

Three Responses to Cheryl Meszaros' Evil "Whatever" Interpretation

Bridging the Gap Between Museums and Visitors: *Karen Knutson and Kevin Crowley*

When we were thinking about who might address VSA for "Counting Visitors or Making Visitors Count," we wanted to choose speakers from a range of perspectives who would address the need for visitor studies professionals to think about their role in influencing change in the field. Alan Friedman, with years at the helm of the New York Hall of Science spoke on the important connection that the field needs to make to policy and institutional change¹. Kathleen McLean spoke about the need to be accountable to designers and creators of exhibits. We thought that Cheryl Meszaros might speak to the area somewhere in between, to look at the theoretical roots of our processes of understanding how information is presented to the public at our museums.

While Dr. Meszaros is a new voice to visitor studies, she has been working as the head of public programs at the Vancouver Art Gallery for many years. Throughout her tenure at the Gallery, in her writing and public speaking, Meszaros presses for curators and educators to create more progressive and cohesive art installations that help visitors engage with the often otherwise opaque language of the contemporary art museum. As a result the Vancouver Art Gallery has become an example of progressive art museum practice, being experimental and innovative in finding new ways to value visitors' experience.

A real theory-hound, Meszaros always has a stack of philosophical writings on issues that involve interpretation, aesthetics and criticism, cultural studies, media literacy, etc. She is always

ready to push curators to examine their practice and her own. We thought she might offer a provocative talk for the conference, and judging by the questions and conversations that resulted, she succeeded.

Not that we must agree with what she asked us to examine. Meszaros comes specifically from the art museum world, which has its own particular challenges when it comes to interpretation. In spite of calls for educator/ curator collaboration and a team approach to design, the discipline of art history has a tight hold on what are appropriate and not appropriate strategies for mediation within an art exhibition. Explicitly visitor-focused strategies tend to be relegated to family rooms, or discovery areas, leaving the primary galleries with little assistance for the uninitiated.

Meszaros is also an outsider to the field of visitor studies. We think it is instructive for the field of Visitor Studies to hear from an interested and highly motivated practitioner. Certainly practitioners in museums with audience research departments have access to our latest research, most others do not. And the kinds of materials that practitioners seem to find helpful are books like Hein's *Learning in the Museum*, Falk and Dierking's *The Museum Experience*, Lisa Roberts' *From Knowledge to Narrative*, or within art museums especially, Howard Gardner's *Multiple Intelligences* and Project Zero's *Project MUSE*. These kinds of books draw upon complex theories and provide practitioners with an overview of the theoretical "why" in

order to consider the visitor's point of view. However, as we think Meszaros is suggesting, there is a difficulty in translating from the theory to practice at work. There is little research available on how exactly to move from the theories of learning suggested in these books to do the kinds of interpretive mediation required on the floor. Uberdidactic approaches appear in discovery rooms, in "educational galleries" while in general museum spaces, the tendency is to abdicate responsibility to make meaning entirely to the museum visitor, who on the one hand, might benefit immensely from feeling empowered to engage in their own critical response, but who on the other, might not benefit at all from the vast knowledge and resources held by the institution.

Do we see the "whatever" in our work as evaluators? In some ways this argument emerges in conversations about front-end studies. In some cases the desire to value the visitor's perspective overshadows the role of the educator and curator in providing interpretation and knowledge through exhibitions. At some point in front end discussions, visitors are not able to provide meaningful information. What would I like to know about this content area that I am not familiar with? Hmm... gee, I really don't know, can you tell me?? Yes, we might argue who decides what content is valued, for whom and for what purpose. However, in some cases, in their desire to be responsive to their audiences, we see museum professionals ceding *too much* authority to visitors. The harder work

for museum professionals is to be able to find a middle ground between what they know is important, and how they might dovetail those conversations with points where visitors are most likely to connect.

At this point, we were reminded of Lee Shulman's notion of pedagogical content knowledge (Schulman, 1986). Shulman talks about the importance of understanding not only the pedagogical skills required to deliver content, but suggests that good teachers also have an in-depth understanding of the discipline itself, and the ways in which knowledge is structured, valued and ordered within that discipline. It seems to us that this reflects Meszaros' call for the field to consider more closely the modes in which interpretation operates, the repertoires and metaphors that are too often hidden and implicit within the design of museum exhibitions. Good teachers need to know not only the subject matter, the content, but they need to know the ways in which knowledge is structured and validated for the discipline. Meszaros makes a call to us to help bridge the gap between tacit curatorial structures and the explicitly didactic educational. As a field we have the task of helping to

illuminate both sides of that equation by using visitors' voices as a leverage point.

Finally, while it is nice to reflect on Meszaros' talk as criticism of the peculiarities of museum practice more broadly, we realize that we are implicated as well. Meszaros draws our attention to Gadamer's examination of the "third force" as method, and we are reminded that our own practices as museum researchers and evaluators are bound up in our own definitions of success and what counts as learning. We frequently stumble upon the limitations of measuring what is bound by our methods. What does "time spent" really measure? What does an analysis of "behaviors," or "types of conversation" illuminate about the learning outcomes of a museum visit? Is the restatement of a "factoid" the best evidence of all that we feel a museum visit provides? As a field we are constantly working to refine and create new methods to capture the impact of a museum experience. Meszaros' provocative talk inspires us to return to our work to look more closely at the structures that implicitly drive and guide our work. Visitor Studies professionals work at the intersection of two worlds, in the

space between museums and visitors, between the curriculum developer and the learner. We are uniquely situated to define and influence the direction of essential questions about what counts as learning in the informal learning world--Meszaros asks us to become more involved in the direction of policy and practice in the museum world, to advocate for the visitor and for learning in a museum world with many competing priorities.

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ENDNOTE

1. Friedman's keynote address will be published in *Visitor Studies*, 10(1).

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Karen Knutson is Associate Director, and Kevin Crowley is Director of UPCLOSE (University of Pittsburgh Center for Learning in Out of School Environments). The two were Program co-chairs for VSA 2006.

Facing my Ghosts: *Joe Heimlich*

In careful re-reading and reflection, I find I agree with most of what Dr. Meszaros offers. This odd start to a reaction piece emerges from a strongly negative initial response to the primary work. In examining the source of this visceral reaction, I found an answer through the process used in the article: the deconstruction of meaning. In my own deconstruction, I discovered that three concepts initially distanced me from the real message Dr. Meszaros was presenting: 1) the language of "interpretation," 2) the assumptions that

education and interpretation support the "whatever" interpretation driven from above; and 3) the view of the brick wall as it approaches.

Coming from a non-museum background, I found the language, underlying constructs, and assumptions difficult to accept, as what appeared at first blush to be common language is, indeed, based on alternative understandings. In my work, interpretation is not grounded in the curatorship or "repositories of meaning-making", but rather in the

act of connecting each visitor with the resource so that visitors can discover the relevance of the resource in their lives (e.g. Tilden, 1956; Ham, 1994; Beck & Cable, 1999). This process should not be content or message void, but rather when done right, content and mission full. Therein lies the grounding for two of the three barriers to my accessing the article--the interpretation of interpretation and the foreshadowing of my reaction to "the whatever."

Once revealed, I was able to read beyond the reaction and discover some

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challenges to my own thinking, one being the naming of the “ghosts.” Interpretation and the parallels of education in zoos, nature centers, parks, and NGOs are not void of the ghosts of the expert “interpretation” Dr. Meszaros identifies. Indeed, good interpreters and those of us who measure the outcomes of their work can quickly identify the myriad tensions between expert and educator; curator and floor staff; naturalist and field interpreter. For me, meaning-making is grounded in the Gestalt tradition (e.g. Carlson, 1988) and the specter of the expert imposing meaning is what the education community has been exposing for the last couple of decades, although in pieces rather than a comprehensive whole.

But here I fall into the very trap the article is identifying: using my experience and the fields with which I am most familiar to assume what is, and what can be. Taking what is, for me, the essence of Dr. Meszaros’ work, every institution and more broadly every type of institution does have its ghosts. The zoos and aquariums have the field conservation biologists and marine scientists; the parks have the naturalists; the nature centers have the botanists, the zoologists and a host of other “ists”—all suggesting we have ghosts as the roots of our exhibitions. The ability and success of naming the ghosts and purging them is, however, different for each facility and type of institution. Witness the intense processes required by the Philadelphia Zoo and the Cleveland Metroparks Zoo to shift their institutions from the historical ghosts of exhibit animals, shows, and animal interpretation (Raab, 2004) and into a focus on Mission (Wagner, 2006) and reconstruction of education toward conservation goals (Searles, 2006).

The second barrier was that I would like to believe that education is not

randomly allowing meaning to be made, but is focused on the mission and the goals of the institution. Indeed, much of my work is interwoven with focusing learning events through a visit on the desired messages of the institution. I found myself saying “yes, yes!” as I heard, then read Dr. Meszaros question why service staff are paid while the majority of education and interpretation is done by volunteers; the inverse relationship of experience and proximity of staff to visitors; and the continued “pedagogy of display.” So why my negative reaction? I know much of the docent-led education and interpretive programming is not only distant from positive and appropriately used constructivist teaching, but is nothing more than facts and personal exposé (Mony, in process). My reaction is not in questioning the contexts, but in questioning the theory when it is not the theory at fault, but its mis-use or application.

I believe good constructivist theory can and will make a difference in visitors’ “getting it.” Not whatever, but it. Our it; our message. Lifespan learning theory and cumulative learning concepts suggest that Dr. Meszaros’ “third force” is indeed at play, and that we understand it to be at play. As evaluators and researchers of visitors, we realize that the brief exposure to our message in the visitor’s life is shaped by the motivations of entry (Heimlich et al., 2005; Falk and Storksdieck, 2005), and by the myriad prior experiences and frames with which the visitor is entering (for example, the identity work of Haggard and Williams, 1991; Mack, 1992; Marcia, 1993; and the positioning theory as explored by Harre and Moghaddam, 2003). One of the difficulties we have is that we carefully avoid claiming something beyond what the visitor experience explicitly provides. Yet, the “whatever” and the

forces at play demand that we make the larger claims—of impact, of learning, of changing the world with the 20 minute visitor interaction—and prove them to be so.

The third barrier is seeing the brick wall ahead and knowing that I’m driving head-first, again, into it. This is in reference to Dr. Meszaros’ preaching to the choir (i.e. us). I am a strong advocate that choirs often need to hear the sermons, but must the ending always be the same? So what is this brick wall at the end of the sermon, to finish mixing the metaphors? It is placing the responsibility for change on those of us doing visitor studies; doing good education; doing good interpretation. This is akin to those outside the environmental education movement who believe the purpose of environmental education is to teach children, and especially those conveniently trapped in schools, so the next generation will be different (UNESCO, 1980). Yet, we are several next generations post the 70s and the world is not yet fixed. Change cannot be incremental when we are discussing a radically different way of being or doing or seeing things. Change, in these cases, must be discordant, radical, or at least uncomfortable. And the change must come from those who own the ghosts—not those who can identify and challenge them.

Perhaps, then, I agree that the evil “whatever” exists. In fact, I know I do, I just don’t want to admit it. Ultimately my reaction to this provocative paper is I agree—I appreciate what Dr. Meszaros is telling us. I just want to get beyond the knowing this and into the change we’ve all been working toward.

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Joe E. Heimlich is an associate professor in the School of Environment and Natural Resources at The Ohio State University and also a Senior Research Associate with the Institute for Learning Innovation.

Constructivism and Interpretive Responsibility: *George Hein*

If Cheryl Meszaros intended to provoke and challenge her audience at VSA with her keynote address, she certainly attained her goal. The opening statement that interpretation “is the least studied of all aspects of museum work” commences her challenge. I wonder how she arrived at that bold assertion? Especially since she later acknowledges the “formidable knowledge, tools and skills resulting from the visitor studies movement.”

But the thrust of the article is a criticism of a “very selective uptake on constructivism” as applied to museums by several authors (including myself.). Meszaros’ own take on what she

describes as “a collection of various histories and practices” derived from “mid-twentieth-century educational theorists concerned with how children learned” is not offered. I would wish to include a number of earlier thinkers (most significantly John Dewey) and go back to Kant to fully describe the origins of constructivism. But I agree that, “At its most basic level, constructivism abandoned epistemological certainty ... asserting that there is no eternal truth outside the knower.” For her, this denial of absolute truth leads to the “evil” of “whatever” interpretation” and to museums abandoning their “interpretive responsibility.” Curiously, her one example of what corrupt practice

“sounds like” comes from Lisa Roberts’ splendid book that argues for an important interpretive role for museums. All Roberts asserts in the passage quoted is that “what [meaning visitors] craft may or may not have anything to do with the messages institutions intend.” Roberts then goes on to argue that as a result museums take into account visitors’ meanings as they craft their important social role in interpreting narratives.

Meszaros’ provocative argument consists of two assertions and a conclusion: *Assertion #1*: Constructivism denies eternal truth

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Assertion #2: Its proponents point out that visitors make their own meanings in museums

Conclusion: Therefore, museums have abandoned their educational function; their responsibility to provide interpretations and, instead, accept all interpretations as equal.

The first two statements are consistent with any definition of constructivism I would accept, but their order is reversed from the typical constructivist interpretation of the world.

Constructivists deny the existence of an absolute truth not as an assertion on which to build a view of the world, but as a consequence of an examination of the existing evidence. The conclusion that we create the world in which we live comes from two general domains.

One stand is based on an immense amount of empirical research of various types from a host of social science fields—including evidence from countless museum visitor studies that visitors make their own meanings—that leads to an increasing awareness that we humans create our perceptual, cultural and social world. The other broad domain that has led to widespread (but clearly not universal) acceptance of some form of constructivism is the difficulty encountered in establishing a solid basis for the opposing view, for the existence of universal truths. Dewey's *The Quest for Certainty* provides a powerful example among many. In a thorough analysis of western philosophical thought, he argues that man's (Dewey, born in 1859 used then current sexist language) quest for certainty had failed and is only continued because of man's fear of uncertainty, of unwillingness to accept life as an ever changing process.

But our denial of absolute truth, and museums' role in making this the basis of their interpretive agenda does

not lead to a "whatever" interpretive approach. I have argued that museums are inevitably educational institutions, and thoughtful education is about helping visitors learn *something*. There is ample evidence, as Roberts points out, that museums, like other educational institutions, can both accommodate visitors' culturally and situationally mediated meaning making and provide means for visitors to appreciate and understand the museum's intentions.

Science centers want to enlighten visitors about either the processes or content of science (or both); history museums interpret history from particular points of view (for example, the International Coalition of Historic Sites of Conscience aims to promote social justice); art museums have agendas of various kinds, including the rejection of "educational" goals and the promotion of art as an aesthetic experience.

What constructivism does argue is that none of these goals can claim access to a universal truth as a basis for its educational mission. Dewey recognized that his educational program—one we would today call constructivist—was the appropriate educational strategy for a democratic society that aimed to bring about greater equality and social justice. He recognized that his educational program could be justified only partly on grounds that it was consonant with what was known about child development. More important for him, as it should be for us, is to ask what is the best museum interpretation program for the society we hope to support. If we want to support the development of critical thinking and inquiry, if our goal is to strengthen democracy, we should accept individual meaning making and use it as a starting point for our educational efforts, recognizing that museums, like all

educational institutions, have messages they wish to emphasize.

Meszaros claims that, "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." At a deliberately constructivist exhibition at the Strong Museum in Rochester, NY, visitors are encouraged to make their own interpretation of social history of the 20th Century from a rich collection of artifacts—lunch boxes, popular kitchenware, clothes, political slogans, etc.—arranged by 20th century decades. But even this exhibition includes a message from the curators, most appropriate for social history: the evocative invitation is for visitors to make their own meaning as they are reminded of their own family histories. In contrast, powerful exhibits from the recent Darwin exhibition at the American Museum of Natural History or the Van Gogh and Gauguin, originally in Amsterdam in 2002, incorporate rich museum intended messages into exhibit design that make an effort to acknowledge visitors' varying interests and backgrounds, to maximize the opportunity for visitors to make connections with the curators' intended meanings.

Constructivism is not about giving up a museum's responsibility; it's about accepting the shared task of developing educational settings that allow the largest possible inclusion of inevitable visitor meaning making.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

George Hein is President of TERC and professor emeritus at Lesley University. Email: ghein@lesley.edu.