Supported Interpretation: Exhibiting for Audience Engagement

by Pat Villeneuve and Alicia Viera

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Supported interpretation (SI) is a new model for visitor-centered exhibitions. A synthesis of exhibition practice and pedagogy, supported interpretation reconceptualizes the exhibition as an interface or point of interaction between the museum and its visitors. The curatorial team anticipates visitors' needs to know and embeds the interface with resources—mostly non-didactic and non-authoritarian—that visitors can choose to support individualized meaning-making.[1] Museum visitors are viewed as interested and capable, although not necessarily educated in the discipline, and their voices are incorporated in the interface, making them an integral part of an SI exhibition. (Love, Villeneuve, Cruz, Hueting, and Keim, 2013).

This article describes a temporary SI exhibition interface and its content, which were intentionally designed to provoke engagement and meaning-making. The results of a qualitative evaluation revealed their influence on visitor experiences and also informed the development of the supported interpretation model and its subsequent applications. Although supported interpretation exhibitions to date have featured art, Villeneuve (2013) has suggested that the SI model may be used in other types of museums.

Supported Interpretation (SI)

Supported interpretation moves beyond the ideas of the constructivist museum (Hein, 1994, 1998; Hooper-Greenhill, 1994) in which visitors are responsible for their own meaning-making. Villeneuve (2012) expressed reservations over constructivist museum practices, noting that museums cannot expect all visitors to have adequate background knowledge and experience to independently interpret objects in ways that are personally satisfying. SI theory developed in response to this concern and was informed by Van Mensch's (1990) methodological museology and Knowles' (1955, 1984) work in *andragogy* or adult education.

VanMensch (1990) reconfigured the functions of a traditional collecting museum from five (collect, preserve, exhibit, educate, and study) to three: preserve (which includes collecting), study, and communicate. In this view, the education and exhibition functions are conflated and must work together to communicate with museum visitors. Knowles (1955, 1984) envisioned teaching as a process of guided interaction between the student, teacher, and content to be learned. He had students work independently in enriched environments, choosing from resources available to, but not imposed on, them. Guided interaction inspired the content-rich exhibition interface for supported interpretation.

Mixing It Up: An SI Exhibition

Mixing It Up: Building an Identity was an SI exhibition held at the Tempe Center for the Arts near Phoenix, Arizona. The exhibition addressed identity while celebrating and examining how artworks made by Mexican American artists are influenced by the cultures of Mexico and the United States (Tempe Center for the Arts). Following the guidelines of supported interpretation, *Mixing It Up* was curated by a team of educators, curators, and community members. To provide context, the curatorial team juxtaposed the Mexican American works with traditional *retablo* devotional

Tagging activity: selected artworks had a supply of magnetic icons with the invitation for visitors to "tag" the works, leaving their assessments on nearby magnetic strips. Photo courtesy of Villeneuve Viera.

paintings, iconic Americana images, and historic Mexican and U.S. artworks (Villeneuve and Erickson, 2012).

The exhibition interface was designed to offer free-choice visitors multiple opportunities to learn about the art themes and styles reflected in the chosen artworks.[2] The following themes and styles appeared with their one-sentence definitions at the exhibition entrance:

Themes

- National Identity: Artists explore connections with their U.S. and/or Mexican heritages.

- Labor: Artists comment on issues about workers.

- Family and Community: Artists celebrate connections with others.

Styles

- Traditional: Artists use old-world knowledge and techniques like anatomy, perspective, and shading to make their artworks look real.

- Folk: Artists inspired by affordable art of the people often use lots of

details, bright colors, and simplified, even cartoon-like, shapes.

- Graphic: Artists use affordable processes for wide distribution of dramatic, attention-grabbing designs.

Each theme and style had a dedicated icon inspired by *la lotería*, a ubiquitous Mexican lotto game that is similar to bingo but uses graphic images instead of numbers. Immediately familiar to Mexican American audiences, these icons were used to cue learning throughout the interface with selected artworks marked with appropriate icons to show visitors strong examples of each style and theme.

The curatorial team included four interactive learning components in the interface—a ***tagging activity,*** a ***lotería game***, a ***reading/gathering area***, and a ***visitor comment book***. These components required different levels of engagement from visitors, and, with the exception of the reading/gathering area, used the style and theme icons to prompt interactions.

The ***tagging activity*** occurred in three locations throughout the exhibition. Selected artworks had a supply of magnetic icons with the invitation for visitors to "tag" the works, leaving their assessments on nearby magnetic

Entrance to the Mixing It Up *exhibition with introductory panels. Photo courtesy of Villeneuve Viera.*

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strips. In this way, they could reinforce their learning of the styles and themes while viewing the opinions of previous participants and leaving traces of their visits for others to see.

The *lotería game* was located in an alcove off the main gallery. The exhibition team recreated an artist's depiction of his grandmother's kitchen, hanging on the adjacent wall, with appliances borrowed from the local historical society. The table top became a large-scale *lotería game* board. Visitors were welcome to sit and play by taking reproductions of exhibition artworks from a card holder at the end of the table and placing them on the style or theme icons they thought they represented. The activity was intended to promote careful consideration of style and theme as visitors played their cards and discussed their placements with others.

The *reading/gathering* area was located in the middle of the gallery space and consisted of four comfortable armchairs around a coffee table. Numerous resource books enabled visitors to pursue individual inquiries on topics of personal interest. An oversized *visitor comment book* was positioned at the exit to incorporate visitors' voices in the exhibition. To encourage reflection and connections with

visitors' lives, the curatorial team inserted prompts by the style and theme icons. For instance, the questions for the family and community theme asked, "What family values or traditions are important to you?"

Evaluating the *Mixing It Up* Interface
Evaluation is a required part of supported interpretation (Villeneuve, 2013), and results underscored the importance of the SI curatorial team approach. Working together from exhibition planning through design and installation, the team was intentional in the selection of artworks, the choice of themes and styles, and their applications as interactive components in the exhibition interface.

Based on qualitative data gathered during informal interviews in the gallery, the selection and placement of works seemed to have stimulated reflection and commentary by visitors from different cultural backgrounds. For example, two female visitors in their fifties commented on the Delano grape strike and the important role played by Mexican American leader and civil rights activist César Chávez. They first shared their memories of the event while in front of the "Sun Mad" poster by Ester Hernández, in which the artist replaces the image of the distinctive Sun Maid woman from the familiar red raisin box with a skeleton and plays with the wording to raise awareness of pesticides and other chemicals that are used in farming. The visitors made a connection between "Sun Mad" and the print located right next to it, pointing at the image of César Chávez and the flag of the United Farm Workers as part of their conversation expanding on their memories of the event. On the other hand, an Anglo American visitor referred to the

fact that "right now the political climate in Arizona is pretty tough for Mexicans" and highlighted the significance of the exhibition and the diverse selection of works agreeing in that "it's important to embrace all of the cultures." Moreover, a visitor of Salvadoran heritage pointed out cultural values she could relate to and highlighted the importance of the theme of labor, as addressed by many of the artists.

Examining the response to the interactive components of the interface sheds light on the visitor experience. Although visitors to *Mixing It Up* engaged with all of the components, observations revealed that they preferred those that required lower levels of engagement, such as the reading/gathering area and the visitor comment book, as opposed to those requiring more active participation.

The *lotería game* was the component that required the highest level of engagement, and it was the one that received the least amount of participation from visitors. The evaluation findings highlighted the importance of intentionality when it comes to signage inviting visitor participation. The absence of a nearby sign explicitly encouraging visitors to sit at the table and play and the fact that the game was part of a display of historical objects seemed to have confused visitors, who may have equated the area with a no-touch zone. During observations, most visitors walked around the kitchen area, looking at the objects and game from afar, unsure whether they could enter or engage. A couple who were gallery regulars were more confident about walking into the alcove and experimenting with the game.

The *tagging activity* was also underutilized by most visitors. Even with a short directional label and examples of tagged

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A large-scale lotería *game board where visitors could take reproductions of exhibition artworks from a card holder at the end of the table and place them on the style or theme icons they thought they represented. Photo courtesy of Villeneuve Viera.*

artworks in the gallery, few visitors were observed participating in the activity. When interviewed, some reported that they were not sure exactly what they were supposed to do while others claimed that they preferred learning about the artists and artworks in other ways or didn't feel comfortable putting themselves on the spot. A few visitors seemed to tag randomly after seeing other cards placed on the magnetic strips.

The **comment book** encouraged visitors to consider the content of the exhibition and make connections with their own lives in written form. Although some visitors didn't address the questions about themes and styles proposed by the curatorial team, many reflected on issues regarding family traditions, identity, and personal preferences. A number of entries were related to food items, such as tacos, turkey, the nopal cactus, and

chocolate cake, either when responding to the question about family traditions or as random comments or illustrations. Multiple drawings of *calacas* or skulls representing the Mexican tradition of *Día de los Muertos* (Day of the Dead) also reflected visitors' identities. This component allowed visitors to share their insights and perspectives with others while highlighting the commonalities and differences among various cultural groups. The question "Which style would you use to express your identity and why?" encouraged visitors to share their preferences and reflect further on their own identities. For example, a visitor commented that she liked the folk style because "I like simple and colorful. I don't like complication," whereas another one articulated: "I would use folk art because of its use of bright colors and expressive format. The simplified shapes often tell a dramatic, expressive story."

The centrally located reading/gathering area contained many resource books for visitors to peruse. Photo courtesy of Villeneuve Viera.

These responses and others suggest visitor learning from the exhibition interface.

The most passive of the interactive components in the interface was the **reading/gathering area**. Its position in the center of the gallery provided visitors with the opportunity to enjoy a selection of publications related to the exhibition, alone or with friends and family members, while still remaining in the context of the exhibition interface. Observations revealed that visitors used this area for different purposes, including taking a break, looking at artworks from a distance, browsing books, and engaging in conversations about some of the artists in the exhibition.

Moving Forward
Although a curatorial team member drafted suggestions for visitor engagement in *Mixing It Up*, the sign was deemed unnecessary because of an on-going docent presence in the gallery. However, the formal evaluation conducted by Viera demonstrated that the changes in practice brought by the supported interpretation model left visitors unsure about their participation and that docents needed retraining to facilitate visitor experiences in an SI interface. These findings prompted the addition of two new guidelines for SI and informed a subsequent exhibition, *Waxing Poetic: Exploring Expressing in Art and Poetry,*[3] at the Figge Art Museum, Davenport, Iowa (Figge Art Museum). This successful SI interface used poetry to interpret works of art. Visitors were welcome to submit poems or "poetry building blocks" (evocative words) about artwork or participate in other ways, as suggested on entry panels. Docents also participated in specialized training in preparation for the exhibition (Villeneuve, 2012, 2013; Love, Villeneuve, Cruz, Hueting, and Keim, 2013).

More recently, Viera adopted supported interpretation at the Texas A&M University-San Antonio's Educational & Cultural Arts Center to advance the new visitor-centered mission of this gallery space, which aims to facilitate an understanding and appreciation of Latino arts and cultures. An on-going implementation of the SI model will present new and exciting challenges and opportunities for continuing evaluation and refinement and will inform practices at other museums and galleries interested in intentionally engaging the communities they serve through meaningful, visitor-centered exhibitions. ✳

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Endnotes:
1. For instance, a demonstration project that preceded the exhibition discussed here also addressed identity in Mexican American art. The curatorial team recognized that meaning making would be thwarted if visitors were unfamiliar with the iconography in the work. Anticipating their needs to know, the team installed labeled thumbnail images of all the symbols among the works of art: U.S. statue of liberty, Mexican Virgin of Guadalupe, etc. An entry label encouraged visitors to use the referent images to piece together the meanings of the works of art (Villeneuve, 2012).

2. Themes are evident in subject matter, whereas style is about form and technique (Villeneuve & Erickson, 2011).

3. Villeneuve was a curatorial team member for both exhibitions discussed here.