

## **From Knowledge to Narrative to.....Action!**

### **Constructing Narratives in Today's Museums**

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From Knowledge to narrative: that short phrase describes a profound shift in thinking that over the last half century has rocked universities, museums, and other institutions in the knowledge industry. It refers to a radical change in how we define “Knowledge”: from objective, verifiable facts to socially constructed meanings. Basically, the idea that knowledge was a social construction called into question the longstanding authority of scientific, positivistic modes of knowing, as both came to be understood to constitute a kind of “narrative.”

Although these shifts largely played out in academic settings, museums were also affected—certainly in their more scholarly role as knowledge producers. But it was in their role as communicators of knowledge—in the work of public exhibition and interpretation—that the impact was most keenly felt. If “knowledge” is a constructed narrative, then objects in museums could be understood to hold multiple meanings depending on the context in which they are viewed and defined—as well as interpreted and exhibited.

For museum educators, this was a defining moment, because it gave their work a new professional grounding and authority. As specialists in pedagogy, communication, and visitors, educators represented the interests and needs of a wide range of audiences, all with distinct backgrounds, motivations, and cultural frameworks. Educators were the ones advocating for alternative perspectives and stories—and ways of telling stories—that reflected the worlds of visitors. They were museum revolutionaries, challenging the status quo and demanding shared authority to determine whose knowledge, whose narratives, would be told.

Over time, these changes were justified many times over, as visitor studies, educational practice, and even marketing demonstrated the importance of making museums meaningful on visitors' terms. And while education remains a central mission in most museums, it has become normal to speak of "interpretation" and "visitor experience", language that accommodates a multiplicity of meanings and narratives. These shifts mark a welcome balance to an era dominated by scholarly, curatorial ways of understanding museum collections.

The key word here is "balance." It is important to remember that visitors' terms are not the only terms; and that narrative construction applies just as legitimately to museum professionals as it does to visitors. While this may seem to imply a certain undermining of institutional authority, the idea that museums themselves are engaged in the construction of meaning is actually quite liberating. It frees them from a kind of absolute neutrality so they may actively take a stand and present interpretations and exhibits that support their own institutional interests and values. Museums could not be better positioned to play a more deeply impactful role.

Museums are by definition social institutions, but every age must consider their proper role anew vis a vis the conditions of the society they inhabit. Although they may uphold missions that cross decades and generations, museums are most immediately accountable to an audience that is contemporary—and which exists within a set of social conditions and issues that frames the way they carry out their missions.

It's hard to say whether conditions today are any more pressing than those of the past, but there is at least one critical challenge that is unique to our time. We are faced with the very real possibility of massive planetary change—even annihilation—through two unprecedented threats: irreversible changes to the earth's climate and the uncontrolled proliferation of nuclear weapons. If we are to find solutions to these or any of the many other social problems facing us, one thing is certain: it will only happen if we can figure out a way to communicate and problem-solve on a global scale. We need to learn to see across the borders and boundaries of our worlds, countries, religions, and classes and find our common ground as human beings.

So what does that mean? What does it look like? It means embracing our narrative function unabashedly and with intent. It means recognizing the urgency behind our role as social institutions and experimenting boldly. And it means thinking creatively about how we do our work. Sometimes this is the biggest challenge of all—imagining new models of practice when tied to old habits of mind. What follows are some considerations for thinking creatively about the work of narrative construction.

### **Alternative messages/experiences**

Social interaction, personal introspection, fun, restoration, and yes—curiosity and learning—all make up an evolving taxonomy of reasons why visitors come to our institutions. A growing number of museums, in turn, are broadening their own purposes and activities beyond the traditional “collect, educate, research.” Examples of innovative public practice are scattered throughout the institution’s history, but it is time to make them front and center. Consider:

- ***Civic discourse:*** Right now, our society is beset with a serious lack of understanding, respect and tolerance for difference. Racism is on the rise; American/Muslim relations have never been worse; and marginalized populations such as immigrants, domestic workers, gangs, ex-offenders and more are being blamed for—and are victims of—a host of social ills. To the extent the museums hold and represent the artifacts of human culture, they are in a position to help give voice and understanding to Others, and initiate compassionate discourse about the problems we all face together.
- ***Social work:*** As social institutions, museums have at times engaged in various types of social work, even if they don’t call it that, employing what many call the “transformative power of art and culture” to try to improve the lives of working class, immigrant, disabled, and other challenged populations. As major social institutions with a public mission, museums should embrace this role and find new ways of using their resources and fostering creative partnerships that they may more deliberately serve society’s most vulnerable communities.
- ***Affective experience:*** When people encounter our institutions, we hope to connect with them at a heartfelt level, where they are most (literally) affected. So important is affective work experience to our overall impact that it bears articulating as a goal unto itself.

It is also a key step in the learning process. Positive, affective experience is an important precursor to effective communication because it induces the kind of open, relaxed, receptive state of mind that is ideal for learning to occur. So if visitors can feel and be moved by their experience with our collections, they may be more receptive to our more didactic messages about it.

- **Personal transformation:** Museums are the collectors and caretakers of an incredible cultural and natural heritage. What they do with that heritage—how they interpret, display, and share it—also makes them agents of human emotion: inspiration, nostalgia, wonder.....also sadness, regret, even anger. Museums may be social institutions; but it is individuals whose values and beliefs are reinforced or transformed by their experiences; and it is these experiences that inspire us to make a change, mend a relationship, reach across the aisle—acts that define people’s understanding of the world and their place in it. This is affective experience at its most effective.

### Alternative media and voice

It is a well-worn phrase, but no less true: the medium IS the message; the means by which we communicate shapes the way our messages are received. Museums have traditionally employed verbal, didactic, often written forms to communicate about museum objects—an approach preferred by curators and other scholars whose ways of knowing have long dominated museum halls. Educators and visitor advocates changed all that, bringing new kinds of language and communications strategies to what were understood to be distinct, specialized audiences. Nonetheless, physical forms of text—labels, signs, handouts—remain the standard bearer for museum messages, although many alternatives now exist.

- **Digital media:** This is probably the biggest alternative with the large number of people who now carry and communicate through a variety of personal devices. Visitors are engaging with museums before, during, after, and even in place of, their museum visit using customized apps, social media, free MOOCs, collections databases, responsive websites, online DIY projects, crowd-sourced activities and the like. Digital tools like these are making museums and their collections accessible literally across the world.

They facilitate the provision of multiple meanings at a level unseen with physical media.

- **“Interpretive” art:** It is the nature of art to convey something: a representation, an idea, an experience. As such, art can be employed as its own medium of communication—i.e., intentional, “interpretive” art designed to deliver a particular message or experience. This is art not as a thing to **be** interpreted but as a mechanism or vehicle for interpretation itself, employing an alternative vocabulary and adept at targeting the affective, emotional, right side of the brain.
- **Alternative voice:** While art can offer one kind of alternative voice based on vocabularies of form, our dominant modes of communication still employ words. Museums have gotten very good at using language that is engaging and accessible to interpret their collections, but far more can be done to experiment with linguistic forms such as poetry, dialect and story. In this way not only are different narratives represented in museums but also different, even original, forms of their expression.
- **Alternative spaces:** Museums are increasingly moving outside their walls, from digital realms to partner settings (hospitals, community centers, airports, etc.) In addition, visitors are engaging with more exhibit-like spaces in the form of pop-up galleries, exhibitions in parks and other public spaces, street art, impromptu memorials, and commercial expositions. These kinds of spaces are worth paying attention to because they are generally free, accessible, and easily relatable, and may offer alternative ways of connecting with visitors.

The hope, of course, is there comes a day when these kinds of practices are not “alternative” but “normative”. As educators and advocates, it is incumbent on us to continue to push for these and other ways of interpreting the many worlds housed in museums and lived by our visitors.

One of the defining characteristics of our time is the near-complete globalization of our world—our telecommunications, our economies, but also our selves. We have never been more conscientious of the multiplicity of worlds—cultures, belief systems, values, ways of living—that coexist on our planet.

Worlds, it must be noted, that also exist in the institutions devoted to their preservation. This has led to both great insight and deep misunderstanding. Now more than ever our world needs people and institutions that are skilled at interpretation, who can bridge difference and facilitate understanding. Museums are perfectly suited for such a role. By offering a platform for interpreting, connecting and helping us to understand one another, museums become forums for the negotiation of meaning. And in this day and age, that is a kind of social action of the highest order and calling.