

Teachers as curators

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There have been a number of papers and books describing the role of medical teachers, most notably by Harden and Lilley (2018) but I want to describe another: although rather, to use a word that sums up a number of other roles but perhaps from a slightly different viewpoint.

That word is 'curator', or perhaps more fully, 'curator of knowledge'.

So what do curators normally do? Definitions vary a little, but the essential feature is that they look after something; from the Latin 'cura'. Usually that something is an art or museum collection, so an art gallery curator will hang pictures on walls, a museum curator will put exhibits into display cabinets.

But we should note that this is not a random process. Pictures are not hung on any available space on a wall nor is Roman pottery in the same case as Chinese ceramics. Objects are put together because they then tell a story. Paintings by the same artist in the same place will show a development of technique. Paintings by different artists painting at the same time but now hung in the same space will show the influence of one painter on another. Sometimes a curator will mount a special exhibition to make a particular point about a time, a place, or a person.

But the exhibits, paintings or objects, are not just left there alone on the wall or in a case. Fortunately, for most of us, the curator has provided a label, explaining what it is that we see and how we might put into a context, perhaps by referencing other objects around. From time to time a curator might give a lecture on a topic in which they are expert. They are also likely to write books explaining some aspect of the collection and perhaps relating it to other collections held elsewhere. Such books are probably to be found in the gift shop attached to many museums and art galleries.

It is probable that many curators are sorry that so much of the collection is not visible, there just isn't enough space. Much, perhaps most, has to be kept under lock and key in the basement. Fortunately the curators have created an index of what is available and will unlock the vaults if asked. They may have also made some visible online.

This is of no value if the doors to the building remain closed. So the curators are only too happy to open up the exhibits to anyone who wants to come. A fee has to be rendered either directly or through taxation because the curators need to be paid but the fee is only an access fee, no one can take any object away.

However much gold and silver is offered, the curators will refuse to hand anything over. This is because the curators do not own anything themselves; the exhibits are an expression of mankind's creative genius; they belong to everyone and to no one. No one can take a picture home to hang on the wall or position an object on the hall table, keeping them for their delight alone.

The curator will be disappointed if people come in, look around a few rooms and walk out again. They will want to suggest a process of 'slow looking'; to spend time not just seeing but understanding; to avoid having 'had the experience, but missed the meaning'. So they may take groups of people round just a few of the exhibits explaining them in more detail; trying to foster a sense of wonder in the viewer.

However, that is about as much as our curator can do; the rest is up to the visitor. The nature of the engagement between viewer and exhibit is almost entirely up to the viewer; the curator can do a little but not much. The response of the visitor may be superficial, a quick glance and then forgotten. Alternatively response may be at a much deeper level; occasionally so much so that the viewer is now a different person as a consequence.

But if our curator is a curator of knowledge rather than of pictures, what does that mean if they also want to open up some doors and let people in?

Perhaps first of all they would want to impose some order on what they have; to put some things together and separate them from other things. Books do this well. A curriculum does too. A curriculum puts some things to come before others and collects other things together in one place. A study guide does the same. If students (because visitors and viewers of knowledge are students, whatever their age) need to understand about patients with heart problems then the cardiology ward is a good place to go. In a problem- or case- based course many different issues of biomedicine, psychology and ethics, at first sight quite disparate, are brought together, just like pictures on a wall.

Any curator of knowledge knows that there is far too much of it to put on walls or in cases, in curricula or study guides. Fortunately, instead of a vault, there is a library, real or virtual, to assist. Not that the curator knows everything in the library, but they know how to find out and can show other people how to do the same. They lend out the key or make a duplicate.

As well as providing some order, curators will want to provide some explanations; these are guides or lectures or tutorials. They will write books, again with the expectation that their students will buy them. Each of these will be inadequate because knowledge is infinite but will provide an entry into a new world.

Knowledge curators need to be paid just like any others and the fee may be direct or through the State but again the fee is for access; knowledge cannot be taken away and hoarded and used by individuals for their own purposes. It belongs to everyone, just like a Michelangelo statue.

But, just like our museum curators, that is as far as curators of knowledge can go. They can try and persuade people to linger longer, to look slowly, but that is all. The depth of engagement with knowledge is personal, nobody can do it for anyone else. It involves work, often painful work and sometimes also change, change in the person so they become different to what they were before.

So teachers are not teachers, they are knowledge curators; their role is vital but also, at the same time, limited.

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John Cookson, MD, FRCP, is currently the Dean for Medical School Development at the University of Portsmouth having worked at a number of medical schools in the UK and overseas.

Reference

Harden R, Lilley P. 2018. The eight roles of the medical teacher: The purpose and function of a teacher in the healthcare professions. Edinburgh: Elsevier