

The museum as a social laboratory: enhancing the object to facilitate social engagement and inclusion in museums and galleries

Thinking about bringing web communities into galleries and how it might transform perceptions of learning in museums

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This is a thinking paper intended to provoke discussion, that looks at current museum learning theory and how this has manifested on the floor of the museum where the author is Head of Gallery Interpretation, Evaluation and Resources, the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. It develops a strand of thinking that informed the idea of the constructivist museum in the 1990s that has subsequently lost currency to the idea of individual personal meaning making: that of the interpretive community. It then looks at current developments in web technology as a way of reintroducing the community experience to gallery interpretation.

Background

In the 1990s there was a very clear theoretical movement in museology to integrate what Eilean Hooper-Greenhill felt was the post-modern paradigm influence, into thinking about galleries and exhibition design (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999b). This thinking was acknowledgement of the concept of multiple intelligences, as first clearly proposed by Howard Gardner but traceable back to Jung's theory of personality types (Hinton, 1998). Hein crystallised this thinking in his proposition of the 'constructivist' museum that the nature of knowledge imparted by a museum experience and by extension the nature of learning as part of a museum experience had transformed. He drew on visitor research and proposed that learning in a museum should no longer be thought of as a straight forward model of 'transmission' of fact, but rather as a construction of knowledge made by the visitor during the visit within a framework of prior knowledge and assumptions that the individual already carries in their mind and brings with them to the visit (Hein, 1998). To a certain extent, this further developed and placed the 'interactive experience' model earlier proposed by Falk and Dierking within an educational framework of learning styles theory. Their model integrates three contexts of personal, physical and social into a central interactive experience, the development of which they proposed as key to designing museum exhibitions and experiences that communicate appropriately and effectively (Falk and Dierking, 1992).

Gallery interpretation today and the constructivist museum

So where are we now with gallery interpretation in non-science museums? How this theory has been applied in practice and where to take it for development is the issue for discussion here. The constructivist museum proposition goes hand in hand with visitor studies, and is most evidently manifested in museum galleries and exhibitions in terms of interactives that are developed with audience input. There are many 'handbooks'

available for museum studies students that lay out the front-end-formative-summative cycle of evaluation. Science museums and centres have been at the forefront of developing and applying this cycle and accompanying methodology for decades now. Yet adoption of this model has not been so simple nor so effective for non-science museums and it is difficult to ascertain why. Interactives in gallery and exhibition space are often still viewed as difficult or unusual in non-science museums by those working on gallery and exhibition development, and most particularly in art and design museums. The surprise and delight at their success which greeted the British Galleries at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) when they opened in 2001 is testament to this. In the book about the development of the galleries, the lead educator who worked on the project, Gail Durbin, is candid about the novelty of including an educator on the core concept team and the initial difficulties she encountered in integrating herself with the others on the team. She is also very clear about how she introduced the theory of learning styles to the curators and designers working on the galleries, and how the team used this theory as a framework to develop the interactives that are spread throughout the galleries, placed next to objects and integrated into the visitor experience (Wilk and Humphrey, 2004).

Now, the V&A as a whole has adopted Durbin and Wilk's model of developing interactives as a core part of the interpretation strategy of new gallery developments. A 'gallery educator' is automatically assigned to the concept teams working on new gallery developments, albeit not with quite the same level of resource commitment – the British Galleries had four full time educators whilst now it is unusual to find one full time educator on a team. Nonetheless, the museum is comfortable with an established base range of interactive devices such as *Style Guide* computer programmes and *How Was It Made?* films.

However, the question still remains open as to how interactive these devices truly are, particularly when considered within the concept of the constructivist museum. If the latter is taken to its logical conclusion, then surely there is no museum knowledge except for that which the visitor constructs in his or her head. As you walk around the galleries, ask yourself, where is *that* museum knowledge and how can I access it? The devices, for the most part, although developed along the front-end-formative-summative audience research model, are extremely controlled by the museum both in terms of presentation and content. There are not actually many two-way communication opportunities that leave a trace in the galleries and contribute to the permanent interpretation accessible to all who visit. All the content has been vetted by the museum and determined by curators, apart from some 'audience response' type devices such as the *Write Your Own Mini-Saga*. These contributions are not presented with the same level of permanence or authority as the museum-authored material. Thus although individuals may access the latter and construct their individual museum knowledge according to their own learning styles and prior knowledge, it seems as if the knowledge that is permanently accessible during an actual visit is still essentially the traditional transmission of authoritative museum controlled content. There is still a huge gap between the knowledge or information that the museum wishes to impart and that which the visitor might wish take away from their visit. A more extreme way of looking at it is to acknowledge what Cheryl Maszaros labels 'the evil "whatever" interpretation', a concept that caused uproar

at the 2006 Visitor Studies Association conference. Maszaros, being deliberately provocative, criticised museums for taking constructivism too far:

By placing interpretive authority in the hands of the individual, and further, by championing the “whatever” interpretation as the final and desired outcome of the museum visit, the museum not only justifies its failure to communicate, but also it absolves itself of any interpretive responsibility for the meanings it produces and circulates in culture. (Mezсарos, 2006 p. 13)

Now, this all sounds rather negative and a criticism that the interpretive provision in the British Galleries does not seem to fit with our wonderful model of the constructivist museum that embraces different learning styles after all. Rather than being negative, it should be viewed as highlighting an issue with the model of the constructivist museum which is particularly enhanced in an art and design museum and that is what role the museum object plays in the model. In science museums and centres, presentation, exploration and construction of scientific concepts is usually the core aim of those designing exhibitions, galleries and therefore visitor experiences. There can be whole areas of museums that do not contain objects from museum collections, and if objects are presented it is often – and this is a generalisation – but they are often presented as more illustrative to the concept being discussed than being the thing itself.

Formalism and literary theory

However, in art and design museums the centrality of the object as a stable entity in the communicative process that goes on in galleries, and the importance of the aesthetics of that stable entity, cannot be underestimated. For years this stability led to the idea that the ‘object speaks for itself’, and a veneration of the intrinsic *form* of the object: a view that everybody who comes into contact with the objects, whether researching objects, designing galleries, visiting galleries, sees and therefore interprets the same thing. In critical literary theory, this is known as ‘formalism’. In broad terms, this can be described as privileging the *form* of the text (or object), over both authorial intent and reader interpretation. Now, we see that this form does not and cannot exist independently of either author (museum) or reader (visitor). Is it possible that by embracing constructivism to a point where the emphasis is all on individual meaning-making, as Maszaros argued we are, the core role of conserving, cataloguing, researching objects is being separated from the museum experience of the visitor?

One of the problems that arose when this productive and generative agency was granted to the interpreter, was a loss of any definitive, authoritative, or even widely shared interpretation of a given text or work. Once the texts of the world were separated from their authors’ intent and subsequently separated from a stable decoding system, they could simply float, adrift on the endless sea of innumerable interpretations. (Mezсарos, 2006 p. 12)

Meszaros herself comes from a fine art background – she is Head of Public Programs at Vancouver Art Museum and therefore to a certain extent her comments can be seen as particularly relevant to the conundrum of the constructivist museum in relation to art and design museums facing the V&A.

In the 1960s literary theory embraced hermeneutics and moved beyond the text alone as central, and into different constructions of the hermeneutic circle of the process of

interpretation and understanding text, where ‘text’ can be understood to be any semiotic symbol present in social systems of meaning (Gadamer, 1989). Battle lines were laid for championing the importance of understanding *either* authorial intent *or* reader interpretation. If we transpose this debate back to the gallery context, then everybody working on gallery development, and everybody visiting the galleries, still sees the same objects. What is key is that their interpretation of these objects is different. Which seems to bring us back to the constructivist museum.

Stanley Fish, interpretive communities and constructivism

This seeming parallel between critical analysis of author-text-reader and museum-object-visitor communicative process was first highlighted by Eilean Hooper-Greenhill in her 1999 paper *Museums and Interpretive Communities*, given at the Australia Museums conference, (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999a). In the subsequent revision of her book *The Educational Role of Museums*, Hooper-Greenhill elaborated on this parallel by citing Stanley Fish and his celebrated book *Is There a Text in This Class?*. In this, Fish draws together a series of essays and papers he had given over a couple of decades, which posited the idea of important role of interpretive communities in the author-text-reader process (Fish, 1980). Hooper-Greenhill used a certain reading of Fish’s thinking in order to support the model of constructivist learning in museums. This reading was that meaning can only be constructed through an *individual’s* prior knowledge. However, in Fish’s model the individual is firmly placed within a framework which is determined by the *community* to which the reader belongs – the reader’s ‘interpretive’ community.

In his early development of the idea of interpretive communities, Fish did indeed privilege individual reader over text and authorial intent in this way, and this is what Hooper-Greenhill uses to support constructivism in museum learning. However, he later revised this point to emphasise that to take such a view is extreme relativism and makes the text redundant in the final instance. In his introduction to the series of essays that lay out the genesis of his thinking, Fish makes it very clear that he moved away from this early relativist stance to make the point that meaning is not constructed because of prior knowledge and one’s interpretive community although these do play a crucial role, but rather it is constructed by the *experience* of the ‘text’:

It is interpretive communities, rather than either the text or the reader, that produce meanings, and are responsible for the emergence of formal features. Interpretive communities are made up of those who share interpretive strategies not for reading, but for writing texts, for constituting their properties. In other words, these strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the shape of what is read, rather than, as is usually assumed, the other way round” (Fish, 1980 p. 14)

In this almost Vygotskian argument, the formal features Fish refers to are the elements of ‘formalism’ that constitute the text i.e. the stable features of the text, whilst ‘writing’ the text is the hermeneutic act, the act of interpretation. Neither text nor reader is paramount in the construction of meaning. The act of meaning making itself as a temporal process is the interpretation.

Back in the museum paradigm, does this mean that rather than solely trying to determine prior knowledge in order to inform interpretive design, the ‘author’, or museum, should be encouraging extension of *experience and exchange* between interpretive communities in order to reform or more properly, *reinforce* knowledge frameworks? If we take a look again at interactives in the British Galleries here at the V&A and think about them in the context of a hermeneutic understanding of the *gallery as an experience* by interpretive communities of a social system of meaning, then what does it mean for how we could develop gallery interpretation in the future?

Interpretive communities and the web

First, we need to move the experience on from individual to community. Most if not all of the interactives in the British Galleries at the V&A are designed to be used by individuals or at the most, pairs, and very few enable interaction between people beyond the visitor group they arrived with. Given the reserved nature of British people this was certainly an entirely sensible approach to take when the galleries were being designed at the end of the 1990s. However, since then a new dynamic force for social exchange has entered society.

Here at the V&A we have been developing our website to embrace ‘Web 2.0 technology’ and build on-line communities. Web 2.0 is the name given to the development and use recently of certain web elements that facilitate and enhance using the internet in a social and participatory way where the web is not just a forum where information is presented and accessed, but a place where everybody can add to and edit:

Ideas about building something more than a global information space; something with much more of a social angle to it. Collaboration, contribution and community are the order of the day and there is a sense in which some think that a new ‘social fabric’ is being constructed before our eyes. (Anderson, 2007 p. 4)

Anderson emphasises that in fact Web 2.0 is not new technology as such – it goes back to Tim Berners-Lee’s original vision of the internet – but rather it is a way of using open source standards of the internet as a way of producing a certain set of outcomes, the common features of which are participation, user as contributor, harnessing the power of the crowd, and rich user experiences (Anderson, 2007). This set of outcomes seem to be equally applicable to the notion of a certain learning environment that allows for personal learning styles to be utilised and built on, but encourages group participation rather than individualisation of the learning experience, through blogs, wikis, multimedia sharing services, content syndication, podcasting and content tagging services.

These communities could be said to a certain extent to be interpretive in that people become part of them not only through shared interests but also through shared frameworks of reference. The explosion of sites such as Wikipedia and MySpace in the last year gives ample testimony to the popularity of social networking as an internet-based activity. On the V&A website, amongst our most popular and successful additions in the last couple of years have been the blog posted by our artist in residence, and a tile design game where visitors vote on each other’s designs. We are currently starting

development on a ceramics 'wiki' which we hope will be taken up and contributed to and edited by amateur ceramics collectors.

The issue is how to extend this to make a connection between shared experiences visiting a gallery and shared experiences via the internet. The ceramics galleries which are due to open in 2009 will be the first galleries for which there is a stated aim to lay the tools for a permanent layer of interpretation to be created by visitors to the galleries. This layer should also be accessible beyond the physical boundaries of the galleries so that the visit can continue beyond the immediate experience of the museum itself. The aim is also to enable visitors to be able to contact and exchange with others interested in the same areas of experience. That is to say, to build an environment of information population and exchange that links the idea and nature of the physical visit to the gallery beyond those physical boundaries.

An example of how this is proposed to be achieved is a response point in the Ceramics galleries in which visitors' responses are given equal weight to and mixed in with curators, specialist collectors and makers by building on the *Ceramics Points of View* discussion that already exists on the V&A website. In *Ceramics Points of View*, six people from the world of ceramics talk about ten different pots, making a total of sixty discussions. The discussions are presented in the form of short video clips. In the ceramics galleries, these responses will be able to be accessed and added to both in the galleries and, via the internet, any other place where someone can record their small clip and upload it. At the moment, we are considering then taking the next step of adding a tagging or bookmarking facility to the responses so that a collective vocabulary ('collabulary') may be built. In the final instance we may facilitate the responses so that people with shared interests in collabularies can contact each other. In this way we would hope to lay the groundwork for an interpretive community whose initial framework of reference is rooted in the ceramics galleries, but which is developed and built organically by members of that community themselves and which is accessible beyond the physical boundaries of the gallery. By giving a forum for this community both on-line and in the galleries we hope to have a constantly evolving level of dynamic community experience and exchange as part of the permanent gallery interpretation. *Ceramics Points of View* is just one of several proposed ways of developing the ceramics gallery interpretation in order to achieve this aim.

In this way it is hoped that the work of the museum around collecting, researching and presenting objects is disseminated, contributed and built on by both author and reader in a way that is evident in the permanent narrative in the galleries. By embedding the museum-object knowledge in the visitor's construction and development of their interpretive community, hopefully the "whatever" interpretation is avoided without privileging one kind of knowledge over another. If we do pursue this model of gallery interpretation, the longer-term question will be how we can revisit Durbin and Wilk's model used on the British Galleries so that we can integrate the opportunities that Web 2.0 technology presents us whilst still seriously considering and integrating the constructivist museum learning model that we have embraced. Revisiting Fish's model of interpretive communities within a hermeneutic context may help us with that.

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