

# Enhancing Museum Learning by Facilitating the Visitor Social Agenda

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## Introduction

Visiting a museum is a social experience. Most studies have reported that visitors come to the museum with three main goals: to see what's there, to learn something, and to spend some quality time with their family or friends. For many visitors, this last item on the visitor agenda is the primary concern of the day. They're looking to engage in a shared mutual experience with their companions and they've chosen a museum as the setting for this event.

Socialization is a variable which is often overlooked by museum professionals and researchers. To many museum educators socialization is seen as a factor which inhibits learning. Contrary to this belief, however, current theories in social psychology hold that social interaction *enhances* learning. Museum educators may find that the surest way to enhance museum learning is to facilitate the visitor social agenda. Ideas for such "social-educational" techniques can be drawn from a combined understanding of the visitor social agenda and the role of social interaction in learning.

## The Visitor Social Agenda

One only has to look around any museum on a Saturday afternoon to realize that socialization is a key component of the museum experience. You'll see groups of visitors taking in the exhibits together—touching, talking, laughing, sharing. You'll see families galore. You'll find visitors hanging out together in the cafeteria, gift shop, and lobby. In fact, Diamond (1986) found that visitors spend an average of 20% of their total visit in these non-exhibit areas. Socialization with group members is important to the visitors. Falk (1988) found that visitors' recollections of the social context of their museum visits are richer and more accurate than their recollections of exhibits seen. Hood's (1983) landmark study of leisure experience values reminds us that many people choose *not* to visit museums because they don't view museums as places where social interaction can take place.

Educators, do not despair! Research has shown that visitors do not attend museums simply to socialize with one another, but rather they are there to learn together. Taylor (1986) examined the three sources from which visitors get information about exhibits: direct observation, reading labels, and conversation with their companions. He found that conversations yielded the most information. Hilke (1988) studied topics of conversations of zoo visitors. She found that 57% of the visitor comments were related to the exhibit itself or the exhibit topic. The remaining comments were social in nature, pertaining mostly to group management/movement. According to Hensel (1987) the conversational nature of museums creates the interactional patterns in museums. She attributed short lengths of stay at exhibits to conversations that ran out of material. Label reading appeared to interrupt rather than facilitate conversation. Taylor (1986) noted that visitor conversations centered on familiarity. Visitors discussed exhibits in terms of previous personal experiences. Silverman (1990) summarized the social/educational experience well by calling it a "shared interpretive experience." She purports that visitors actively negotiate the meaning of exhibits through talk with their companions.

### The Role of Socialization in Learning

Much can be learned about the notion of shared interpretive experiences from the field of social psychology. Of the dozens of theories which address social interaction in learning, three stand out in importance for museum education: *the experiential learning cycle, social cognition, and cooperative learning.*

The experiential learning cycle, in its most basic form, is a cyclical phenomenon involving learning by doing, processing the event, further experience, further processing, and so on. As Kolb (1984) explains it, an individual has some experience which leads to consequences. These consequences are a cause for reflection, which may cause the individual to modify their mental models of how the world is. New experiences arise and the cycle continues. The important point that Kolb brings out is that all of this happens unconsciously. In order to make learning more effective, the individual must be conscious of his or her reflections on the experience.

Social interaction facilitates the experiential learning cycle by helping the learner become conscious of and reflect upon his or her experience. The learner gains a better understanding of the experience as he or she describes and interprets the experience for his or her companions. Likewise, museum visitors will gain a better understanding of a science exhibit or their feelings about a painting if they can reflect upon their experience with someone.

The principles of *social cognition* describe how we interpret and store information about the world (Deaux & Wrightsman, 1988). Current theory holds that information stored in long-term memory is organized into

“schemata”, or groupings of related ideas. In order to get information (or an opinion) into long term memory, the new information must either be linked to a schema already existing in memory or a new schema must be created. In order to retrieve information from memory, the appropriate schema must be activated. This is the same way a filing cabinet works. In order to put a document in the cabinet you must either locate a pre-existing folder containing similar documents or create a new folder. In order to retrieve a document you must recall which folder it is in.

Social interaction facilitates the cognitive process by helping the learner identify and activate the appropriate schemata. Suppose, for example, that Justin and Kate are looking at a display of penguins in an exhibit on Antarctica. For Justin the sight of the penguins activates his schemata for birds, zoos, and the North Pole. He tells Kate he’s confused about seeing penguins at an exhibit about the South Pole. Kate reminds Justin of a PBS special they saw together on wildlife in the Antarctic. Now it all clicks—Justin can now store information he learns at the exhibit in a schema which he can access and use later. Thanks, Kate.

*Cooperative learning* theory is one way in which several theories of social psychology have been integrated, expanded, and applied to a learning situation. The basic idea is that by structuring situations where a small group of individuals have a set of shared goals, resources, and rewards, the group members will work cooperatively on learning tasks. Research has shown that not only do people learn more while working in a cooperative environment, but they enjoy the learning task more. Roger and David Johnson (1991) have been successful in encouraging many schools to adopt cooperative learning practices as their predominant mode of operation.

Social interaction is the key to cooperative learning. Students learn together by interacting. Academic success, self esteem, and social relationships become intertwined creating an upward spiral where an increase in any one component elevates the others. In a classroom where communication is the key to learning, silence is not the optimal state. The same goes for museums. As visitors work through exhibit problems together, they will learn more, their self-esteem will be enhanced, and they will enhance their relationship with their visiting companion.

## Applications

An understanding of the visitor social agenda and the role of social interaction in learning can be applied to the museum setting to develop ideas for facilitating shared interpretive experiences. The key component is to get visitors to talk about the exhibits and relate them to their own personal experiences. Labels and brochures can be written so as to encourage discussion, debate, and the sharing of personal memories. When possible, exhibits can be designed to facilitate eye contact which will in turn facilitate discussion. Try placing objects on small low pedestals so that

visitors can look over the object at each other and carry on a conversation with the object between them. Create a few exhibits which require two people to operate/appreciate.

Let visitors know that you acknowledge their social agenda. At the information desk in the main lobby offer brochures for families, pairs, and groups. The brochures might describe games to be played together or direct the visitors to exhibits which are designed for groups. The concept could be reflected throughout the museum in your labeling scheme. In addition to your "normal" white labels, advertise your blue "family labels" or "social labels" which are designed to promote discussion.

Finally, support the fact that the goal of many visitors is simply to spend some quality time with their companions. Provide plenty of benches where visitors can sit and chat. Better yet, provide soft, comfortable chairs. Set a premium on maintaining attractive non-exhibit areas. Construct little alcoves within exhibit areas. Make them places where people will want to linger.

Visitor research has shown that social interaction is a key component of the museum experience. Social Psychology contends that social interaction is a key component of learning. It's up to the museum educator to harness this potential for enhancing museum education by supporting and facilitating the visitor social agenda.

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