



Meaning-Making in Children's Museums: Why Try?

by Alissa Rupp

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When developing meaning-making exhibits for children, it is especially important to design through emotional connections.

Knowledge without love will not stick. If love comes first, knowledge is sure to follow.
—John Burroughs, quoted in Sobel (1996)

Exhibit design for children's museums is an exciting and dynamic task; as designers we are being asked to create meaningful, unique, engaging exhibit experiences. We are able to investigate what stories, programs, and philosophies should be utilized to support and inform the exhibits, and often contribute to the development of the topics and themes that the exhibits cover. And children's museums generally bring to the table a strong educational philosophy about their role in the life of a community, and about how and why kids and adults visit. Often the initial design possibilities are very broad, and (apart from the budget) impose few obvious constraints.

But upon closer reflection, there is a hidden challenge. It comes when exhibit designers are asked to create exhibits that are *meaningful* in a children's museum. Where is the meaning in children's exhibits? When you move past some common themes—getting opportunities and information across to a diverse group of visitors; providing safe and enriched spaces that are interesting to kids and adults; creating places for learning through various kinds of play; creating kid-oriented “environments” that you hope will engage children—where does that leave you in terms of visitors finding meaning in what you have provided?

In a recent visioning workshop, our design team began by asking adults to recount their favorite experiences from childhood, or to tell about memorable experiences they have had with their children—what we would see if we opened their fond-memory scrap book. They spoke of secret hiding spots, doing “projects” with a favorite relative, dressing up in costumes, building forts, endless summer days in back lots, organizing intricate hierarchies for stuffed animals or other collections, exploring in nature, being set free (or taking prohibited steps) into the “real world.” If people did remember being “entertained” by going to Disneyland or watching TV, they remembered it as a time when a family was all together, or when they spent time with an important person in their life. There are as many experiences to list as there are people in the world: for every person there is an entirely different set of memories that emerge when we let ourselves look back on the times when we were truly happy, truly engaged, truly present.

But when examined, these experiences have something in common: in each case, the person doing the remembering was engaged in an *emotional* way. Relying on emotional engagement is not often seen as very academic or theoretical. It is laden with impressions of sappy “movie-moments,” or associated with times of extreme joy or difficulty. We forget that adults and children alike can have emotionally rich experiences on any normal day, either with others *or* alone as individuals. We are not encouraged to take a close look at the emotional landscape of our days as working, thinking people. Emotion seems volatile, and rational intellect is easier to deal with in the work place. Similarly, emotional content is not usually seen as a necessary component of exhibit design, unless the exhibit deals with a topic that is inherently emotional, or there is a “tugging-at-the-heart-strings” aspect to the program.

If there are emotions involved, we learn better.

This may represent a misconception of what emotion really is, and what it really does for us as life-long learners. It has now been shown that when information (in the form of a sensory stimulus) is accompanied by emotional content (or just by the presence of neurotransmitters introduced to mimic brain events that occur when emotions are in play), there is increased retention, understanding, and transference (Khalsa 1997). In other words, if there are emotions involved, we learn better. We are



more likely to remember. We are more able to find *meaning* in what we have encountered.

It is also true, perhaps unfortunately, that a similar situation occurs when experiences are paired with an increase in the “adrenaline response” in the brain. That is, things that are scary, or otherwise highly stimulating, stick in our minds. In fact, we can adapt to those situations, and we are often able to increase our ability to “handle” stronger and stronger rushes of adrenaline. This may be the reason for our growing societal obsessions with danger-sports, increasingly violent films, faster-louder-scariest video games. Are we becoming addicted to something that is crowding out our need for (or our recognition of) emotional connections to ourselves and to each other?

Design for Meaning Through Emotional Connections

[It is a] sense of interconnectedness, which occurs when emotions and cognition come together, [that] is a key to the appreciation of life and learning and to overcoming the downshifting that so often precludes us from functioning compassionately and effectively.

—Caine and Caine 1994:100

Children’s museums rely heavily, and correctly, on learning through play. Enriched, exciting environments, open for non-directed play can be powerful in their ability to engage children and stimulate curiosity, experimentation, and role play.

The bridge between this play (even creative or expressive play) and creating a new understanding (dynamic learning) is reinforced by *emotional connections*. This relationship, where emotion links the intellectual concepts to the positive experience, is what makes things memorable; when things are remembered they become part of our human ability to make connections between the present, the past and the future. These connections are what give experiences and information meaning in the larger context of our lives.

Children extrapolate meaning by collecting these rich, interconnected experiences and adding them to their growing catalog of knowledge of how the world works. This may not be made obvious by asking children “how does that make you feel?” or “what did that mean to you?” Instead educators and exhibit designers can invest in the creation of *opportunities* for emotionally significant learning and provide an environment that fosters interconnection.

Strong emotional connections in a child’s every day life emerge from several kinds of circumstances:

1. *Solid, “quality” time spent with parents, grandparents, peers, siblings, friends, teachers.* This creates an emotional connection with important people, potential for positive feedback, identification of oneself in others.

2. *Physical, full body experiences.* Combining experiences of smell, touch, sound, taste, sight, and movement into kinesthetic activities allows sensory-based interaction and memory.

3. *The opportunity for reflection.* Allowing children to pause, wait, slow down, stop, and thus reflect, provides time for discovery, asking why, and thinking things through.

4. *Multi-level, varied learning opportunities.* Connect to the importance of emotion, but also to varied learning styles, cognition, and personal and cultural memories.

Given these tools, how can we use them to create emotional connections, memorable events, and thus meaning, in exhibits? Some design strategies and goals are suggested here:

1. Foster intergenerational interaction: Build exhibits where people of different ages, abilities and backgrounds can find opportunities to share their ideas and experiences with each other. Create situations where a child can find herself with the undivided attention of another person, while they do, see or create something together.

2. Provide kinesthetic activities: Engage kids and adults physically in diverse ways. Connect to the senses (use smell, texture, color, taste, and sound in varied aspects of the exhibit), as well as to balance, large-muscle skills, and other physical tasks and challenges to activate and ingrain a body-memory in the visitor.

3. Consider pacing: As tempting as it is to follow retail and entertainment industry leads, exhibits in children’s museums do not need to have the pace of an MTV music video to engage children. It is a precious thing to allow a child (alone or with learning-companions) the time to go slowly, do one thing for a long time, think things through, or have time to actually wonder what will happen next (longer than a tenth of a second!). Children’s museums can provide the truly “alternative” experience in this case—the alternative to the hyper-fast world we live in. (It is difficult for children’s museums to provide, but there is also extreme value in un-programmed time. This self-directed part of children’s lives can have a profound effect on them in later life [Sobel 1996.] Where a museum has a large site, or even in an art museum’s varied and peaceful galleries, children can take advantage of time to explore, wander, be quiet, and think on their own schedule.)

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4. Account for varied learning approaches and incorporate diverse representations: Howard Gardner's multiple intelligences, the Reggio Emilia philosophy, and many other frameworks for thinking about learning have made it clear that different people learn in different ways. Each "message," topic, or activity has to be addressed in several ways, or must be available for multiple

Where is the meaning in children's exhibits?

interpretations, so as to be most likely to engage any given child. If a person is able to get at something from more than one cognitive (or physical) direction, there is more possibility for a combined approach wherein all of the above tactics (1 through 3) can work together.

In addition to the broad means of access to exhibit material, children must recognize themselves and their stories in children's museums. Exhibit topics, materials, graphics and presentations must include elements that are culturally and socially relevant to children and adults of diverse background, heritage, and family configuration.

As exhibit topics and themes are chosen and design strategies are developed, it is easy to leave these goals

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behind in the desire to incorporate as much information as possible. These tools will be most effective if they are seen as a "check list" throughout the design, implementation, and use of exhibits. Incorporation of emotionally rich content requires the dedication of developers, exhibit designers and museum staff alike.

Why to Try

An emotionally strong, meaningful experience is a gift for a child, especially a modern/urban child, whose world moves so quickly as to actually over stimulate and hyper-engage children (and adults) over the course of the day.

A children's museum has the ability to create an experience that is emotionally strong but not adrenaline based. Emerging technologies have much to offer exhibit design in children's museums. But every exhibit medium should help the museum offer children and their caregivers the opportunity to discover and take advantage of an

emotionally rich environment, without the bombardment of stress factors that may encourage them to "tune out" instead of engage.

As children are assured that emotional memories are valuable, they begin to realize that they can shape themselves and the world around them. They have agency, and they create meaning for themselves from their experiences. By including intergenerational experiences, adults can also be given opportunities to help kids build their world in this way.

Over the course of their development, children will develop core values and skills. I am not suggesting this in a religious context, but more in terms of a basic set of tools needed to cope in the world. The system each child develops will either be constructive or destructive to their lives as thinking participants in our society. If it is constructive, the tool box will include: problem solving and conflict resolution abilities; critical thought; respect for self and others; compassion; and an understanding of the value of relationships between and among people.

This list is not meant to be tossed back and forth (or "right" and "left"). Extracted from a politicized "values" debate, these are the core cultural components of a democratic society, and what every parent wants for her/his child. Children who find meaning in their lives are more likely to find meaning in these concepts. If exhibit designers, curators, and museum educators can contribute to that meaning making, our culture will only benefit.

While it was once a radical notion to suggest that play is the "work" of childhood, I am suggesting that there is value in utilizing play and also trying to create truly meaningful exhibits for children and their families. As members of creative teams, we strive to add to the emotionally rich landscape through which children travel every day. Whether we succeed will only be clear when children (and people who care about children) have the opportunity to visit the exhibits we design and decide whether they are welcome to make an emotional investment and find meaningful experiences in the museum. And we look forward to hearing them tell us what they remember most.

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