



Breaking Out of the Norm: Meaning-Making Within the Context of Everyday Museum Experience

by Joan M.E. Gaither and Genevieve Kaplan

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...Humans need to know that their actions matter, that their existence forms a pattern with that of others, that they are remembered and loved and that the individual self is part of some greater design beyond the fleeting span of mortal years.
—Csikszentmihalyi, 1981

In the 1999 Fall *Exhibitionist*, editor Jay Rounds and authors examined the role of meaning-making in exhibitions. Readers were challenged to explore new ways of engaging visitors and enhancing the overall museum experience. Rounds cites author Lois Silverman’s call for museums to explore innovative approaches to “make major shifts in practice to radically different types of exhibits that will more powerfully stimulate and support visitor meaning-making” (p.8).

This article explores the role of community collaboration in creating exhibitions as a way of developing meaningful experiences for museums and visitors. Community involvement in the exhibition process allows would-be visitors to take active roles while providing new opportunities to connect with museum audiences old and new. This is critically important as museums endeavor to be more inclusive. Results from the National Endowment for the Arts’ 2008 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts show that museum attendees do not reflect the diverse population of the United States. With the U.S. Census projecting a growth in the minority population, museums need to develop meaningful exhibitions that reflect this demographic shift (NEA, 25-29).

Collaboration and community involvement in museum exhibitions provide opportunities for museum staff to work beyond institutions’ physical walls. Through direct museum-community partnership, organizations can develop exhibitions in which audience members see themselves reflected, whether directly or indirectly. This article highlights the need for community input and collaboration in exhibitions through an examination of case studies and emerging ideas.

Case Studies

Below are three case studies highlighting successful collaborations between museums and African American communities whose history was rarely shared in historical institutions. In each case, the museums had minimal information on the respective subject areas and wanted to increase their knowledge base and make new connections with communities. As museums are traditionally non-diverse institutions, creating meaningful collaborations was essential to connecting with the African American communities by partnering with individuals and organizations known within the communities. The museums gained unprecedented access to materials and information that previously were held “within” the communities with little or no access to perceived “outsiders.” By incorporating community collaboration into the entire exhibition process rather than limiting it to the evaluation stages, the museums went beyond their usual authoritative perspective and created exhibitions in which the community could see itself and appreciate that its voice was being honored.



Community members gather to add finishing stitches to the Trails, Tracks, Tarmac quilt during a public quilting session held at St. Mark United Methodist Church in Hanover, MD. Courtesy of Theodore Mack.

Case Study 1: Trails, Tracks, Tarmac

In 2004 the Maryland Historical Trust suggested that Northern Arundel Cultural Preservation Society, Inc. (NACPS) develop a partnership with the Banneker-Douglass Museum (BDM) to document the culture of several small African American communities. These communities were disappearing due to urban sprawl and commercial development. The initial collaboration focused on gathering information for a documentary story quilt developed by fiber artist Dr. Joan M.E. Gaither. Community-led research teams gathered materials such as farm implements, early school house furnishings, manumission papers, pickers' checks, and railroad items from local homes, businesses, churches, and organizations—items depicting African American life in Northern Anne Arundel County, MD from 1865 through 2006. The objects and documents collected permitted the museum to discover new privately held resources that had never been shared publicly.

These were offered for use in the museum because owners were invited to share/loan information and to become active participants in the project's process. The information provided quickly exceeded the space available on a single story quilt. This led to a series of quilting workshops with community members creating 26 personal small subject-specific quilts.

NACPS and BDM determined the resulting collection deserved a larger exhibition entitled *Trails, Tracks, Tarmac*. The exhibition concept was to document local history in such a way that audience members of all ages and backgrounds would be able to find multiple meaningful connections, whether they were from the documented area or not. Each organization was able to bring to the table components the other did not possess. NACPS held tremendous research and objects while the museum staff had the experience of turning raw materials into museum exhibitions.



Two members of the watermen community studying the completed “Black Watermen of the Chesapeake” quilt while on display at the Annapolis Maritime Museum during its unveiling ceremony. Courtesy of Theodore Mack.

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The goal of the quilt was to highlight this slowly disappearing community and its history through the watermen’s eyes.

Museum staff facilitated exhibition design creation, while allowing the community organization to serve as primary author. During the entire process, museum staff worked alongside NACPS to create an exhibition that “grew out of an interaction between a trained professional artist and a group of individuals who discovered their unique power for creative expression.” The exhibition opened in October 2006 and was extended several times due to popular demand.

Case Study 2: Black Watermen of the Chesapeake

In 2008, Vincent Leggett and the Blacks of the Chesapeake Foundation (BOC) approached Gaither to quilt the African American watermen story in Maryland. The overall maritime history of Maryland is well documented; however there are gaps in publicly available information and research on African American watermen. The goal of the quilt was

to highlight this slowly disappearing community and its history through the watermen’s eyes. The challenge of creating an interpretive project in which the community saw itself while people outside of the community were able to make connections to their own lives was met through collaboration. Leggett represented the watermen’s voice while Gaither, and later Banneker-Douglass Museum through then-Education and Public Programs Manager Genevieve Kaplan, brought the outside viewer’s perspective. The quilt’s photographs, objects, and stories from the watermen community itself informed the basic design of the quilt imagery familiar to the general public. By using this approach, the quilt allowed viewers to use an object they recognized to lead them into a more in-depth examination of the topic.

Participants at public quilting sessions held at the BDM and Bates Legacy Center, not members of watermen communities, expressed a desire to participate because of their love of art-making and quilting. In advance of the two public quilting sessions held within the watermen community, Leggett actively worked to encourage reluctant watermen and their families to participate, as previous documentary research projects had resulted in depictions not well received by them. While Leggett was perceived to be an “insider,” Gaither and the museum were not. By holding quilting sessions at locations within the community, at the invitation of an insider, interest was piqued and a few family members came at the beginning of the first session. As family “recon representatives” viewed the quilt, they recognized names, photographs, and events, and they



Using community collaborations as a primary driving force for meaning-making in exhibitions is a powerful tool when done correctly.

"Life at Anne Arundel County Almshouse's White Dormitory," Historic London Town and Gardens. One of two quilts created during Common Threads project depicting the treatment of black and white residents of the Anne Arundel County, MD Almshouse. Courtesy of Genevieve Kaplan.

willingly provided missing information. Phone calls to absent community members encouraged them to preserve their stories by bringing images and documents to add to the quilt. When the 10x14ft quilt was unveiled publicly during a one month period, over 200 community members attended, and several participated in the program.

Case Study 3: Common Threads

In 2012 BDM, Historic Annapolis (HA), and Historic London Town and Gardens

(HLT) teamed with Anne Arundel County Public Schools for a four-month project featuring three interconnected projects. The projects focused on teaching students about local history through museum research and interpretation to create artworks for an exhibition entitled *Common Threads*. Each historical organization worked with schools to study specific topics in local African American history with ties to national subjects. The purpose of the projects and resulting exhibition was to show that people can

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make connections to the past through their present lives, and that everyone has a story to tell. Kaplan (BDM) worked with classes at two high schools to capture the history of six Rosenwald Schools¹; Heather Ersts (HA) worked with 6th graders studying segregation and integration in schools; and Lisa Robbins (HLT) worked with a high school class studying racial segregation at the Anne Arundel County Almshouse located on the grounds of HLT. The three historical institutions reached out to eight community organizations to serve as program partners, offering research assistance, venues for public information sharing, and project support.

The museums conducted historical research training and provided the students access to images and objects from the institutions' collections. Through BDM and HA student-led oral history sessions, members of the community shared information and brought images and objects for the students to use. Students noted personal connections to their research topics through their parents, grandparents, and community members. Realizing they knew people with first-hand experience with the topic being studied, the students took greater personal pride in the project.

Gaither tasked students to create documentary story quilts to interpret their research for future display at the museums. As additional images, information, and people joined the project, the students and the community recognized the work was creating a feeling of "I am important" for all involved. The deep level of students' personal connections to the subject



Bates Quilt I, Historic Annapolis. A detailed photo of a Common Threads quilt square created by a student using an image of a family heirloom. Courtesy of Genevieve Kaplan.

matter was best displayed in the HA project. When students studied U.S. segregation and integration, they were encouraged to talk with older family members about their personal experiences and to incorporate them into their quilt squares. When the project team began to assemble the quilt squares into larger quilts, several squares created by Hispanic students made references to today's immigration struggles.

An exhibition comment opportunity allowed additional voices to emerge. Key words used by the students in their research were listed on a board where visitors could write about their connections to any of the words. At exhibition conclusion, the board was filled with visitor responses from people of all ages visiting from around the world. *Common Threads* opened at BDM for a five-month run in June 2012.

Emerging Ideas

Using community collaborations as a primary driving force for meaning-making in exhibitions is a powerful tool when done correctly. In examining the three case studies we can identify some common elements that were critical to the successful execution of the projects. These

“I don’t live too far away from history.” Student participant in *Common Threads* project.

elements also established connections and opportunities for future collaborations. Based on these three experiences we recommend the following:

- *Identify potential topic interests by examining research requests, visitors’ comments and suggestions.*
- *Provide open invitations to encourage community involvement throughout the exhibition process.*
- *Work with existing organizations with common missions to introduce your museum to new partners.*
- *Lay out expectations for all partners at the beginning.*
- *Be flexible, but know your limitations.*
- *Realize the museum is not the only expert: all partners are working WITH each other NOT FOR one particular organization.*
- *Maintain transparency by holding public exhibition meetings and working sessions to encourage questions, curiosity, and participation.*

Conclusion

The mark of successful community collaboration is growth. A strong collaboration will generate interest in the community, and people will want to participate because they see connections between the project and themselves. When museum visitors see themselves reflected in exhibitions, they want to

involve themselves with the institution and its mission. Initially envisioning *Common Threads*, the three historical organizations anticipated five quilts. In the end, quilt numbers rose to 16, the number of participating schools increased, and the numbers at one school rose from an estimated 20 students to 275. While extremely heartening for the project leaders, the growth created logistical issues with funding and available resources. Because of the connections the partner organizations felt towards *Common Threads*, they were able to help secure additional funding and supply volunteers to allow the project to carry on with the unexpected increases. Students, community members, project organizers, and volunteers became invested in the project and donated approximately 2,000 volunteer hours in order to ensure the *Common Threads* exhibition shared their voices with museum visitors.

When students were asked what they took away from this collaborative learning experience, one described a meaning-making experience. Agreeing with Csikszentmihalyi, the student said,

I think the project will have a strong effect especially for the youth when we share youth to youth, because we don’t always like to do so with older people. I feel it will have a strong impact because not a lot of kids like history, but when you say “Oh it’s just right around the corner from where you live,” then it draws an interest like “I don’t live too far away from history.” You feel like you are a part of something. ✨

End Note:

1. Rosenwald schools were part of a project to fund schools, shops, and teacher houses built by and for African Americans. It was organized in 1912 by Booker T. Washington with funding from Sears Roebuck, headed by Julius Rosenwald, who was also a member of the board of Tuskegee Institute. The project spread to many states, including Maryland. The schools became obsolete after the 1954 Supreme Court ruling against segregated schools, and are now on the Historic Trust’s list of Endangered Historic Places.

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