemporary commentators recognize the potential natural history museums – and their dead collections – have to contribute to the public understanding of the living world, albeit if a somewhat problematic potential (see for example discussions in Haberman 2015 and Tewkesbury et al. 2014).

Significantly, for such debates, Jacqueline Palmer considered the “whole aim” of museum collections to be the encouragement of people ‘to go out and see things for themselves’ (Palmer 1954 p. 74), thus connecting the dead with the living. The overall intention of this article is to relate elements of her professional story to those of modern natural history practitioners.

The Jacqueline Palmer Archive

When visiting the Jacqueline Palmer archive in the Natural History Museum, London, UK, one is confronted by boxes of documents pertaining to her work and aspects of her professional life: copies of bills,

letters to and from the museum managers and the London County Council (LCC, her direct employers), and letters to children who attended the Young Naturalist’s Club at the museum and others who lived too far away to attend regularly, along with letters from trainee teachers interested in her methods, evaluation forms, and notebooks. It is a wonderful textual map of an educator’s life as a lived experience in a certain time and place. Examining the archive identifies a potent pedagogical legacy, in the detailed form of professional development courses for teachers, formal evaluation criteria of school visits, specimen-rich encounters between learners and the museum collections, frameworks for inclusion and outreach work. It also shows how difficult at times it was for Palmer to obtain resources for her work to continue.

Given the substantial scale of the archive, I have chosen to focus on two long letters from Palmer, one to the LCC in 1952 and the other to a Miss Nettlefold in 1956. These letters have been chosen as they demonstrate (a) how Palmer appears to shift her professional focus from classroom teacher to museum educator, and (b) the ways in which she sees these identities differing. The second letter in particular contains an extensive section on her educational methods and a plea for help to retain the educational centre at the museum. Both letters reference topics that remain current for natural history museum educators.

For example, Palmer reflects on what it means to be a museum educator and calls for differences between classroom teacher and educators in museums to be recognised. In so doing she provides a “long tail” of historical evidence to the recent research work of Tran and King (2007) in their examination of the professionalization of science museum educators, a study in which they call for “rightful attention to be paid to the complex role of the museum educator” (Tran and King 2007 p. 132). Furthermore, Palmer is also clear about her pedagogical methods and the importance of taking diverse students out to different environments, again a topic pertinent to current debates.

Memorandums and Letters

A substantial number of memorandums concerning Palmer’s work were exchanged between the museum management, the London County Council (LCC), and Miss Palmer herself. In many ways, she was a pioneer in setting up training courses for teachers to make the most of the museum and in encouraging schools to use both the museum and their local environment by working with children and teachers on school sites. Her commitment to working with schools, in the museum and through outreach projects, attracted comment from

both the LCC and the museum management. A 1952 memorandum appears to dismiss her outreach work by stating “Miss Palmer is too fond of running around!”

Another memorandum from the management of the museum, also written in 1952, expresses concern that Miss Palmer’s club was attracting too many “little professor types,” and needed to attract “more normal children.” However there is little suggestion of what these “more normal children” might consist of, nor indeed any evidence that the museum management understood the notion of outreach work. In addition to these exchanges, the archive suggests that Palmer had differing pedagogical philosophies to specific colleagues, indicating that tensions surrounding her professional identity were not limited to a single interface of institution versus individual.

Museum Educators

In the first letter I discuss, Palmer appears to be arguing for the development of museum educators with their own set of pedagogical ideas, knowledge, and practice belonging to a professional network. This argument would not be out of place in the aforementioned work of Tran and King (2007), in which they make the case for a professional identity that is “complex and involves a specialized skill and knowledge-base” (Tran and King 2007 p. 132).

In December 1952 Palmer wrote to the LCC “because of my general interest in museum education.” She wished “to make an individual protest against the L.C.C.’s recent change of policy in the appointment of teachers in museums in London, a change, which, in my view, is far from being for the better.” The LCC was to restrict recruitment of teachers to museums to persons who were already in the LCC teaching division and were permanent members of staff.

Palmer wrote, “I deplore this policy for the following reasons”: The first being that, in London at that time, “only three museums and one art gallery in London” appointed trained teachers. “The new policy,” Palmer stated, “seems to indicate that no museum post is likely to be filled by a teacher with museum experience.” She goes on to say “Moreover, it will place an unnecessary heavy burden on those in charge of the London schemes if they have to train a teacher new to the work every time a post becomes vacant, when there will be in the country a body of experienced museum workers from whom teachers could be selected” (Palmer archives, DF5006/81).

Her second reason was:

“[T]here has been much recent discussion about the lack of co-ordination and of the exchange of ideas in museum teaching. By the appointment from time to time of museum teachers with experience gained elsewhere, the L.C.C. might substantially assist in the development of a coherent body of opinion and in the working out of principles and techniques in museum teaching. But this can only be done by the exchange of views and by the co-operation of those with experience of work in different types of museum” (Palmer archives, DF5006/81).

She concludes by saying “I am convinced that museum posts should be open to those who have already had experience of teaching in other museums.” Furthermore, it is clear from this letter that she was committed to the idea of building a professional network of museum educators in order to further develop “principles and techniques in museum teaching” (Palmer archives, DF 5006/81).

Education and Outreach

The second letter, to Miss Nettlefold in January 1956, explains Palmer’s approach to working with children in the museum and bemoans the impending closure of the children’s centre and associated clubs, and the possibility of an unnamed “civil servant” working with children in the museum galleries only.

“You can imagine how enthralling this educational experiment has been. It gradually expanded to include several different projects which were all based on the work of discovering what interested children in this particular field, and how to develop the interest once it had been discovered. First there was the actual “teaching” of unaccompanied children in the galleries in their leisure-time: this is based on the principle of getting them to work on their own to collect information, and learn a method of work in doing so. Second there is the work of developing and maintaining any interest in natural history that may arise from the activities in the galleries: this has meant taking the children to parks, to places round London, and in 1954 and 1955 to camp with me in the Channel Islands.....It is possible to interest boys and girls with very different backgrounds and attainment-even near-Teddy boys-if you approach them in the right way and at the right moment” (Palmer archives DF 5006/81).

In the same letter Palmer goes on to discuss plans to close the centre:

“However the museum authorities apparently feel that it is too difficult to maintain the dual control with the L.C.C., and the Trustees have asked the L.C.C. to withdraw at the end of March. I have been told that the museum is not really interested in carrying on anything more than activities in the galleries, though it would like to maintain these if somebody can be found to run them as a civil servant. But as a teacher I must withdraw.....I must work to live; but all I want to do is to keep the work I have made. I know it is useful, and that I shall be more useful doing it, than in teaching children in a class, and I will not let it die.”
(Palmer archives DF5006/81)

In this second letter, Palmer clearly alludes to her pedagogical philosophy, views her work as an “educational experiment,” and interestingly, places speech marks around the word “teaching,” suggesting that her methods differ from dominant educational models of that period. She also defines the broad breadth of students with whom she is attempting to engage: “It is possible to interest boys and girls with very different backgrounds and attainment – even near-Teddy boys – if you approach them in the right way and at the right moment” (Palmer archives DF 5006/81). She asserts a learner-centred view of “getting them to work on their own to collect information, and learn a method of doing so” (Palmer archives DF 5006/81).

In addition, she makes clear her wish to take children to different environments in which to experience the natural world. Palmer also alludes to an embryonic discussion on non-formal learning. Her final words demonstrate that she saw the work of museum educator as distinct from classroom teacher and felt herself to be “more useful” in the former. Clearly, she is unhappy at the reticence of the museum to continue her work and sees “activities in the galleries run by a civil servant” as a reduction in the provision of professional educational facilities.

An Inquiry-based Approach

In looking through a retrospective lens, Palmer could be seen to be an early proponent of museum educator as a separate professional identity and museum pedagogy as a distinct knowledge base. This was not a view shared by the LCC, and at that time no distinction was made between classroom teacher and museum educator. Perhaps, this was due to the expectation that natural history expertise was part of being a classroom teacher during this period. However, there was, and there remains, a substantial difference between, on the one hand, a narrow approach of “monomania of nomenclature” (Quinn 1995), and on the other, a range

of pedagogical practices based in and around a variety of natural history specimens and teaching spaces.

From the evidence that the Palmer archive presents, it appears that Palmer held an inquiry-based, multimodal view of natural history education that straddled indoor and outdoor environments. For example, she was especially convinced by the power of observational drawing (“making drawings helps to fix what you have seen in your memory” [Palmer 1954 p. 74]) and believed strongly that drawing should happen in museums (“I hope you will not come up against really old-fashioned museum authorities, who have been known in some localities to forbid any drawing in their museum” [Palmer 1954 p. 121]). She felt that this was “such a ridiculous rule” that it “should be abolished everywhere” (Palmer 1954 p.129).

It is notable that in 1956, after eight years at the museum, Jacqueline Palmer became a peripatetic teacher of field studies for the Inner London Education Authority. According to her obituary (1961) in *School Nature Study* she gave “great stimulus to many London teachers and children to discover the possibilities of London’s open spaces, and even of the back streets, for the study of nature” (1961 p. 26). Her appointment and the contributions she made through this post suggest that the professional trajectories she took in the museum were undervalued inside the institution but perceived as significant in her wider communities of practice.

Seeing Things for Themselves

The Jacqueline Palmer archive provides a window on an emerging profession, that of natural history museum educator, and demonstrates how one person fought to retain “open and creative spaces” (Ogawa et al. 2007) in her pedagogical practice.

Moreover, her story offers a mid-twentieth century view of an evolving identity, one where the role of natural history museum educator becomes distinct from classroom teacher. But it is in her unifying call for the experience of the dead specimens in museums to become bridges of attention to the living world outside that she leaves a potent legacy, and on-going challenge, for modern natural history educators.

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