

Collections Policy Checklist for Museums—Helping the Memory Institutions to Remember

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Thinking big

This presentation reports how small, heterogeneous organizations can improve the quality of their strategic planning and decision making, as well as their processes by advocating communication, transparency and trust—and thinking big. This case of creating a common checklist for museums writing their collections policies takes place in Finland during 2011 – 2014.

Working together requires common understanding which is created by shared language. This is obvious in international projects but is easily forgotten when collaborating within one museum or among organizations in one country. On the course of the project we recurrently faced the need of clarifying processes and procedures as well as translating, specifying and defining terminology. Clear terms - clear thoughts became our motto.

Development and museological thinking has been the privilege of universities and large institutions—out of reach of the small and medium size museums. Museology should be in dialogue with the grassroot level and grassroot experience brought to museology. Big thoughts are needed to make the everyday work in museums more focused.

Ideas for development projects tend to spark from a single source. However, we argue that it is vital to observe one's own doings in larger context. Even if one would start solving an isolated problem, such as polishing up an out-of-date collections policy of Finnish forest museum, the results can be amazing when widening the perspective.

We observed and analyzed the professional traditions in museums and the organizational cultures nurturing them. Self-evidently, the central organizations have taken the lead, identified a problem to be solved and offered the solution to the smaller ones. Yet, we venture to say that the expertise is not a monopoly of large organizations. The solutions developed by large museums tend to be extra large for the average museum organization. Solutions need to be scalable: there is no one size fits all solution.

We started from one challenge of one museum, but reasoned that it would concern many others within the next few years. When solving our own problem we were committed to find scalable solutions which could be shared with our colleagues. In doing so we also profited from their expertise.

In the beginning of the project we had to overcome some psychological obstacles. Firstly, traditionally we have emphasized the differences: the differences of collections, of size, of museal processes. It has been a valid argument for not to solve common problems around the same table. Secondly, me and my fellow writers were in no position to pass laws or even recommendations. How could we reach our target audience, persuade them to listen to us, and to try out our suggestions?

Collections Policy Checklist for Museums

In the very beginning of the project when charting what had been done elsewhere, we had to tackle the challenge of language: there wasn't an established terminology covering museum processes, such as documentation and collections management, existing in Finland. We started by defining “an object”, “a collection”, “documentation” and a set of other key terms as they were used in Finnish museums. When doing background research in Swedish, English and French we couldn't but notice that also the scope of terms tend to vary country by country. Therefore, we urge the reader to look at the definitions behind the terms and find the corresponding concepts from their own organization and language before going further.

Kokoelmapolitiikka (en: Collections Policy): A collections policy is a document prepared by a museum on aims, courses of action and principles of collections policy and the forms of operation and methods applied in their implementation. A collections policy document describes the museum's collections management and its related processes.

Kokoelmahallinta (en: Collections management): A mode of operation for museums comprising accessioning, collection management, collection care and the use of collections. Collections management is described in Collections Policy.

The Collections Policy as we understand it is a strategic document that offers a solid foundation for the museum processes defined in ICOM's definition of museum: acquisition, conservation, research, communication and use of collections. Our Collections Policy is a map to the history and significance of the collections. It reveals and explains the changing emphasis in the acquisition policy. It describes how the collections are taken care of and documented throughout their museum life, as well as how they can and cannot be used. It helps the museum to communicate its purpose and goals.

How to get it done?

All started from the need of one museum whose stakeholders required a refreshed Collections Policy. The same museum was facing increasing demands of openness, community outreach, efficiency and need to co-operate—just like many others. Rather than treating the challenges as isolated problems of one museum, these questions were voiced out.

We were initially shy to share the unfinished work and thought of strategies how to market our ideas. We knew how irritating it is when someone knows better than yourself how to do your job.

Brainstorming resulted with an outline for the written Collections Policy document as well as five mind maps encompassing the key aspects.

The outline proposes a flexible structure for the written collections policy. It poses questions to the writer who should answer them from the point of view of their own organization. The writer can skip those items in the Checklist that are not relevant. However, leaving something out is then a choice, not something forgotten to take into consideration. We suggested the museums form a team of specialists: collections managers, curators, museum technicians and conservators to work on their collections policy together. Drafting the collections policy can be done simultaneously by several teams who look at the ways their organization works—or should work.

The feedback from our closest colleagues encouraged us to go public. It was necessary to get wider understanding of the procedures of diverse museums in order to engage more museums. Letting the interested have their say, it was also easier for them to commit to the common goals. The project group set up a stand in a national museums conventions in 2013. The five mind maps covering the five sections of our Collections Policy Checklist were printed on tablecloths and displayed for participants to draw in and comment on. This outreach expanded the network of collaborating organizations into more than twenty.

Concrete results

The project brought many positive results: There was a wide acceptance and adaptation of the new Checklist and the working methods. Using a common checklist helped museums of all sizes to get a kick start in writing their own policies. Also National Museum of Finland used the Checklist.

Many national actors participated in working for the common goal. When professionals managing collections were asked to speak about their work, they didn't stop! To channel the newly found energy, the Finnish Museums' Association helped us plan a two-day writers's workshop and implemented it. The Museums Association also took responsibility to organize virtual and real meetings for the writers' peer support group. The terminology is becoming part of the practise. And the Checklist is used in vocational museum training. National Board of Antiquities and Museo2015 project made a web publication of the Checklist.

The Finnish Ministry of Education and Culture funded the translation of the working document in English as part of SAKU and SÄMPLE projects enabling us to share our work with colleagues abroad. It will be published in September 2014. The material of the Finnish writers' workshop will be adapted to a CIDOC training course module for international use.

Collections Policy Checklist for Museums was developed in a project that ended in 2013. The authors wanted to ensure that the material would be accessible afterwards. TAKO, a national task force of

museums' collections development, is going to host the master document (in Finnish) in their website, and allow the users to give feedback on the Checklist.

We didn't do this alone. Thanks for everyone who participated!

We argue that any and all museums are responsible for developing new ways of working. Regardless of the size of the organization, the personnel should be encouraged to share their expertise and contribute on national and international scale.

Helping the memory institutions to remember:

The Checklist helps us write good policies, a good collections policy helps us remember both the big picture and small details. It helps us understand the significance of work with collections.

The project of creating the Checklist made us realize that cooperation, networking and courage to try new things can advance purposeful and productive work in museums even if the resources are scarce.

The International edition

The English version was not through the proofreading when submitting this paper. It will be published in September 2014 in the same directory as the Finnish original.

The Finnish version can be found in:

http://www.nba.fi/fi/museoalan_kehittaminen/museo_2015/julkaisut/

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