

Rethinking the Visitor Experience: Transforming Obstacle into Purpose

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ABSTRACT The purposes of museums and those of their visitors often have little in common—despite the growing body of knowledge about museum learning and visitors’ motivations. Based on concepts of experiential learning envisioned a century ago by the American educator and philosopher John Dewey, this paper explores bringing those purposes into closer alignment. A re-evaluation of several factors—including criteria of experience, content organization, and the nature of inquiry—could lead to exhibitions more closely aligned with visitors’ processes of self-motivated activity and museums’ goals for informal learning. One way is to shape exhibits and activity around problematical situations developed out of the exhibit experience itself and shaped by visitors’ own purposes. By shifting focus from knowledge taxonomies to problem-solving situations, museums could increase their exhibitions’ potential for providing engaging educational experiences to visitors.

INTRODUCTION

Exhibits in natural history museums, science centers, aquariums and other such institutions (museums, henceforth) are no longer thought of simply as static displays of collected objects set out for public viewing. Regarding exhibits as three-dimensional textbooks in which museums transmit knowledge to a receptive, attentive public ignores much of what is going on in museums. Exhibits are environments in which complex interactions occur among visitors, objects, environment, and meaning. They are places of experiences as unpredictable and idiosyncratic as the individuals who visit them (Crane et al. 1994; Roberts 1997; Hein 1998; Falk and Dierking 2000). This recognition has given rise to much discussion of “creating experience” and becoming more “visitor cetered.” Yet, in spite of an explosion of studies and theoretical writing on the subject, there is remarkably little evidence in practice that the purposes of visitors and those of institutions have actually come closer together.

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Since at least the 1960s, many museums increasingly seek to communicate the messages and stories they think are most important to tell. Museum visitors, however, continue for the most part to enjoy museums as leisure-time social activity as they pursue personal interests. Museums and their visitors seem to be engaged in a long-term, congenial relationship in which neither speaks the language of the other. On the one hand, visitors continue to have experiences that they find sufficiently rewarding to repeat on a more-or-less annual basis, without being bothered in the slightest that they miss most of the institutions' messages. On the other hand, in spite of repeated efforts to shape and reshape their messages, institutions continue to have a difficult time persuading visitors to "learn" while they're having their experiences.

If institutions are having problems drawing visitors to their purposes, perhaps it is time for them to reconsider their purposes. Perhaps it is time, as Ansbacher (2002a) suggests, for institutions to embrace a broader range of outcomes and to actively support visitors' purposes in exhibits. Constructivist theorists and practitioners have made considerable inroads into creating conditions for open-ended learning and more visitor-focused experiences, especially in science centers and children's museums. But in many institutions, the focus remains almost exclusively on the messages that the museum wishes to communicate. Despite an expressed endorsement of visitor-focused experiences, exhibits in these institutions are largely shaped by pre-defined content rather than by experience itself. The result, in museums whose exhibits are intended primarily to educate¹ (contrasted with those in which objects are exhibited for the most part on their own terms), is a diminished potential for robust experiences motivated by visitors' spontaneous curiosity and shared by audiences that are more diverse.

A central problem lies in the way "experience" is defined and used. Experience has come to be viewed as a saleable commodity, as expressed most jarringly by Pine and Gilmore (1999, ix), who argue that: "Experiences represent an existing but previously unarticulated *genre of economic output*." In their view, the purpose of such experience is a "guided transformation" of customers invited to play a role in a script that is just short of complete without them. Through the health club experience, the customer is transformed from frumpy to fit. Through a decade of planned birthday experiences, the child is progressively transformed into a sensitive, responsible adult. Readers will be transformed by reading experiences that "guide them through intellectual pursuits by identifying books and other materials worth reading, followed by observations and perhaps even examinations." The authors suggest that such "transformation offerings will emerge across almost every industry that today views itself as part of the service sector" (Pine and Gilmore 1999, 168).

Pine and Gilmore define experience as something designed, in which the participant plays a role shaped by the entity that designs it. Their view is shared by many in the business and entertainment community, and has gained currency in discussion (and vigorous debate) within the museum field as well. Particularly for museums, what is most disturbing is that this definition of experience represents a veiled form of manipulation. Pre-defining the outcome of experience is the goal of marketing; it is not the openended enrichment and pleasure that museums, at their best, can provide.

I propose that museums would benefit from a different way of thinking about experience. This approach is based on the work of a much earlier proponent of experience. A century ago, John Dewey shaped a powerful definition of experience and made a definitive case for education that is constructed of the experiences and the purposes of those being educated. The lessons of his long lifetime of work on education *as* experience have remained largely unlearned by educators up to the present (Tanner, 1997). And in spite of some excellent writing on Dewey and learning in the museum profession (Ansbacher 1998, 1999, 2002; Cole 1984, 1985, 1995, 1998), there has been little practical application of Deweyian theory in actual museum practice. Nevertheless, his writings on thought, experience, and learning offer authentic, useful insights into the task of exhibit makers today.

CONTINUITY OF EXPERIENCE

Dewey regarded learning as a process deeply connected with the experience of the everyday world, a function of the interactions between the internal conditions of the learner, made up of all previous experience and knowledge, and the objective, external conditions of the environment (including not only the physical environment, but also the teacher, the social context, and educational materials) in which the experience occurred. This means that: . . .

every experience enacted and undergone modifies the one who acts and undergoes, while this modification affects, whether we wish it or not, the quality of subsequent experiences. . . . From this point of view, the principle of continuity of experience means that every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after (Dewey 1938, 35).

An experience, however, could lead either to educative or mis-educative ends. The educative *quality* of an experience was to be judged by clear criteria based on the effect the experience had on the student's capacity for future experiences. Dewey argued that:

There is no paradox in the fact that the principle of the continuity of experience may operate so as to leave a person arrested on a low plane of development, in a way which limits later capacity for growth.

On the other hand, if an experience arouses curiosity, strengthens initiative, and sets up desires and purposes that are sufficiently intense to carry a person over dead places in the future, continuity works in a very different way. Every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into (Dewey, 1938, 38).

By this criterion, an educative experience is valuable to the extent that it prepares one for broader, richer experiences in the future; it expands possibility. What Dewey meant by this was that the learning process can be viewed as a directed process of growth from the tangible to increasingly abstract and complex capacities of critical thought and judgment. Growth itself is both the means and the end. The role of teaching, in this view, is not to transfer information, which can in any case serve to perpetuate “received dogmas” (Dewey 1910, 26). Rather, teaching is “to cultivate deep-seated and effective habits of discriminating tested beliefs from mere assertions, guesses, and opinions; to develop a lively, sincere, and open-minded preference for conclusions that are properly grounded, and to ingrain into the individual’s working habits methods of inquiry and reasoning appropriate to the various problems that assert themselves” (Dewey 1910, 28).

If museums see their purpose primarily as imparting knowledge, synthesizing specific messages and constraining the outcome of the experience to a common set of ideas and concepts, then the way visitors actually use museums is an obstacle. If, on the other hand, their goal is to increase the visitors’ own capacity for broader experience, offering a variety of specific knowledge along the way, then Dewey offers insights into greatly expanded possibility. His work shows ways to see visitors’ native tendency to follow their own pursuits not as obstruction to positive outcomes, but as the primary means for achieving them. Instead of trying to impose their own priorities onto visitors, museums can harvest visitors’ priorities and offer ways of expanding them into richer purposes and interests. While factual knowledge may well be developed along the way, the primary criterion of experiential value becomes “the extent in which it creates a desire for continued growth and supplies means for making the desire effective in fact” (Dewey 1916, 53). Activity becomes the basis for experience, continuity the glue that makes experience stick.

The Exploratorium in San Francisco is the archetypal example of a museum in which the exhibit outcomes are the product of in-the-moment activity on the exhibition floor. Interpretation is largely restricted to instructions for using the devices, which are developed and extensively modified based on the way visitors use them. Insight, whenever it occurs, is the result of something felt or observed in the course of doing, not something listened to and understood. Continuity is based not on reference to past experience, but on the creation of present experience. The question remains open whether such exhibits adequately provide means for visitors to extend the present experience beyond the immediate activity, or to make deeper intellectual connections that would allow them to apply a felt or perceived principle to a broader universe of knowledge.

The principle of continuity becomes more difficult to apply in an exhibit formed around artifacts instead of directly observable phenomena. An example of the difficulty is an anthropology exhibition currently in early stages of design. One area concerns the emergence of power structures in ancient societies, in which the primary curatorial challenge is to show that hierarchical societies are not inevitable and that, in fact, power is a comparatively recent social invention. Most of us are so accustomed to the presence of social status and inequality that we are rarely able to step sufficiently outside of our experience to imagine a world without it. One proposal under

consideration for the exhibit is to place a large chair in the center of the gallery, slightly elevated on a ramp which rises out of an otherwise downward-sloping floor. Only one visitor at a time can sit in the chair, which simultaneously lowers the stature (literally) of all the others. The intention is to create a situation in which spontaneous activity gives the participants a common experiential basis for questioning the nature of power, or who sits and who stands. The surrounding exhibits, in this model, will offer artifacts and other activity to explore open-ended questions relating both to the ancient societies depicted and to modern societies in which the same patterns are evident.

ORGANIZATION OF CONTENT

Constructing activity with continuity of experience in mind demands that we find a way to provide visitors with a means of constructing the present experience out of what is already meaningful and important to them. Building areas of activity into exhibits like those described above provides one means of access through experience in the moment. But for many exhibits, visitors also need to be provided comprehensible and relevant entry points into a body of intellectual content. How such entry points are provided may vary greatly. One common practice is to draw on analogy, relating new concepts to everyday examples that illustrate the point the developer is trying to convey. Another is to break the subject into parts which can be presented as comprehensible units that may individually bear a relationship to a visitor's prior knowledge. In either case, the developer most often attempts to structure the exhibit experience around a set of subjects as an expert understands them.

Dewey took a radically different approach to content. Dewey made a clear distinction between organized content as an expert might see it and the way most of us experience those things it represents in the real world. Laurel Tanner quotes this example from an article published by Dewey in 1897:

There is no fixed body of facts which, in itself, is externally set off and labeled geography, natural history, or physics. Exactly the same objective reality will be one or the other, or none of these three, according to the interest and intellectual attitude from which it is surveyed. Take a square mile of territory, for example; if we view it from one interest, we may have trigonometry; from another standpoint, we should label the facts regarding it botany; from still another standpoint, it would become historical material. There is absolutely nothing in the fact, as an objective fact, which places it under any one head. Only as we ask what kind of experience is going on, what attitude some individual is actually assuming, what purpose or end some individual has in view, do we find a basis for selecting and arranging the facts under the label of any particular study (Dewey 1897, in Tanner 1998, 45).

Dewey founded an experimental school at the University of Chicago, in 1896, to

test theories of education in actual practice. It continued within the university for a period of seven years, constantly adjusting and refining its techniques and theories as experience informed its work. Teachers in the school did not work directly from a systematic taxonomy of knowledge. Instead, they organized the program from two directions: “the children’s side (activities) and the teacher’s side (logically organized bodies of subject matter: chemistry, physics, biology, mathematics, language, literature, history, music, and physical culture)” (Tanner 1998, 47). On the one hand, teachers drew upon the students’ own interests and knowledge as the primary motivation for learning activities in the school. On the other hand, they relied upon a concrete organization of subjects, now grouped around activities of interest to the students, to ensure that the activities were ultimately educationally purposeful.

In our effort to find familiar examples and metaphors to bring organized content to life, we tend to overlook the possibility that a content-based exhibit need not have a content-based form. Activities in a museum or attraction can include observation, experimentation, problem solving, discussion, pattern recognition, and a host of other things. They need not be arranged in a systematic flow of subject matter in order to reveal something about the nature of the material concerned. The world is composed of things connected together by myriad interrelated webs of meaning. By rethinking how we organize subject matter, our exhibits could be constructed in a similar fashion.

Until the advent of computers and network technology, the task was greater because so much depended on physical juxtaposition. That is no longer true; experience for the most part remains physical, but it can be guided, supported, and informed by a battery of developing virtual technologies. Techniques only now becoming available could enable a widespread realization of genuine, inquiry-based experience in museums just as Dewey originally envisioned for schools. By providing multiple channels of inquiry in exhibits, the intellectual or emotional means of access chosen by developers can embrace other, equally valid means of access chosen by visitors.

The Musée des Arts et Métiers in Paris, which reopened in 2000 after extensive renovations, is an example of exhibit-making which allows visitors to approach the museum’s collection through a variety of modalities and from a variety of perspectives. The museum has a spectacular collection of scientific instruments, inventions, vehicles and model structures dating from the 17th Century to the present. Many of the objects, while beautiful in their own right, are intellectually inaccessible to most visitors. To make them more accessible, the museum has provided two principle accommodations. The first is a ubiquitous electronic touchscreen on which visitors may select any of several visual animations of the devices in operation, illustrating with virtually no verbal explanation how the artifacts work and what they do. These devices open a window into the artifacts, effectively transforming them from objects displaced in time to characters in an unfolding, story of visceral immediacy and clarity. To judge from several hours’ observation on two visits, they not only engage visitors in a vivid experience, but also encourage them to move from one to the next to the next, absorbing each and often watching an animation several times to fully understand it.

The other accommodation is equally significant. The museum provides comfort-

able sofas where individuals or groups of visitors can leaf through printed materials or explore electronic media which approach the material of a particular gallery from different points of view. In one gallery, for instance, visitors can use a touchscreen to select any of a number of common household devices, following a variety of trails that lead to different predecessor inventions on the exhibit floor. Along the way are links to biographies and other histories that may be of interest. Visitors use these as centers of conversation, often lingering for several minutes, comfortably browsing, discussing and exploring together.

In a similar vein, the anthropological exhibit discussed above may include clusters of seated or standing activity which uses a technological interface to draw upon current events in politics and culture which will already be familiar to many visitors and which illustrate patterns of power and inequality that are equivalent to those illustrated by the ancient artifacts. While the artifacts may be arranged only within a single physical organization, visitors may be able to draw upon them through any of several current topics which are of interest, broadening their perspective on the present and creating a relevant means of access to the past. The materials available to visitors could be continuously adjusted based on what visitors pursue and on shifting current events. In this way, it is hoped that visitors will draw upon the resources of the exhibit according to their own patterns of inquiry and capacities for meaning-making, while the subject matter of the exhibit will actually evolve in response to the way visitors use it.

PROBLEMATIC EXPERIENCE

In the Deweyian universe, normal life experience shifts unceasingly between two modalities. The first is the relatively unconscious experience of life as it flows continuously from one moment to the next as an uninterrupted stream. This kind of experience is that of walking along a familiar path in which nothing seems out of order and no particular attention need be paid to the surroundings. It is almost automatic. The second type of experience arises at the moment the normal flow is interrupted by something out of place, a passing thought, something that catches the eye, an event, or a change. This second type of experience was of greatest interest to Dewey, and should be to us as well. This kind of experience is where memory is formed and growth occurs.

For Dewey, the nature of *an* experience is fundamentally problematical; an experience arises from activity that leads to a situation in which an individual is moved to *interact* with his or her environment—information, other people, physical objects, the nature of the environment itself—to change or resolve a state of perplexity.

Thinking begins in what may fairly enough be called a forked-road situation, a situation which is ambiguous, which presents a dilemma, which proposes alternatives. As long as our activity glides smoothly along from one thing to another, or as long as we permit our imagination to entertain fancies at pleasure, there is no call for reflection. Difficulty or obstruction in the way of reaching a belief brings us, however, to a

pause. In the suspense of uncertainty, we metaphorically climb a tree; we try to find some standpoint from which we may survey additional facts and, getting a more commanding view of the situation, may decide how the facts stand related to one another.

Demand for the solution of a perplexity is the steadying and guiding factor in the entire process of reflection (Dewey 1910, 11).

Theory without a problem, like an answer without a question, is no cause for inquiry and no cause for interest. Seen this way, the essential task for the exhibit developer is not to make organized content more accessible to visitors' own experience. Rather, it is to fashion engaging problems *out of* visitors' own experience, through which visitors are motivated to draw upon the material resources of the exhibit in a desire for resolution. The exhibit experience is distinct from its intellectual and material resources. Of course, they are connected; they must be tightly integrated if the visitor is to have the means to explore the terrain of an interesting problem. In an exhibition environment based on these concepts, the visitor's experience ceases to be one of browsing an encyclopedia, of reading a library from one shelf to another, of viewing arrangements of objects in the hopes of discovering relevant meaning among them. Instead, the experience becomes a self-motivated inquiry that begins with a problematic situation, a question, an idea that has become relevant precisely because it creates an immediate emotional or intellectual unease. The inquiring visitor then reaches outward for whatever materials are needed to resolve the unease. Through the resulting activity, a spark of attention is transformed into interest.

Developers of this kind of exhibit need not find ways of creating a demand for the material; rather, they must find a way of assembling problems that will be meaningful enough to capture visitors' attention. It is not enough to simply display objects and offer the means to explore. Most visitors, unaided, have access to only a narrow range of meaning and have not developed basic observational skills in areas where they have no special expertise. Museums need to find ways of calling attention to things that are interesting, unusual, contradictory, counter-intuitive, or otherwise challenging. Museums have to accept that on a given visit, each visitor will respond to only a portion of the material that is available. In *Arts et Métiers*, the presence of interesting, unpredictable elements of subject matter within comfortable social spaces provokes exploration and discussion. In the anthropological exhibit under development, the enigmatic chair would demand attention, as would the presence of current events anachronistic to the period of the exhibit artifacts and obvious subject matter. Other examples of obstructions could include seemingly inexplicable discoveries (a fossil seashell found on a mountaintop, once questioned, can lead in many directions, including the whole of plate tectonics); observable phenomena (a soap bubble enigmatically floats motionless above a block of dry ice); ongoing debate (two experts disagree on the meaning of an archaeological find); or issues which are by their nature accessible to any visitor (the conflicting claims of rival parties in a current national election).

Such problem-based experiences are all too rare in current exhibit practice; per-

plexing situations are typically avoided by exhibit developers and most museums for fear of confusing their visitors. But a problem need not be confusing, any more than a jigsaw puzzle is confusing. The steps to putting it together are intuitive, and the desire to see the assembled picture drives the activity forward to completion. Similarly, exhibits built around problematic situations may provide impetus for visitors to explore content in a way that is most meaningful to them because they take an active role in determining the purpose and the nature of the activity. Although the museum may initiate the encounter, the visitor drives the experience. Once in play, the museum provides a supporting role.

THE ROLE OF INQUIRY

Writing of inquiry and the importance of reflective thought in Dewey's philosophy of education, John Childs describes life as "a process of experimental adjustments in a precarious world where man is confronted with a novel development of conditions" (Childs 1939, 429). He further quotes Dewey, who proposed the idea that "the conjunction of problematic and determinate characters in nature renders every existence, as well as every idea and human act, an experiment in fact, even though not in design" (Dewey 1929). Childs further argues:

Since living is intrinsically a process of selective adjustment, Dr. Dewey believes that these adjustments should be made consciously. Impulsive behavior, blind trial and error, slavish reliance on custom and routine habit will not suffice in a world in which change and novelty are real. Hence, the continuous exercise of intelligence is a necessity, not a luxury, for all who would live well in a precarious universe (Childs 1939, 429).

In many writings on the subject over a period more than 70 years, Dewey uses the terms *an experience*, *scientific method*, *process of reflection*, *method of intelligence* and *theory of inquiry* to describe the essence of experience as shaped by conscious thought (McBride 2002). An initial "sense of conflict" marks the first of what Dewey generally outlines as five distinct steps that demark "an" experience from the flow of undifferentiated life experience. They suggest points at which designers and developers might find ways to usefully provide support or guidance at key points in a visitor's experience. Generally described, they are:

An interruption, or obstruction, breaking the normal flow.— An awareness of change, "sense of conflict," some kind of "perplexity" or "felt difficulty" of an "indeterminate situation." This may be the chair in the anthropology exhibit, the soap bubble, or any of the other examples discussed above.

Observations to "bring to light just what is the trouble, or to make clear the specific character of the problem" (Dewey 1910, 74).—Inference; judgment suspended until the nature of the problem is clear. This may occur simultaneously with the first step. It can be aided by design which really makes objects visible, aided by tools like

magnifiers and cameras, docent-led programs which aid observation, the availability of contextual information, or technology that renders things perceptible which are not normally so. It may be aided by the temporary withholding of direct answers in favor of guidance that stimulates more careful observation, discussion, and thought.

Suggestion of alternative solutions for dealing with the situation as explicitly formulated.—This is the process of hypothesis making, conjecture, supposition, or the formation of theories. It can be aided by active questioning, by media (i.e., exhibit text, audiovisual media, and/or docents) that offers multiple hypotheses from different perspectives, by employing different curatorial perspectives in the same exhibit, by including visitors' hypothesis in interpretive materials, or by creating spaces which encourage visitors to discuss things among themselves.

Reasoning; mentally testing one idea against another.—Following possible consequences in a logical manner, developing ideas further and measuring them against prior experience in an exercise to predict their results. This can be aided by the same examples discussed immediately above.

Verification of the idea; “experimental corroboration.”— Testing the hypothesis through direct observation or through experiment until the sense of unease which began the experience is replaced by the satisfaction of order restored and, in the spiraling journey that is inquiry, a new question uncovered. This can be aided by different experimental apparatuses in science museums; by providing (through media, or manipulable collections, or replicas), a means for comparison of objects; by providing on-demand, online references for comparison; or, in the case of subjective conclusions, by providing a means of documenting varied opinions and comparing them with other museum visitors or experts in a field.

The number of steps taken and the degree to which any is carried out depends on the individual and the nature of a given situation; Dewey himself suggested that there are no hard and fast rules to be applied. On various occasions he altered his descriptions of the number of phases and their precise nature, though they are generally uniform (McBride 2002).

Dewey's description of inquiry offers a useful tool to foster meaning making in exhibits and attractions. Active observation is the beginning and the end. Through observation we experience a difficulty, obstruction, or sense of conflict and discover its nature. Through observation we gauge the quality of hypotheses, judgments, and ideas formed for solutions to the obstruction. More intricate processes of reflective thought occur between the observation of the unresolved and the observation of the resolved. The process as a whole begins as activity halted by obstruction, moves through a process of thought and concludes again as activity restored. The difference between the activity of the beginning and that of the end is a kind of transformational growth that affects experience in the future.

Such experiences allow visitors and institutions to engage in constantly shifting roles of leading and following—an active exchange. The institution is active in pro

viding the obstacle that obstructs the normal flow of thought, but the visitor is the one who initiates the experience itself, becoming an active explorer, a problem solver seeking an answer to his or her own question. The institution occupies a supporting role, providing guidance, resources, information and tools or other means required by the visitor in pursuit of an end. In practice, each stage should be seen as a potential point of intervention, based on the subject material and context of the exhibit, through which museums can help visitors extract the greatest possible meaning out of the potential inherent to their experiences.

CONCLUSION

Designing exhibits from the perspective of visitor experience requires a reconsideration of the way we define “experience” and a re-evaluation of the purposes of museums and other visitor attractions. Many insightful authors have offered new perspectives in the last decade and it is clear that many institutions are searching for more effective means and purposes. This changing landscape enhances the opportunity to bring an institutionally centered world of messages and knowledge taxonomies into more immediate connection with a visitor-centered world of activity and enjoyment. To more fully understand what that means, we must ask deeper questions about the nature of experience and museums’ purposes for engaging with the public. It is not sufficient to say that we provide “experiences” or “educate.” These statements don’t begin to account for what really happens in exhibits, nor do they offer insight into improving the public experience. If museums are going to create richer places of experience, then they need to create fertile ground on which both the visitor and the institution have roles in shaping the nature and the purposes of the experience. Though much has been written on the subject since Dewey, his writings remain a wellspring of insight and have as much applicability today as they did a century ago. More directly and with greater distance and clarity, they call on museums to reflect carefully on their purposes for engaging with the visiting public and how they engage with and foster visitors’ purposes.

Absent such reflection, the drive to “create” visitor experiences in museums will profoundly miss the mark, as I believe Pine and Gilmore do in their “Experience Economy.” Their vision of work (indeed, life) as theatre suggests that experience can be staged and that simple rehearsal of action is the prelude to meaning. On the example of the birthday offerings mentioned above, they write that the “selection of gifts, the invitation of guests, the post party thank-you notes, and other aspects will aim to help a child learn to act; at first, acting “as if” he is thankful, for example, and later drawing on his emotional reservoir of thankful deeds past to make his own personal statements of appreciation whenever appropriate” (Pine and Gilmore 1999, 195). The museum, in this view, would become a “transformation elicitor,” directing “the aspiring actor to perform new parts.” Where in this is there room for the purposes of actor? Where can any real autonomy of the self be found? In the work of exhibits, as in the work of education, there must be an alternative.

Museums can offer experiences in which visitors participate in the formation of purposes driven by their own curiosity and interest. In doing this, museums will be reshaping their exhibits into more effective exchanges between the people who create them and the people who use them. One largely unexplored method is for institutions to free themselves from an experiential structure that mirrors knowledge taxonomies, and whose predominant purpose is to deliver facts and messages, no matter how sincerely intended or urgently felt. Alternatively, museums can offer a range of problematic situations that engage visitors in active experiences of inquiring into a body of physical and intellectual resources made widely and engagingly available for their use.

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NOTE

1. It might be useful to note that this argument (and others in this paper) bears in direct proportion to the degree to which the objects in a given museum are interpretively or emotionally accessible to the general public. In this paper I am primarily addressing institutions (such as natural history museums, historical museums, or science centers) in which the exhibited objects (or exhibition components) are presented at least as much for their illustrative or interpretive value as for their own sake, in contrast to others (such as art museums) in which it could be said that the majority of the objects stand on their own terms and are presented in their own right. As an example, while an exhibition of diatoms may be aesthetically accessible to anyone, without some form of interpretation by the museum, it will be intellectually opaque to all but a very few. An exhibition of Warhol paintings, on the other hand, will be accessible to a far greater number of visitors regardless of their specific knowledge of his work or the amount of interpretive material accompanying it. How much a given visitor's experience of Warhol's work would be enhanced by added experiential or interpretive exhibition components is best left to another discussion.