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Title:

What does a museum mean?

A narrative approach to museum impact
Abstract

This paper presents ‘narrative’ as a theoretically informed qualitative perspective to explore and substantiate such abstract concept as ‘museum impact’. It argues that the impact of museums is best understood via the meanings visitors make and negotiate in the long-term. This provides critical insights into what a museum visit means and how its impact is negotiated within time and space. I lay out the theoretical rationale and methodological approach for the research project underpinning this paper while future publications will provide empirical findings and theoretical conclusions.

Museums, impact and visitor research

‘More has been written about museums in the past decade’, according to Preziosi & Farago (2004:1), ‘than in the previous century’. The new museum’s purpose, responsibility and vital potential as a forum for debate as well as an agent of social change and cultural inclusion has been widely recognized, theorised and conceptualised. But does it work for and with the visitor, the central focus of the new museology, in practice? Research on the long-term impact of museums on visitors, and thus on society, has been largely neglected and consequently we are not able to answer ‘the question we must ultimately ask ourselves’, as Weil reminds us: ‘do our museums make a real difference in, and do they have a positive impact on, the lives of other people?’ (Weil, as cited in Allen & Anson, 2005:159)

The impact of museums on society has also been widely theorized, but it equally lacks empirical evidence. Scott (2003) conducted a study among museum professionals and the public leading to the definition of indicators for museum impacts such as social capital, community building and developing, social change and public awareness, human capital and economic impact. Kelly’s (2006) research on the impact of small museums in their local communities as well as exhibitions
as contested sites and the roles of museums in contemporary society represent attempts to measure the impact of museums. Although empirically grounded these studies define potential indicators only. Scott (2003) demands that evidence is now required to support these claims. Anderson (2005: 21) highlights the need for a ‘new language’ to describe museum impacts and in this paper I argue that these are best understood via the lived museum experience with meanings being the required ‘new language’.

Even advanced research methods such as formative, front-end and summative evaluation are of provider-oriented nature and guided by the museum’s or researcher’s ‘system of relevancy’ (Wengraf, 2001). Results are solely compared to predetermined museum goals and fail to consider visitors’ actual experiences. In doing so, both museum and visitor research perpetuate the old reformist agenda of cultural institutions and pedagogic forms of democracy. The arbitrary and artificial dissection into neatly isolated subcategories such as ‘perceptual’, ‘cognitive’ and ‘affective’ is another tendency that ignores the complex and subjective nature of any human experience. Instead, I contend that there is constant interdependence, simultaneity and interpretation within the human experience and that, in Hennes’ (2002:14) words, the ‘world is composed of things connected together by myriad interrelated webs of meaning’.

**Meaning and narrative**

Lived experience can never be reduced to thoughts or ideas. However, it can be related to the totality of human existence through reflection…and thus it can be understood in its essence, that is, its meaning (Dilthey, as cited in Ferguson, 2006:103).

According to Ham (2006: 3), the ‘human experience…is purely and wholly a subjective mental phenomenon.’ Ham (2002: 14) further argues that ‘interpretation makes meaning, and in turn, these meanings define the experience that every visitor anywhere will ever have.’ Thus, what visitors think, feel and subsequently interpret constitutes their experience and the meanings they
make impact the memories they take away. This is the ‘only impact’ museums can have on its visitors (Ham, 2006: 2).

Silverman (1995: 162) reminds us that ‘humans share a basic need to express the meanings we make by telling them, often in the form of stories’. Several scholars have argued for this inherently human capacity of making sense and meaning of life experiences via narratives. Bruner (1990: 56) concludes that ‘the typical form of framing experience (and our memory of it) is in narrative form’ and Roberts (2002: 138) quotes Josselson:

> Narrative is the representation of process, of a self in conversation with itself and with its world over time. Narratives are not record of facts, of how things actually were, but of a meaning-making system that makes sense out of the chaotic mass of perceptions and experiences of a life.

The above literature, just like the vast majority of Western academic knowledge production, can rightfully be critiqued for its purely Western focus. However, Maori scholars such as Royal (2004) equally stress the central role of narrative in constructing reality and transmitting meaning, especially in oral cultures, and claim that it is a universal mode of thought and knowledge in all cultures.

*Narrative approach and method*

The biographical narrative approach therefore represents the most suitable methodology to understand meaning-making processes among humans. While ‘narrative’ is recognised as the most appropriate mode in museological representation and education for facilitating meaning making among visitors (O’ Neill, 2007; Roberts, 1997), it has rarely been used as a visitor research method (Allen, 2002; Paris & Mercer, 2002) and thus requires further attention within the social sciences in general as well as visitor studies in particular. Studies into the long-term impacts of museum experiences have been conducted within a learning or education context but narrative and biographical approaches are now required (Anderson, Storksdieck & Spock, 2007).
The primary method for the research project informing this paper is the semi-structured and in-depth narrative interview. The main advantage of this method to this study is that it avoids the findings, or knowledge claims, being ‘artificialised’ (Bruner, 1990) by the researcher’s ‘system of relevancy’ (Wengraf, 2001). Other available methods, even if of qualitative nature, are organised by the researcher and thus are more likely to lead to consciously constructed and, in the case of a controversial topic, socially desired responses (Davidson, 2006; Elliot, 2005). A narrative description instead leaves it up to the interviewee to retrospectively construct meanings. The researcher gets access to the subconscious level of a lived experience without pre-structuring or guiding the flow of the interview. Wengraf (2001: 115) confirms this methodological advantage by stating that

> precisely by what it assumes and therefore does not focus upon, narrative conveys tacit and unconscious assumptions and norms of the individual or of a cultural group. At least in some respect, they are less subject to the individual’s conscious control.

He proposes a three-stage analytical structure of biographical narrative interviews which was applied in this research project.

**Stage one:** the researcher asks a single question to initialise the interview and elicit the interviewee’s narrative. It must be made clear that the interviewer will not interrupt or prompt and any intervention must be of non-directional nature.

**Stage two:** following the narrative-eliciting question in stage one, in stage two ‘narrative-pointed questions’ will be asked, which are restricted to the topics and themes brought up by the interviewee and the order in which these were raised in stage one. This limited intervention and guidance by the researcher in stage one and two facilitates the ‘system of relevancy’ of the interviewee to reveal itself.

**Stage three:** the third and final stage is organised by the researcher’s ‘system of relevancy’ and asks ‘narrative-pointed’ or non-narrative questions to harmonise the narrative material of the first two stages with the research question.
Ideally this final session is conducted as a separate interview at a later date after analysing the first two stages. Wengraf (2001), however, highlights that any research design is a compromise and for pragmatic reasons I preferred to conduct one interview while maintaining the three ‘analytical subsessions’. The fact that I conducted follow-up interviews with the interviewees after six months in their respective home environment should outweigh such methodological limitation and was crucial for understanding the context-dependent ‘endemic fluidity of meaning’ (Bauman, as cited in Davidson, 2006).

*Narrative Analysis*

With its primary focus on the understanding of experiences and their interpretation from the perspective of the visitor and interviewee, this study is philosophically and sociologically informed by interpretive hermeneutics. However, I agree with Thompson (1981: 4) who states that ‘the problem of understanding cannot be divorced from considerations of explanation and critique, as both Ricoeur and Habermas insist’. Thompson refers to the inextricable link between philosophy and social science as well as the central social function of language and action in both traditions, hermeneutics and critical theory, and proposes a ‘critical hermeneutics’. Kincheloe & McLaren (2000: 288) support such argumentation and explain that

> researchers inject critical social theory into the hermeneutic circle to facilitate an understanding of the hidden structures and tacit cultural dynamics that insidiously inscribe social meanings and values.

The above introduced biographical narrative approach seeks an understanding of the individual in relation to its socio-cultural environment and thus of society within a socio-political and historical context. Sartre called for an appropriate method to study humans as ‘universal singulars’ (Denzin, 1989: 9) and the literature provides several examples of how the biographical narrative approach can shed light on the universal and particular dimensions of human experiences (Davidson, 2006; Denzin, 1989; Elliott, 2005; Roberts, 2002; Wengraf, 2001).
Sartre’s Progressive-Regressive Method (Denzin, 1989), which Denzin termed ‘critical-interpretive method’, as well as Pamphilion’s Zoom Model (Pamphilion, 1999) represent appropriate techniques for narrative analysis within this framework. Both analytic strategies situate the individual within wider socio-cultural, political and historical contexts. Sartre’s method moves the interpretation process progressively in time and space and reflects back on the various conditions affecting the experience studied. The temporal dimension of such analysis corresponds with the longitudinal design of this thesis. Pamphilion’s model reveals the multiple layers of meanings by focusing on the different levels of narratives – macro-zoom on the socio-cultural dimension, meso-zoom on the process of the individual story, micro-zoom on the oral dimensions of the story and interactional-zoom on the interviewer-interviewee-relationship.

Conclusion

I have laid out the theoretical rationale and methodological approach for a narrative exploration and of ‘museum impact’. Future publications of the underpinning research project will provide empirical findings and theoretical conclusions. The hermeneutic interpretation of visitors’ meanings negotiated via narratives provides a holistic picture of the museum experience. It facilitates the synthesis of specific individual as well as broad socio-cultural perspectives, by combining agency with discourse and fluid identities with interpretive communities. Visitors’ narratives substantiate the abstract concept ‘museum impact’ and provide insights into what a museum means - a decisive step towards answering the question we must ultimately ask ourselves’, as Weil reminds us: ‘do our museums make a real difference in, and do they have a positive impact on, the lives of other people?’ (Weil, as cited in Allen & Anson, 2005:159)

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Bibliography


