

The Construction of Meaning

by Julianne Snider

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Our goal as instructors is not to train students to become museum educators or exhibition designers but to provide the students with insight into the complexities of interpreting objects.

Objects may be imbued with many meanings over the course of their tenure in a museum. Meanings shift as knowledge is gained, technologies change, and interpretations are constructed by curators, collections managers, educators, exhibition designers, and museum visitors. Museum professionals construct object interpretations through research, scholarship, interaction with colleagues, visitor studies, and direct interaction with museum objects. Museum visitors construct object interpretations by engaging in the multiple learning modalities offered in the museum, by drawing upon prior knowledge and experiences, and through interactions with other visitors. This article explores how undergraduate students enrolled in a general museum studies class construct interpretations of museum objects as they work toward gaining understanding and appreciation of museum practices.

They're Not Just Things

Each spring semester, another instructor and I co-teach a class titled Museum Education at a small, secluded, liberal arts college in Pennsylvania. The 12-23 students in the class major in a variety of programs (e.g., art, biology, physics, environmental studies, geology, history, international studies, education) and may be at any class level (freshman through senior). Some have taken other museum studies courses, others have not. The purpose of the Museum Education class is to expose students to the history and philosophy of museum education, the roles and functions of museum educators, and the importance of observation and perception of objects and ideas comprising the medium in which most learning takes place in museums, the exhibition.

Although exhibitions are not always thought of as educational materials they are the primary environment where learning and meaning-making takes place within museums. Our goal as instructors is not to train students to become museum educators or exhibition designers but to provide the students with insight into the complexities of interpreting objects. The exhibition provides a framework for the students' learning and meaning-making processes as they work with objects and consolidate their interpretations into a cohesive display.

Early in the semester, each student is assigned an object by lot. The objects are numbered, cataloged, and enclosed in archival storage boxes secured with twill tape. Each student completes a loan receipt form and condition report for his/her assigned object. Once objects are distributed, the students keep weekly journals chronicling their research efforts, information sources, new queries they generate as old ones are resolved, and comments about the process as they answer twelve questions:

1. What is the object, and what is it called?
2. What was the object used for?
3. When was the object used (date range)?
4. What did the object replace?
5. What is now used to accomplish the same task that the object once did?
6. What material(s) is the object made of?

7. Where did the material(s) come from?
8. How was the object made?
9. How was the object used?
10. What is the historical significance of the object and the materials of which it is made?
11. What is the cultural significance of the object and the materials of which it is made?
12. What is the significance of the object and the materials it is made of in the history of technology?

The research journals are kept throughout the semester and are updated on a weekly basis. Once compiled, the journals become written accounts of how the students constructed meanings and how those meanings changed as they first gained knowledge and made connections to their objects and objects histories, and later made connections between all the objects assigned to the class.

The objects, items manufactured between 1885 and 1975 and fabricated from a variety of materials (e.g., glass, wood, thermoplastics, metal, leather, fabric), are similar to objects that could be found in many museums' historic artifact collections. Procured from antique and second-hand stores, the objects have no provenance but are representative of industries or materials that were once common but are no longer in general use. The objects are largely unfamiliar to the students, most of whom were



Detail of Museum Education students' exhibition. Courtesy of John E. Simmons

born after 1993. We feel this approach is a good approximation of what occurs in museums: an object with little or no associated information is found in the collections, and a museum staffer is tasked with identifying and interpreting the object and negotiating with colleagues to incorporate the object into a themed exhibition of many objects.

As answers to the twelve research questions are fleshed out, the students work together to identify an overarching theme which can be illustrated by their diverse collection of objects. This process adds another layer of complexity to the individual objects, and meanings may shift again. The theme becomes the basis for a small exhibition the students develop and install in a large multi-shelved, glass-walled exhibit case built into the lobby of a central, multi-use academic building on campus. Installation completion is timed to coincide with the college's Founder's Day, Liberal Arts Symposium, and Board

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of Trustees annual meeting. The location of the exhibit case ensures the class exhibition project will be seen by a majority of the college's students, faculty, staff, administrators, parents, and prospective students. Analysis of meaning-making by visitors is beyond the scope of this paper



Museum Education students installing graphic panels, didactic labels, and objects in the exhibition case. Courtesy of John E. Simmons

Tracking the Construction of Meaning

It has been fascinating to follow the student's progress through reading their accounts of conducting research, making connections, and interpreting their objects. The students' research journal entries reflect their initial naïve concepts of the objects, their familiarity with conducting research, and the point at which some finding in their research sparks a new connection and their focus shifts from the object to the meaning the object holds for them. The one constant, so far, among the research journals is the students' ability to envision themselves using their objects in the context of their present world but their inability to place themselves in the context and time from which the objects derived. This was also reflected in their exhibition theme "what would college life be like if..." The exhibition, which featured the objects highlighted in the following case studies as well as those assigned to other class members, employed a timeline to feature research results, graphics and ancillary items to visually support students' object interpretations, and two-part object labels. Each label included a student's conception of their object and a scenario in which the student and their peers had to use the object displayed rather than current technology, e.g., carrying around a portable record player and case of 45 rpm records rather than an iPod.

Five Case Studies

The sophomore biology major with little museum experience drew an aluminum 35mm film canister as her object. Her first journal entry began "This project is actually a lot harder than I thought it would be." Her initial reaction to the object was to identify it as an "old film canister." After a thorough examination of the object,

she spent many hours on the internet tracing the trademarked product logo imprinted on the canister to a European company. Additionally, she identified the film type and manufacture dates. From there, the type of film that may have been in the canister became the focus of her interest and research. She next reviewed scholarly articles that made reference to the film type. The articles she selected were “related to science and how this film has been used to take pictures of many different specimens used in experiments.” From there she shifted her focus first to the history of film and film packaging and then on the invention and evolution of 35mm cameras. By the time the canister was incorporated into the class exhibition, it represented the technologies that led to digital cameras and “the luxury” of snapping pictures and seeing the results without waiting for the film to be processed.

The object a senior majoring in anthropology drew was identified as “some sort of vehicle tag” from the mid-1940s. It was similar, he believed, to a motorcycle license plate. He was unable to find a similar object through his initial internet image search. His second research effort was to contact a local antique automobile museum and make arrangements for a consultation visit. Before the meeting date, he found objects similar to the one he was assigned available on eBay. Based on that search he was able to identify the object as a state revalidation tag issued during WWII. The small size of the tag was the result of war-time metal conservation efforts. Although he eventually visited the automobile museum, his research and focus shifted to scrap metal drives held during the war years. He found reports and

announcements of drives in newspapers archived in the college library. He also contacted his grandparents, veterans of WWII, for their perspective on how the war affected “their lifestyles, scrap drives, and how government institutions had changed.” From these conversations he focused on the importance of scrap metal collection and waste reduction for “the war effort.” While the student did not connect to WWII he did make strong connections between the revalidation tag and the recycling efforts he championed on campus.

A freshman, who had not yet declared a major, noted her first impression of the object she was assigned as “some form of measuring tool” that had some mathematical function. This impression was validated through consultation via Skype with her father. Later, she met with her advisor who identified the object as a slide rule and holster. The advisor still had the slide rule she had used in undergraduate calculus classes and was able to show it to the student. The student then turned to the internet to gain further information on slide rules. While she did obtain a synopsis of slide rule history from invention to present, she was more captivated with logarithms and logarithmic scales. Her interest in



Prior to installation, Museum Education students prepare for the exhibition by mapping the exhibition location and case, inventorying objects, and selecting label fonts. Courtesy of John E. Simmons

According to the ten research journals that have undergone preliminary analysis, meaning-making begins as objects are first removed from their archival boxes.



Polyvinyl chloride 45 rpm record and Edison Ambercol recording cylinder. Courtesy of Julianne Snider.

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National Research Council. (2009). *Learning science in informal environments: People, places, and pursuits*. (P. Bell, B. Lewenstein, A. W. Shouse, & M. Feder, Eds.). Washington, DC: The National Academies Press.

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logarithmic calculations and slide rules shifted back and forth while her research overall became more in-depth. Her research culminated with chronicling the use of slide rules during space exploration plus the advent of electronic calculators.

Another freshman, majoring in art history, received a 1920s French Ivory (celluloid) hair receiver as her object. After identifying the object through internet searches she called her grandmother to get her perspective. Although she acknowledged the object was “a bit before” her grandmother’s “time” she felt certain that her grandmother would know why hair receivers were included in dresser sets. After the conversation, the student announced that the purpose of her object was to collect loose, oily hair for use as pin cushion stuffing. The hair oils inside the cushion acted as lubricants for dressmakers pins. From that point, the student would not accept any other explanations, suggestions, or evidence for other uses, nor would she conduct any additional research on the object.

A junior, with no declared major, was able to identify her object as an early Ambercol (celluloid) recording cylinder after a series of internet searches and visits to the college’s special collections library. She then turned her research efforts toward plastics and how and why their invention

affected the world. Upon learning that another student, a sophomore majoring in art history, was conducting research on a 45 rpm vinyl (polyvinyl chloride) record the junior suggested pooling resources and tracing sound recording technologies. While one student concentrated on the use of plastics, the other traced the advent and evolution of portable music playback devices. Both students expressed strong feelings about their personal attachments to, and the “prevalence and easy access” of recorded music in their daily lives.

Conclusion

According to the ten research journals that have undergone preliminary analysis, meaning-making begins as objects are first removed from their archival boxes. These initial interpretations are quickly replaced as research into the object is initiated. Typically, research strategies begin with internet searches before progressing to personal communication with family members, friends, former teachers, and current professors, and visits to libraries, archives, and museums. Some students trust their own interpretations of their research while others place more trust in interpretations offered by friends or family members. In either instance, at some point the object is no longer the main focus of the students’ efforts; rather, the object’s function, history, composition, other attributes, or tangential connections takes precedence as the element of interest. The meaning of the object shifts as the object becomes the abstract representative of that interest. ✨

A formal, qualitative research proposal to expand the study and analyze additional journals is in progress. The Editor.