

Misunderstandings of *Meaning Making* Ted Ansbacher

Traditional creators of museum exhibitions have generally viewed them as a medium of communication—a way to transmit information, convey messages, or tell stories. An exhibition was deemed successful if visitors “got” what the developers intended. *Meaning making* is a term which recently has come to represent an alternative view of exhibitions—conceiving them as rich environments that encourage visitors to observe, explore, experience, and inquire, and from this to make their own meanings. Such an exhibition is successful to the extent that visitors engage in these activities, and the emphasis is at least as much on the *making* as on the resulting *meaning*.

There is no official definition of *meaning making*, so it is open to interpretation and, inevitably, to misunderstanding. There are arguments for and against both types of exhibits, but when the traditionalists’ objections to *meaning making* are examined, many of them turn out to be based on mistaken ideas of what *meaning making* implies. Some of these misunderstandings are presented here, along with a corrected view.

***Meaning making* implies that all meanings are equally acceptable; anything goes; all knowledge is relative.**

As its defining characteristic, *meaning making* recognizes that the meaning an individual makes—the outcome of mentally processing sensory input—is the only meaning valid for that person at that time. So in this sense there is no choice; each individual’s meanings must be accepted. But that does not imply that all meanings are equally “good.” *Meaning making*

also recognizes that people with larger bases of experience and more sophisticated processing skills are able to pursue inquiry to higher levels and with greater rigor. In that sense, their meanings may be better than others, and all meaning/knowledge is *not* relative. An individual’s personal meanings can change, of course, and an important insight from *meaning making* is that the way to move people towards “better” meanings is not by simply telling them those meanings, but by enlarging their experience base and improving their mental skills.

***Meaning making* implies that individuals have to make meanings and create knowledge all by themselves. This seems hardly realistic; most people wouldn’t get very far.**

In one sense, yes, an individual *is* the only one who can make his or her own meaning. But that does not imply it must be done in isolation or ignoring the rest of the world. Other people *can* help. For example, a teacher (or museum) can help by setting up an environment to facilitate particular experiences and then coaching the inquiry process. It is important to recognize, however, that it is the *process* that is being facilitated and not a predetermined outcome that is being imposed. *Meaning making* also does not rule out seeking additional *information*, including what is considered established knowledge. But it makes all the difference that the information is integral to the self-motivated inquiry and, again, is not imposed from the outside as an end in itself. An additional source of outside help, particularly important in museums, comes from a visitor’s discussions with others in his

or her group. This social interaction not only enhances meaning making, it also, as an added benefit, increases its enjoyment.

If visitors are going to make their own meanings, interpretive labels no longer have a place in exhibitions.

It is true that *didactic* labels, so often the mainstay of information-transfer exhibits, no longer have a place. Labels that facilitate or coach engagement with the exhibit, however, have an important role to fill. They can do this by identifying what the visitor is seeing, instructing how to use working devices, suggesting things to do and notice, raising questions, connecting to a visitor's previous experiences, and, yes, even making information available that might be of interest and extend the inquiry. But the labels are *not* there to convey what the exhibit developer hopes a visitor will learn from the exhibit. They are written from quite a different point of view, intended to help visitors engage with and derive meaning from the exhibit.

If visitors make their own meanings, many of them may come away from an exhibit with misunderstandings.

Actually, the possibility of misunderstanding is greater with exhibits that are trying to teach something, because in those cases there is only one right way to understand the exhibit compared to myriad ways to misunderstand. On the other hand, for an exhibit which has a primary goal of providing meaningful experiences, all degrees of engagement and meaning making are acceptable. The things that can go wrong with a *meaning making* exhibit are of a different nature. The biggest danger is that visitors may not fully engage with the exhibit and therefore not have much of an experience at all. The fact that some visitors will make meanings for themselves—personal

meanings—which are not the same as the accepted meanings is of much less concern. Personal meanings may differ from accepted meanings for two basic reasons. One is that the visitor's skills are not sufficient to carry the inquiry process through to that level. The remedy would be to improve the visitors' skills and coach them through the process. A second reason visitors may fail to reach accepted meanings is that their experience is too limited. The meaning they make in that case would be more accurately described as a *limited* understanding than as a *misunderstanding*. (For example, believing that the world is flat is a reasonable, but limited, understanding based on most people's direct experiences.) The remedy for this is to provide additional experiences, the very thing exhibits can do so well. In either case, the focus is on improving the inquiry *process* rather than correcting the outcomes.

The *meaning making* approach may work well enough for art museums, where judgments are subjective anyway, but not for science or history museums.

Someone voicing this objection is thinking of science and history museums as having established, objective information to communicate, in which case it would not be acceptable for visitors to invent their *own* science theories or their *own* versions of historical events. But instead, if the goal of a science museum is to make phenomena of nature accessible for exploration and to encourage inquiry, the situation is changed. Meanings like *I never saw that before*, or *That reminds me of ...*, or *I didn't expect that*, or *I wonder what would happen if...* are not only acceptable, but desirable. If a visitor has success in constructing some understanding of the phenomena, even if it is a personal understanding and does not match accepted scientific theory, that is a tremendously

satisfying and positive outcome and a strong motivator for further inquiry. Likewise, if the goal of a history museum is to let visitors examine genuine artifacts, or to give them a sense of what living at some earlier period was like, or experience the kinds of tools that were used, this opens up the range of desirable outcomes far beyond just acquiring historical information.

Since people can get *some* meaning from almost anything, you could really just put any old artifact out on the floor and call it an exhibit. There doesn't seem to be a role any longer for curators and exhibit developers in shaping the content of exhibits.

John Dewey said, "The belief that all genuine education comes about through experience does not mean that all experiences are genuinely or equally educative." Similarly, the belief that meaning is derived from exhibits does not mean that all exhibits are genuinely or equally meaningful. For a *meaning making* exhibit, the role for curators and exhibit developers is to give visitors truly *meaning-ful* experiences, which they do by creating an environment rich with opportunities for exploration and inquiry. The developer's focus does indeed shift from the informational content and what visitors will *learn* to the experience possibilities and what visitors will *see* and *do*. What can be seen and done must be specified in fine detail, and creating exhibits from this approach actually turns out to be *more* demanding of curators, developers, and designers.

***Meaning making* seems to cover the cognitive outcomes of exhibits, but what about the affective.**

Meaning is a general term, not precisely defined, and can be interpreted in various ways. Some people hear *meaning* as being

close to knowledge and understanding (cognitive); others hear it as closer to personal feelings (affective). There is no reason why it cannot include both. A key insight from the *meaning making* model is that there is no way to convey knowledge, understanding, or feelings *directly* into a person's mind. Whatever ends up in the mind—*meaning* in its broadest sense—is the result of a person's mental processes acting on sensory input, and this can be any combination of cognitive and affective.

***Meaning making* seems to cover the affective outcomes of exhibits, but what about the cognitive.**

See above.

***Meaning making* exhibits may serve well as a starting point, but they can't take visitors very far in terms of "real" learning.**

This is probably true for both *meaning making* and information transfer exhibits. (After all, how much learning of any type can take place in the few minutes spent standing in front of an exhibit?) However, if a visitor has engaged with an exhibit and has had new experiences, or seen some aspect of the world in a new way, or understood something as a result of his or her own inquiry, that is not only a valid and satisfying result in itself, it lays the foundation for further genuine learning—learning *with* understanding. Not only does this kind of exhibit provide a strong start for "real" learning, it also makes the best use of the unique strengths of museums.

***Meaning making* just introduces another bit of "educationese" jargon, loosely referring to the feel-good approach to education—do whatever you want with no standards and no accountability.**

There certainly is a danger that *meaning making* will join the list (or perhaps already

has) of terms such as *discovery*, *hands-on*, *inquiry*, *constructivist*, etc. which are not well defined and are often preached better than they are practiced. One way to avoid this pitfall would be simply to stop using the term *meaning making* and instead say more specifically what we mean—that we are developing exhibits intended to engage visitors in meaningful experiences. What *name* is given to this kind of exhibit doesn't really matter. But what about standards and accountability? If the exhibit goal is meaningful engagement, then accountability lies in determining to what extent that has taken place, and engagement can be evaluated largely by observation, perhaps supplemented with visitor interviews. Whether or not it is *meaningful* engagement is a separate judgment, but criteria for that can be, and need to be, established. As for standards, such as those now being developed for schools, they include both *content* and *process*. What takes place at a *meaning making* exhibit can usually be matched to process standards. Specific content may be an *indirect* outcome of the exhibit experience; however, the extent to which that is realized will depend largely on followup to the museum visit. This does not invalidate exhibits as educational; rather it focuses on their strength—providing experiences which become the foundation for genuine learning. An exhibit experience can be an important *component* of learning, although it will almost never be complete in itself.

exhibitions that are enjoyable, meaningful, and memorable—something all museums can embrace.

Conclusion

With misunderstandings cleared up, *meaning making* emerges as an accurate description of what visitors do at exhibits and as a model to guide exhibition development. Setting the overall goal as *engaging* visitors in meaningful experiences and focusing the developers on what visitors will be able to *see and do*, the *meaning making* approach should produce