Visitors and learners: investigating adult museum learning identities

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Current theories of learning focus on the meanings an individual makes based on their experience—alone, within a social context and as part of a community (Matusov and Rogoff, 1995, Hein, 1998, Woolfolk, 1998, Malone, 1990, Falk and Dierking, 2000, Falk and Dierking, 1992). A critical aspect in better understanding the process of learning for an individual is to find out how people view themselves as learners across the rich array of both formal and informal learning experiences available to them. As informal learning environments museums and other cultural institutions are increasingly positioning themselves in the market as places for rich learning experiences. Research has shown that when asked why they visit museums and other cultural institutions people often say “to learn” (Falk, 1998, Falk et al., 1998, Prentice, 1998, Jansen-Verbeke and van Rekom, 1996, Combs, 1999, Kelly, 2001) but there has been little exploration into what learning means for visitors. What do museum visitors think learning is, how do visitors view themselves as learners within the context of a museum visit and does this change during and after their visit?

This paper reports on my doctoral study that investigated adult museum visitors’ learning identities defined as how an individual describes themselves as a learner within a sociocultural context, including future views of learning and the roles learning plays across a person’s life. The two research questions addressed were:

- What are the interrelationships between adult museum visitors’ views of learning and their learning experiences at a museum?
- How does a visit to a museum exhibition interact with an adult visitors’ learning identity?

Other areas examined included the relationship between learning, education and entertainment and how the roles adults play in a visit influence their learning identity. In this paper findings from the research are presented and the implications for museological practice outlined. Although this paper focusses on museums, the outcomes are very relevant to other cultural institutions with broad applicability to other informal learning environments.

Background

Museums have always seen themselves as having an educational role. Yet, more recently the need has been identified for a conceptual change from museums as places of education to places for learning, responding to the needs and interests of visitors (Bradburne, 1998, Carr, 2003, Falk and Dierking, 2000, Falk and Dierking, 1995, Hooper-Greenhill, 2003, Falk, 2004, Rennie and Johnston, 2004, Weil, 2002). Weil (1999) stated that museums need to transform...
themselves from ‘... being about something to being for somebody’ (p.229, emphasis in original). Hooper-Greenhill (2003) noted that the conceptual change from education to learning was an important development in the ways museums need to think about their visitors and provide services for them.

As learning is as a key issue for museums, there were a number of reasons identified why studying the word learning was needed. First, literature about why people visit museums revealed the overwhelming reason given was for some type of learning experience, usually described as education, getting information, expanding knowledge or doing something worthwhile in leisure. Often the word “learning” was used, which was linked to higher-order fulfilment of personal needs and enhancing self esteem (for a detailed list of references see Kelly, in preparation). There is a large body of literature about how people learn, where they learn, and what they learn, yet less has been published on what the word “learning” actually means as defined by the learner, especially in a museum context. A wide range of studies were found in the phenomenographical literature, as well as two studies with the general population (for a detailed list of references see Kelly, in preparation). To date, there has been little research that looked at learning from the learners’ perspective in a museum context, with only three studies sourced—one focussing on museum visitors (Combs, 1999) and two with staff (Environmetrics, 1998, Rowe, 1998).

The second reason was the potential confusion between the words “learning” and “education” (Falk et al., 1995). Prince (1990) investigated a range of attitudes and perceptions that were key to museum visiting. He argued that visitors’ previous experiences with museums, as well as with learning and education generally, determined whether people then visited museums and their responses to them. Prince suggested that if museums were perceived as “educational” this could be a deterrent, due to peoples’ past negative experiences with formal education. He proposed that people made positive choices to do things in their leisure time because they valued and enjoyed them. He then concluded that if people valued the concept of learning more highly than education museums may be doing themselves a disservice if they portrayed themselves as being educational.

A related issue is that entertainment as a concept has become problematic, with the belief that if museums were entertaining they were somehow “dumbing down” to the audience and not being as educational as they are expected to be (Kilian, 2001, Kimmelman, 2001, Kelly, 2003). However, can learning experiences in museums be both educational and entertaining? Do visitors think there are real or perceived differences between the concepts of learning, education and entertainment? Do they think that if museums offer entertaining experiences they are failing in their learning goals or dumbing down?

The third reason to study the word learning in museums is that it has been proposed that people who think about themselves as learners have better learning outcomes (Saljo, 1979,
Marton and Svensson, 1979, Taylor, 1996, Clarke, 1998, Pramling, 1996). These authors suggested that if learners thought about their learning rather than merely learning how to learn their learning outcomes would be better. Saljo (1979) concluded that the focus of research should be on how learners conceptualised their ways of thinking about learning rather than how they thought they learned and what they learned.

The issues described above suggest that it is vital to further understandings about how visitors describe learning and how they see themselves as learners within a museum context. Therefore, the purpose of my doctoral work was to understand the interrelationships between visitors’ views of learning and their museum learning experiences, summarised in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Research approach

The work was undertaken in two stages. **Stage One** investigated an individual's personal philosophy and views about learning. This stage comprised eight in-depth interviews and 100 questionnaires with adult museum visitors. As well, a telephone survey of 300 Sydney adults using two areas from the questionnaires was conducted to compare responses of museum visitors with the general population. **Stage Two** explored whether engagement with a museum exhibition had any effect on visitors' learning identities. Ten groups of visitors were interviewed before and after a visit to the *Uncovered: Treasures of the Australian Museum* exhibition. Their conversations were audio-taped and detailed behavioural observations undertaken during the visit.
Literature findings

As shown in Figure 1, there were two major areas of literature accessed—learning theory, with an emphasis on perceptions of learning and education; and identity, with a focus on museums. The literature review demonstrated a view of learning as a creative process of change in a person at an individual, social and community level. Although learning is complex with many interrelated factors, the essential elements found consistently across the literature reviewed was that learning is both unique to an individual and a shared process. Learning occurs across all facets of a person’s life and is both immediate and happens over time and across contexts. Learning is an active process of reflection leading to self-awareness and change, an activity chosen by an individual based on their own interests and preferences. It is shaped by a person’s prior knowledge and experiences, being creative, innovative and enjoyable. Learning is facilitated by a wide range of tools—a dynamic between a person and “something”. Motivation and purpose are key components of learning, with the social dimensions of learning being critical. Learning is an essential part of being human, is both conscious and unconscious, and linked to identity and sense of self.

In contrast, the literature suggested that education was passive; formal; being told to do something; imposed, not chosen; associated negatively with school and teachers; hard work; structured and systematic. For example, Taylor and Spencer (1994) reported that, when comparing education to learning, one respondent in their study commented ‘Learning is you doing it and education is somebody doing it to you’ (p.5, emphasis added).

Identity is a concept that has received increased attention across a range of research disciplines (Sfard and Prusak, 2005, du Guy et al., 2000, Kidd, 2002, Maslow, 1999, Falk, 2006, Rounds, 2006). Identity is a political term related to power and conflict (Hall, 1996), while Wenger (1998) considered that identity addressed issues of participation, inclusion and exclusion. There is a large literature dealing with identity, as well as the politics of identity, across diverse fields such as sociology (Kidd, 2002), educational psychology and personality theory (Shaffer, 1979, Vânder Zanden and Pace, 1984, Pervin, 1984) and cultural studies (Hall and du Guy, 1996, du Guy et al., 2000).

The concept of identity has been recognised as a tool that can be used in educational research as a framework for analysis (Gee, 2001). My study focussed on identity as a way of defining how people described themselves as learners in relation to their world and to others, in conjunction with a range of demographic and cultural factors. As identity is a very complex notion, with a number of debates surrounding the use of the term across a range of contexts including museums (Rounds, 2006, Falk, 2006, Spock, 2006, Leinhardt and Knutson, 2004), the literature I reviewed focussed on descriptions of identity that informed Stage Two of the study.
From a synthesis of the identity literature reviewed, it was concluded that identity is how a person sees themselves in relation to their world and their role in it. It is fluid, being shaped by the social context and membership of a community. Identity changes across a person’s life cycle, based on a range of factors such as age, gender, cultural background, socioeconomic status and general life experience. Identity is an integral part of a person’s personality and how others see them. Identity not only influences who a person is now, but also how a person behaves and conceives themselves in the future. It is what makes people different from one another—how a person thinks, behaves, perceives themselves and their role that differentiates themselves from others. Wenger (1998) saw identity as ‘… an integral aspect of a social theory of learning … a pivot between the social and the individual’ (p.145).

It has been recognised that a visit to a museum can influence a person’s identity and their sense of self (Leinhardt et al., 2002, Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, Falk, 2006, Rounds, 2006, Leinhardt and Gregg, 2002). The interplay between the backgrounds that visitors bring and their reactions to objects and experiences can lead to subtle changes in views of themselves, their identity and meaning making, both individually and collectively (Hein, 1998, Silverman, 1995, Stainton, 2002). Rounds (2006) suggested that visitors use museums for “identity work”, defined as ‘… the processes through which we construct, maintain, and adapt our sense of personal identity, and persuade other people to believe in that identity’ (p.133). Sfard and Prusak (2005) argued that learning played a key role in shaping identities.

**Research findings**

Three areas of the research findings are discussed in this paper—a model of museum learning developed from visitors’ responses to the word learning; the relationship between learning, education and entertainment; and the relationship between adult visitors’ learning identities and their museum experience.

1. **5P model of museum learning**

From an analysis of all data sets, overall it was found that a person's learning identity was fluid, strongly influenced by the context of a visit and the roles they play during the visit. Strong support emerged for learning as meaning making; social learning; physical learning and learning based on a person's interests, choices and motivations. Also, there was a general recognition of the key roles that prior knowledge and experience played in learning.

Following a fresh look at the literature in conjunction with the study findings I framed museum learning under five interrelated categories—person, people, place, purpose and process, which I called the **5P model of museum learning** (Figure 2). The model is not intended to simplify the concept of learning; rather it attempts to integrate the vast literature with findings.
from my study. Many elements of the model are closely linked and hard to separate, with the connections between them emerging from the Stage Two data.

**Figure 2. 5P model of museum learning**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERSON</th>
<th>PURPOSE</th>
<th>PROCESS</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>prior knowledge</td>
<td>motivation</td>
<td>“doing something”:</td>
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<tr>
<td>experience</td>
<td>interests</td>
<td>• gathering</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>role</td>
<td>enjoyment</td>
<td>• choosing</td>
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<td>gender</td>
<td>change</td>
<td>• understanding</td>
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<tr>
<td>cultural background</td>
<td>choice</td>
<td>• applying</td>
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<tr>
<td>lived history</td>
<td></td>
<td>• linking</td>
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<tr>
<td>personal interest</td>
<td></td>
<td>• discovering</td>
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<tr>
<td>personal change</td>
<td></td>
<td>• assimilating</td>
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<tr>
<td>meaning making</td>
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<td>• acquiring</td>
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<td>seeing in different way</td>
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The category of **person** relates to the individual learner, their prior knowledge, experience and lived histories; their cultural backgrounds and gender; as well as the roles played at different times in their everyday lives. It also covers individual changes that result from learning through meaning making and seeing things in different ways. The framework of constructivism, with its emphasis on the learner (Fosnot, 2005, Hein, 1998, Woolfolk, 1998) is the theoretical construct that underlies the person category. The aspects of constructivism strongly supported were learning that builds on what people already know; personal interest; personal change and seeing something in a different way. When describing learning the role that prior knowledge played was also mentioned:

- **Expanding your knowledge, a new aspect on life** (Interview #11).
- **An expansion of what you already know** (Interview #47).
- **New things that add to your body of knowledge** (Interview #78).

Museums have been described as socially-mediated meaning making environments (Falk and Dierking, 2000). People make meaning from their museum experiences in many different ways based on a conjunction between what the museum provides and the social norms of the group they visit with (Fienberg and Leinhardt, 2002). The study suggested strong support for learning as meaning making. For example, 82% of Museum visitors rated the statement **Constructing meaning based on my own experiences** as important/very important in learning.
something new. In the open-ended responses participants talked about learning as a process of gaining some knowledge, thinking about it and then making new meanings. For example, learning was described as making sense of something in order to draw conclusions and reach new understandings:

- **Finding your place in the world. Engaging with the world in a way to discover more about it and make sense of things. That’s the big picture** (Interview #40).
- **Gaining ideas and knowledge which then enables you to gain understanding** (Interview #68).
- **Being able to put pieces of information together [to] draw conclusions** (Interview #71).

**People** is the social dimension of learning. A range of people involved in learning were identified by participants, including family; friends/colleagues/work peers; and professionals such as museum staff, teachers, and university lecturers. Learning that is community-based within a “community of practice” (Lave and Wenger, 1991) is also covered by this dimension. The role of people in learning has been well recognised in the learning literature (for a detailed list of references see Kelly, in preparation). Morrissey (2002) reported that adults exhibited learning behaviours that were group-based, resulting in people learning ‘… about each other while they learn through each other’ (p.285, emphasis in original).

Those interviewed in-depth felt that the social dimension of a visit was an important way that learning happened through people’s interactions with others in the group and the roles they played in a museum visit. The recognition that family and the general community were valuable learning units was a particularly strong result. When discussing their museum experiences participants recognised that they learned with and through others—learning about themselves and others, as well as the subject matter. In-depth interviewees talked about interacting with both the content of the exhibition and the other people in the group they had visited with. For example, one discussed the nature of the learning between himself and his friends as a social event: … *sometimes we’d bounce off something of interest to ourselves, then we’d look at it a bit more, wander off. Then we’d come together a few times to have a look at things. I also learned a bit more about my friends. I didn’t know they had an interest in [tattoos] either, and you sort of learn more of what they’re about as well.* (Interview Transcript 3.4, 24/02/01).

The learning that this participant talked about was both personal and social, with a resulting change in attitudes and seeing things in a different way: *You have this stereotype about people who’ve got tattoos and it really gives you a different perspective on it … I probably just thought it was an abuse to your body, sort of, beforehand … And since then, like, when people have piercings I just look at it, not stare at it, and think about where they got it, what sort of thing they had done.* (Interview Transcript 3.4, 24/02/01).
Process includes the myriad ways that learning actually happens. The words listed in the 5P model under process were used by participants, demonstrating the enormous diversity in the ways people described the learning process. Across all samples learning was expressed as an everyday process undertaken by all humans. It was seen as a way of acquiring and gathering something, for example, information, skills or knowledge, and doing something with it, such as understanding, applying, expanding, discovering, assimilating, experiencing and exploring. Learning was associated with change, both profound and surface, as well as engaging with facts and ideas. Learning was also mentioned as a cognitive process (inside a person’s head) and a physical process (such as a hands-on, manipulative experience). Some examples of responses that illustrated process were:

- Opening the mind to new experience (Interview #4).
- Acquiring new knowledge and applying that (Interview #5).
- Expanding your knowledge about an area by a variety of means (Interview #11).
- An understanding of how things work (Interview #42).

Purpose includes the motivations behind learning—a person’s general interests; enjoyment and fun; choosing learning and learning for change. Purpose is closely related to the person and the process of learning. The issue of choice, particularly when comparing learning with education, was one area participants felt strongly about. The differences seemed to lie in the word teach which was associated with being “talked to” or “told to do something” in an educational sense, and the word learn that was connected with personal choice. Choice was seen as an important way of facilitating learning, for example: Obviously [learning is] something that’s not boring, something that’s not passive, so it’s more of an active thing … Something where you choose to be involved, that you’re interested in doing. (Interview Transcript 3.1, 22/11/00).

Place covers where learning happens. While learning was viewed as contextual and occurs across all aspects of a person’s life there were specific places nominated by individuals when thinking about where they learned. These included the formal education environments of school, university and libraries and informal places such as cultural institutions and the environment/nature (specifically holiday and travel destinations which was very strong in Stage Two), for example in this conversation between a mother and her two children:

Eddie. Look at the seahorses.
Cath. Like the one in the salt water.
Bree. They’re just so cute and they swim along…
Eddie. I’d hate to be bitten by these fish, look at the teeth!
Cath. But they don’t normally attack. … When we go to Port Stephens next week we should go and find the white seahorses. Wouldn’t that be mad if we see one and we go, that’s a white seahorse. The guy’s going to just look at us [and go] how do you know that!

(Conversation Transcript F5, 30/09/2004)
2. Learning compared with education and entertainment

One of the research areas was how learning, education and entertainment were described and whether there was a relationship between them, as it had been suggested that the word “learning” may be confused with “education” and therefore be negatively perceived. It was found that although the concepts of learning, education and entertainment shared some similar characteristics, there were five major differences between them.

The first was that responses to the word learning were more varied than for education and entertainment. Second, the general language used to explain each concept differed. More active words were used to talk about learning, such as discovering, exploring, applying and experiencing. Museum visitors in the study described education in more concrete ways, including words and phrases such as “structured/formal” and “something you are told to do/tell others to do”. Third, previous research established that people had generally negative views of education as a passive process over which they had no control (Taylor and Spencer, 1994). Across my samples I found that the negative views of education emanated from the perceived lack of choice it offered. Fourth, although there were differences in the language used to describe these concepts, there was still an appreciation of the role that education played in both acquiring facts and information, and in delivering learning. Education and learning were closely linked in people’s minds, with education leading to learning and learning being a part of education. Education was not seen as necessarily negative, just different—something we all have to experience at some stage of our learning lives.

The fifth difference emerged when comparing entertainment with learning. Entertainment was described as fleeting, short-term, a good time, with the recognition that the medium or delivery mechanism (such as film, videos and multimedia programs) formed an important part of the entertainment experience. In contrast, people felt that learning used your brain, built on previous knowledge, was long-term and could be entertaining as well. A strong finding was that descriptions of entertainment included words and phrases that were based on feelings and emotions in contrast to learning and education.

Compared with other literature that has discussed entertainment in museums (Roberts, 2001, Moore, 1997, Witcomb, 2003, Roberts, 1997, Combs, 1999), it was concluded that learning, education and entertainment were related in positive ways (Figure 3).
From this model it is suggested that the *museum experience* links the three concepts. Museums have a strong learning focus, with the educational role being one way to deliver museum learning, and entertainment representing the enjoyment, leisure, emotional and sensory aspects of a museum visit. In relation to the 5P model of museum learning described earlier, I propose that education is a *process* that occurs within a defined *place*. It is a formal way of delivering learning, grounded in sites such as schools, adult education courses and universities. Entertainment also happens within a defined *place*, either real or imaginary, yet is *person*-centred—being sensory, escapist and relaxing, undertaken both individually and with others. Learning, while it involves other *people*, is essentially an individual *process* that happens inside a person’s head and at their own instigation. It is also *place*-centred, occurring across a broad range of contexts, both formal and informal.

## 3. Learning and identity

As the literature review revealed, learning is an integral part of a person’s *identity* (Sfard and Prusak, 2005, Rounds, 2006). The adult museum visitors in this study tailored their learning style to suit their particular situation, rather than seeking learning experiences that matched how they stated that they liked to learn. In this sense learning was an adaptive process, both a structured and unstructured experience, where learners used a set of tools in accordance with both their learning identity as well as the sociocultural context. For example, in a museum visit how an individual saw themselves and the role they played within the social and physical environment influenced both how they experienced the museum as a learner, as well...
as what they were learning. Stage Two focussed on adult museum visitors’ learning identities with three broad outcomes emerging.

First, participants gained new insights into their learning identities in three ways:

• their learning identity changed through discovering new ways of learning
• their learning identity did not change as the exhibition matched it
• their learning identity did not change because the exhibition reinforced how they did not want to learn.

A second outcome from Stage Two was that visitors played three roles during a visit. These roles were interchangeable, occurred simultaneously, were closely linked to the process of learning and were dependant on the social context of the visit and the composition of the group, particularly the ages of accompanying children. The roles were—the “visit manager” by directing and organising; the “museum expert” through explaining, clarifying and correcting; and the “learning-facilitator” through questioning, linking, reminiscing and wondering. A second strong outcome was that all groups shared their learning during their visit, evidenced from the conversation transcripts:

Rick. Hey Kate look at these ones, how’s that for a shell?
Kate. That’s an unusual one.
Toni. That’s beautiful.
Kate. Were shells alive, are shells alive?
Rick. They’ve got things inside them.
Toni. Molluscs in them.
Kate. But are the actual shells alive?
Toni. No.
Rick. They’re a shell.
Toni. I think the shell is the shell of the mollusc that originally lived in them, like a snail.
Kate. So they’re part of something?
Toni. They’re part of something that was, yes.

(Conversation Transcript C3, 29/09/2004)

The final outcome was the variety of ways that adult visitors linked to their past, present and future life experiences. Many examples were found of adults using objects they saw in the exhibition as triggers that linked to previous life events, often holidays and other “environmental” experiences, for example:

Kate. Are they stick insects?
Toni. Some of them are. That’s at the end of Lord Howe Island, Ball’s Pyramid.
Kate. Did we sail past that?
Toni. We didn’t sail past that but we flew nearby. You could see it from the top of the mountain Daddy climbed. Look at the frogs. Look at the size of those. Not like our piddly little ones.

Kate. Like that small one? [points]

Toni: Ours would be like that.

(Conversation Transcript C3, 29/09/2004)

**Implications for museums using the 5P model of museum learning**

Museum learning is a dynamic process dependant on the individual and their environment within a social context and a community of practice. It is focussed on some change in a person through inspiring individuals to find out more and changing how they see themselves and their world. It is a positive process, well-regarded and appreciated by individuals. The findings imply that museum learning experiences are enhanced through giving attention to the learner and the multiple roles they play in a visit; the social context in which they operate; the objects and tools the museum provides; and the interpretive approaches employed within the 5P framework of person, people, place, purpose and process further discussed below.

**Person**

- Encourage visitors to think of themselves as learners and open them to new ways of seeing themselves as learners.
- Recognise that a person’s learning identity is fluid and changes during their visit.
- Appreciate the multiple roles a person plays at various times during the one visit.
- Understand the general nature of learners’ prior knowledge, experiences and interests through a rigorous program of front-end evaluation.
- Facilitate the capacity for visitors to apply information to a variety of other contexts and life experiences.
- Recognise that people construct their own narratives and make their own meanings, which may be different to those intended by the exhibition developers.

**People**

- Recognise that visits are mediated experiences with knowledgeable others who facilitate discussion and sharing of opinions and understandings.
- Design exhibitions that encourage conversation and promote group interaction and group activities, yet also allow for private reflection.
- Appreciate that different people in a group play different roles, and some individuals play more than one role at any one time.
- Recognise and reinforce that everyone learns in an exhibition and that learning can be from “simple” facts; to aesthetic appreciation; to deep change in attitudes, behaviours or self-perceptions.
- For adults accompanying children:
Provide rest spaces throughout exhibitions where “visit management” can take place (such as plenty of chairs, resting and eating spaces, as well as activities to distract cranky, bored children).

Provide guides/texts with conversation starters and information detailing key messages of an exhibition.

Process

- Provide access to collection objects and other real material to actively use and manipulate.
- Use objects that make an impact on visitors—big or tiny; unusual or familiar; bizarre or mundane.
- Provide layered information and personal stories behind objects, as well as access to curators who work on the collections.
- Plan for diverse modes of presentation for self-direction and choice in interpretive styles and levels of information provided.
- Provide opportunities for visitors to engage in critical thinking and questioning, with exhibitions that raise questions, yet also point to answers.
- Present multiple points of view to enable visitors to reach their own conclusions and make their own meanings.

Purpose

- Recognise that people visit museums to learn, to be educated and to be entertained in an exciting and stimulating environment; that is enjoyable for them and all members of their group.
- Give the learner choice and control over their museum experience and their learning through providing multiple pathways through an exhibition.
- Make exhibitions relevant by making explicit why it is important to know something.

Place

- Provide a relaxed physical environment that is welcoming and enjoyable, as well as sensual and stimulating.
- Make links from unfamiliar to familiar places that visitors have been and shared as a group.
- Design activities and material that can be accessed after a visit for further exploration and discovery at the learners’ own pace and discretion.
- Use the internet as an information resource to provide deeper layers of content accessible either on-site or off-site.
Conclusion

As people access a huge range of places when learning, museums need to position themselves as unique and accessible learning settings where visitors can experience the real and be together in an enjoyable, safe environment. My study found that museums can shape adult visitors’ learning identities. Through access to objects and information visitors see reflections of themselves and their culture in ways that encourage new connections, meaning making and changes to their learning identity. When given the opportunity to articulate their personal views about learning, adult museum visitors revealed wide-ranging and deep understandings of themselves as learners. These are fluid and shaped by the sociocultural context of the museum in conjunction with the multiple roles people play in a visit. The literature review revealed that visitors learn a great deal from museums across a diverse range of content areas and at many different levels. However, I also concluded that visitors could learn more about the concept of learning as well as their own learning processes if they were encouraged to think about their learning identity before they engaged with an exhibition.
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