

Making Meaning in Museums and Its Collaborations

Some relevant questions have already been asked which come in the realm of communication and education in museums. “How is meaning produced in museums? How do the pedagogic approaches of the museum intersect with the interpretive processes of the visitor? How was this changed? In asking questions about the interpretation of visual culture in museums the themes of narrative, difference, and identity arise in relation to interpretive processes and museum pedagogy. These are complex and multi-layered matters, where meanings rooted in the past clash with contemporary interpretations that challenge their continued validity.” (Greenhill 2000, 1)

Meaning-making in museums have some complexity involved. “Two things complicate matters even further, particularly in the contemporary exhibition. The first complication lies in the recognition that the meaning of an object, its communication, does not stop with its display, nor is it determined either by its place in the display or the description offered of it in the adjoining label. The meaning of an object continues in the imaginative work of the visitor who brings to it his or her own agenda, experiences and feelings.” (Silverstone 1994, 164)

“During the second half of the 19th century, museums were understood to be educational institutions with important and far-reaching social roles. The uses that visitors make of museum visits need to be considered, and this raises questions about the cultural possibilities that museums open up.” (Greenhill 2000, 2). She further says that “the pedagogic functions of museums can be analysed by reviewing what is said and how it is said. Museum pedagogy produces a visual environment for learning where visitors deploy their own interpretive strategies and repertoires.” (Greenhill 2000, 2).

These questions and statements do emphasize on museums partnering communities so as to assign meaning to their exhibits. It is also important to note that the meanings change with time and place and hence, an object can be subjected to multiple meaning in different eras and regions. This suggests that it may be possible for a single object to have different functional aspect and symbolic meaning to different communities. This only adds to the richness of the object in question. In fact, if a museum is able to do complete justice to an object by showcasing every known fact and story about it, the object tends to have a ‘global’ reach which is more valuable than being relevant to just one community.

The partnerships that a museum can have with a community and with academia needs to be stressed now. A museum is open for public which is in turn made up of many communities. It is very essential for a museum to be able to connect with the community people through its exhibitions. In fact, what more would museum professionals want if they can successfully connect to the visitors in an interactive way? It is here one realizes the importance of partnerships. A community can surely give a much better detailing for an object which was used by their ancestors or are still using it. This will help the documentation in museums as the

documentation officer can sit and discuss the history and significance of objects with the community people. Similarly, libraries and archives can play a decisive role in letting the museum professionals and people understand the significance of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of their community. Academicians and researchers can greatly help in the process of documentation as they have the skill of correlating the memories of the community members. Moreover, they understand the role of the museum in a society. This can in turn facilitate the exhibition designers in placing the objects in a suitable context and creating an interactive environment in a museum.

Gurian focuses on the “the importance of museums” and their role in ‘the building and rebuilding of community’ which can foster societal cohesion and civility.” (Gurian 2006, 48)

Two major examples of museums and libraries working together are the Exploration Center at the Port Discovery Children’s Museum and the Brooklyn Expedition. Such collaborations can help institutions to work in a cost-effective way by sharing their resources. Also, too many brains working together will not only help the overworked staff but also bring in fresh ideas to the fore.

Port Discovery Children’s Museum in Baltimore defines a community partner as “a group or organization that donates their time and resources to the Museum and commits both when asked.” This is reiterated by Port Discovery through providing resources to the community partners and also by acting as a venue to these partners.

Heart of Brooklyn was the result of partnership among six institutions in 2001. This is one of the vibrant cultural hubs in Brooklyn which owes its existence to Brooklyn Botanic Garden, Brooklyn Children’s Museum, Brooklyn Museum, Brooklyn Public Library, Prospect Park, and Prospect Park Zoo. These institutions came together to promote culture and tourism. Brooklyn Cultural Adventures Program offers summer programmes for the kids of different age groups in which the participants can have thematic hands-on experience at each of the six partner institutions relating to culture, nature, science, literature, etc.

Another example of such a fruitful partnership has been seen in the initiative of the Institute of Museum and Library (IMLS). This institute does an excellent job of covering all the libraries and museums of USA to give a bigger platform for access to knowledge and its sharing. It is also known for funding many innovative approaches which help young learners immensely. Its main office is located in Washington DC. The institution also focuses on community engagement and community development. This is achieved through information sharing by incorporating various learning tools. They have to their credit the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading. This Campaign is a collaborative effort among foundations, nonprofit partners, states, and communities the main focus of which is early literacy to low-income students so that they can read proficiently by the end of third grade. Currently, 134 communities nationwide are partners

in this campaign. In fact, museums and libraries are playing a major role in order to facilitate early learning in these communities.

One of the path-breaking initiatives with respect to partnerships between museums, academia, and communities has been the programmes jointly organised by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and the Department for Education and Skills (DfES), now Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) in England. The partnership involves national and regional museums in England. Here, the main objective of the museums working together is to strengthen relationships between museums, schools, and communities. The programme saw a grand success which was confirmed through an evaluation done in 2006-2007. The emphasis of this programme was mainly social inclusion (as museums and galleries, in this initiative, were partnering mostly with schools which had children coming from low-income groups), and through this, deepening partnerships between museums and academia, and museums and communities. The museums deeply looked into the school teachers' needs in order to design the programme accordingly.

UNESCO's Programme for the Preservation of Endangered Movable Cultural Properties and Museum Development has linked up with an innovative 'Museums and Communities' Network in Central America to strengthen the relationship between museums and local communities in Honduras.

"As part of the UNESCO project 'Museums and Communities for Development in Honduras' launched in January 2007, the Comayagua Museum of Anthropology and the San Pedro Sula History Museum are strengthening their relationship with local communities and developing strategic alliances with schools, businesses, tour operators and other important partners. The participating museums, which are both profoundly linked to the history of Honduras through their prestigious archaeological collections, have improved and modernized their cultural offerings and community services. Moreover, communities have been solicited to become actively involved in the preservation and promotion of heritage. Training in cultural heritage has allowed members of local communities and staff from the museums to increase their knowledge of Honduras cultural heritage. A stronger link has also been forged among communities, museums and teachers so that Honduras museums can be used as effective and diverse pedagogical resources. As a result, 40 tour guides in Comayagua and 40 teachers in San Pedro Sula received training in order to enhance their understanding of museums and simplify their access to comprehensive cultural heritage information about Honduras". ("As of August 3, 2015, the UNESCO stated in its website about promoting partnerships between museums and communities in Honduras").

Similarly, the 'Understanding Slavery Initiative' is one which has enabled the Museum of London Docklands to partner schools, teachers and educators to develop resources which throw light on London's role in transatlantic slavery. The students are allowed to understand history through physical exploration of objects in the gallery.

Conclusion

One can very easily sum up that the partnerships that museums have with the academia and communities bring in good results which also silence the critics asking about the sustainability of museums. Working with libraries, archives, and communities not only ensure a better future for the museums but also for the people and their communities. There is a fear of losing our heritage in this fast-paced time and the only medicine to preserve it is to document it immediately with the help of people and other organisations so that the documentation is as authentic as possible. Also, as discussed above, the partnerships between museums and schools is very much the need of the hour as it aids the school curriculum as well as teachers in facilitating learning in children. Moreover, the advantages of learning in this kind of an informal set-up can be readily seen. It is important that the museums place themselves in such a platform which is devoid of barriers resulting from cast, creed, race, age, literacy, etc. and the best way to achieve this is to collaborate with academic institutions and communities.

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