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## THINGS CHANGE

### Museums, Learning, and Research

**Abstract:** This chapter will address how changes in our perception of museums and learning are resulting in a paradigm shift in how we approach research of learning in and from museums. Traditional notions of the museum as ultimate authority and arbiter of taste are being challenged as we recognise that visitors make their own meaning in museums. An evolved understanding of the nature of learning suggests that learning is a relative and constructive process that is dependent on personal, socio-cultural, and physical contextual factors. To be meaningful, research on learning in and from museums, therefore, must be designed to be responsive to these realities. Personal Meaning Mapping, one such approach that was specifically developed with these criteria in mind, is explained and illustrated through three case studies.

### INTRODUCTION

When we think of the monumental changes that have occurred in our lifetime, the ones that most often come to mind are those that directly affect our daily lives, such as the growing significance of the Internet or radical discoveries in science. These changes are easy to identify and fairly easy to accommodate. Fundamental changes in how we perceive a situation or describe the dimensions of a problem, on the other hand, are much trickier to recognise and often our adjustment to them is much more difficult. Thomas Kuhn (1970) described this phenomenon as a paradigm shift. Depending on where one is in the wave of change and how astute or open to change an individual might be, paradigm shifts can be seen as either an exciting possibility for transformation or as a frustrating and disorienting period of displacement. This chapter will address how changes in our perception of museums and learning are resulting in a paradigm shift in how we approach research on learning in and from museums.

### CHANGES IN PERCEPTIONS OF ART MUSEUM

Think about what art museums do. Essentially, they have changed very little in the last century. Museum staff continue to collect objects that they preserve and conserve. These objects are displayed and some form of interpretation is provided for the objects. Although changes have occurred in the areas of interpretation of objects and museum education (Roberts, 1997), the core functions of an art museum today are very similar to what they were 50 or even 100 years ago. So what is the big paradigm shift in the museum world? It is in the way we think about the role of museums in society and the nature of the visitors' museum experience.

Traditional notions, "such as the authority of the curator, the sanctity of objects, and even the prestige of the institution itself as a source and distributor of knowledge," are being challenged (Roberts, 1997, 132). Developments in critical theory about knowledge and social movements that seek to include and empower previously marginalised or excluded voices have resulted in shifts in the relationship of the museum to its visitors as well as to the broader community (Roberts, 1997; Crimp, 1993; Harris, 1991; Hooper-Greenhill, 1992):

The museum is being re-conceptualized as a set of transactions between exhibitor and visitor in which meaning and value are constantly renegotiated. The museum as final authority on itself is disappearing (Harris, 1991, 7).

Museum professionals have an opportunity to embrace these changes, but whether or not they do recognise and accept this paradigm shift, visitors will continue to make what meaning they can from museum experiences regardless of, and often counter to, what museum staff intended or expected them to make.

### CHANGES IN PERCEPTIONS OF LEARNING

We all learn – continuously. Learning is as critical to our survival in a modern, technologically-sophisticated society as it was in ancient, more traditional societies. That humans learn has not changed, neither has the way people learn. What has changed dramatically is our understanding of how, why, and what people learn.

Much of what we understand about learning is based in a Behaviourist-Positivist conceptual framework. Underlying this framework are a number of assumptions, most significantly that learners come to the learning situation knowing nothing, or virtually nothing and, after a suitable educational intervention, exit "knowing" something. That something is the "thing" that the instructor/designer chose for them to learn. Because, according to this framework, learners are assumed to be virtual blank slates, their prior experiences, interests, and motivations are assumed to be, if not irrelevant, then not aggressively factored into the analysis of the learning process. This model of learning focuses primarily on the acquisition and retention of new information (Sylwester, 1993). Behaviourist teaching strategies tend, therefore, to be more lecture-based where the teacher provides the *What*, *When*, and *How Fast* of the learning experience. Although the Behaviourist-Positivist learning model has been helpful in advancing our understanding of learning, like most theoretical models, it has limitations.

Through advancements in neuroscience research we are able to literally see the brain learn. Rather than the straightforward process suggested by the Behaviourist model, learning has been revealed to be a relative and constructive process (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Pope & Gilbert, 1983; Roschelle, 1995; Rosenfield, 1994; Solomon, 1987; Sylwester, 1993). This framework is usually referred to as the Constructivist-Relativist model of learning. From this perspective, learning is seen as a continuous, highly personal process. Learners start from different cognitive frameworks and build on learning experiences to create unique, highly individualised schemas. Operating from a Constructivist perspective requires accommodating to the diverse and individualised nature of learning. Certainly the Constructivist theory of learning

is not a new development; the ideas have been circulating in academic circles for quite some time. But we do not have to visit very many exhibitions to realise that the Behaviourist-Positivist learning model is thriving in art museums. Many museum practitioners, consciously or unconsciously, operate as if by properly adjusting the lighting, composing the right label, and positioning an object “just so,” all visitors to the museum will emerge having had the same experience and having learned exactly the same thing. For art museums, that “thing” to be learned is often a set of facts about the period or style of the art or artist.

In the Constructivist model, learning is seen as a highly contextual process. The learners' prior knowledge, experience, interests and motivations all comprise a personal context, which is imbedded within a complex socio-cultural and physical context. Learning can be described as the interaction and negotiation of these three shifting contexts in time and space (Falk & Dierking, 1992, 2000):

In a world that allows for multiple perspectives, the conditions for meaning have become as important as the meanings themselves (Roberts 1997, 132).

This model also factors in the importance of time in the learning process. In every learning event “there are delays between an experience and genuine understanding and these delays are uncomfortable for educators” (Oakes & Lipton, 1990, 39). Rather than understanding these delays as a natural part of the learning process, they are frequently regarded as unsuccessful learning. For example, if a museum visitor is not able to articulate information acquired or meanings made immediately upon exiting an art exhibition, the assumption is often made that learning did not occur, when, in reality, a conversation with that visitor a few days or even months after the visit is likely to reveal that the museum experience was a very rich learning experience (Adams, et.al, 1997).

From a Constructivist perspective, learning in and from museums is not just about what the museum wishes to teach the visitor. It is as much about what meaning the visitor chooses to make of the museum experience.

At their most basic, museums communicate. In communicating, they ignite memories, activate emotions, and spark interchange. What visitors do with these possible responses is part of the narrative they craft. What they craft may or may not have anything to do with the messages institutions intend. (Roberts 1997, 137)

It is not that one learning model must take precedence over the other for both have contributions to make to our understanding of learning. Rather, a meaningful and respectful dialogue between the two positions must be constantly negotiated in the museum learning environment.

## CHANGES IN MUSEUM LEARNING RESEARCH

Along with a paradigm shift in our understanding of how visitors learn in museums, it follows that our approach to learning research must also shift. Clearly the research techniques and strategies that evolved to study learning from a Behaviourist perspective have many strengths but there is a need to refine those techniques and to create new ones that are more aligned with the assumptions underlying the Constructivist learning model. Researchers of past studies of museum learning have

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