



Special Section: Making Meaning in Exhibits Meaning Making: A New Paradigm For Museum Exhibits?

by Jay Rounds

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An introduction to this issue's special section on visitor meaning making in museum exhibits.

When visitors experience an exhibit, their activity is directed not toward the acquisition of information, but rather toward the construction of meaning. This assertion appears to be the nub of a new way of understanding the exhibit experience. It may also have revolutionary implications for how we design exhibits. Indeed, one of the leading theorists of meaning making, Lois Silverman, has declared that "The implications of the meaning-making paradigm...illuminate critical directions for a new age of museums" (1995:161). Silverman's influential articles (1993, 1995) introduced the idea to most American exhibit people, but a growing body of work has expanded on the concept (e.g., Taborsky 1990, Pearce 1992), and references to "meaning" and "meaning making" now abound in the literature. Many museum professionals believe that meaning making is truly the foundation for a radical new approach to exhibits.

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Nonetheless, at its current stage of development the concept is more an assemblage of intriguing ideas and provocative experiments than a coherent and comprehensive theory with clear implications for practice. To advance its impact on actual practice in museum exhibit, we need a more detailed understanding of the nature and process of meaning making itself, presented in terms accessible to practicing exhibit professionals. We also need persuasive examples of exhibit methods that clearly implement the concept. In both cases, it needs to be made clear exactly how these differ from traditional ways of thinking about, and designing, exhibits. The articles in this special theme section of *Exhibitionist* seek to clarify the idea of meaning making, and to identify some concrete ways in which exhibits can be designed to stimulate and support visitors in their processes of meaning making.

What's It All About?

Just what *is* the "meaning-making paradigm," and how is it different from traditional ways of doing exhibits? This is a bit of a loaded question. Meaning making is a complex idea with many as-yet unresolved issues, a number of which are identified below. There is, however, a reasonably clear notion of how it differs from traditional practice—from what we might call the "cultural-transmission paradigm."

For most of this century museum practice has been rooted in a set of ideas from the evolutionist social theories developed in the late 19th century. These ideas held that humans were entirely products of their culture. Entering the world as a "blank slate," the child was transformed into a civilized human being by a process of "deep socialization." This consisted of a variety of methods for pouring the contents of the culture into the head of the child, so that he or she became a walking embodiment of that culture. Social order was ensured because all people, being so thoroughly socialized, saw and understood things the same way (except, of course, for the occasional deviant who needed to be fixed).

Education was thus understood as a process in which a knowledgeable person who had already internalized that aspect of the culture poured information into the head of the ignorant person who had not. The learner was a passive receptacle waiting to be filled with the body of information that constituted the culture. Errors in cultural transmission would threaten the social order, since they would result in members of the society having incompatible viewpoints, understandings or values. Thus, it was essential that education be designed to make certain that everyone has gotten the facts right, that everyone knows the same things and shares the same conceptions of what is "true." Museums, of course, were understood to be one of the mechanisms for this process of cultural transmission.



The cultural-transmission paradigm began to run into trouble in the 1960s, signaled by an enormously-influential article titled "The Oversocialized Conception of Man in Modern Sociology" (Wrong 1961). The emerging new theory argued that deep socialization was a myth. Humans are not passive receptacles waiting to be filled with culture, but rather active agents who are pursuing personal agendas. Certainly individuals acquire cultures, but they do not internalize them so thoroughly or deeply as the old model had assumed.

Over the past few decades a variety of theories have been developed that attempt to depict a more complex and

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reciprocal relationship between cultures and the individuals who live within them. Various aspects of these theories are presented in the

articles in this special section of *Exhibitionist*. While there are important variations, almost all stress the idea of the individual as an agent who actively "constructs" knowledge in his or her mind, through interactions with cultural institutions and artifacts, and with other persons. While this process may involve acquiring specific "facts," the most important aspect of the process is the way the individual translates these experiences into patterns of "meaning."

Thus, the meaning-making paradigm ("M-M") differs from the cultural-transmission paradigm ("C-T") in some critical ways. Where C-T sees a one-way transmission of information from the expert to the novice, M-M sees a two-way interaction through which knowledge and/or meaning is constructed anew in each case. Where C-T understands the learner as a passive receptacle, M-M sees an active agent. Where C-T sees outcomes in terms of the acquisition of the culture, M-M defines outcomes in terms of the construction of meaning. Where C-T aims at a perfect, mistake-free transmission of factual knowledge from teacher to learner, M-M confronts the complex and ambiguous challenge of facilitating a highly-individual process of interpretation that nonetheless is tremendously influenced by culture. Most fundamentally, though, the difference lies in the difficult and elusive distinction between "facts" and "meanings," and the respective roles they play in the way that individual human beings manage their lives in human societies.

If museum exhibits were formerly understood in the relatively simple terms of cultural transmission, adoption of the meaning-making paradigm requires us to produce a far more complex model of what happens when visitors encounter exhibits. The challenge to the field is both formidable and exciting. In the following sections I briefly review some of the issues that must be addressed to bring greater clarity to the emerging paradigm. Each of these

issues is addressed in one or more of the articles in this special theme section.

What Do We Mean By "Meaning"?

References to "meaning" now abound in the museum literature, but the term is used to cover a vast range of concepts. In many cases, "the meaning of an exhibit" appears to be akin to a dictionary definition—the one correct interpretation of the message the designer meant to convey. For instance, Allen (1997:8-9) described a study of a science exhibit designed "to show feedback operating in an electromagnetic system." Visitors, however, interpreted the exhibit as a model of the solar system, leading Allen to note "the exhibit's tendency to generate spurious meanings." This usage of "meaning" seems indistinguishable from the assumptions of the cultural-transmission paradigm.

Deeper levels of meaning seem to be implied in statements by various theorists about how central meaning making is to the nature of our species. Max Weber, a sociologist, observed that "Man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun." In more recent formulations, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz said "the imposition of meaning on life is the major end and primary condition of human existence" (1973:434). Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist, argued that "man's main concern is not to gain pleasure or to avoid pain but rather to see a meaning in his life" (1985:136). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, a psychologist well-known to museum professionals for his concept of "flow," said that "The battle for the value of life is fought in the arena of meaning." 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 their individual self is part of some greater design beyond the fleeting span of mortal years" (Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton 1981:145).

If visitor meaning making offers a radically different way of understanding the exhibit experience, then its significance must surely lie further toward these deeper layers of meaning. The basic human drive toward meaning making that is described by the theorists cited above deals with "the meaning of our lives," not with the acquisition of mere dictionary definitions. Chiodo and Rupp (this issue) cite educational theorists who emphasize the need to address "deep meaning," "what governs a person's sense of purpose," or "governs what people look for and what they are willing to do." The most exciting potential of the meaning-making paradigm lies in the possibility that we can learn to create exhibits that visitors experience as powerful vehicles for exploring such "deep meaning."

In discussing this concept with colleagues I encountered the objection that "the meaning of life" is an impossible focus for museums, since it has eluded philosophers (and even



Monty Python) for thousands of years, and could hardly be the motivating factor for museum visitation. I agree that so abstract and esoteric a question is best left to philosophers and theologians. I am, rather, following Viktor Frankl (1985:131) in asserting that the question that drives us is a more immediate and concrete one: "What is the meaning of my life?" Each of us *must* come to terms with that question—and must do so constantly, since (as Frankl argues) meaning evolves throughout our lives as experiences accumulate and situations change. Museum exhibits can be as powerful a tool in this process of personal meaning making as any other art form.

Nevertheless, "dictionary meaning" currently seems to be the sense in which "meaning" is used most frequently in museum literature. We need a more refined vocabulary for talking about the subject, one that clearly distinguishes what is meant by "meaning" in any given context.

What Are Visitors Making Meaning About?

"Meaning" is always *about* something. Thus (as Hein argues in this issue), to understand visitor meaning making we need to ask *what* it is that they are making meaning about. The majority of references in the existing museum literature appear to assume that the meanings visitors construct are *about* the explicit content of the exhibit, no matter how idiosyncratic their interpretation. This may sometimes (or often) be the case, but it is by no means the only possibility. Silverman (this issue) argues that the visitors she studied were using their exhibit experiences to construct meanings about *themselves*—their identities, their place in the world, the meaning of their lives—regardless of the official subject matter of the exhibits. As Spock (this issue) notes, visitors also use experiences of one subject as metaphors to help them extract meaning from other experiences that are totally unrelated. Creativity research has identified the making of such "remote associations" as a central mechanism of pattern

recognition, which is also central to the construction of meaning.

Assuming that visitors make

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meaning *only* about the explicit content of an exhibit seems an unnecessary limitation, and probably reflects the lingering expert-to-novice mind-set of the cultural transmission paradigm. We will almost certainly learn more about what our visitors are really doing if we cast our research nets more broadly.

Nonetheless, this raises a puzzling issue that we are still far from resolving. Exhibit developers do, after all, create exhibits that are *about something*. If visitors can make meaning about everything and anything, then what does

what we do in designing an exhibit have to do with what visitors do? As Kathy Corbett (this issue) puts it, how do we manage to join the conversations visitors are having in our exhibits?

Is it a legitimate use of the museum exhibit experience for visitors to construct meanings that are highly personal or totally unrelated to the explicit subject? This thorny question runs through all of the contributions to this issue, and is given particular attention by Ansbacher, Dillenburg, Ross, Silverman and Spock.

Is Meaning Making an Esoteric or an Everyday Activity?

For most of this century social theory depicted meaning making as an esoteric process that took place only in specialized times and places such as churches and secular holiday rituals, so that the need could be met without interfering with the vital business of everyday life. A distinction between the sacred and the profane (now more commonly described as symbolic versus instrumental action) emphasized the separateness of the activities dealing with meaning making from those dealing with the mundane and practical. Symbolic action was understood as necessary to social order, but because it was a distraction from practical business it needed to be confined to certain times and places. During the last few decades, though, social theory has swung in the opposite direction, following Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) argument that the most powerful meaning making occurs precisely in the context of everyday, practical action. For instance, nothing better demonstrates the meaning that "the world is an orderly and sensible place" than routine, instrumental activities in which predictable actions reliably produce predictable results. Nevertheless, specialized settings for meaning making persist in our society, and appear to still play a vital role. This is an important issue for understanding museums as environments for meaning making, since it focuses attention on the persistent question of whether museums should be designed as temple-like environments, with a strong sense of separation from everyday life, or should endeavor to emulate the familiar environments of everyday life. As yet this issue has received little attention in the literature on meaning making in museums.

Is Meaning Making a Personal or a Social Activity?

One apparent strength of the meaning-making paradigm is to reassert the role of the visitor as an independent agent engaged as an active participant in the exhibit experience. This image replaces the old view of the visitor as a passive receptacle, come to be filled with the expert knowledge offered up in the exhibit. Other theoretical streams, though, argue that meaning making is a social process rather than an individual one. Individuals do construct meanings in their minds, this view holds, but the meanings they

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construct are provided by the culture. A fully-developed theory of visitor meaning making in museums will certainly require a complex model of the interplay of cultural and individual elements in the process. Though the implications of this debate for exhibit practice remain undeveloped, it seems likely to provide one point of entry into the vital issue of the relationship between exhibit creators and exhibit visitors in the process of meaning making.

Do We Really Need To Do Anything About It?

Silverman argues for "the importance of fashioning a better 'fit'...between human meaning-making and museum methods (1995:161)." To go with the emerging new theory describing what visitors actually do in exhibits (make meaning), we need a new prescriptive theory telling us how to create new types of exhibits that will effectively serve visitors in their process of meaning making.

A cynic might argue that the meaning-making model requires no change in exhibit practice, since visitors have always been more-or-less successful in making meaning in the kind of exhibits we already know how to design. After all, the idea of the meaning-making model is not that visitors used to attend exhibits in order to acquire facts, but now attend exhibits in order to make meaning. Rather, it asserts that visitors to exhibits have *always* been engaged in meaning making, in spite of the assumption of museum professionals that cultural transmission was the name of the game. We've simply been slow in coming to a correct understanding of what visitors were up to.

Silverman's view, though, asserts that traditional exhibit design has been undermining the visitors' experience, and that we should make major shifts in practice to create

radically-different types of exhibits that will more powerfully stimulate and support visitor meaning making. Resolving this issue in any concrete way must await a better understanding of the actual nature of meaning making in the exhibit experience. Nonetheless, most of the articles in this section agree with Silverman, and take the viewpoint that such understanding will be advanced by exploring how innovative approaches to exhibitry might directly serve the process of meaning making.

How Can We Tell If It's Working?

The meaning-making paradigm asserts a radically-different view of the output of the exhibit experience—from facts successfully transferred to meanings constructed in the minds of visitors. Evaluation techniques developed to measure the first type of output will not work to measure the second (St. John 1990, 1993; Spock, this issue; Ansbacher, this issue). If meaning making is to achieve its promise as a new paradigm for exhibit development, an appropriate technology for evaluating the success of exhibits will need to be established. Ideas for this new form of evaluation must emerge along with ideas for exhibit techniques that support meaning making.

As John Maynard Keynes pointed out long ago, all important new ideas start off fuzzy and incomplete, and require years of development to reach their true potential. Much significant work has already been accomplished in exploring meaning making as a new paradigm for museum exhibits, and I hope that this issue of *Exhibitionist* will prove to be another useful step forward. In future issues we'll be delighted to publish articles and letters responding to the arguments presented here.

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