

IN ORDER TO HELP ADULT VISITORS AND CURATORS ESTABLISH A CLOSER DIALOGUE IN THE EXHIBITION ROOM, LET US REVISIT LEARNING

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Over the years, the concept of learning has acquired increasing importance to account for what visitors do when visiting an exhibition. Nowadays, this importance is such that learning overshadows all other concepts that might facilitate the identification and comprehension of what visitors produce when observing an object, reading a text or considering the museography (design) of an exhibition. This is regrettable, for quite obviously – and this has been noted thousands of time – learning only represents a part of what the visitors produce. Indeed, unless the concept of learning is deformed to the point of rendering it unrecognizable, it covers only new knowledge or abilities acquired by a visitor.

Theories like constructivism rightly emphasize what precedes learning and what follows it. But even considered this way, learning itself equals the addition of new knowledge or abilities.

Whether such new knowledge or abilities are the visitors first introduction to a field – which is rare in an adult – or add to what he already knows or can do, in no way this changes the narrowness of the concept and its inability to span and describe what a visitor accomplishes during his visit to an exhibition.

Thus, a museum that would be concerned only with what is learned would have a very one-sided view of the relationship that the visitors establish with the exhibition which, after all, constitutes the museum's main offering. And if the curators of this museum relied solely on this view, they might well run the risk of preparing exhibitions that do not match the visitors capacities.

AN ALTERNATIVE CONCEPT

I shall focus my expose on “meaning-making” because, these days, it seems the most interesting alternative to learning. I shall start by defining this concept and then, show its relationship with that of learning. Afterwards, I shall examine a method that gives access to a visitor's meaning-making process and, lastly, I shall present some data gathered with the help of this

method, interpret them and stress a type of visitor-curator dialogue that takes place in the exhibition room.

Meaning-making, a definition

When I set out to define meaning-making, I realized that the most useful studies were those of contemporary philosophers and psychologists, namely Cléro (2004), Dennert (1993), Garneau and Larivey (1983), Glendlin (1962), Merleau-Ponty (1969), Millikan (2004), Ricoeur (2004), Searle (2002) and Taylor (1970). In synthesizing these works, I obtained the following definition:

For an individual, the making of meaning consists in symbolizing - i.e. expressing what he is aware of in words. These are the inner words a person keeps to herself, does not pronounce, or eventually speaks out loud.

One might also say that meaning-making is the inner discourse that is developed as a person “experiences” something.

It is the inner discourse that follows the experience as it unfolds, or that accompanies what is thought, imagined and felt and that constitutes the experience. Thus, in a museum setting, meaning-making may be considered to be the inner discourse that accompanies the visitor’s experience as he goes around. Or, if one prefers, it is the inner discourse that corresponds to what the visitor thinks, imagines or feels.

Meaning-making and learning

What I just said imply that meaning-making, in other words what a visitor thinks, imagines or feels, is learning only when it represents a new piece of knowledge or ability. The relationship between the two concepts may perhaps be expressed as follows: learning is based on meaning-making, but meaning-making is not limited to learning. It is much wider and, in fact, corresponds with everything a visitor produces mentally in an exhibition room.

(The question that comes to mind immediately is how to record meaning-making. I shall describe a method, but before, I shall stress a characteristic that it should possess)

A method for recording meaning-making

If the collecting of data on meaning-making is to be valid, it must be done on the spot. Any attempt to do it later - at the end of the visit, for example - generates a description that is biased as regards to what is produced. There are many reasons for this, the most obvious being that what a visitor thinks, imagines or feels is so abundant and complex that he cannot accurately remember it, even a few minutes later.

The only method known to date that permits the researcher to gather this on-the-spot data satisfactorily is "Thinking Aloud." This method is now used in many contexts and has been validated in the case of problem solving by Ericsson and Simon (1993). These researchers have shown that "thinking aloud" does not modify the experience. More precisely, it does not change the orientation, quantity or quality of the experience. Since then, researchers have studied the validity of the "Thinking Aloud" method in many other situations.

(Of course the Thinking Aloud Method should be adapted to the museum situation. How was it done?)

Concerning the utilization of Thinking Aloud in a museum context, the research team I lead with a colleague of the École du Louvre has adapted the method and established its validity for this context. It consists in asking a visitor as he enters the museum if he would kindly agree to do his visit saying out loud as he goes along what he thinks, imagines or feels, without trying to remember or explain anything, for he will not be questioned on these points. In other words, the method invites him to express spontaneously and without effort whatever comes into his head.

The visitor's words constitute an audible discourse that conveys his inner discourse, his experience. These words are recorded by a research assistant who goes round the exhibition with the visitor, but never intervenes. The itinerary is left entirely up to the visitor.

At the end of the visit, the data on the tape are fed into a computer and subsequently analyzed in their written form.

DATA ON MEANING-MAKING

Before presenting any data, I shall briefly describe the visitors base from which they are taken. A first series of results comes from nearly 1, 000 visits by adults of the general public type in 3 permanent exhibitions and 7 temporary thematic exhibitions offered in Paris, Montreal or Quebec. For

each visit, we have a discourse and an exhibition exit interview, giving a total of 300 discourses and interviews from permanent exhibitions and 700 from temporary exhibitions. A second series comes from the systematic analysis of some 150 permanent or temporary thematic exhibitions on show in major European or North American cities since the last 10 years. Finally, a third series includes some sixty Master's theses in museology (museum studies) presented to the École du Louvre or the Université de Montréal.

I shall not introduce groups of tables or graphics. It would be fastidious and of little use here. I shall rather use a very small selection of data that I shall analyze, and from which I shall draw implications. These represent six object-discourses, in other words, what was said concerning six different objects. These object-discourses are taken from the 300 whole discourses gathered in the three permanent exhibitions that I just mentioned. These exhibitions were devoted to objects relating to the fine arts, history, ethnography, archeology or natural history.

They provided a minimum of information: a panel indicating the title of a gallery and a simple label set nearby to identify each object. Thus, the six discourses reveal what visitors of the general public type do when they are more or less left to themselves.

Their analysis will enable us to identify the various types of discourse that visitors produce, and in each type, to access the following dimensions of the discourse:

- . the particular way of treating the object,
- . the meaning-making, learning and, sometimes, the creativity that accompanies the treatment of the object,
- . the abilities underlying the meaning-making.

These data will allow to establish empirically the relationship between meaning-making and learning, but also to understand the dialogue that sometimes takes place between curator and visitor.

Analysis

(Let us first look at a general result)

The 300 discourses produced in the permanent exhibitions contain 10,260 object-discourses, and their analysis reveals three major categories that correspond with three types of treatment of an object. The six discourses that I shall examine illustrate these three types of treatment.

Category 1: Very short and simple discourses and treatments of an object
(represents 35% of the 10, 260 object-discourses produced in the three permanent exhibitions)

Discourse 1: “I like that quite a lot (S.2)¹. Yes, I really like it.”

Discourse 2: “What is that? (reads the label) a Javanese sarong.”

Study of the two discourses

. In Discourse 1, the visitor is merely moved by the object, whereas in the second, he tries to identify it. The **meaning-making process** has produced only a few remarks. However, these remarks are not without value, for being moved by an object or trying to identify it constitute very pertinent activities in a museum; affective in the first case, cognitive in the second.

. As far as the **abilities** are concerned, this meaning-making calls on three of them: being moved, observing and reading. Indeed, to be able to say, “I like that,” one must be capable of being moved, and to be moved or to want to identify an object, the visitor must have observed it. Lastly, the ability to read is obvious here. Since these are abilities the visitor possesses, one might say that in exercising them, “he uses himself.”

. Regarding **learning**: There is none to be found in Discourse 1, whereas in Discourse 2, there is perhaps an example: the type of object, if it is something new to the visitor. So it grossly corresponds with the meaning-making present in the discourse.

. Since about 50% of the object-discourses are similar to Discourse 2, and the other 50% are like Discourse 1 where no learning could be observed, one can say that in half of the very short object-discourses, learning and meaning-making may be almost equivalent.

Category 2: Discourses and treatments of object of average length and complexity

(represents nearly 65% of the object-discourses)

I must say that this category of discourse comes with several variations. I shall present only three, for all the variations share the characteristics present in the examples that I shall introduce.

¹ Length of Silence in seconds.

Discourse 3: (the visitor explores his affective reaction to what he is observing)

“That’s a painting I like. I like where it’s complicated on the right. It makes me think of Japanese films where they fight according to rules and it’s a bit like a ballet.”

Discourse 4: (the visitor explores a cognitive dissonance between what he reads and what he knows)

“So what’s that? (reads the label) Marc-Aurèle de Foy Suzor-Côté 1860-1937. Women of Caughnawaga. Pooh! They weren’t women, they look like nuns. They’re wearing veils and long dresses. Squaws didn’t have veils or dresses like that.”

Discourse 5 (the visitor vents an emotional reaction and then describes a memory)

“Gosh, he’s huge, and it looks as if he’s weighing down the roof, the shell, and squashing the men. That reminds me of totems with fantastic animals. I’ve seen lots of them on the campus (of the University of British Columbia). I’ve even seen one they were setting up, and I saw how the Amerindian was finishing it before the ceremony. The totems on the campus have all sorts of animals: salmons, beavers, whales, bears. They have big teeth, but they’re all alone so they don’t look too threatening. They’re scary but really great.”

Study of the three discourses

. **How the object is treated:** The three discourses begin like those in Category 1, namely by an affective reaction to the object or by trying to identify it. (In fact, 95% of the discourses produced by visitors of the general public type begin in this way whatever their category.) But contrary to what happens in the first category of discourses, the visitors do not stop there. They explore or exploit in some way or another what they have produced in their first contact with the object.

. As for their **meaning-making**, this constitutes a set of ideas that arise from one aspect of the object and then links up. Because of this linkage, the ideas may be said to form a small and simple universe of meaning - indeed, a universe formed by a single train of thought.

. The elements of this universe of meaning stem from two types of **sources**:

- a) The first includes observation, an affective reaction to an object, or reading, i.e. information coming either from the object or the label;
- b) The second type is the visitor himself, his own personal universe; this is the case when he mentions a Japanese film, knowledge of the clothing habits of the Amerindian women, or a memory of totems seen on a university campus.

These latter elements constitute a personal enrichment of the object observed. As the enrichment comes from a free and new match the visitor makes between what he is observing and an element of his personal universe - as it happens in the creative process - one can say that the visitor is creative. (*He is creative in a personal sense, but not in the sociological sense of having produced something recognized as new by his social group.*)

. A characteristic of the discourse that appears in the Category 2 and that was absent in the Category one is that since in his treatment the visitor seeks elements in the objects or texts and associate them with something of his own, the visitor may be said to establish the **beginnings of a dialogue** with the offering of the curator.

. As regards the **abilities** he uses to produce his universe of meaning, we find the same ones as in the first category of discourses: observing, reading, being moved, but now there are two additional ones:

- a) The ability of the visitor to use his imagination : in each discourse the imagination serves to evoke what I have just identified: a Japanese film, Amerindian women's clothing and totems seen on a university campus.
- b) The ability of the visitor to use his data processing system to link up ideas.

So the visitor who produces a Category 2 discourse may be considered to "use himself more" than the visitor who produces a Category 1 discourse.

. As far as **learning** is concerned, only one example is observed. We find this at the beginning of Discourse 4. It concerns the name of the sculptor. For the other piece of information read, namely the title of the carving, "The Women of Caughnawaga" it is rejected as non-pertinent. Whereas the information rejected has a strong link with the rest of the discourse, the one accepted seems not to have any.

As a conclusion of these observations, it may be said that learning is not always present in the second category of object treatment, and that, when it appears, it is not always closely related to the treatment of the object, and it occupies only a limited place in the totality of the visitor's production.

(With the 3rd category of discourses, we will notice very important differences with what we have seen up until now)

Category 3: Lengthy and complex, but rare discourses and treatments of an object

(represents less than 1% of the total)

This type of discourse appears with only a few variations that are well represented in the example that I am introducing.

Discourse 6: “Yes, this is a picture that does not please me greatly. I think it’s because of (S.3), all the black of, oh hell, I’ve forgotten the word! (S.10). But if you look at it alone, and closing your eyes, you realize it’s interesting. The motifs are very interesting. They have a fine rhythm (S.3). A real series of verticals, and quite fine. I’m sure that (consults the label) T. Thompson was attracted by that. And then, look, the branch in diagonal which avoids platitude, it’s ingenious (S.5) as in literature. And then the main tree trunks behind continue quite subtly, that’s right, the parallels of the, I do not find the word, let us say the front. It’s ingenious. In any case, I find it ingenious (S.3) And then, yes, how funny, the blobs of black, a bit like mistletoe berries! My comparison isn’t too good because there isn’t any mistletoe here. In any case, they create a sort of net. It could be, ah yes, quite obviously, it could be an abstract painting. I’m still hunting for the word. Well, in the, let us say front, are those fir trees or spruce trees that have burned? I think so, let’s say they’re fir trees. If they had not burned, they would have had their needles (S.12).

Oh, here, that’s really cool! The blues of the spruce trees in the distance, they continue the hedge of the verticals of the front. And then, oh yes, the pale pink and the pale green in the middle, they’re a real pleasure for the eyes. Ah, and then the salmon pinks (S.5) that’s terrific, they continue across the black hedge of the fir trees. That’s really a great idea (S.7). Yeah, in fact you can read this landscape in lots of different ways, (S.3) just what’s there in the background, just what is there in the foreground. I’ve found the word I was looking for! And then, yes, for sure, both together. Then (S.5) you can go from one to the other (S.5). That’s really interesting, it almost looks three-dimensional. Oh, look at that! It’s not a painting any longer, it’s a real landscape. Wait a bit while I have a look (S.15). I’d like to go and sit in it.

It seems to be about 11 o'clock in the morning. And then look at the little sun that's all misty. You can feel it's not cold, even if it's late in the fall. Ah, yes, you can feel the sun's damp (S.10). I would be glad to stay here, beside the river, sitting and looking (S.5), just taking pictures. I would look at one little corner after the other to take it away with me (S.5). To make it last, too. Multiplying the pictures, multiplying the moments – it's as simple as adding up two numbers!

Hm, it's really great (S.7). I must go, there're others to see. It's so beautiful, it's hard to leave it! Taking a good, long look in bits or larger sections, it stretches out the time. Ha, I don't say that because stretching time... it's true, I've stretched out the time! That's really amazing, I've tricked time by making it last longer. I've done that once before, and like it very much. Well, we've got to go. I must finish my visit.

Study of the discourse

Because of its complexity, this discourse could be studied from many different angles. To be brief, I shall limit my remarks to the aspects treated in the preceding discourses.

. The visitor starts his treatment of the object by being moved by it, as we have seen in Discourses 1, 3 and 5.

. The **meaning-making** resulting from its treatment is lengthy and complex. It differs at least in three ways from what we have seen in the second category of discourses:

- First difference: The visitor is no longer interested in one single aspect of the object, but in several. He observes them and then adds to each something of his own invention;
- Second difference: He sees the same thing, for instance the blobs of black in a variety of ways: they are a bunch of mistletoe, then a net, and finally an abstract painting.
- Third difference: After adding something to what he is observing, he uses his addition as a starting point to produce something else.

Thus, his meaning-making is based on **abilities** already seen and on some that are particular to the third category of object treatment.

. One might add that this meaning-making constitutes a highly developed and complex **dialogue** with the object, that it is accompanied by a **creativity** that is much more important than the one seen in the second category of object treatment.

. As regards **learning**, there is perhaps one example, the name of the artist, but as in Discourse 4, it is not related to the rest of what the visitor produces and it represents a very minor part of the visitor's meaning-making.

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Before leaving the analysis of the six discourses, I would like to do three remarks.

Firstly, I would like to stress how abundant, detailed and subtle is the information obtained on the treatment of an object by the Thinking Aloud method. The same quality of information can be obtained on the treatment of the texts when, as it is usual in a thematic exhibition, their content is developed. Then, if desired, one can, for instance, relate what was produced after the object and after the label, and understand the sort of help the label provides or fails to provide.

Secondly, meaning-making as we have seen it resembles what in the French language is called "Connaissance".

Thirdly, meaning-making as "connaissance" of an object contributes certainly to the development of the adult, and so could be considered as having a main educational role (apart from eventually helping the adult to be a better professional, family or society member).

(Now that we have a series of data and their interpretation, let us use them to go further)

EMPIRICAL RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LEARNING AND MEANING-MAKING

When members of the general public visit a permanent exhibition of fine arts, history, ethnology, archeology or natural history where the texts are minimal and leave visitors more or less on their own, we observe the following.

. The place occupied by learning in the treatment of an object is reduced, except in the case of very short treatments, where it may coincide with the meaning-making as a whole.

. Moreover, in this case as in more complex treatments, learning is not always present.

. Finally when it is, it is not necessarily closely linked with the rest of the visitor's meaning-making. The data studied thus not only confirm, but also detail and explain the theoretical position that I took at the beginning of my

paper. Consequently, they clearly show that learning constitutes a partial and biased indicator of what a visitor of the general public type produces in a permanent exhibition of certain types of objects. The data also confirm that “meaning-making” is a far better indicator of this production.

*(At the beginning of my exposé, and while analyzing the discourses, I pointed out the **dialogue** that the visitor establishes with the object, i.e. with the curator’s offering.*

Now, I would like to have a closer look at this dialogue in order to better understand and eventually identify means to enhance it.

I shall first look at the characteristics of the dialogue)

MEANING-MAKING, COMPREHENSION AND ENHANCEMENT OF THE CURATOR-VISITOR DIALOGUE

The Dialogue and its Characteristics

. The dialogue that was observed in the discourses of Categories 2 and 3 seems to be almost totally concerned with the object, and very seldom with the text of the label, and never with the gallery wall panels. This disproportion between these elements may be explained very simply by the limited nature of the labels and wall panels of the exhibitions the visitors were treating.

. As revealed in the discourses, the dialogue consists essentially in grasping one aspect of the object observed and in grafting on to it something that comes from the visitor, more particularly from his personal universe but which, as we saw in Discourse 6, could be very complex.

. Although simple, this dialogue, or game, as we might call it - since it is carried on quite freely and effortlessly by the visitor - (*this dialogue*) may be considered from several angles of which the following seem the most interesting.

. It requires creativity on the visitor’s part to establish a link between what he sees and an element of his personal universe, and then to treat this pertinently. Two abilities account for these two aspects of creativity, namely:

- The first is utilizing one’s imagination in both its reproductive and constructive forms identified by I. Kant (1980). As in the second category of discourses, the visitor’s reproductive imagination serves to recall a piece of knowledge or a past experience, and to associate this with an object.

- As regards his constructive imagination, this participates in various operations like that of transforming what he sees. For instance in discourse 6: the dark lines criss-crossing in the foreground become a bunch of mistletoe or an abstract painting and, later, the entire painting is transformed in a real landscape in which the visitor enters and spends a few moments;
- The second ability is using the data processing system that any adult possess for articulating the ideas produced with the help of the imagination and giving these ideas both coherence and direction. It is easy to understand that without this articulation, the universe of meaning produced by the visitor would be completely chaotic.
 - . Another characteristic of the dialogue is that it entails a real enrichment of the object, for what the visitor says is rarely false. (In analyzing the 10, 260 discourses, we discovered that less than 3% of what the visitors say is false.)
 - . Besides, it represents a psychological appropriation of the object, at least as regards some of its aspects. And as any educator or psychologist knows, this is very important because it means that the object as discovered by the visitor is taking its place in his personal universe and could be reused in many productive ways.
 - . Lastly, the dialogue is synonymous with what we call interaction, and with what museums try to obtain by a variety of means.

(I am going to leave aside for a moment the dialogue that takes place in the permanent exhibition to consider what occurs in the temporary thematic one)

Regarding the dialogue in the temporary thematic exhibition, my team observed that, when the texts of this type of exhibition are detailed, the dialogue is very often established with them. One may therefore conclude that what the visitor takes as a basis of dialogue depends mainly on the way the exhibition is designed.

In fact, in some of the 7 temporary thematic exhibitions where we collected data, we observed that the treatment of the texts - sometimes the labels, sometimes the section panels (panels attached to a part of the exhibition) - entails very complex discourses. The visitors really dialogue with the text more or less as they dialogue with an object in the permanent exhibitions studied. We also noticed that the visitors reading behavior is closely related to the texts, and especially with the relationship they have **what could be observed on the objects.**

Enhancing the dialogue

There are two ways of enhancing the dialogue. One is to increase the visitors' skills in treating objects, which may be obtained by offering them a short program. In fact, we designed and experimented such a program and obtained satisfactory results.

The second way is to modify permanent exhibitions so as to promote the production of a higher rate of Category 2 and 3 discourses. Finally I should say that the analysis of these discourses offers a series of data that can guide educators in the development of their programs and curators in the design of their exhibitions.

Some propositions to conclude

The data presented here and their significance imply first of all that the notion of learning should be replaced by that of meaning-making when one wants to account for what adult visitors produce in an exhibition. However, this replacement does not mean total abandonment for, as we have seen, learning may be identified in the midst of meaning-making. And using both concepts can provide insight on their relationship.

Secondly, a comparison between meaning-making in permanent and in temporary thematic exhibitions highlights the effect of different exhibition designs and their impact on visitors.

In fact, the characteristics of an exhibition have profound effects on the visitor. So they should be introduced besides the characteristics of the visitors as strong variables in what is now called visitors studies. Actually, these studies rarely do so.

Thirdly, the information provided by the "Thinking Aloud" method could guide a curator in the development of completely new types of exhibitions, inspired for instance by literary or musical genres, and help him to adjust them to the sort of visitors he has in mind.

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