



Commentary: Reflections on the Adolescence of Meaning-Making

by Lois H. Silverman

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It's hard to believe that 14 years have passed since the *Exhibitionist's* most popular issue announced the arrival to professional discourse of a bouncing baby paradigm called "meaning-making." Unkempt and hard to hold, it compelled us with its promise of a new age for museum exhibitions. With excitement and skepticism, we opened our arms to the orphan on the doorstep, debated its lineage, and did our best to raise it in an increasingly uncertain world. From the destruction on September 11 to the creation of Facebook and Twitter, little did we know just how much that world would change in nearly a decade and a half. Nurturing the concept along through discussion, research, and innovation, something remarkable has occurred: meaning-making has come of age. As the articles in this issue demonstrate, the fledging paradigm has proven itself not only capable, but influential, even in its youth. It has changed museum exhibitions, visitor experiences, and us.

According to Erik Erikson's theory of psychosocial development (1950), every life stage poses a special conflict, an existential question to be answered. En route to adulthood, adolescence presents the challenge of identity: *Who or what am I now, and who or what could I become?* Pondering this about meaning-making, I'm drawn to two topics: 1) the accomplishments of meaning-making to date; and 2) the seeds of its emerging potential. Both are evident in the insightful pages of this issue. What is meaning-making today, and what could it become? Let's start by taking stock.

Accomplishments

As the articles in this *Exhibitionist* issue reveal, meaning-making has grown up to be a provocative, multi-faceted concept. True to its nature, it has prompted different authors to define, defend, and discuss meaning-making through their own frames of reference and past experiences—as visitors do when they encounter exhibitions. As a result, meaning-making has inspired subtly different interpretations and applications, each one important in its own right for exhibitions. For example, Beverly Serrell, Matt Sikora, and Marianna Adams studied visitors' "personal meaning," while Ted Ansbacher emphasized "experienced-based learning," and Peter Samis and Mimi Michaelson examined "visitor-centered" interpretive practices. At the same time, meaning-making has also given rise to what Robert Crosman (1980) described as a particular or common understanding. At least among the authors in this issue, it seems that meaning-making involves a holistic, respectful understanding of and orientation toward visitors and their processes, experiences, and perspectives. Arguably, meaning-making has helped correct a significant imbalance of power, repositioning visitors alongside staff as active, equal partners in the construction of exhibition meanings. In short, meaning-making has changed what and how we think about museum visitors.

As research and life both demonstrate, it is much easier to influence how people think than what they actually do. Yet, meaning-making has informed action as well as thought. Early on, many people

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doubted the practicality of meaning-making, and thought it a passing fad. Fourteen years of exhibition development suggest otherwise: meaning-making has changed our exhibitions and how we make them. For example, it has inspired Darcie MacMahon to examine how choice and placement of iconic objects influence visitors' thoughts, feelings, and overall orientation before making changes in gallery design. Others, like Joan Gaither and Genevieve Kaplan, now foster community collaboration and use personal stories as subject matter to create engaging exhibitions, while Rae Ostman and her colleagues on the "Nano and Society" project use carefully guided conversations among museum visitors and staff to engage pressing social issues. Peter Samis and Mimi Michaelson benchmark designing for a multiplicity of experiences as a "best practice" in museum interpretation. To my mind, these examples demonstrate that meaning-making has inspired the field to create, implement, and recognize practical strategies that encourage and support visitors' experiences with exhibitions. Long ago, I hoped we'd learn to "fashion a better fit between human meaning-making and museum methods" (Silverman 1995). Meaning-making has empowered us to make notable progress.

Last but not least, meaning-making has influenced exhibition evaluation, in other words, our accountability to visitors. As Serrell, Sikora, and Adams demonstrate in this issue, we seek to understand what visitors value and why. As a result,

We now have more authentic, experiential questions to use in our

summative evaluations that go beyond "What did you like?" Exit interview prompts or probes that will resonate with visitors' meaning-making thoughts might include, What would you like to remember from your visit today? Something that you saw...or made a connection with...or discovered that was new? Something that made you say, "Oh!?" (Serrell et al, p.15 this issue)

As Darcie MacMahon has done, we also ask visitors how they feel and what they think about in order to make informed decisions. Like Laura Burd Schiavo, we have even internalized certain meaning-making values that now inform our own professional opinions and exhibit critiques, such as the ability of an exhibition to provide "a more open-ended encounter" or to get visitors "talking about things." Since meaning-making has inspired us to new thought and exhibit practice regarding visitors, it's no surprise it has also brought about change in evaluation and accountability too.

What has meaning-making accomplished in 14 short years? Who or what is it now? Without a doubt, meaning-making is a change agent within the museum field—a paradigm that has shifted and enhanced our understanding of visitors, and consequently, our exhibition and evaluation practices. It has been the herald of a new age of more visitor-sensitive museum experiences. Does this give meaning-making reason to rest on its laurels? Fortunately, that won't be possible. It's still young, and there's demanding work ahead. According to Erikson, there's another pressing

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question to be answered in word as well as deed: Who or what could meaning-making become?

Potential

I see emerging potential in meaning-making. In fact, I'm even more excited about its future than its past. What does the next decade hold in store? I honestly think some of the best is just ahead. If you've ever participated in the life of an adolescent, you know: growing up means developing an identity in relation to the wider world. In the process, most teens grow in their capacity for depth and complexity, and in their sense of responsibility to others. Perhaps more than anything, adolescents take risks, push boundaries, and break rules as they seek to understand their power and place. In short, depth, social responsibility, and experimentation are key characteristics of adolescence, however contradictory they might seem. To my mind, these are exactly the areas where meaning-making is already showing potential for the future. How can we help it grow?

The roots of meaning-making lie in the disciplines of communication, education, and cultural studies, whose different and often dense approaches can be confusing. When meaning-making arrived in the museum world, one specific application quickly took hold, and soon, the broad concept became nearly synonymous with "visitor meaning-making." While this contribution has had invaluable impact, it is time to take a new look at those roots and engage the full complexity and depth of understanding that meaning-making has to offer. For example, as writings here and elsewhere suggest, meaning-making is not only something museum visitors

do, it is what we *all* do—including staff members, students, teachers, community members, and politicians. And, while we do make meaning of exhibitions, we also make meaning of individual objects, images, people, places, selves, relationships, and institutions. We need models of meaning-making that link seemingly independent components, explain how they are related, and demystify these collective social processes. We need meaning-making theory that will help us understand, predict, and achieve change—individual, social, and cultural—both inside and outside of museums. As Ted Ansbacher has observed in this issue, the meaning-making model to date has not gained traction among some museum professionals, formal educators, politicians, or parents, perhaps because it is unfamiliar, difficult, or impractical. This seems a strong indication that it is indeed time to go deeper and work harder to articulate clearer, more comprehensive models and useable theories of meaning-making.

Even as a young paradigm, meaning-making showed a fundamental appreciation for others. Teaching us that visitors, their meanings, and their needs are diverse and often deeply significant, it is no surprise that meaning-making has informed a new era of socially responsible museum practice. Although we are just beginning to understand how museums can contribute to the transformation of individuals, relationships, society, and culture, meaning-making is a bedrock for this work. For example, meaning-making in museums has the potential to foster inclusion—the support and engagement of meaning-makers of all kinds,

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including those who are “different,” disenfranchised, and feared. Meaning-making may help lead to greater empathy and respect for multiple and varied meanings and their makers. Meaning-making of exhibitions and other cultural fare seems to enhance peoples’ lives and generate engagement around global problems. In this issue of the *Exhibitionist* alone, we see such goals and possibilities, particularly in the community work of Joan Gaither and Genevieve Kaplan, and the “Nano and Society” project by Rae Ostman and her colleagues. Meaning-making’s continued growth in these areas seems particularly promising.

On the other hand, adolescence is a time of risk-taking, boundary-testing, and rule-breaking, so we’d better be prepared for anything. As meaning-making develops, it might be rude, ignore us, raise eyebrows, get hurt, offend people, generate bad press, or jeopardize funding. It could also move in directions that frighten or shock us, make us question ourselves and our meanings, and turn our “best practices” on their heads. Let’s hope so.

Museums are historically slow to change. Meaning-making’s experimentation phase just might offer up its most dramatic contributions. In this issue, Barbara Cohen-Stratyner surely foresees one arena ripe for rule-breaking: how we tell stories in exhibits. Lagging far behind the vast possibilities of our digital age, she notes, “museums need to adapt or invent new strategies or tools of narrative development.” Who better to shake loose the “default structures” and innovate than the adolescent meaning-making?

What, then, is the potential of meaning-making in the coming years? Who or what could it become? Maybe meaning-making will grow up to be a true scientific theory, a change agent for the world, or an architect of cultural innovation. Perhaps all three. Maybe it will motivate people and incite revolutions, in museums and outside of them. More than anything, I hope and trust meaning-making will become something we can’t possibly imagine at this moment: everything it was meant to be. ✨

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