Everyone Has a Story to Tell

Exploring the Associations and Connections Made by Visitors at a Zoo, Art Gallery and Two Museums

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I dedicate this thesis to the memory of Valda & King. I know you were both very proud when I began this journey and I just wish you were still around to see me complete it!
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Statement of Authentication

This thesis is submitted in order to fulfil the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the School of Social Sciences/Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney.

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part, for a degree at this or any other institution.

_______________________________________

Ashley D Harris
March 2010
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Abstract

Interpretation is commonly associated with communicating and revealing to visitors the natural, cultural and heritage significance of a landscape. Many definitions of interpretation imply that visitors will learn something as a result of the site’s interpretation. This thesis challenges this assumption and argues that visitors’ learning at sites is far more complex and unpredictable than indicated by the interpretation definitions. Although this thesis is concerned with the role of interpretation and visitor research at a variety of heritage, natural and cultural sites, museums have been at the forefront of the literature and research regarding education and learning and therefore much of the literature cited is from a museum context.

Communication in museums is no longer seen as a one-way transmission from sender to receiver, curator to visitor. Yet a significant proportion of visitor research still operates within a behavioural psychology paradigm that concentrates on learning outcomes of a museum visit. This research fails to capture the complexity of visitor learning at the point of interaction. Learning is a process as much as it is a product and in the museum context it is important to understand the how of visitors learning by investigating the meaning-making and interpretive strategies of the visitor. Drawing on past experiences and prior knowledge is now commonly accepted as crucial to visitor learning in the museum environment. However, very little learning related research in the museum has concentrated solely on the role of prior knowledge in the meaning-making process. This thesis attempts to correct this imbalance and as others have done in the museum world, literary theory is used to analyse and explain the interpretive strategies of the visitor.

Through research carried out at four separate institutions the thesis tackles the learning process as it appears in visitor’s conversations. The data illustrates that making connections and associations to prior knowledge and prior experiences appears to be a common meaning-making strategy regardless of the type of site. Being able to communicate these personal connections to the social group one is visiting with is a significant component of the meaning-making process. This thesis argues for a panoptic view of learning that includes personal associations, memories and social interactions, in addition to the information related outcomes so frequently associated with the museum visit.
The thesis positions the visitor experience as an intertextual construct. Learning ensues from the museum interpretation in conjunction with a myriad of external knowledge and experiences that are introduced through the visitor's personal stories and conversations. These contingent aspects cannot be accurately captured by research that focuses on the learning outcomes post-visit. The thesis concludes with an analysis of the practical implications of prior knowledge and more specifically a description of the *A Day in the life of Pompeii* exhibition mounted by the Melbourne Museum.
Chapter 1

Interpretation at natural, cultural and heritage sites: An introduction

“Interpretation is produced in the tradition of what we think ‘they’ need to know”
(Gwynne, 2007: 53).

“Interpreters rarely seem to come clean and admit that the interpretation of a place, event or phenomenon is precisely that – an interpretation. In other words, the past as presented is one interpretation among many possible interpretations. Stories are told as if they are true, as if there is only one way of understanding” (Uzzell, 1994: 296).
It is a brutally cold July morning and the park has only just opened. Today I am observing visitors as they enter or walk past exhibit 1 in the Desert Rivers habitat. I am excited, yet uncertain, of how successful the research will be. Twenty minutes passes until the first signs, or rather sounds, of the visitors. I hear them well before they arrive as they stop at a sign 20 metres up the track. I prepare myself, clipboard in hand. The exhibit is a small concrete shelter with an aviary attached. There is a larger window allowing visitors to observe the birds. On each of the walls is some form of static interpretation: signs describing the species of birds; flip panels explaining the different shaped beaks of birds and how this relates to the food they eat; and a mural painted by the Alice Springs artist Kaye Kessing that takes up an entire wall. As the visitors draw closer to the exhibit I face the aviary and pretend to watch the birds. It is a young couple, possibly in their thirties, with two young boys. The father is immediately drawn to the aviary and takes delight in helping his boys spot the birds. The mother watches briefly before turning and engaging with the static interpretation. She calls her boys over to help her with the flip panels. The father continues with his bird watching. After ten minutes they leave the exhibit. I am left wondering: why did the father not engage with any of the interpretation? Did the mother interact with the interpretation for her children’s benefit and not her own interest?

Another ten minutes goes by before the next visitor appears. I resume my ‘fake visitor’ position in front of the aviary in anticipation of their arrival. It never comes. I poke my head outside of the shelter to see a couple, probably in their late fifties or early sixties, walking down the path. Why did they not enter the exhibit? Were they headed somewhere else? I consulted the park’s schedule that’s included with the visitor map. The time was nearing 8.30am so maybe they were headed for the first presentation. Would they come back later to visit the exhibit?

These field notes, taken from an evaluation of the Alice Springs Desert Park interpretation program (Harris, 2005), illustrate the difficulties in analysing visitors’ experiences using observation as the only method. The research raised more questions than it could answer, many relating to the same issue: how do the visitors’ worldviews, values, prior experiences and prior knowledge influence what they look at, where they go and what they discuss? The current research attempts to answer this question.
Interpretation: What is it and how is it defined?

The term interpretation, in the context of what tourist sites such as the Alice Springs Desert Park deliver to visitors, was founded in the United States in the 1930's coinciding with the National Park movement. Interpretation was initially used by the National Park Services in the US to show the visitors the significance of the natural and cultural resources (Merriman & Brochu, 2006). In 1957 the term gained greater prominence with the publication of Freeman Tilden’s *Interpreting our Heritage* (1977). It has become the ‘bible’ for interpreters and is still widely quoted in most literature concerning interpretation. Although the US National Park Services first used the term *interpretation*, the activity had been the domain of museums and early tourism since the 19th century (Roberts, 1997).

Interpretation is an integral component of the management of most culturally and historically significant sites, zoos and aquariums, and major tourism destinations and cities. It has been recognised as a way of giving meaning to a landscape and used to add value to a site in order to increase visitor satisfaction, raise awareness of important preservation and conservation issues and for general marketing purposes (Uzzell, 1994). Although no universal definition of interpretation exists, most definitions share similar themes. For example:

Interpretation is a means of communicating ideas and feelings which helps people enrich their understanding and appreciation of their world, and their role within it (Interpretation Australia Association cited in McArthur & Hall, 1996: 90).

Interpretation is the process of making something understandable or of giving something a special meaning........The meanings most closely related to the museological use of interpretation are to offer an explanation about something, or to translate objects and knowledge into a ‘language’ the visitor can understand (Edson & Dean, 1994: 171).

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1 See Merriman and Brochu (2006) for a detailed history of interpretation in the USA.
2 For a comprehensive discussion of the use of Tilden in interpretation see Staiff (2008). The impact of Tilden’s ideas on the progression of the field is beyond the scope of this thesis. However, a recent survey of interpretation literature was carried out for the purposes of other research. In this survey of 338 items (199 journal articles, 38 books, and 101 book chapters) 20% made reference to Tilden. It must be said that because Tilden’s work was based on communicating in national parks and outdoor sites, literature relating to museums very rarely cites Tilden and 49% of the work cited in this survey came from a museum context (165 items: 94 journal articles, 19 books, and 52 book chapters).
The translation of historic, cultural and natural phenomena so that the audience can better understand and enjoy them (Knudson, Cable & Beck, 1995: xvi).

Interpretation is the act or process of explaining or clarifying, translating, or presenting a personal understanding about a subject or object (Dean, 1994: 6).

Interpretation tells the story behind the scenery or history of an area. It is a process that can help see beyond their capabilities (Beck & Cable, 2002: 3).

These definitions imply that for the visitor to truly understand the site they require the interpreters’ explanation. Do visitors passively accept the interpreters’ explanation as implied in these definitions? Do they not have their own ideas and feelings? Are they not themselves active ‘interpreters’ of the site? These definitions suggest that the site being interpreted is the only source available on the subject matter and that visitors’ prior knowledge of the site is inadequate. Far from being the case it is unlikely that visitors arrive with little prior knowledge, as information has never been more readily accessible as it is in today’s society. It is this role or view of interpretation this thesis argues against.

Interpretation is also considered by some as the delivery of messages (Aldridge, 1989). Will visitors pick up on the message delivered? And what happens if they don’t, can they still understand and enjoy their experience? Chapter four will demonstrate that visitors can and do enjoy their experience without engaging with a sites ‘message’. Of course the goal of interpretation is not always to deliver targeted messages. Interpretation at an art gallery is significantly different to that of a zoo or national park where delivering a message to influence or change attitudes and behaviour is the intention. Different museums also use interpretation differently. The Holocaust Museum in Washington DC, for example, has a completely different focus to that of a science museum. This dissertation attempts to bring the different worlds of the different sites together.

Research conducted across multiple sites is complex as each site has its own history, its own set of conventions and languages. What this research demonstrates is that visitors do not necessarily ‘interpret’ differently in a museum as they do at a zoo. The institutions make these distinctions between themselves because of their history and culture but visitors do not necessarily make such distinctions. Chapter seven explores
the challenges that zoos face in getting their message across to visitors and the implications for how interpretation is conducted at such sites.

Interpretation, as a method of delivering messages or intended meanings, is therefore commonly associated with education:

Interpretation has been defined as the attempt to create understanding. I agree, provided that the word ‘understanding’ is seen to have an active quality. There should be a positive educational element in what we do. We should offer the means of understanding and a springboard for further study (Rumble, 1989: 27).

Interpretation is an educational activity that aims to reveal meanings about our cultural and natural resources. Through various media……interpretation enhances our understanding, appreciation, and, therefore, protection of historic sites and natural wonders (Beck & Cable, 2002: xi).

It is the relationship between education, interpretation and the visitor experience that provides the platform for this study. It is a relationship that has received much attention in the museum world (Falk & Dierking, 1992; Hooper-Greenhill, 1994a; 1994b; Roberts, 1997; Hein, 1998; Falk & Dierking, 2000; Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). While interested in the broader context of interpretation at all natural, cultural and heritage sites, museums are at the forefront of this research and literature from the museum context will dominate much of the discussion.³

Museum education

Although the term interpretation at heritage, cultural and natural sites is founded from the conservation movement in the national parks in the US, but in reality the concept is a reflection of what museums have been doing for decades prior. It is not the intention to provide an in-depth history of education in museums, as others have done this previously (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994a; 1994b; Roberts, 1997). It is important, however,

³ For this chapter museums, heritage sites, zoos and art galleries are treated as separate entities. From chapter two onwards the term museum will be used to refer to all of these sites as a collective.
to briefly outline the shifts that have occurred in the educational role of the museum to demonstrate how their relationship with the visiting public has also changed.¹

In the 19th century museums were established for the purposes of knowledge acquisition and for people to educate themselves (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994b). During this time the display of the museums collection and the educational activities were performed in unison. A change took place in the 1920’s with the two functions separated and education became the domain of specialised staff (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994b). Up until the 1960’s, displaying collections was a matter of filling cabinets with objects. However, as education became a distinct professional role in the museum, those responsible began to fight for the rights and needs of visitors. The end of the 1960’s brought with it a concern for how objects were presented and how visitors might understand the exhibitions they were looking at. Nevertheless, it wasn’t until the 1990’s that a real interest was shown in how visitors interpret the museum environment. This represented a shift from “static storehouses for artefacts into active learning environments for people” (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994b: 1). With these active learning environments came the recognition that the personal contribution of the visitor was more important than the simple transmission model of communication that had dominated the early museums (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999b).

This new focus in communication and education brought with it a new set of issues: finding the appropriate balance between the needs of the institution and the needs of the visitor. Highly contested within museum practice and theory has been the relationship between education and entertainment and what gets delivered to visitors. In other words, are visitors there to be educated or to enjoy themselves? This has been an on-going debate since the very first museums and can be traced back to the 1800’s where museums were established as purely didactic institutions that presented the ‘respectable’ ideals of the wealthy parts of society (Roberts, 1997). In the 1800’s attendance rates were dropping and museums found themselves in a fight for survival that led to the motto “we must amuse as well as instruct” (Roberts, 1997: 24). The 1830’s saw museums turn to “one-man bands, trained dogs, ventriloquists, and the obligatory freaks of nature” (Roberts, 1997: 24) to attract visitors. The two positions of

¹The word education first appeared in the museum vernacular in the US (Roberts, 1997). Therefore, much of the history will be taken from this context.
scholarship (research, display and collections) and popularization (the need to attract visitors by appealing to them) were pitted against each other.

The polarization of the two activities of scholarship and attracting audiences was repeated almost 80 years later with the emergence of the world expositions or world fairs. Again the struggle to compete forced museums into more enterprising and effective ways of displaying their collections:

Well-conceived interpretation became the key to museums’ success and the battleground for competing institutions. Lectures, tours, demonstrations, and even labels had been employed to varying degrees in the nations early museums. In the early twentieth century, they became staples (Roberts, 1997: 30).

Survival and the need to attract more visitors has been the catalyst for the innovative entertainment aspects of contemporary exhibitions. In the era of mass-communication and burgeoning technology museums are still criticised for selling out, over popularizing, and for introducing theme-park elements to exhibition design (Roberts, 1997). The education versus entertainment debate in the contemporary museum is made more complex by the conflicting roles of curators and educators. Wehner and Sear (2010) illustrate the conflict that occurs:

We – the curatorial staff – tend to understand exhibitions as open, performative environments in which meaning, or rather multiple meanings, are created as visitors observe and interrogate displayed objects and recognize and construct relationships between object elements, drawing on both new and known knowledge. We are not too worried about visitors ‘learning’ any one idea…………we tend to talk about the exhibition as a creative environment designed to be a social experience that stimulates the imaginations, the senses and the emotions. In contrast, some of our colleagues in Education and Public Programs tend to see exhibitions as educational technologies which should convey to visitors some authoritative knowledge about Australian history. They are focused on what visitors ‘learn’ from exhibitions in terms of conceptual, propositional and generalized knowledge (151).
On the one hand museum educators are maintaining their fight for visitors’ rights but at the same time fighting to keep the educational integrity of the museum in the face of the ‘theme-park’ criticisms:

After all, it was only a few short years ago that educators were defending museums’ popular use and appeal against pure curatorial science. Now many found themselves in their old adversaries’ shoes as they fought for serious, knowledge-based instruction against what increasingly came to be viewed as frivolous, popular entertainment. Argument about ‘popularization versus scholarship’ had shifted into an argument about ‘entertainment versus education (Roberts, 1997: 39).

Museum education remains a delicate balancing act of the traditional roles of scholarship and collection based research, in combination with the needs of the audience. The difficulty is that the role of the curator and educator often contradict the goals of the visiting public:

This uncleanness on the part of visitors is duplicated by museum educators, who are sometimes perplexed by their clients incidental or ‘wildcat’ learning of things unrelated to the explicit purpose of exhibits. Regrettably, self-initiated learning forays by imaginative visitors are seen as a failure of an exhibitions objectives (Hein, 2000: 125).

These incidental aspects of the visitor experience are documented in chapter four. The question remains: is ‘wildcat’ learning, unrelated or peripheral to the museum content, really a failure of the exhibition? Chapter six argues that not only is this not a failure of the museum, nor is it a negative outcome, instead learning as defined in the museum context should include such incidentals. Coming to terms with this type of learning has represented a major challenge for an institution that has a history of maintaining control and authority over the knowledge and meaning created within their walls. In light of these changes the use of the word education has come into question (Kavanagh, 1990; Roberts, 1997; Hooper-Greenhill, 2006).
Education or learning?

Education, commonly linked with the formal sector of schooling and gaining qualifications, has more recently, in museums, been substituted for the term learning which is seen as corresponding more to the individual:

In ‘learning’, visitors engage actively with the museum and its exhibitions, pursue activities according to their own tastes and interact with objects, information and other people in order to make sense of themselves and the world around them. In contrast, ‘education’ is a passive activity in which the museum systematically imparts information to visitors (Wehner & Sear, 2010: 151).

More than a semantic shift in terms, it reflects the change in museum communication techniques from one-way transmission to embracing the visitor’s own interpretive processes (Hooper-Greenhill, 2007). It follows the trend of the formal education sector that makes the distinction between the terms very clear:

Education is an activity undertaken or initiated by one or more agents that is designed to effect changes in the knowledge, skill, and attitudes of individuals, groups or communities….Learning is the act or process by which behavioural change, knowledge, skills and attitudes are acquired (Knowles, Holton & Swanson, 2005: 10).

In other words, there is the process by which learning occurs (learning) or the person responsible for facilitating the learning (education). For the purpose of the current research, education will be viewed as an umbrella term for the policies and practices that relate to the educational activities carried out by the museum including the interpretation program. This is illustrated in Figure 1.1. If education refers to the activities of the museum, then learning is what occurs for the visitor as a result of the museum activities. As indicated by Figure 1.1, learning falls both in and out of the education umbrella because, as this thesis will document, visitors’ learning may or may not be attributable to the museum’s interpretation. For example, chapter five explores the conversation of a group of visitors at the Powerhouse Museum. During this conversation the women involved traded stories about their childhood. While these stories may have had little to do with the meaning intended by the museum, it is still a
form of learning and is as important as any information related learning attributable directly to the museum content.

In the context of the current research learning is viewed as a process, something that is lifelong. It is not simply confined to reading and remembering information, or acquiring new knowledge. It can, and does, involve picking up skills, understanding more about oneself and understanding more about those you visit the museum with. Chapter two will explore learning in more depth.

**Figure 1.1: Museum education umbrella**

Formal education theory, such as constructivism, has been prominent in promoting the active role of the learner in the learning process. Constructivism is described as a psychological theory of learning and not a theory of teaching (Fosnot & Perry, 2005) and argues that individuals produce meaning and knowledge from their experiences. George Hein has been largely responsible for introducing this theory into the museum context (1995; 1996; 1998; 1999a; 2006). He believes that learning is meaning-making and therefore constructivism provides a good fit for analysing, or at least explaining, the visitors’ experience as it places personal meaning-making at the core of learning and ultimately education:
A major contribution of educational research during this century has been its focus on the process that learners use, more than on the structure of the material to be learned. Inevitably, we have come to the conclusion, long recognized in popular literature, that humans interpret data the senses provide, and that these personal interpretations, i.e. meaning-making, are pedagogically significant (Hein, 1999a: 15).

Research regarding personal meaning-making has primarily been the domain of literary theorists. While much of the interpretation literature relating to zoos, national parks and other environmentally focused sites may have neglected disciplines such as cultural and literary studies, there have been a number of pioneers in the museum literature who have argued for, and successfully integrated, other approaches. Susan Pearce, for example, employs literary theory to discuss material culture and the display of objects (1989; 1994; 1995). Through semiotic theory she positions objects as pluralistic with a myriad of meanings that are not inherent in them but created around and through them by individuals and cultures. Taking such an approach challenges definitions of interpretation that imply meaning is inherent in a site and can be communicated or revealed to the visitor. In chapter four the different meanings that visitors extract, or place upon objects, are explored.

Lisa Roberts is another who has argued for the use of literary theory:

One of the key features of literary theory is its insistence on the productive nature of knowledge and meaning, be it by the texts original creator or by its consumers (Roberts, 1997: 10).

By treating the museum as a ‘text’ she positions meaning as a function of those who design the museum exhibitions and the visitors who themselves ‘interpret’ the text. Much of the data collected for the current research supports the work of Roberts and this will form much of the theoretical focus of chapter six.

Adopting literary theory in the analysis of the visitor’s experiences is not without its difficulties. The use of the word interpretation in literary theory is very different to how it is used at heritage sites like those discussed at the beginning of this chapter. Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, another of the pioneers, has raised this issue while using
philosophical hermeneutics to explain the way individuals interpret the world around them:

There is a major difference in emphasis between the way the words are used in hermeneutics and in the museum. In the museum, interpretation is done for you, or to you. In hermeneutics, however, you are the interpreter for yourself. Interpretation is the process of constructing meaning (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999b: 12).

Taking a non-reductive approach, this thesis embraces the complexity of meaning-making in the museum context. In chapter three literary theory is used to describe how meaning-making is a process of interpreting new experiences and new information. Using the word interpretation to describe what museums, and other sites, deliver to their visitors is problematic considering that visitors are themselves interpreters when at museums. However, the term is now firmly entrenched in the vernacular of many institutions and therefore any attempt to change it would be difficult. In this thesis the word interpretation will be used to describe what visitors do as well as the communication activities of the museum.

**Researching the visitor experience**

With visitors learning at the forefront of museum education, researching their experiences has become increasingly important. Yet it is nothing new. Research studies that examine the visitors experience have been conducted in museums since the early 1920’s (Bicknell & Farmelo, 1993; Bennett, 1995; Roberts, 1997; Hooper-Greenhill, 1999b), albeit very sparsely (Hooper-Greenhill, 2006). Most of the early work in the 1920's through to the 1960’s was rooted in behavioural psychology and based on the observation of visitors: that is where they went and what they were doing (Hooper-Greenhill, 2006). In the 1960’s and 1970’s the focus turned to surveying visitors for the purposes of collecting demographic data, such as age, gender, education levels and other information aimed at getting a better understanding of who was visiting, or not visiting, museums (Roberts, 1997; Hooper-Greenhill, 2006). By the 1980’s visitor research had become a field of study in its own right, particularly in America, which led to the following:
The establishment of a journal (ILVS review); an international clearinghouse and reference centre for visitor studies (International Laboratory for Visitor Studies at University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee); an annual conference (Visitor Studies Conference); a standing professional committee in the American Association of Museums (Committee on Visitor Research and Evaluation, later changed to Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation); and a quarterly newsletter (Visitor Behaviour). All of these directed toward studying the behaviours, expectations, experiences, and perceptions of museum visitors. These activities culminated in 1991 with the formal incorporation of a Visitor Studies Association (Roberts, 1997: 158).

In more recent times funding bodies and policy makers have pressured institutions to demonstrate what visitors may or may not be learning as a result of their visit (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994b). At best this research has been inconclusive and limited in its ability to document visitor learning and influenced by the perceived role of education and learning in the museum:

Much research in this area has to try and lay rest a number of well established, often untested, convictions. These include the notion that the museum is a neutral space, innocent of conveying anything but the word-for-word content of labels and the silent unambiguous messages transmitted by objects ‘speaking for themselves’, strongly held assumptions that there is a ‘general public’, undifferentiated by gender, age and cultural background, which respond uniformly to the museums expectations of it, have had to be confronted……………The unquestioned belief that museum practice is without real flaw still holds sway in some quarters. Arguably, some of the attitudes encountered, although by no means held by the majority of museum professionals, are borne of curatorial traditions and have developed to the point of belief systems (Kavanagh, 1991: 5).

Traditions and belief systems, such as the one-way transmission models of communication and the view that visitors will learn what museums want them to, have impeded the progression of visitor research. More insightful work was being carried out in the humanities and the social sciences:

It was during the 1960’s and 1970’s that more radical thought in the human and social sciences finally broke with the model of positivist, empiricist science that
had been their paradigm for most of the century, turning, along with the post-
Saussurian humanities, to a concern for meaning and its cultural production, for
subjectivity and intersubjectivity, for textuality and intertextuality. The parent
disciplines of museum evaluators, however, remain those large areas of psychology
and education which stayed within the empiricist paradigm (Lawrence, 1991: 25).

Only those aspects of visitors’ experiences that could be tested and measured were
studied, to the point where instead of using evaluation to improve exhibition design,
exhibition design was influenced by what was easy to evaluate (Aldridge, 1989). A
change was beginning to occur in the mid to late 1990’s, partly through the work of
Hooper-Greenhill, who argued that visitor research should not limit itself to theories,
practices and beliefs of the museum world but also engage with communication theory,
literary theory, sociology, cultural studies and media studies:

Media studies in the 1950’s proposed the active audience and the importance of
social context in the reception of the message long before we had even begun to
study our audiences in museums. Our methodology in museums has not paid
attention to methods used by communication and cultural theorists, and an over-
reliance on behaviourist, positivist methods has failed to reveal the importance of
audience decoding (Hooper-Greenhill, 1995: 9).

Hooper-Greenhill argued that research solely concerned with those aspects that could
be tested and measured may not adequately capture the interpretive activities of the
visitors. Rather than researching the impact of exhibition design on visitors’ experiences,
or why visitors were going to the museum, studies turned to more complex issues:

‘Psychographics’ replaced demographics as researchers dove into what they now
saw to be the heart of the museum encounter: the interests, needs, attitudes, and
values that shaped the way visitors experienced an exhibit (Roberts, 1997: 5).

All of which reflected the changes in how education was viewed in the museum
environment. Institutions began acknowledging that what visitors carried with them to
the site greatly influenced what they did while they were there and as a result, more
rigorous methods have been employed:
There is now, even in museums, a ‘softer’ school of evaluation, one which discourages the pre-setting of objectives, behavioural or otherwise, which advocates paying as much attention to visitors’ talk and visitors’ accounts, preferably obtained by open-ended interviews, as to survey data. It is clear that newer thinking and more recent techniques in the social sciences have had some influence (Lawrence, 1991: 21).

In the last decade even more advanced work has been conducted. For example, Leinhardt, Crowley and Knutson (2002) and Leinhardt and Knutson (2004) have focused on the conversations of visitors as opposed to post-visit accounts that ignore the on-site interactions. This thesis will continue the work conducted in the area of visitors’ conversations and chapter two will discuss the methods adopted.

The current research

Although the contingent and complex nature of social interactions and the use of our prior knowledge and prior experiences to interpret our environment is now commonplace in learning related literature in the museum (Falk & Dierking, 2000), very little research has comprehensively documented the contribution of prior experiences and prior knowledge to the conversations and meaning-making of visitors. Even more limited is research of this nature carried out across multiple sites and in an Australian context.

A review of interpretation literature examining the foundational use of cognitive or more generally psychological perspectives indicates that approximately 90% of the books and journal articles employ this paradigm. Most of this literature is dealing with communicating messages, whether the visitors have picked up on the messages communicated, or what visitors have learnt from a visit to the museum. Again what this is suggesting is that interpretation is seen as something that is delivered from site to visitor, a message from sender to receiver, and that the most important issue is how this message is received. This thesis takes a critical view of interpretation defined in this manner. Rather than simplify the museum experience by pre-setting objectives and

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5 The same survey was referred to in an earlier footnote in this chapter. This was a comprehensive survey of 338 sources relating to interpretation and communication at all natural, cultural and heritage sites.
coding categories, or searching for narrowly defined learning outcomes, the research will embrace the complexity that exists in the museum environment. Complexity that involves more than the visitors’ engagement with the museum interpretation:

How strange is it that in published accounts visitors always seem to be talking about the exhibitions – never the weather, their love life or even the location of the tea bar……..We have nothing resembling a full blown ethnometodological account of museum visitors, or one from a discourse analysts, to date, both of which might be expected to be rather less selective in their assessment of what constitutes relevant data (Lawrence, 1991: 22).

The current research suggests that these aspects may be more important, more powerful and more memorable than the exhibition related conversation. Regardless, ignoring these aspects of visitor’s conversations is to ignore elements of learning and meaning-making. By illustrating the frequent nature of visitors’ personal connections, narratives and associations, the research strengthens the case for focusing on how before we look at what in relation to learning in the museum. The aim is not to make generalizations about all visitors at all sites, but simply to use the experiences and conversations of my research participants to illustrate how people make meaning on-site and the evidence of how the meaning-making appears as it happens. In addition I hope to demonstrate that the most insightful and most unobtrusive method of investigating visitors’ meaning-making as it happens is through their conversations.

Very few studies have used the same visitors across multiple sites. Some research and literature has noted the importance of prior knowledge (Falk & Dierking, 1995; 2000) but very few studies have made it the sole focus of the data collection, and if they have it has tended to explore content knowledge rather than the more personal and affective area of prior experiences (Hooper-Greenhill, 2004; Leinhardt & Knutson, 2004). Yes research has noted the importance of social interaction in the visitor experience (Hein, 1998; Falk & Dierking, 2000; Leinhardt & Knutson, 2004) but not much attention has been paid to describing in detail the content of this social interaction and the importance of the narrative. Nor to documenting the importance and influence it has on the individuals’ meaning-making. This research explores these gaps and confirms the work of Roberts (1997) Hooper-Greenhill (1994a; 1994b; 1999a; 2000a; 2004) and Pearce (1994; 1995) just to name three.
The three major aims of the thesis are:

1. To document prior knowledge and prior experiences used to make the museum experience personally relevant for the visitor.
2. Challenge the assumption that interpretation will lead to a better understanding of the site.
3. To argue that the way we research and evaluate the visitor experience should concentrate on the *how* before the *what* in relation to learning.
“Learners with their individual differences and abilities are seeds; instructors and designers are the gardeners who help the seeds grow; and context is the soil in which the seed is embedded. Successful gardeners consider both seeds and soil in their gardening” (Tessmer & Richey, 1997: 87).

“It is not enough now for museums to provide an aesthetic or inspiring experience or to seek simply audience enjoyment – audiences must be encouraged to come to learn and, at least in the opinion of national policy bodies, the nature of that learning must be measurable in some shape or form” (Black, 2005: 128).
The intricacies of learning

Learning in general has been extensively researched yet there is no universal definition or description about how it works or what it encompasses (Dierking, 1996a; Knowles et al., 2005). But is it possible to precisely define learning and how it occurs considering it depends on the individual and the context? Learning includes acquisition of new knowledge but is not restricted to this acquisition. It also includes improving skill levels, forming different attitudes, and gaining a better understanding of one’s own identity (Hooper-Greenhill, 2004). However it is defined, learning is both a product and a process (Falk & Dierking, 1995; 2000). Yet much of the research in museums has investigated learning primarily from a product perspective and later in this chapter I argue for a need for more research exploring the processes of visitors’ learning. Regardless of how one defines it, learning is dynamic (Falk & Dierking, 1995; Harrison, Reeve, Hanson & Clarke, 2002) and requires a constant restructuring and the building of layers of knowledge (Falk & Dierking, 2000). Learning encompasses all dimensions of the individual: emotions, the intellect and physical domains (Kolb, 1984; Csikszentmihalyi & Hermanson, 1995).

While there are some universal characteristics of all learners, individuals are different and have different learning abilities. This concept of individual learning styles has been referred to by countless writers in the interpretation and museum contexts (Miles, Alt, Gosling, Lewis & Tout, 1988; Serrell, 1993; Hooper-Greenhill, 1994a; Davis & Gardner, 1999; Rogers, 2002a; 2002b; Clelland-Gray, 2003). But it is Gardner (1993) who pioneered the concept of multiple intelligences: a theory that suggests that individuals have preferences for methods of processing information. Although individuals are not tied to one style or intelligence and may use different styles depending on the situation (Serrell, 1993), it is often the case that people are stronger in one particular style or intelligence (Cranton, 1992; Hein, 1998). This is particularly the case in museum environments and research by Kelly (2007), which focused on how visitors perceived themselves as learners, concludes that the way people learn and think about how they learn relates very much to the person’s identity. She found that peoples’ learning styles are fluid and that they will match their learning style with what is provided.

1 The seven intelligences Gardner (1993) refers to are linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, musical, bodily kinaesthetic, inter-personal and intra-personal.
Over the years research in the formal education sector has been inundated with theories attempting to explain learning. The most notable theories include behaviourism, cognitive learning approaches, constructivism, and humanist learning theory. According to Hein (1998) any understanding of education must consider three theories: theory of knowledge (that deals with the debate on whether or not knowledge is internal or external to individuals); theory of learning (discussed on a spectrum with one end focussing on a transmission of knowledge and the other end with individuals constructing their own meaning); and a theory of teaching (concerned with how the other two theories are catered for in the provision of learning). The diagram below shows the theories of knowledge and learning:

**Figure 2.1: Formal education theories**


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Individuals, according to learning theories on the right of Figure 2.1 (discovery and constructivism) construct their own meanings. So the more control learners have of their own learning experience the more they construct their own meanings. In formal education there has been a shift away from learning as the transmission of information and knowledge, to acknowledging the important role of an individual’s interpretation (St John & Perry, 1993). In other words, a move toward the learning theories on the right side of the diagram. This shift has also occurred in the museum context and will be discussed shortly. Most of the traditional learning theories do not consider learning that occurs outside the formal learning situation (Dierking, 1996b) and are therefore not easily transferable to the complex and informal nature of museums and similar settings (Roberts, 1996; Falk & Dierking, 2000). Museums are different to formal education mainly because there is no measure of success or failure and therefore no pressure in the learning experience (Esteve-Coll, 2000; Hein, 2000).

Learning occurs before the visit begins and carries through well after the visit finishes (Matsuov & Rogoff, 1995; Borun & Korn, 1999; Faggetter, 2005). The trip to a museum is just one of a large array of daily and life-long learning experiences for the individual. It is for this reason that the museum visit is difficult, as I argue in chapter 6, to isolate from other learning experiences. The composite of prior knowledge and prior experiences is used as a way of negotiating the museum experience and is the pivotal argument presented in the remaining chapters. Falk & Dierking (2000) have also recognised the importance of the visitors’ own lives on the experience they have in the museum. Their intention was not to provide a definition of learning but a model which acknowledged the complexities of learning. They called this model ‘The Contextual Model of Learning’ and listed 8 factors in three contexts that influence learning: Personal context (motivations & expectations; prior knowledge and interests; choice and control); Socio-cultural context (within-group socio-cultural mediation; facilitated mediation by others); Physical context (advance organizers and orientation; design; reinforcing events and experiences outside the museum). They describe their model as three-dimensional and as a process that occurs throughout one's life. All three contexts come together as the individual makes meaning from their surrounding environment. Each of the contexts are also always changing and in flux. Falk & Dierking (2000) believe that in investigating the visitors’ learning experiences researchers have been asking the wrong questions:
What does an individual learn as a consequence of visiting this museum, or seeing this exhibition, or attending this lecture? The better, more realistic question is, How does this museum, exhibition, or lecture contribute to what someone knows, believes, feels or is capable of doing?” (11).

I think an even better question is ‘how does the visitor use the museum to make their own meaning?’ which may or may not contribute to what someone does in the future.

**Investigating learning through visitor studies**

Museum interpretation should be about creating a dialogue with the visitors (Roberts, 1997; Rowe, 2002; Witcomb, 2003) which means museums must improve their understanding of how visitors engage and interact with the material they present. Unfortunately many visitor studies are concerned with *what* the visitors have taken away with them rather than *how* they are engaging with the museum i.e. the focus has been with the product (or outcome) more than the process. As the data in this thesis will demonstrate the visitor’s experience may be highly unpredictable and personal in nature and therefore the outcomes are not necessarily compatible with those intended by the museum. For this reason it is important to shift the attention away from the transmission of messages from curator to visitor and whether this transmission is accurate or not (Silverman, 1990). It is a matter of understanding how we construct the world rather than the products of that construction (Bruner, 1986). Roland Barthes argued that we should attempt to understand how texts mean before we study what they mean (Sturrock, 1979b). Wolfgang Iser makes a similar argument:

> As meaning arises out of the process of actualisation, the interpreter should perhaps pay more attention to the process than to the product. His object should therefore be, not to explain a work, but to reveal the conditions that bring about its various possible effects (Iser, 1978: 18).

Culler asks similar questions regarding the interpretation of texts:
What sort of procedures do readers follow in responding to works as they do? What sort of assumptions must be in place to account for their reactions and interpretations? (Culler, 2000: 62).

Visitor studies in museums have had a tendency to put the cart before the horse, so to speak, by focusing on learning outcomes before fully appreciating the intricacies involved in how visitors reach those outcomes. For example, audience research that deals with attitudes of visitors often fails to investigate how the attitudes are formed (Coffee, 2007). Constructing meaning and partaking in learning is an active process, which, unfortunately, is often treated as a substance (Polkinghorne, 1988). If learning is a ‘substance’ it is one which does not necessarily have quantifiable outcomes (Falk, 2002). Research that neglects this fact fails to capture the subtleties of the learning process in the museum environment.

To their detriment many institutions still hold the view of learning as a product and not a process where achieving learning requires an attainment of new knowledge and facts. Hooper-Greenhill (2004) refers to this as the mono-dimensional definition of learning and that educational theorists now understand learning to be multi-dimensional, viewed as a process and an act. She also makes the point that there are clear distinctions between the outcomes and the processes of learning and uses the example of enjoyment which is definitely an ‘outcome’ of learning but is not always considered learning in its own right. Previous research has shown that people do learn when they visit museums (Boggs, 1977; Lee & Balchin, 1995; Falk, Moussouri & Coulson, 1998; Falk & Adelman, 2003; Falk, Scott, Dierking, Rennie & Jones, 2004; Falk & Storksdieck, 2005). But the type of learning associated with these studies may not be the most important attribute of the visitor’s experience. Other factors of the visit tend to be overlooked, such as social interactions and being able to make links and connections. If one takes a broad view of learning then these aspects are themselves evidence of learning but may not appear in the type of research that measure learning post visit. Rather they appear during the visit and it is this type of learning that is the focus of the current research. These contingent aspects may be more important and useful to the development of interpretation.

Within the visitor studies literature there are many examples of research and that has focused on the outcomes rather than the processes of visitor learning. Table 2.1 is a small sample of literature indicative of this limited research focus. There were no criteria
for selecting or analysing the studies represented in this table, rather it is a collection of research which (strongly) demonstrates the type of studies I am contesting.

**Table 2.1:** Sample of visitor studies concerned with learning outcomes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AUTHOR</th>
<th>COMMENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Boggs (1977)</strong></td>
<td>▪ The author describes a study of visitor learning at the Ohio Historical Museum with the goal to assess whether the outcomes are cognitive or affective.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ One of the cognitive elements they were testing for was whether visitors could recall isolated lists of information. The issue is that the testing occurred during the visitor’s experience so recall may only occur because it is fresh in the mind of the individual. This is not a true reflection of what maybe recalled after the visit.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Lee and Balchin (1995)</strong></td>
<td>▪ One of the aims of the research in this paper was to measure attitude change of visitors to a nuclear fuel centre. Pre and post tests were conducted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>▪ How can attitude change be measured by a simple test straight after the visit? In fact the authors ask the same question: “The question must be raised whether the learning and attitude change effects are likely to endure. As the subjects were tested immediately after coming out of the exhibition, they have had little time to assimilate the experience. It would be helpful to have a follow-up study after several months to see if the effect is still apparent” (295). Why attempt to measure attitude change with such a limited methodology if it fails to reveal useful information?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| **Stainton (2002)** | • Another study which measured learning and the addition of new information and whether the subject could discuss this new information.  
• Although they used pre & post visit tests the focus was not specifically on the retention of facts. |
|---------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| **Hughes and Morrison-Saunders (2002)** | • Discussed the impact of installed interpretive signs at the Tree Top Walk in Western Australia.  
• Conducted pre & post visit surveys to measure changes in visitors’ knowledge. They refer to knowledge gain, and information or fact recall although they don’t propose or discuss increases or improved learning. They simply analyse the effectiveness of the signs and whether people read them. |
| **Falk et al (2004)** | • Investigated learning outcomes of interactives at a museum and science centre.  
• Visitors were approached as they entered the sites and asked if they wanted to participate. They were interviewed before and then told to visit an exhibition where they were observed. Being told to visit specific areas of a site creates an unnatural experience as the visitors in the course of a normal visit may never have attended these particular displays.  
• The use of statistics is an attempt to ‘quantify’ learning and this is problematic as will be discussed below.  
• They recognised the importance of prior knowledge, experience, interests and motivations in the visitor experience but treated the data from these variables in a quantitative fashion rather than a descriptive analysis of how these factors influence the learning process. |
| **Falk and Adelman (2003)** | - The goal was to test whether the variability in visitors meaning-making could be overcome to affectively measure learning outcomes.  
- Used data from another research project looking at the impact of a particular aquarium, which involved pre & post visit interviews and was quantitative in nature.  
- Recognised the importance of prior knowledge and experiences but because it didn’t illustrate how people used their prior knowledge it was only significant to the site the study was conducted at as it was dealing specifically with the sites content. |
- Identified 12 factors across the three contexts that influence learning with the intention of isolating factors that were individually more important than others.  
- Study involved pre and post visit interviews as well as unobtrusive observations of visitors at one exhibit within a science centre.  
- Prior knowledge and prior experiences were discussed but visitors were asked to ‘rate’ their own knowledge. Their level of knowledge was also rated based on answers to questions. The data was analysed quantitatively. Only prior experiences at this and other sites were discussed rather than other more general prior experiences. All this study seems to do is support the fact that a variety of factors or variables impact the learning outcomes of visitors. |
A common methodological element with the studies presented in Table 2.1 is the use of pre- and post-interviews or tests. Assuming that the post-visit interview occurs straight after the visit all such studies do is measure what the visitors can remember from the hours spent in the museum. Measuring retention of information ignores the complexity of the visitor experience and ultimately the learning that may occur in the future (Rennie, 1996; Gleeson, 1997). As Borun (1990) suggests giving correct answers to a test does not necessarily result in the individual using or applying the material in future situations.

There is enormous variability in visitors’ learning and for researchers to overcome this diversity the following needs to occur:

The better we are at meaningfully structuring samples and measurements to cope with that complexity, the more likely we will be to derive a robust understanding of the underlying reality (Falk & Adelman, 2003: 172).

How can we as researchers understand the ‘underlying reality’ if we go from pre-visit questions and interviews straight to the post-visit outcomes while all the time ignoring how the visitors actually arrive at these outcomes? While a plethora of visitor studies have identified the importance of what visitors bring with them to the site (Hein, 1999a; 1999b; 2005) it is virtually impossible to completely understand the ‘body of knowledge’ that audiences carry into the visit. However, it is more plausible to understand how people use their prior knowledge and for what purposes. The research presented in this thesis is dealing not with what visitors might be learning but how they are using prior learning (prior knowledge and prior experiences) in constructing meaning in the museum. The narratives that visitors construct may lead to learning in the future but it is unrealistic, in my opinion, to think that such learning will have occurred thirty minutes after the visit is completed.

All visitors have varied interests and varied prior knowledge and experiences. But one thing they share is the need to make connections to their own lives (Csikszentmihalyi & Hermanson, 1995; Spock, 2006). The data presented in the remaining chapters will demonstrate that visitors will often ‘overwrite’ the intended experience of the site in preference for an association that draws on their own personal experiences. The personal experiences and prior knowledge that visitors bring with them to the site is used to provide “their side of the tacit dialogue” (Stainton, 2002: 213).
Assembling the parts: Documenting the research methodology

The introduction referred to an evaluation that was conducted at the Alice Springs Desert Park (Harris, 2005). From this study it became very clear that so much of what visitors do on-site is influenced by what they bring with them; particularly when dealing with questions of learning. In psychology, education and, to some extent, the museum literature, it is well documented that we use our prior knowledge to interpret new information and new experiences and this became the overall theme of the current research. The dilemma here was how do you accurately establish the prior knowledge of visitors? How does one report on the ‘knowledge’ they may have about a particular subject? Is it possible to develop criteria to measure visitor's levels of understanding? Keeping in mind that I was attempting to distance the research from measuring the recall of information to investigate how visitors process, understand and make meaning from this new information.

Numerous authors have commented on the difficulties in determining the prior knowledge of visitors (Falk, 1983; Korn, 1999) but none comment on why it is a problem. Although face-to-face interpreters can ask their audience about prior knowledge (Roschelle, 1995; Lewis, 2001) static interpretation is not afforded the same luxury and therefore requires intrusive research questions. Prior knowledge is stored in constructs that often remain hidden from the conscious mind (Mandler, 1984; Cranton, 1992; Schon, 2002; Saukko, 2003). It is therefore very difficult to put into words what it is we know. Meaning-making generally happens sub-consciously and self-reflection can only highlight the outcomes of the meaning-making process not the mental processes (Polkinghorne, 1988). The following illustrates the difficulty with asking visitors about what they learnt and from where they picked up the information during a visit to a zoo:

At the tiger exhibit, a visitor reported having received the extinction message from information that the docent had provided about there being only 400 individuals in the wild. Observational data indicated that the docent had not mentioned this.

3 The original intention of the research was to undertake a comparison study of sites that have quality pre and post visit interpretation to those sites that do not (by this I mean the quality of information provided to visitors through websites or brochures). The purpose of this was to determine what impact the information has on the tourists before and after they visit. It was also the intention to establish whether the importance of the knowledge provided to visitors before they visit relates to the type of site involved. For example, do visitors to museums require more pre-visit information than those at zoos? This was later abandoned in preference for the current study.
message and had not even mentioned that fact. Rather, the signage at the exhibit included all of that information. Such mental merging of the message sources was observed in a few other cases as well (Mony & Heimlich, 2008: 157).

Investigating the specific knowledge that visitors already possess was therefore thought to be a phenomenon too complex to research with any validity. Still interested in exploring what visitors bring with them to a site, the prior *experiences* of visitors became the subject of this research. Much of what we learn is through experiences. In fact “what we learn *are* experiences” (Schank, 1990: 54). Not only is knowledge accumulated through our experiences, but it is frequently articulated in relation to a particular event or the experience where the knowledge gain occurred. Not always, but as the data introduced in later chapters will demonstrate, this is a common strategy in conversations. A hypothetical example will help to explain what I refer to here. A family, comprised of a teenage girl and her parents, are watching a nature documentary on television. The daughter is studying animal science at university and something she sees on the documentary relates to information she recently learnt as part of her studies. This triggers a discussion, led by the daughter, on this particular piece of knowledge. But rather than sprout facts and figures she premises the story with “In one of my lectures the other day Professor Smith said …….‖. In other words the context or the situation where the information was learnt becomes part of communicating the knowledge she possessed and the story she tells her parents.

If learning can occur as a result of any sort of experience, then the stories we tell about family gatherings, events at work, or what happened on the weekend are all evidence of prior learning. It was for this reason that the exploration of how people use their prior experiences and what connections and associations they make while at museums guided the methodology. The aim was to investigate whether these connections and associations differ across the different types of sites and visitors and whether generalisations could be made about the associations of my research participants.

Data collection was conducted in three stages, the first being the preliminary fieldwork with the aim of establishing that visitors to museums actually do make frequent connections to their prior knowledge and experiences and that these connections were displayed in people’s conversations. There were two components to this stage of the research. While visiting sites I analysed my own experience to identify possible
connections I may have made. The second component was to analyse the conversations and experiences of others. Two friends were taken to the National Portrait Gallery, the National Museum and the Australian War Memorial, all located in Canberra. On a separate occasion another friend was taken to the Sydney Aquarium. These participants were interviewed before and after their visit and detailed notes were kept on the conversations that occurred on-site. The participants were not aware of the aim of the research until we sat down for the post-visit interview. Some interesting issues emerged from this stage, most notably that regardless of the site we had visited our conversations involved stories about experiences we had shared as a group. This was an early insight into what would be one of the most critical aspects to an individual’s meaning-making: the influence of the social group. Based on the analysis of my own experiences at the sites it appeared that I was searching for stories and connections to experiences related to the material presented at the site. But it’s very difficult to establish whether this was a natural strategy when I visit museums or whether it was a conscious reaction influenced by my own research agenda. Nevertheless, this early stage suggested that this was a legitimate area of research and that valuable data could be collected.

The second stage consisted of two pilot studies conducted at the Australian Museum in Sydney in association with AMARC (Australian Museum Audience Research Centre). The primary goal here was to test the method of recording visitors’ conversations. In the first of these pilot studies participants were recruited as they entered the temporary Wildlife Photography exhibit at the museum. Those who chose to participate were handed a pouch which contained a cassette recorder and a microphone and were left to explore the exhibition at their own pace. Again the participants were not aware of the specifics of the research. A pre-determined sample size was not set rather the number of participants recruited was determined by the amount of data required to test the appropriateness of the methods adopted. Post-visit follow-ups were also not conducted for the same reason. The second pilot study involved recording the conversations of just one social group as they explored the entire site (Australian Museum). During the first pilot study the major problem identified was the recording equipment used. Using cassettes meant that only 30 minutes could be recorded after which time the visitors would need to be interrupted to switch the tape over. For the second pilot study the decision was made to use digital voice recorders which could record over 5 hours of conversation at a time without interrupting the participant’s experience. This equipment
proved to be very successful and was therefore chosen for the major component of the research. The other advantage of this equipment was that the recordings were already in a digital format and could be easily transferred to a computer. This also added an extra level of security and backup for the data collected.

The major fieldwork (stage 3) began in 2007 when four groups of volunteers were recruited. Table 2.2 shows the make-up of each group and how they were recruited. There are five groups included in the table as group B withdrew from the project halfway through so I was forced to recruit group E. Demographic characteristics were neither an issue nor a specific focus in the study as the intention was not to explore how the differences in age, gender, and culture might influence the connections that people make. Results suggest that age was not a factor in the amount or types of connections made, but gender and culture may be a factor. Each of the four groups were then taken separately to four sites around Sydney. The four sites being the Art Gallery of NSW, Taronga Zoo, The Powerhouse Museum and Hyde Park Barracks Museum. The participant's entry into each of these sites was paid for as well as their associated transport costs. Each of the sites were approached at the start of the fieldwork seeking their assistance in getting the participants in for free, however only one of the sites showed any interest (Hyde Park Barracks Museum). This is another indication that sites are only interested in research with demonstratable and measurable outcomes.

At the beginning of the research the participants were given an information sheet detailing the methods and what was expected of them and also informing them they could pull out of the project at any stage. Before each of the site visits, participants were asked to sign a consent form to have their conversations recorded, their movements tracked, and allowing correspondence with them after each visit.

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4 The names of the participants used in this thesis are pseudonyms.
5 Group E visited all four sites. Group B only visited one site and as a result none of the data collected from group B was drawn upon. Appendix A provides details on when groups visited each site and how long they spent at each site.
6 Most of the participants shared a similar cultural background and the majority, bar two, were female.
7 The intention was to get four different types of experiences thus the reason for four completely different types of sites as opposed to choosing four museums or four zoos. This was also important to determine whether prior knowledge and prior experiences played a bigger part in one type of site over another.
8 The sheet is shown in Appendix B.
**Table 2.2: Research participants and recruitment details**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GROUP</th>
<th>CHARACTERISTICS</th>
<th>RECRUITMENT METHOD</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Sandra &amp; Gary</td>
<td>Responded to an email sent through the Australian Museum membership newsletter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>married couple</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>over 50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Jo, Emma &amp; Sophie</td>
<td>Participated in the first pilot study and were later asked to participate in the major fieldwork. Dropped out half way through the research due to study commitments.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>friends in their 20’s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>university students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Belinda &amp; Catrina</td>
<td>Responded to an email sent through the Australian Museum membership newsletter.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>friends</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Barry joined them for the Zoo visit (mutual friend)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>all over 50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Gina, Shelly, Jill &amp; Caroline</td>
<td>Participated in the second pilot study and were later asked to participate in the major fieldwork.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>All over 50</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>They play golf together</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Sam &amp; Melissa</td>
<td>Sam was asked to assist in the research at a late stage when group B pulled out. She then recruited Melissa to take part as well.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>friends from school</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>in their 20’s</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Both university students</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sam’s mother joined them for the zoo visit</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Tracking and recording the movements of the participants was vital to the analysis of the conversations. In other words, when the group was conversing about an exhibit, and may not have mentioned what the exhibit was, I at least had an idea of what part of the site they were at when the conversation took place. They were then given some simple questions to answer before they entered the site. These questions were based on previous visits and expectations about the upcoming visit. After arriving at each site the volunteers were hooked up to digital voice recorders and a lapel microphone (Figure 2.2) and were left to explore each site without instruction on where to go and what to do.

**Figure 2.2:** Recording equipment used during the research

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9 An example of these questions is shown in Appendix C.
10 Not all visitors in all groups were provided with microphones. I started with only two of the microphones but purchased more for the larger groups when they visited the zoo. Due to the noisy outdoor nature of this site it was important that every participant’s conversations could be heard.
They could explore as much or as little of the site as they wished. Leinhardt et al (2002), who in their study also told their participants which sites to visit, state that the visitors may not have otherwise visited these sites if not for the purposes of the research. Therefore the time spent and the type of experience they had was often a reflection of this fact. I saw no point directing the participants where to go on-site as their motivation may have already been low. It was also hoped that each group could make a fifth visit in which they would choose their own site but time did not permit this. Allen (2002) suggests that studying exhibitions rather than whole visits yields far better results as it doesn’t take up as much time and can be compared to the specific goals of the curatorial effort for that exhibition. That may be the case for simple evaluations, but for research of this nature studying the whole visitor experience is far more beneficial as the narrative created and the connections made in one exhibition or section of a museum may be completely different to those in another section.

Nevertheless every step was taken to minimize the intrusiveness of the research methods on the visitor experience. This included not informing the volunteers of the specific research questions: they were only aware they were having their conversations recorded (although some of the participants may have worked out the aim of the research after the first few visits based on the questions I was asking them). After each visit the recorded conversations were listened to by the researcher and a list of questions were compiled to ask the group based on comments they had made. This post-visit correspondence proved to be a crucial aspect of the research. The following excerpt is from Group A’s visit to the Art Gallery of NSW. At the time they were in a temporary exhibition called the Archibald Prize which is one of Australia’s most prestigious art awards for portraits. They were looking at the portrait in Figure 2.3, when the following conversation took place:

*Sandra* – That winner is almost the same style as the French impressionists. Criss cross brush work……….Dick Quilty (chuckles). That name haunts us doesn’t it ……….I really like it too. Is that a mixture of watercolour and oil?……….Doesn’t say

Even in this very brief comment two types of connections appear. Firstly, Sandra is using her prior knowledge of art to assist her interpretation of the painting. But it is

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11 This issue will be explained further in chapters three and four.
the second connection I am interested in here. The portrait is of a man named Ben Quilty and Sandra made some association to someone she knew with a similar name.

**Figure 2.3: Ben Quilty portrait from the 2007 Archibald Prize exhibition at the Art Gallery of NSW**

![Ben Quilty Portrait](image)

**Source:** Art Gallery of NSW (2007)

The detail of this association is not evident from the conversation itself and it was not until the post-visit correspondence that this association was revealed:

“A long story.....After divorce, my first husband (who owned a tobacco shop at the time) became involved in the intra-state tobacco trade and while supposedly within the law brought semis filled with cigarettes from QLD to NSW to avoid the NSW Tobacco Tax. State Police seized one such truck load, so he sought the services of a criminal lawyer, Dick Quilty..............Several
years later, Gary and I took an outback tour with the National Trust and lo and behold we find that the tour leader is none other than the very same Dick Quilty, now calling himself Richard Quilty. As you can see nothing whatsoever to do with Ben Quilty – just the Quilty surname and its association for me.”

This highlights how important the follow up questions were as on many occasions the research participants made very personal and unpredictable connections, such as this example, but didn’t necessarily articulate it completely during the on-site conversation. Of course how much of a particular story that gets told during a conversation depends heavily on the social dynamics of the group, an aspect that will be explored further in chapter five. This conversation took place between a married couple so Sandra didn’t need to tell the whole story of ‘Dick Quilty’ as her partner (Gary) had obviously heard it before. Nevertheless Sandra’s method of making meaning in this situation still required her to verbalize the association, albeit a brief comment.

The research was very exploratory in that much of the correspondence with participants after the visit was to clarify and expand on data retrieved from earlier stages of the fieldwork. The post-visit correspondence was conducted via email and was unstructured and very site and visitor specific. Originally it was hoped that in-depth interviews could have been carried out after each visit but the logistics of organizing the visits themselves were difficult enough let alone an additional interview. At the end of the data collection all the conversations in their entirety were listened to again by the researcher and transcribed word for word. The decision was made to complete the transcription process without external assistance as some of the conversations were hard to hear with a lot of background noise and I had a very good knowledge of the voices of the participants as well as where they went and what they may have been looking at. 12 It was only during this second listening that any sort of analysis took place. The first listening was simply identifying questions to ask the participants.

12 In Allen’s (2002) study professional companies and museum volunteers were used to transcribe the conversations. They found that both were highly inaccurate: “For example, ‘What frogs and toads eat, insects’ was transcribed as ‘Can frogs and toads mate? Its sex’” (272). They conclude that familiarity with the exhibition is vital for successful transcription. Hutchins & Klausen (2002) also refer to the fact that a transcript from audio and video footage involves some interpretation and prior knowledge of the event and what might occur by the researcher.
Justifying the study

According to Falk, Dierking and Holland (1995) and Falk, Dierking and Adams (2006), research investigating learning in museums should adhere to a number of criteria. Table 2.3 lists these criteria in one column along with how it is addressed in my research in the second column.

**Table 2.3: Qualities of successful visitor research according to Falk et al (1995; 2006)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Falk et al’s Criteria</th>
<th>How it is addressed in this research</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research should be conducted across multiple sites.</td>
<td>Project involves research participants visiting four sites in Sydney over the course of the project (Art Gallery of NSW; Taronga Zoo; Powerhouse Museum; Hyde Park Barracks Museum).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research should relate to other educational experiences.</td>
<td>This has been interpreted to mean ‘how does the museum experience relate to other learning situations’. By looking at prior experiences and prior knowledge the research specifically deals with prior learning. In other words in order for it to become a ‘prior’ experience or ‘prior’ knowledge it has been learnt in some other situation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research must address the effect of time on learning.</td>
<td>Obviously the research is restricted by the time frame allowed for a PhD but the data was collected over a 1 year period and follow-ups were also conducted 6-7 months after the last site visit.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research must allow for individual learning agendas.

This was taken to mean that research should acknowledge that visitors construct their own meaning which may or may not be entirely different to the intentions of the site. Not only is this acknowledged but it is the focus of the research: exploring the way visitors construct meaning.

Research must respect that learning is situated and contextualised.

One of the aims of the research was to explore this issue and to see how different the meaning-making process is across different sites.

Research must be relevant and practical.

It wasn’t the intention for this research to necessarily have practical outcomes.

The lack of coherence within the visitor research industry is partly due to most museums conducting simple evaluation rather than generalisable research motivated by theory (Schauble, Leinhardt & Martin, 1998).\(^{13}\) Hooper-Greenhill (2006) refers to two ethnographic style studies looking at museum visitors and that the use of theory is considered to be one of the strengths of the two projects:

Their research questions are theory-based and they seek to explore social phenomena in an open-ended way; the researchers themselves are very obvious throughout the discussion, positioned as reflective and responsive researchers; and the analysis of the museum event is placed within contexts that extend the analysis beyond the museum. The primary aim of these and related studies is deep understanding rather than the improvement of practice (374).

\(^{13}\)Within the visitor studies literature it is generally recognized that there is a distinction between visitor research and evaluation with research being general without exploring a specific practical problem and applicable across contexts, while evaluation is usually an investigation of a specific problem with a practical outcome for a specific site (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994a; Falk & Dierking, 1995; Caulton, 1998). By definition there may be a distinction between research and evaluation but practically the distinction may not be so clear cut (Shettel, 1991).
The current study has been designed with the aim of achieving this deep understanding through the use of theory. By taking a naturalistic approach the research is very descriptive and highly exploratative. While the research direction and approach was guided by clear aims, no specific objectives were set, rather a list of themes and research questions were developed. They are:

1. How do visitors personalise their experience and what connections are made when they visit sites?
2. Are there common life experiences or events that visitors connect to?
3. Can the connections be classified as being from a specific type of memory retrieval or pathway?
4. How do motivations and expectations guide the choices made by visitors at sites?
5. What is the relationship between motivations and expectations, and the prior knowledge and experiences of visitors?
6. Are the connections that visitors make part of the ‘memory’ of past visits?

The themes were used to guide the data collection rather than a way of coding the data during analysis. As a result many other themes or issues emerged from the data which have influenced the structure of the thesis. The themes listed above will be addressed at different stages throughout the chapters that follow.

**Capturing the essence of visitors’ meaning-making**

As already discussed the problem with much visitor research is that it focuses on the ‘learning outcomes’ of the visitor experience at the expense of other factors. Vom Lehn (2006) states that marketing research has been interested in how people engage at the “point of experience” (1342) and suggests that this could be employed in the museum context. In a study investigating the flow of information in the museum Taylor (1986)

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14 Hooper-Greenhill (1994a) describes what naturalistic research is: “‘Responsive’ or ‘naturalistic’ evaluation is concerned to describe rather than to analyse and to understand, rather than to explain. It emphasises the meanings that experiences have for participants, and demonstrates this by using the words of those who were part of an event. Rather than focusing on a narrow set of pre-determined objectives, naturalistic evaluation is open to the emergence of spontaneous activities and expressions, and seeks to account for a range of different values and perspectives” (82).
concluded that visitors get the most information from the conversations they have with the people they visit with. These conversations are a direct insight into the ‘point of experience’ of the visitors and are the main source of data collected for this project. Leinhardt and Knutson (2004) state that by analysing visitor conversations they have the ability to explore the complexities of visitor learning including the ‘ebb and flow’ of attention and the personal aspects of constructing meaning. The advantage of collecting data on visitor conversations is that it provides an insight into the meaning-making and interpretive strategies as they happen:

Human meaning-making requires a great deal of assumptions and interpretive work by both speakers and addressees. Achieving understanding and making meaning are things people do actively, and that work is reflected in their conversations both in the themes of the conversations (what they say) they have during meaning-making activity and in the structures of the conversations and activities (how they say what they say) (Rowe, 2002: 22).

It takes away the need to ask people what they said or what they did, a method which can sometimes produce unreliable data:

Collecting an after-the-fact summary from the visitor is certainly useful, but we must recognize that such a distillation of a visit may be very different from knowing about the particular aspects or features of artwork s/he noticed or other associations made while in the gallery (Stainton, 2002: 214).

Leinhardt and Knutson (2004) discuss three risks with using the conversations of visitors. The first risk is confounding museum talk with group experience. A social group has a history of creating the structures of their conversations well before they enter the museum and will continue after they leave. Leinhardt and Knutson say that exploring conversations in the museum environment is an act of isolation and a distortion of this process. The second risk is destructive segmenting of the conversations in museums (Leinhardt et al., 2002) is focused entirely on visitors’ conversations. Within this publication Fienberg and Leinhardt (2002) is the one study that is somewhat similar to my research. They looked at how the identities of visitors (knowledge, interests and experiences) influenced their conversations in the museum. This is slightly different to my research because it involved investigating what connections were made to knowledge, interest and experiences. The other difference is that Fienberg and Leinhardt restricted their research to one exhibit in one museum as opposed to the multiple site approach adopted for my project.
conversations for analysis and that the intentions of the speaker may be lost or manipulated when breaking up the conversations based on time, themes, or events and visitors moving to new exhibits. The final risk is that of artificial talk and a risk that was particularly relevant for this study. It refers to the participants talking for the benefit of the research as they know they are being recorded, or would hush other members because they are being listened to. Leinhardt and Knutson (2004) stated that in the pilot stages of their research they found that most people forgot about the microphones and that they naturally engaged in talk not simply because they felt they had to:

Visitors cannot discuss connections between an object and their personal world if the idea of doing so has never occurred to them or if they had no such connection (79).

Because the participants in Leinhardt and Knutson’s research were recruited on-site they considered that although these risks existed they were visitors to the museum first and foremost and participants in the study second. Even though in my research the visitors were participants first, their behaviour throughout was still quite natural. This was made possible by not revealing the aim of the research to the participants. So although they may have talked more because they were being recorded, they weren’t sure exactly what they should have been talking about in order to influence the data collected. In the conversation transcripts there was significant evidence of this artificial talk. Instances were recorded as talk that made reference to the research, or the researcher, or talk that made reference to the recording equipment. In the first case there were 72 instances (across 16 sites and 4 groups). Examples of such talk are given below:

Group D (Powerhouse museum)

Shelly – Where to………Oh leader
Jill – Level 2. Upstairs level 3. What’s in store shopping in Australia?
Shelly – Oh I remember this section when we were here with the kids
Jill – Want to look in here. Isn’t that beautiful
Gina – Shopping Australia. We’ll do that………Can you remember those?

Griffiths (2002) also states that researchers can often be guilty of reductionism when taking extracts from transcripts out of their original context. Tannen (1984) refers to the paradox of analysing recorded conversation and that like a photograph it takes a small portion of a larger behavioural experience and analyse it which effectively takes it out of contexts.
Jill – I can remember those. Maybe not…….

Gina – We better tell Ashley what we are looking at. It’s a cash register Ashley. Where the pounds shilling and pence pop up (Jill laughs)

Jill – Not that exact one but, however

Gina – Yeah

Jill – Something like that. Aren’t they beautiful though

Gina – Yeah

Caroline – Like the old typewriters too. Same keyboard as the old typewriters (Jill laughs)

Jill – Exactly it is. Yes

Group C (Art Gallery of NSW)

Catrina – Ok now what do we do. What do you fancy?

Belinda – Um, well shall we go and see what’s on?

Catrina – That would be a sensible thing to do wouldn’t it

Belinda – What are exhibitions are on

Catrina – Yeah,………..unless you want to pop through the Asian gallery

Belinda – Hmm?………..I just assumed that he would pick for us. He would say go to this exhibition and (inaudible) have a look at the program shall we

Group D (Taronga Zoo)

Shelly – Don’t look now but I think there’s this strange man who’s been following up all day (laughs. Talking about me)

Jill – And everybody looks

Shelly - Yeah

Jill – Isn’t that always the way you say don’t look but its automatic isn’t it (laughs)

Group C (Taronga Zoo)

Catrina – Now do we think Ashley still knows where we are? (Belinda & Catrina laugh)

Barry – I think he’s got some way of knowing hasn’t he?

Catrina – Oh I see that’s…….

Barry – You know

Belinda – GPS (laughs)

Barry – GPS thingy in here as well (laughs)

Belinda – He’s probably tracking us through the SIM card in the phone (laughs)
Catrina – Last seen at the wombats
Belinda – Oh this rain means business. Oops this isn’t very waterproof either. So be careful where you stand

There were also 15 references made to the recording equipment and a couple of instances that contained both types of talk as shown in the following examples:

Group E (Taronga Zoo)

Sam’s Mum – I wonder what he said about the gorilla
Melissa – I wish they had a camera as well so they could capture your expression every time they say something like this (towards Sam. Sam laughs)………Where is Ashley isn’t he supposed to be behind us?
Sam – He is being Mr sly
Sam’s Mum – Oh is he following us?
Sam – Yeah he stalks us. Stalker (speaking directly into the microphone)
Sam’s Mum – But we are going around in circles (all laugh)
Melissa – Confuse the bell out of him
Sam – Which is why he is probably sitting there going what the fuck are they doing
Sam’s Mum – But he can’t hear us can he?
Sam – Mum (laughs hysterically)
Melissa – Not now (laughs). Later be will
Sam’s Mum – No but later. He can’t hear us now
Sam– No it will be delayed
Sam’s Mum – Later

Group E (Art Gallery)

Sam– See some of these don’t look like paintings. That one looks more like a print……….You know photography. One sun one moon……….I don’t get it (in a funny voice)
Melissa – Oh you’re so bad (laughs)
Sam – Sorry say that louder for the um……..the microphone
Melissa – Then you’ll screw up his PhD. Be nice
Despite the evidence of artificial talk there were only a few examples where the talk represented some sort of influence on the participants behaviour:

Group E (Taronga Zoo)

Sam’s Mum – You don’t want to say anything (Sam and her mum laughing). You don’t want to sound silly. I know
Melissa – Why aren’t you saying anything?
Sam – Cause it will come out bad (all laugh)
Sam’s Mum – Because it’s getting recorded
Sam – No I’m using electric silence (chuckles)
Sam’s Mum – So which way?

Group D (Hyde Park Barracks Museum)

Jill – It goes up again. I couldn’t see that from down there. Oh ok.
Shelly – Yep, Ashley’s that way so we’ll go this way
Gina – Oh is he I didn’t see where he…..
Shelly – He was down there lurking in the corridors (laughs)
Jill – He does look like that doesn’t be.

Group C (Powerhouse Museum)

Catrina – You’re supposed to speak what are you making of this now?
Belinda – Hmm?..........What?
Catrina – We’re not supposed to just stand in silence (laughs)
Belinda – I know I guess we’re watching a silent movie so I became silent (laughs)
Catrina – Oohh that’s a nice beach. Unusual. I wonder where it is.........Oops. Ouch
Belinda – Oh my god
Catrina – She might have broken her neck................Active little girl. Tap shoes, and ballet shoes
Belinda – I’m just intrigued by all of this stuff
Catrina – I know but we’re not doing our job
Belinda – I know....................That must be one of the most famous kisses in history by now (Catrina chuckles)........I think the reason why we talk less is that I’m a bit overawed by all of this and there is so much too read as well. It’s not like paintings that we’re looking at
Catrina – Also you really don’t like walking around with people talking at you all the time. Of course given that our job is to do talking you have to remember from time to time that what we’re supposed to (chuckles)

Belinda – Yes so do nudge me in the ribs will you

In the first example Sam was being quiet for fear of saying something ‘silly’ which would be heard by me, the researcher. In the second example my physical presence forced the women to move into a particular room. Catrina and Belinda’s conversation is the most direct example of artificial talk and illustrates the influence that participating in the project may have had on the amount of talk that took place. However, the point must be reinforced that this did not necessarily influence the content of that talk. It is important to note that 43 hours of recorded conversation was collected and over 178,000 total words made up the transcripts. So less than 100 examples of potential influences on the conversations is relatively minor.

Data analysis

Analysis occurred in two stages. Firstly, while transcribing the conversations notes were taken about the common categories of connections that emerged from the data. Although developing a typology was not an aim of the research, the common categories of connections and associations will be discussed throughout the document. The second stage of the data analysis was a perpetual process occurring throughout the writing component of the project. The data presented in this document is used to confirm or contradict previous research in the area as well as to assist in the explanation of how people create meaning in their everyday lives.

The theory of intertextuality was used to assist this analysis. The way visitors make meaning at museums is very similar to the way they make meaning of a book, magazine, newspaper or any other form of text. Meaning is extracted by interpreting the information in front of them which is influenced and constructed by all the previous ‘texts’ read by the individual. This is the crux of the concept of intertextuality: that not only are the texts themselves influenced by other texts, but so too are the reader’s interpretations. It therefore supports the notion that multiple interpretations exist and that visitors will create varied meanings which are specific to themselves, similar to the
way Roland Barthes (1977) described readers of texts in the *Death of the Author*. Many curators are cautious about this prospect as they think it implies that they have no role in the process. This is not the case, as will be argued in chapter six, and a deeper understanding of the narratives visitors create on-site will hopefully assist sites in creating interpretation that connects to the lives of the visitors. Intertextuality is used to support the idea that visitors ‘read’ or interpret the site the way they read a text:

One could argue that authorial intentions are mostly unknowable and what we do have in abundance, and what in effect the institution of literature is largely made from, are readings of texts, we should take as our focus what readers take texts to mean, rather than what texts have supposedly been intended to mean (Storey, 1999: 64).

The argument is that interpreters have as much chance of getting visitors to take-away intended messages, as do the authors of books. This is the central argument of the next chapter.
“Meanings, it must be stressed, exist because subjects interpret them: meanings depend on subjects and are produced by subjects” (Munoz Vinas, 2005: 152).

“What is important in the game of interpretation is not the answer you come up with. ………… What’s important is how you get there, what you do with the details of the text in relating them to your answer” (Culler, 2000: 65).

“Whether it be based in poststructuralist or Bakhtinian theories, or in both, intertextuality reminds us that all texts are potentially plural, reversible, open to the readers own presuppositions, lacking in clear and defined boundaries, and always involved in the expression or repression of the dialogic ‘voices’ which exist within society” (Allen, 2000: 209).
In the previous chapter it was reported that museums and other sites were increasingly aware that their audience constructed their own meaning. But what is meaning-making? This chapter will delve into this process. How texts are read and interpreted has been a focus of literary studies and is where meaning-making is given the most attention. In order to shed some light on how visitors go about constructing meaning at museums three theories of ‘reading’ will be explored. They are hermeneutics, semiotics and intertextuality. In the context of this chapter the word interpretation will be used in reference to the general process of making meaning from everyday experiences, rather than the material that is delivered to visitors at museums.

Meaning is a complex phenomenon. It can be both the experience of an individual or an attribute of the ‘text’ encountered by that individual (Culler, 2000). In the curatorial effort choices are made about what, how and the ways to communicate, all of which are meaning-making on the part of the museum and its curators. In traditional models of communication it was simply a matter of ‘transmitting’ the site’s messages to the visitor (Wertsch, 1991; Pea, 1994; Rounds, 1999). It is now commonly acknowledged that such models are no longer relevant (Urry, 1996; Roberts, 1997; Hein, 1998; Silverman, 1999; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000b; Livingstone, 2003; Ravelli, 2006; Kelly, 2007). Meaning is not imposed on individuals rather it is created by individuals in an act of interpretation. We see nothing in a situation without introducing projections and as a result interpretation is not a conscious choice that we make nor can we ever escape from doing it (Nicholson, 1985; Shanks & Tilley, 1992). We are constantly analysing experiences, familiar or unfamiliar, using the concepts of identity and similarity (Eco, 1992b). Even as we read texts we naturally interpret:

Because we are compelled to interpret as we read, we can make the paradoxical statement that we probably never experience the text in its raw form; the very act of reading sets in motion a translation (Spence, 1982: 51).

What this suggests is that like readers of books, visitors at museums never experience the ‘raw’ material of the site and will interpret and ‘translate’ to make the material personally meaningful.
Meaning-making is about negotiating the gap that exists between our past and present experiences.¹ It is a dialogue between the individual and the ‘experience’ which is being interpreted (Hall, 1997a). In the context of this research this dialogue is between the visitor and the interpretation material provided by the museum. Both parties are participants and the meaning created in any situation is dependent on the context and the individuals involved in constructing that meaning (Allen, 2000).

**Hermeneutics: Looking over the horizon**

Hermeneutics is concerned with understanding the interpretation of texts or interpreting human action using textual analysis (Ricouer, 1981; Drinkwater, 1992). Understanding the author and their motivations and intentions and the effect this may have on the reader has been a point of interest of critical analysis in the humanities for some time. But the idea that there is a discoverable inherent meaning in the text is unrealistic due to the variety of readers and their individual interpretations (Fuery & Mansfield, 2000). Philosophical hermeneutics came about as a result of the problems associated with determining the reader’s interpretation of a text. The issue was more the readers’ misunderstanding rather than them not understanding at all. This misunderstanding was created by differences, such as the culture and worldviews, between the reader and the author and led to the approach of situating the author in their historical and social settings with the hope of understanding how these settings influenced the work and the intended meaning of the work. Hans-Georg Gadamer, a German philosopher whose most notable work *Truth and Method* was published in 1960 (Linge, 1976), was critical of two other philosophers of the time, Schleirnacher and Dilthey, who both believed that the individuals’ understanding of a text was impeded by their beliefs, values and culture. Gadamer argued that any understanding or interpretation was not plausible without the influence of the past:

> Understanding is not reconstruction but mediation. We are conveyors of the past into the present. Even in the most careful attempts to grasp the past “in itself”, understanding remains essentially a mediation or translation of past meaning into the present situation (Linge, 1976: xvi).

¹ Geertz (1973) refers to humans living in an ‘information gap’ where the gap exists between what we are told by our body and what we need to know to function. The gap is filled by culture.
The idea that any interpretation involves the ‘past’ of the individual is today a common understanding when discussing learning of any kind. We process new information by referring to information we have learnt in prior experiences. Gadamer also stressed that it is not just a matter of utilizing prior information, but a process of manipulating these prior experiences to suit the current situation. In the hermeneutic sense this role of ‘time’ in interpretation is very important:

Every interpretation is historical, relative, in the sense that it always presupposes historically transmitted preconceptions, and also in the second sense that in order to be relevant, it is applied to the present time by the interpreter. Added to which the interpreter projects it on a future, in the form of plans, expectations, and so on. Every interpretation thus contains the three aspects of time-past, present and future (Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000: 85).

Before Gadamer the process of understanding a text was mainly concerned with aspects ‘behind’ the text, such as the values of the author or their culture. Gadamer was more interested in the actual context and what the text was saying (Linge, 1976). He concentrated on the dialogue brought about by the interpreter further questioning the ideas presented by the texts.

According to Iser (1978) each literary work consists of two poles: the aesthetic (the reader’s interpretation) and the artistic (the author’s text). He states that the work itself lies between the two poles and reading is a two way process. Meaning-making therefore only ever comes about through the relationship between these two poles; hence the idea of reading being described as a dialogue or conversation. Hermeneutics treats reading as a ‘re-reading’ and ‘reconstruction’ of the text. Therefore meaning is not simply a result of reading but comes about through the active participation of the reader (Wilson, 1993). It is this notion that has major implications for museums with many still holding the belief that by engaging with the site’s material visitors will naturally learn or understand what the site intended (Black, 2005). When individuals read they manipulate the text as much as it manipulates them and thus they often “overlook things that are there and put in things that are not there” (Abbott, 2002: 79). Abbott calls this manipulation under-reading and over-reading. This suggests that interpreting a text is both bottom-up processing, based on the text components, and top down based on prior knowledge and

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2 Chapter four will explore this in more detail.
expectations that an individual carries into the interpretation (MacLachlan & Reid, 1994). Gadamer discussed the concept of ‘horizons’ whereby interpreting always occurs from a particular vantage point (Storey, 1999). By analysing understanding as the ‘fusion of the horizons’, that of the interpreter and the author, he further highlighted the dialogue that exists between the past and the present:

A horizon is a set of prejudgements, prejudices in the root sense of the word. We could have no experience at all without them. We are what we are because of them (Crusius, 1991: 34).

Such prejudices can influence interpretation in an enabling or inhibiting way depending on our motivation in the context (Drinkwater, 1992).

Roman Ingarden, a Polish philosopher, investigated the reading of literary texts and coined the term *lacunae* to refer to “spots of indeterminacy” (Fuery & Mansfield, 2000: 42). In other words there are always places in the text where readers will supply their own elements. He called this process ‘concretisation’ and can be a subconscious activity by the reader making connections and associations through memory and prior knowledge, or it may be a conscious activity as directed by the author of the text. The ‘capacity’ of individuals to make links and connections seem to be acutely enhanced when visiting a museum, or similar site, and that visitors in fact do experience ‘as they will’ regardless of the museum’s intentions. It is through the site/visitor dialogue that meaning is constructed and the role of the museum becomes one of facilitation. Associations and connections don’t simply surface in conversations without being triggered by an object looked at in the museum, something read or something heard from other members of the visiting group:

The multiplicity of possible meanings in a text spring from that text and not from the multiplicity of possible occasions in which the text can be read (Dentith, 1995 cited in Allen, 2000: 58).

Although those communicating the messages cannot precisely determine what messages are received, the encoders do set boundaries in which the decoding occurs (Hall, 1993).
One of Roland Barthes’ gripes with academic critics in France was that they assumed texts had only one ‘true’ meaning. He argued that one meaning should not be privileged over another and that multiple meanings in a text are crucial (Sturrock, 1979b). Barthes believed very much in ambiguity. According to Eco (1990) there have always been two poles where one side believed there is a ‘meaning which is to be found’ while the other believes that interpretations are infinite. He states that this second pole leads to the hermetic drift which is the idea that one thing could be connected to another and so on; a kind of deferred or postponement of meaning. He links the hermetic drift to the unlimited semiosis proposed by Charles Peirce. However, as Eco stressed, criteria still exist which limits interpretation. An individual must, therefore, still justify their interpretation (Culler, 2000).

The discussion of hermeneutics has helped to position readers, and visitors in museums, as active participants in meaning-making which results in constructing a personal and individual narrative. It is a theory which can be used to explain the reader’s construction of meaning rather than their attitudes to the text after the meaning has been constructed (Wilson, 1993).

**Semiotics: The science of signs**

Culture, through its symbols and signs, is a method of guiding and regulating our behaviour (Geertz, 1973). Semiotics is the study of these symbols and signs and helps to explain the relationship between communication, social contexts and the way we interpret and construct meaning from signs (Fuery & Mansfield, 2000). The earliest uses of semiotics originated in a form of ancient Greek medicine which required interpreting symptoms as a form of diagnosis (MacCannell, 1989). Today semiotics is adopted in all manner of disciplines for diverse reasons and as a result it can be difficult to define:

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3 Ambiguity in the meaning of words is particularly vital in styles such as poetry and crosswords where the goal is for the reader to interpret the material. Lack of variation in the meaning of words would result in a language that is void of communicating new ideas (Meadow, 2006).
4 In a later publication he continues this argument and states that interpretation is not endless nor does it mean that there cannot be ‘incorrect’ interpretations (Eco, 1992a).
5 Eco (1992b) refers to bad interpretation or over-interpretation and that there does not necessarily have to be criteria that identify good interpretations, but criteria can single out the interpretations that are bad. Culler (1992) compares over interpreting with overeating: “There is proper eating or interpreting, but some people don’t stop when they should. They go on eating or interpreting in excess, with bad results” (111).
Semiotics contains a philosophy, a critique of symbolic logic, a model of communications process, and a set of methodological procedures (MacCannell, 1989: 4).

Much of the current work on semiotics is based on two theorists, both working on similar ideas at the same time but in different parts of the world. In Europe the foundation of semiotics came from the work of the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure who provided the foundation for many of the great French theorists, such as Barthes. Saussure argued that language was made up of the signifier (sound of the word) and the signified (the concept of the word):

> Things themselves, for which linguistic signs can be asked to stand when we want to refer to the world around us, are ignored. The signified is not a thing but the notion of a thing, what comes into the mind of the speaker or hearer when the appropriate signifier is uttered (Sturrock, 1979a: 6).

The separation between the signifier and its signified only occurs when referring to language not in practice (Sturrock, 1979a). It is the combination of the signifier and the signified that forms the sign (Barthes, 1993). But it is not the concept, or the word used for the concept, that contains the meaning, rather the difference between the two concepts:

> Signs are not ‘positive terms’; they are not referential, they only possess what meaning they do possess because of their combinatory and associative relation to other signs. No sign has a meaning of its own. Signs exist within a system and produce meaning through their similarity to and difference from other signs (Allen, 2000: 10).

Saussure stated that linguistic signs are different across different languages so there is no direct link between the signifier and the signified (Sturrock, 1979a). Signs therefore have

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6 Saussure also coined the terms *langue*, which is language and refers to the system and rules of language that allow communication, and *parole* which is speech and is the use of the system in everyday life. Saussure chose to study the *langue* as it allowed him to explore how language practically operated (Sturrock, 1979a). Because it was ‘closed’ and ‘limited’ in nature it allowed a more scientific study (Hall, 1997b). Barthes (1967) stated that *langue* is a social contract of communication and cannot be modified by individuals, whereas speech or parole is the individual selection of the elements of the social contract or the *langue*. This selection does not modify the *langue*, however both depend on each other and neither can exist in isolation.
no meaning outside of the language system they are part of. The relationship between the sign, concept and object are arbitrary in that the concept of an object is the same across cultures and languages, but the word used to refer to the concepts are different for different languages.\(^7\) It is through culture that meanings are attached to words and signifiers:

This means that all verbal constructs are basically catachrestic, in as much as no union of any signifier with any signified is ‘natural’ or given by ‘necessity’. Literal meaning, like ‘proper’ usage, is the product of the application of a norm, social in nature, hence arbitrary, rather than a result of the operation of a law (White, 1979: 93).

Michael Foucault made the point that before language or speech ‘everything was simply what it was’ (White, 1979). With speech came differentiation, classification and analogies.

Around the same time as Saussure was developing his ‘semiology’, Charles Peirce, an American philosopher, was working on his own form of semiotics. While Saussure’s semiotics was a branch of linguistics, Peirce’s was rooted in philosophy.\(^8\) Saussurian semiotics was founded on the notion that a message could be sent to a receiver who would then simply decode the message. Peirce, on the other hand, believed that the messages were mediated by the receiver and interpreted by relating it to something already in the mind of the individual (Gottdiener, 1995). The power of Peirce’s semiotics over that of Saussure is that it incorporates the material world and is not entirely fixed on language and communication systems (Eco, 1976; Gottdiener, 1995). Material objects for Peirce are part of the process of interpreting signs; it is not simply a mental process as implied by other semioticians. Another point of difference between Saussure and Peirce is in the property of the sign (Sebeok, 1994; Brent, 2000; Deledalle, 2000). Saussure’s sign had only two elements while Peirce’s is triadic comprising the representamen, an object and an interpretant:

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\(^7\) Hall (1993) refers to examples of some signs which have been coded and constructed but may appear ‘natural’ as they are universally recognized. He states that this occurs because of the shared understanding on the encoding and decoding sides.

\(^8\) Some semioticians try to translate Peirce’s theory of signs into Saussure’s and vice versa, but Deledalle (2000) believes it is not possible: “My opinion is that the two theories are untranslatable into one another, because their underlying philosophies and logics are incompatible. Saussure’s are dualistic, Peirce’s, dialectic” (55).
A vehicle that conveys an idea to the mind, which he called the \textit{representamen}; another idea that interprets the sign, which he called the \textit{interpretant}; and an object for which the sign stands (Gottdiener, 1995: 9).\footnote{Peirce’s use of the word interpretant was not referring to a physical interpreter (Brent, 2000). At different times in his career he also adopted different uses for the terms sign and representamen (Deledalle, 2000). The three major aspects of his version of the sign are symbol (a sign that stands for something in the mind of the interpreter), icon (a sign which is closely tied to the object it refers to), and index (a sign which is produced through experiences of the interpreter) (Gottdiener, 1995).}

Peirce described the sign in action as semiosis while the theory of this experience was labelled semiotics (Deledalle, 2000). The process of semiosis involves an event A (the representamen) which produces the second event B (the interpretant or the signified of the representamen) all of which is conducted to produce event C (the object). In this process the interpretant leads to another sign/representamen and thus another object and again another interpretant. It is a process of one sign triggering another and so on, and is often referred to as unlimited semiosis (Cobley & Jansz, 2004). Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton (1981) give an example of this semiosis by referring to a woman who, when interviewed, talked about her and her husband’s grandmothers’ wedding rings and the special meaning of them:

These rings are signs (first element), standing for five generations of family continuity (second element) to this woman. The third element of these signs are her memories of the people and events and the thoughts or emotions evoked through reflection. In a given act of reflection the memories, thoughts, or emotions may not be new at all, but over the course of her life these rings have continued to ‘grow’ and develop and to take on new meanings, and are still doing so, even while retaining the same physical form (50).

It is this third element that is at the heart of a visitor’s connections and meaning-making in museums and it reinforces the idea that we can never impose meaning from an object/exhibit upon a visitor as they determine for themselves what is meaningful. In an example from the data collected for this research, Caroline and Gina (group D) were looking at an exhibit on traffic lights at the Powerhouse Museum and had the following conversation:

\begin{quote}
Caroline – You know my mum when we first come over here…….
Gina – Yeah
\end{quote}
The conversation itself is not overly interesting but the response to a question about it after the visit illustrates the importance of this connection for Caroline:

“My mother had a job at AWA at North Ryde not long after she came to Australia about 1968. North Ryde then was farm land and orchards. My parents rented a house that was originally an orchard and AWA was one of if not the first factory in the area and was within walking distance of my parent’s home. I also worked there in the office and I remember going to see Mum occasionally in the factory and her showing me the tedious job she was doing. She was soldering the smallest parts ever onto the circuit boards that went into traffic lights.”

It wasn’t necessarily the traffic lights themselves that were important but the memories associated with her mother’s job. It’s quite possible that Caroline is reminded of her mother’s experience whenever she sees traffic lights and therefore this story is perpetuated. What is interesting is that in most of the post-visit questions throughout the study Caroline gave very limited responses unlike the one above which emphasizes how ‘memorable’ or important this particular experience was to her. This example also serves to reinforce the arbitrary nature of signs. Different individuals may have had different stories to tell, or no stories as the case may be, with this exhibition. Caroline’s example portrays how powerful and important the role of the object is in provoking and conjuring up the third element in Peirce’s system.

Tourists are sometimes considered ‘allies’ of semioticians as they engage in ‘decoding’ sign systems in their travels (Culler, 1988). MacCannell (1999) uses Peirce’s idea that a “sign represents something to someone” (110) to analyse tourism sites. He developed three characteristics of the tourist attraction: the marker (represents), the sight (something) and the tourist (someone). MacCannell defines the marker as the information relating to the site that the tourist comes into contact with before visiting the site. For example, signs with the name of the site or information in brochures and travel guides. MacCannell provides an example which highlights the arbitrariness of the sign by referring to a painting that was displayed and thought to be painted by de Hoogh but turned out to be painted by another artist, Vermeer. The owner of the
painting changed the mark of the artist from Vermeer to de Hoogh who was more valuable at the time. However, when the owner sold the painting, Vermeer was a more valued artist:

The information that the canvas was painted by de Hoogh, information once held to be so important that someone took the trouble to take it, has now become a curious part of Vermeer’s painting, an aspect of the sight with a marker of its own. The transformation of marker into sight turns the painting into a display of an even more important painters work. Suddenly, the entire surface of the painting is alive with new information………As the marker is turned into the sight, the sight turns into a marker, and the esthetics of production are transformed into the esthetics of consumption and attraction (MacCannell, 1999: 120).

This transformation is not the work of nature but a cultural production. In other words, signs and markers can be manipulated and as a result the meaning and interpretation of such signs will be affected.

Peirce’s semiotics illustrates that signs cannot be understood without being interpreted. Signs are not only produced through people’s everyday experiences and social interactions but are also used to produce meaning in social interaction (Gottdiener, 1995). So semiotics promotes the multiple connotations of signs, which contests the doctrine of a stable, fixed or unitary meaning (Eco, 1992b; Fuery & Mansfield, 2000). Due to the varied nature of an individual’s prior experiences and culture a signifier can have different meanings for different people (Sturrock, 1979a). This can lead to a discrepancy in the interpretation of messages between author and reader, speaker and listener:

There is a constant sliding of meaning in all interpretation, a margin – something in excess of what we intend to say – in which other meanings overshadow the statement or the text, where other associations are awakened to life, giving what we say a different twist (Hall, 1997b: 33).

To communicate is to construct meaning and, by its very nature, is a semiotic process (Ravelli, 2006). Based on the work of the French semiotician George Mounin, Hooper-Greenhill (1991) discusses two avenues of semiotics. Semiology of signification, which studies unintended messages, and the semiology of communication which deals with
intended messages. The semiology of communication makes a differentiation between indicie and sign: the indicie is an indicator that can be observed standing for something which cannot be observed, and the sign is an ‘artificial indicie’ in that it is produced to send a message about something which cannot be observed. The semiology of signification school of thought believes that all indices can function as signs but making a distinction between an indicie and a sign allows one to also make a distinction between the intended messages of communication (sign) and the ‘interpretation’ of that message (indicie). Furthermore, the indicie only has meaning because it is interpreted. Hooper-Greenhill (1991) argues that by viewing the museum with the semiology of communication approach we begin to see the site consisting of intended messages (signs and signals) and unintended messages or interpretations (indices):

All socio-cultural phenomena, including museums, exhibitions, posters, and objects, are saturated by indices, which are ‘signicative’; they may become ‘signifying’ if relevant to and selected by the observer through a personal process of interpretation (54).

The significant issue here is that visitors will choose which messages they pay attention to and how the messages are interpreted. Using this semiology Hooper-Greenhill developed a model of communication (Figure 3.1) that reflects the dynamic relationship between the intended museum messages and the visitor’s interpretations.  

Figure 3.1: Hooper-Greenhill’s Communication Model

Source: Hooper-Greenhill (1991)

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10 Hooper-Greenhill (1994a) has developed a more complex and holistic model of communication as shown in Appendix D. However the model in Figure 3.1 simply illustrates how the meaning created is a function of the visitors’ actions and the museums communication rather than just a one-way process.
In this model the intended messages of the museum and the visitors, who bring with them a variety of influences, come together in the middle where meanings are constructed and reconstructed. This middle ground is not still but in a constant state of ‘flux’ and includes all aspects of the site such as the building itself and the exhibitions. Gadamer’s ‘fusion of horizons’ briefly referred to in the hermeneutics section of this chapter, supports the fluid nature of constructed meanings. From Gadamer’s point of view ‘understanding’ is reached through the coming together of the text’s horizons and the interpreter’s horizons:

The concept of understanding as a ‘fusion of horizons’ provides a more accurate picture of what happens on every transmission of meaning. By revising our conception of the function of the interpreter’s present horizons, Gadamer also succeeds in transforming our view of the nature of the past, which now appears as an in exhaustible source of possibilities of meaning rather than as a passive object of investigation (Linge, 1976: xix).

The constructed meanings are a product of the influences carried into the ‘reading’ and can be considered an intertextual process.

**Intertextuality: A tissue of quotations**

From this very brief foray into semiotics it becomes clear that how we speak and the language we use is a result of rules and systems that are established before we are born and as we develop we learn to adopt this system. The linguistic signs are a function of the language system we use and therefore have no meaning outside of that system (Allen, 2000). Texts are produced similar to the way we use language; they are based on a system of rules and codes that precede the author. Intertextuality as a theory emerged from literary studies to explain the shaping of a texts’ meaning by other texts. Texts lack independent meaning because they are selections from the larger ‘social text’ and are therefore functions of the cultural influences on the author and reader. Intertextuality can also be used to explain semiotics (Morgan, 1985). For instance in the language

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11 There is a large body of research from the field of visitor studies that has demonstrated how the visitor experience includes all aspects of the site, and all have an influence on learning. For example Caine and Caine (1994) state that the content of learning is inseparable from the context and Maxwell & Evans (2002) discuss the influence of the physical environment of the museum on visitor learning.

12 This title is inspired by Barthes’ (1977) description of texts.
system, words can have a variety of different meanings and connections to other words depending on the context, and the theory of intertextuality suggests that one text can connect to a variety of other texts. Intertextuality is not only a good fit for semiotics it is also very useful when explaining how visitors construct their meanings on-site.

Intertextuality can be explained by considering three texts A, B and C as an example. Text A was the first written in a chronological sense. With every text there are two realms: the reading and the writing. Text C has not only been produced (written) through the codes and traditions but also influenced by texts A and B. The meanings created by all three texts enter the ‘network of textual relations’ described by Allen (2000) in the following passage:

The act of reading, theorists claim, plunges us into a network of textual relations. To interpret a text, to discover its meaning, or meanings, is to trace those relations. Reading thus becomes a process of moving between texts. Meaning becomes something which exists between a text and all the other texts to which it refers and relates, moving out from the independent text into a network of textual relations. The text becomes the intertext (1).

In the network of textual relations no meaning is independent. In the realm of text reading an individual may be engaging with text C but they are also engaging with texts A and B in the intertextual process. Texts can only be read in relation to other texts similar to the way one sign can only have meaning in its difference to another sign (Culler, 1981). Authors do not simply choose words from the language system; rather they utilize genres, phrases and other features from earlier texts, codes and traditions. Intertextuality is therefore a web of relationships between the text and the intertext. The intertext is defined as “the set of texts discovered by the reader in his memory at the reading of a given passage” (Miraglia, 1994: 54). Barthes argued that it is the reader who brings the various ‘intertexts’ together to make meaning and made it clear that the reader themselves are made up of multiple intertexts (Morgan, 1985). Barthes also made the point that the intertexts are interpreted by each reader and so different intertexts

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13 Using an analogy, text production is like creating a palimpsest: “On the same parchment, one text can become superimposed upon another, which it does not quite conceal but allows to show through” (Genette, 1997: 398).
14 This network is similar to the middle section of Hooper-Greenhill’s communication model in Figure 3.1.
may be discovered by different readers. Riffaterre (1990) prefers to think of the text guiding the reader towards meaning by using the intertexts. This is in opposition to Kristeva who postulated that intertextuality opens up indefinite messages and ambiguity for the reader. The biggest problem with Riffaterre's position is that it assumes the reader has the knowledge or capability to pick up the signals of the author to follow this path (Morgan, 1985).

Although intertextuality originated in literary studies it is now used in a variety of disciplines and contexts. The fact that poststructuralists and structuralists used the theory for contrasting purposes proves the concept's flexibility (Allen, 2000). The following also provides a justification for its multi-disciplinary uses:

With the view that any event—whether in verbal, visual, aural, or kinesic 'discourse'—can be analysed as a text, or a hierarchy of relations among codes and their constituent elements, the gateway is open to applying the concept of 'intertextuality', defined generally as the structural relations among two or more texts, to any of the disciplines in the humanities and the social sciences (Morgan, 1985: 4).

Carlson (1994) discusses the intertextual elements of the theatre, such as the audience having previously encountered the actors and remembering them from other roles. He refers to these previous roles as the actors 'ghosts' and makes a comparison to 'ghosts' of previous readings when engaging with texts.\textsuperscript{15} Intertextuality has also been used in tourism by Edensor (1998) who refers to destinations as 'texts' therefore implying that these sites are 'read' by tourists. He states that the meaning created by these texts is based on methods used at other sites and is thus intertextual.\textsuperscript{16} It is in humanities where the importance of textualisation to all aspects of our lives has been frequently taken up:

There are, in Barthes's intertextual world, no emotions before the textual description of emotions, no thoughts before the textual representation of thoughts, no significant actions which do not signify outside of already textualised and

\textsuperscript{15} Carlson (1994) also refers to intertextuality in terms of patterns of costumes and character relationships that audiences become familiar with. The author goes as far to say that these are necessary for the audience to orient themselves. Hatten (1985) uses intertextuality to analyse music and concludes that music can be viewed through filters of style and strategy.

\textsuperscript{16} Edensor (1998) refers to the role of tourism and all its promotional material in reproducing familiar representations and styles of representations and images. He also states that the tourists themselves are involved in this reproduction of 'narratives' through photographs and 'stories' from their travels.
encoded actions; we feel and think and act in codes, in the cultural space of the *deja*,
the already spoken, written, read (Allen, 2000: 73).

This approach has also not escaped some researchers in museums with the trend now to
analyse the site as a text that produces meaning (Hall, 1997a; Roberts, 1997). By the very
fact that museums are designed to communicate meaning, they can be considered and
analysed as texts. According to Mason (2006) there are three advantages of the ‘textual
approach’ of analysis. Firstly, it reduces compartmentalization: in other words, rather
than focusing on one aspect of the museum, such as the influence of the physical
environment on the visitor, the analysis includes all aspects of the museum context.
Secondly, the analysis draws attention to unintentional meanings or meanings left out or
not considered by the curators. And thirdly, it moves the analysis away from the curator
as author and their intended messages to the responses of visitors as readers. The
research presented in this dissertation adopts the textual approach of analysis with the
intention of demonstrating how audiences read the Art Gallery of NSW, Taronga Zoo,
the Powerhouse Museum, and the Hyde Park Barracks Museum. In particular, how
unintended meanings occur as a result of the visitors’ ‘readings’.

Through the use of literary theory this chapter has demonstrated that visitors’
experiences with the text (museum) is influenced by what they carry into the
interpretation. As Ravelli (2006) suggests “there will always be provisional and
contingent aspects to meaning” (157). Contingent aspects such as prior knowledge and
prior experience.
Chapter 4

“Remember the time when…….”: The relationship between memory, prior experiences and visitor’s conversations

“Like the objects in them, museums do not have a meaning. Rather, they accept and reflect the meanings that are brought to them” (Annis, 1987: 17).

“Past memories, present experiences, and future dreams of each person are inextricably linked to objects that comprise his or her environment” (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981: ix).

“We are plugged into everything. Our culture isn’t limited by the objects and ideas in our local communities anymore” (Westbury, 2008).
Visitors to museums unveil their meaning-making through the conversations they have with other visitors. A common criticism of memory related research is that the psychological laboratory style methodology adopted may not reflect how memory functions in everyday contexts (Middleton & Edwards, 1990b). One of the justifications for the methodology undertaken in this project is the ability of the data to illustrate how meaning works in everyday situations and suggests that museums may be useful contexts for studying memory and recollections outside of the laboratory setting. The chapter begins with a discussion of the function and use of memory in everyday life. This sets the scene for an analysis about how visitors at museums use their memory to connect to prior experiences and prior knowledge while ‘interpreting’ and ‘reading’ the museum.

**Processing information**

Part of the excitement of visiting a museum is the immersion in an experience which may be different from our normal routines. This experience may also involve engaging with new and unfamiliar information. In order to comprehend unfamiliar material we rely on a complex system of processing rather than simply absorbing this new information (Hooper-Greenhill, 2004). Processing this new information relies on several distinct components of the brain:

Perception and cognition together constitute the universal interface between the realm of ideas which a human being has internalized and the realm of matter and energy which surrounds an individual. They serve to reduce the information overload (apparent chaos) of an un-cognized environment to manageable proportions. The reduction is achieved by searching for apparent symmetries (similarities). Cognition allows us to ‘fix’ instantly in the memory certain symmetries in real, virtual or conceptual space, which disappear the next moment (van der Leeuw, 1994: 135).

The process begins with detecting stimuli through our senses which is then translated and interpreted. Meaning is attached to the stimuli in an operation commonly referred to as perception (Hedge, 1995). While interpreting and making meaning was discussed in detail in the previous chapter, what is of interest in this chapter is why we attend to
certain stimuli and not others, and what sort of personal meanings are attached to the stimuli. We are forced to be highly selective in what we attend to because of the sheer volume of information that surrounds us on a daily basis (Markus, 1977; Hudson, 1986). As a result we are not aware of everything around us because we filter based on what interests us.

Incoming stimulus enters the brain through two pathways; the conscious and the archival memory. This is known as the ‘twin data stream’ and suggests that the brain is dynamic rather than stable and acts in response to the situation and the context we are faced with (Ableman, 1999). When encountering new information and experiences we use a schema, or schemata, to identify and contextualise the information presented (Anderson, Pichert & Shirey, 1983; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000a). We use our schema to transform new and unfamiliar material into more familiar information and then relate this information to that already in the long term memory in order to make links and connections (Gallagher, 1992; Hooper-Greenhill, 1994a). It is these links and connections that this research is primarily concerned with and their relationship with visitors’ meaning-making. Our search for information can be internal (retrieval of memories) or external (from the surrounding environment). The data presented in this chapter suggests that it is the external information that triggers the search for the internal information.

**What is memory?**

Memory allows us to make decisions about present and future situations based upon meanings created in the past. It is a complicated process which provides a system and identity for the self (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Sprenger, 1999; Archibald, 2002; Cattell & Climo, 2002; Krueger, 2006; Throsby, 2006). Although constantly active it is selective and works unconsciously to prevent us from being inundated with useless information, such as what you ate for breakfast two weeks ago (Throsby, 2006). We often take for granted actions crucial to our day to day living that

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1 Other authors refer to the schemata as meaning perspectives (Mezirow, 1977), conceptual frameworks (Boud & Walker, 1990; Ham, 1999), frames of understanding (Harrison *et al*, 2002), self-image factor (Miles *et al*, 1988) or worldview (Dean, 1994; Renfrew & Bahn, 2004). However, all have the same role in information processing.
were learnt and stored in memory to be repeated unconsciously e.g. walking. (Kavanagh, 2000). Memory therefore assists us in reaching the goals that drive our behaviour:

Memory in a sense is the content of the self, it determines what we are and importantly it determines what we can become. People often aren’t that aware of the role of memory in allowing us to have a future.……..So memory provides a basis for action in the present moment but also for us having a future and it allows the self to have a continuity in time which stretches not just from the past but also into some future point in our lives (Brockie, 2006).

The role memory plays in our future becomes quite clear when it fails, superbly demonstrated in the movie Memento (Nolan, 2001). The plot is centred on the character of Leonard who has lost the ability to make new memories. As another character in the movie eloquently puts it “he knows what he wants to do next but has no idea as to what he has just done” (Nolan, 2001). It becomes extremely difficult to learn from mistakes or past experiences if you can’t remember what they are. In another movie 50 first dates (Segal, 2004) Lucy, the main character, was involved in a car accident and doesn’t remember anything about it, nor can she make new memories. She lives the same day over and over. When she wakes up in the morning she thinks it is the day of the accident all over again. While both movies are extreme cases of memory failure, the conditions are not unheard of and serve to highlight the role of memory in guiding our future and present behaviour.2

There are three parts of our memory that are important: short, working and long term memory. Working memory incorporates all the information we are currently thinking about. It is a short term memory, but is not the short term memory which is an entirely different concept. Short term memory lasts about 15-30 seconds, whereas working memory can last a couple of hours and is used to transform information into long term memory through semantic coding (Sprenger, 1999).3 The new information is structured to fit in with existing knowledge already in the long term memory. Different types of

2 The example used by Hein (1998) is an excellent illustration of how important experience is in allowing us to negotiate events. He describes an adult who has been blind their whole life and then regains their vision: “They cannot distinguish the foreground from the background, the ‘shapes’ from among the multitude of sensations, they lack the repertoire of ordered perceptions that is necessary to make visual meaning out of their environment” (156). This indicates how difficult it is to learn without prior experience.

3 It is during sleep that the brain makes the transformation of memories from short term to long term (Ableman, 1999).
information are held in different areas of the brain, such as one area for visual and one area for kinaesthetic information. The long-term memory consists of ‘association cortexes’ for each of these different types of information. When the information is to be retrieved it is brought back into the association cortex relating to the area it was retrieved from and is then disposed of and used in working memory (Sprenger, 1999).4

Put simply memory is a function of personal stories and ‘biographical’ experiences (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000a). What we know about our selves and these past experiences is often referred to as autobiographical memory (Fivush, 1998; Rubin, 1998).5 Our autobiographical memories are used to create ‘narratives’ of our selves and how we live our lives. Robinson and Taylor (1998) take a different view and make a distinction between autobiographical memory and self-narratives:

Autobiographical memory may comprise a wide range of personal information and experience. Self-narratives, in contrast, consist of a set of temporally and thematically organised salient experiences and concerns that constitute one’s identity or self-concept (126).

Data from my own research appears to support such a distinction. The following is an excerpt from the conversation of group C at the Powerhouse Museum:

Catrina – Look at these lovely carriages made out of this beautiful wood
Belinda – Yes, you know there was um………
Catrina – Look at this lovely light
Belinda – Gorgeous………….When I was in the National Trust they let us onto the oil carriage ones at the Mortuary station. You had to take all your jewellery off and people had to justify having their glasses on as well so that you didn’t scrape the cedar on the inside. And all solid silver serving ware………

4 Like most cognitive processes, memory is influenced by a variety of internal and external factors such as the physical environment, social environment, health and psychological state of the individual and their attitudes (Hermann & Plude, 1995).
5 According to Rubin (1998) there are five functions involved in autobiographical memory: Cuing (internal, external or a combination of both and relates to the information search behaviour discussed earlier); retrieval processes (a slow process which may be because the first retrieval acts as a cue for the next retrieval and so on); language and narrative structure (most autobiographical memories take the structure of narratives); imagery (important part of autobiographical memory that give the feeling of ‘reliving’ a particular experience. Images also make the memory more believable); and affect (closely tied to imagery and can impede recalls of specific events or details of such events).
While this was an important connection for Belinda to make at the museum, if she was asked to give an account of her own life or describe her ‘self-narrative’ the same experience may not appear. The following is an example from the same group’s visit to the Art Gallery of NSW and does highlight an aspect of Belinda’s life that may well appear in her ‘self-narrative’:

Catrina – What does that mean, Beatrice you speak these languages. Du kunst (Obviously reading)
Belinda - (inaudible) forms of art
Catrina – Ohh. Is Kunst art is it?.........Oh right. Well there we are you see. You were right.
And that is a very working mechanical device isn’t it

At the time they were looking at the title page of a book in the display cabinet which was in German. After the visit Belinda mentioned that she speaks the following languages: “In varying degrees of fluency: Afrikaans, English, Xhosa, Dutch, Flemish, French and Italian, with some knowledge of Latin, Greek, Russian, German and Spanish”. She also explained where this passion for languages comes from:

“All I can say is that it sits in my soul. My step-grandfather was German, my father was fluent in classical Greek and Latin, but I will probably never know if that had anything to do with my love of words, etymology, grammar etc...........Two vivid memories come to mind though, the more disturbing being a photograph of my father when he was a small boy, forced to wear at school a large heavy placard around his little shoulders with the words "I AM A DONKEY" in big letters. This was the punishment inflicted on school children who spoke Afrikaans during the British Occupation of South Africa. The other memory is one of constant embarrassment, if not shame, at my total inability to understand anything said to me in English when I was a child. Maybe that made me decide that I would never again allow a language to master me. Stubborn bugger.”

Before the research begun each group was asked to write a ‘profile’ of themselves; a summary of their life if you like. Included in Belinda’s profile was that she held degrees in law and languages. While it was significant enough to feature in her profile it also suggests it may be part of her self-narrative.⁶

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⁶ It must be clarified that individuals may have more than one self-narrative (Bruner, 1994).
Her response highlights a number of issues. Firstly, on a methodological level, it shows the importance of having access to respondents after their visit to question them about their conversations. Without this correspondence such a response would never have emerged. Secondly, it raises the question about whether Belinda’s expertise would have been called upon if she was visiting with someone else, possibly another friend who was unaware that she even spoke German. Thirdly, it’s already apparent in this early discussion that memories or connections of visitors may be of an autobiographical or self-narrative nature. And finally, Belinda’s response highlights how important memory is in directing future behaviour as she describes how the two visual memories of her father and her own ridicule led to the decision later in life to learn other languages. Experiences such as Belinda’s have been described as self-defining memories:

The vividness of these memories and the intense affect they may evoke ensure the memorability of the original event but also make recollection of that event particularly revealing to us of what matters most. Although memory is perpetually taking snapshots of each and every experience that we encounter, there always emerges a core of slides to which we return repeatedly. This dog-eared bunch of slightly obscured or distorted images comes to form the central concerns of our personality (Singer & Salovey, 1993: 12).

McAdams (1996) refers to key events in people’s lives as nuclear episodes and that these episodes reveal aspects of people’s self-narratives or personal myths. Why is it that some 40 years later such memories appear just as vividly as they did a couple of years after the experience happened? Schank (1990) provides an answer:

Stories about significant episodes in our childhood, for example, do not go away so easily, partly because our childhood doesn't keep recurring, and partly because significant episodes are, by definition, different from the norm and thus unlikely to repeat (142).

Childhood memories, such as those of Belinda, were a common connection for participants and further examples will be provided throughout this chapter.

7 The importance of the social nature of the museum visit will be discussed in chapter five.
The experiences that become stories are those that are most interesting and memorable. In 2006 on his *Enough Rope* program Andrew Denton interviewed Joanne Lees, the victim of a vicious kidnapping in central Australia. Although she managed to escape her boyfriend was never found. In the interview Andrew asks Joanne what it was like to turn up to the hotel she went to after she was found:

> It was just the strangest place that I have ever visited or been to in my life. As I entered I had to – well, I thought – very fearful, because I thought that perhaps the man who just attacked me could possibly be there. The roadhouse was in the middle of a New Year’s Eve party………in the middle of July. I remember it vividly. I remember the song that was playing on the jukebox as I walked in, which was Paul Young, and I was led over to the bar, where I met the proprietor (Denton, 2006).

Obviously this was an event that involved very extreme emotions and as such is memorable for all the wrong reasons. Singer and Salovey (1993) liken the vividness of self-defining memories as participating in virtual reality:

> To a similar extent, affective memories, along with dreams, have the capacity to insert you into the reality of the events that transpired in the past. You feel, more than remember, the experience (30).

The emotional component of memory is vital but appears to disintegrate as we get older (Thompson, 1998). While the exact reason for this is not certain it may be that memories themselves are not as ‘vivid’ as they once were. In the case of Joanne Lees the event is still relatively recent so some strong emotion is still attached to the memories, although not as strong as the time of the event. Thompson (1998) refers to research that shows that pleasant and unpleasant feelings declined when recalling memories from prior experiences, with unpleasant feelings declining more than pleasant. The results also suggest that the more extreme the emotion attached to the original event, either pleasant or unpleasant, the better the event is recalled, and the more positive events are remembered better than the negative events, or at least the emotion of the positive events is stronger: “In effect the memory for unpleasant events remains but the emotion is forgotten” (Thompson, 1998: 40). Although when recollecting the emotions may feel
similar to those encountered during the original event, the individual is actually experiencing a new emotion (Christianson & Safer, 1996).

**Remembering and recollecting**

Memory is focused on experiences and episodes and when we have an episodic memory we have a feeling called a ‘recollection’ (Throsby, 2006). When memory is discussed in everyday contexts it is mostly recollections from memory that people refer to. Recollecting is at the core of meaning-making and how we retrieve memories is even more critical than how we perceived the information in the first place. According to Sprenger (1999) there are five ‘lanes’ or pathways through which memories are retrieved; semantic (information learnt from words); episodic (locations and contexts); procedural (processes related to your body); automatic (conditional responses); and emotional (which is the most powerful and overrides all other lanes of memory). These lanes are either implicit or explicit, where explicit is voluntary (semantic and episodic lanes) and implicit memories are involuntary and are retrieved instinctively (automatic, emotional and procedural memory lanes). Storing information in more than one of these lanes enhances learning and triggering one memory lane will more than likely open up others (Sprenger, 1999; Kavanagh, 2000). Part of being able to access these memory lanes can be attributed to schema, which has been discussed earlier as the organizational system used to process new information. The schema is used to search for past memories and cues relating to the new information that is encountered (Anderson *et al*, 1983). These cues are dependent on relevance and explain why different individuals remember different aspects of an event they both experienced together.

In their earlier work Schank and Abelson (1977) argue that memory organization is based on episodic memory; that is it is organized around personal experiences and ‘episodes’ rather than semantic knowledge. They state that the memory must then have a system which can recognize repeated events and experiences in order to ‘fill in the blanks’. They propose that when enough episodes that are similar are stored they

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8 It is for this reason that Edwards and Middleton (1986) prefer to use the term ‘remembering’ rather than memory.
9 Even though two people who shared the same experience may recall specifics of the event differently, the general structure of the event will be recalled similarly (Chawla, 1998).
become part of a script for that type of situation, such as going to a restaurant or the grocery store. So scripts make up our specific knowledge and allow us to interpret familiar events and situations. It allows us to conduct less processing of information:

Knowledge of specific situations such as theatres allows us to interpret the remarks that people make about theatres. Consider how difficult it would be to interpret ‘second aisle on your right’ without the detailed knowledge about theatres that the patron and the usher both have. It would be rather odd to respond ‘what about the second aisle on my right?’ or ‘where is my seat?’ or ‘is this how I get into the theatre?’ The usher simply takes the ticket and, assuming you understand and have specific knowledge about theatres, utters his otherwise cryptic remark without any verbal input from you (Schank & Abelson, 1977: 37).

Scripts are structures of events that are made up of slots and ‘slot fillers’ refer to all the possible alternatives that could fill the slots (Slackman, Hudson & Fivush, 1986).10 The major implication of script based knowledge and understanding is that it relies on prior knowledge and prior experiences. When information is missing the slots are filled with information from these prior experiences. Scripts are unlike other schematic organizations as they rely on the individual using inferences based on experiences of similar events (Hudson, 1986; Nelson, 1986). Scripts also make it easier for visitors to negotiate museums as they already know what to expect and that they will behave in a certain fashion. Similar to the idea of scripts Falk and Dierking (2000) refer to behaviour settings:

If people needed to relearn the ‘rules of behaviour’ every time they walked into a behaviour setting, their ability to learn other things would be significantly limited (55).

This partly explains why new visitors to museums spend a lot of time navigating and getting used to the ‘setting’. Much of the museum literature discusses what visitors bring with them to the site (prior knowledge, motivations and expectations) as the entrance narrative (Doering & Pekarik, 1996; Falk, 2006) or the visitor agenda (Falk et al, 1998). A plethora of research has indicated that the pre-visit agenda influences the behaviours and learning of the visitor (Falk et al, 1998).

10 Slackman et al (1986) state that because the event schema is organized as a ‘whole’, what is filled in one slot affects the other slots.
While our past experiences are retrieved and used to make sense of new experiences, our recollections are not simple reproductions of past events; more like reconstructions:

We do not remember an event by activating or ‘replaying’ some fixed memory trace. Rather, we construct a schematic representation of our past experience by piecing together remembered bits and pieces with new facts that we supply to flesh out or augment our emerging knowledge of the past (Snyder & Uranowitz, 1978: 942).

This is not to suggest that our memory for details of events is stable, quite the opposite (Thompson, Skowronski, Larsen & Betz, 1996). In other words, it changes from being reproductive (recalling a ‘memory trace’) to reconstructive (knowing about the people, places and the event involved and then reconstructing that event). The most intriguing aspect of memory and recollecting is how specific events of past experiences are used in the interpretation of a new experience. This ability can be attributed to the way memory is encoded and stored:

Memory, in order to be effective, must contain both specific experiences (memories) and labels (indexes) used to trace memories of experiences. The more information we are given about a situation, the more places we can attach it in our memory, and the more ways it can be compared to other cases in our memory (Schank & Abelson, 1995: 7).

Increasing the number of links we make between memories increases the stability of our newly acquired knowledge and information (Jeffery-Clay, 1998). The more indices we have the more comparisons we can make, which in turn increases the chances of learning. The indexing and creation of labels for stored information is not a conscious process and is only possible to analyse by looking at the stories produced (Schank, 1990). So memories of events, such as travel experiences, are not stored as simply ‘the trip to

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11 Other research suggests that when storing memories a separate cue for the time and date of the event is not constructed and the ‘temporal’ details of events are almost always reconstructed rather than reproduced. Semantic memory is factual information that has lost its temporal characteristics and lacks the personal relationship to the individual (Fivush & Slackman, 1986; Howes, 2007). According to Thompson et al. (1996) there are five common methods of reconstructing the temporal details of events: using temporal information that is part of the event (e.g. the weather involved in the event); using time and date details of the type of event (e.g. birthday); placing events in particular stages of life (e.g. during high school or university); using chains to place events in time and order (e.g. undergraduate degree before a PhD); landmark events (e.g. where you were when Princess Diana died). The amount of detail retrieved relating to an event will also significantly influence the ability to place that event in time.
Europe in 2007 but are broken down to the specific events that happened on that trip and are indexed accordingly. It is this indexing system that may explain why travel experiences are a frequent source of connections and so prominent in the data collected for this research. These experiences appear to contain numerous ‘indices’ allowing individuals to access various events from the travel experience. For example during group A’s visit to the zoo, the following connection was made while looking at the penguin exhibit:

*Sandra –* Hey look here. Hello gorgeous. Do you want to have a closer look?

*Gary –* He’s from New Zealand

*Sandra –* Look at the (inaudible) of the water. You’re a pretty little thing aren’t you? Is he going to read the paper..........Here read the paper

*Gary –* Don’t put it down (Gary taking a photo)

*Sandra –* (chuckles)......Have a read of the paper..........Red eye. Look at the pink eyes

*Gary –* Mmm

*Sandra –* Is it the same on the other side or is it (inaudible)

*Gary –* No

*Sandra –* That yellow is like a long feather

*Gary –* Mmm. They are the ones we saw in New Zealand. I forgot they.....

*Sandra –* Yeah. That’s like a long feather

*Gary –* Yeah

*Sandra –* It’s silken. Very beautiful

*Gary –* Mmm (Gary spoke to another visitor)

*Sandra –* That’s glass he won’t touch this

For this connection to be made the original experience of seeing penguins must have been stored as a separate event that occurred as part of the visit to New Zealand. After the visit Gary described other memories of this trip:

“Seeing several different species of penguin in different places in NZ. Getting up close to penguins as they came out of the water to return to their nests for the night. Sitting in hides watching them come out of the water and waddle to their nests, passing so close to us we could have reached out

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12 This type of connection may also be a reflection of the amount of travelling that occurs in modern society and whether these connections would have featured so prominently 2-3 decades ago is questionable. Ableman (1999) has a different view of such connections and concludes that our ancient ancestors would have relied on landscapes for recognition of safety and food sources being nomadic beings.
and almost touched them. I have never been to Phillip Island but can remember seeing penguins come ashore at Terrigal when I was on holiday there as a young boy.”

From this response it is evident that experiences relating to ‘penguins’ have been stored together for easy access; not only direct experiences of seeing penguins in the wild but all penguin related knowledge as he refers to Phillip Island which is a world renowned penguin attraction.

Travel experiences were also part of the interpretive strategy adopted by Sandra and Gary during their visit to the Art Gallery of NSW. The couple had spent 18 months living and teaching English in Japan so they were particularly interested in the Asian section of the gallery. The following is an extract from a conversation that took place in this exhibition:

*Sandra –* That’s one heck of a large badge  
*Gary –* Yes. These are rank badges  
*Sandra –* Yeah I can see that. Crane. The crane in Vietnam as well as Japan ……oh ok so it goes in the middle  
*Gary –* These go along because they were tied at the side like the Japanese stuff  
*Sandra –* So it’s a child’s one and this is the……  
*Gary –* Yeah but these went on the front  
*Sandra –* Ok, Korea did the same. It goes Chinese, Korea, Vietnam. I don’t think we have seen anything like that in Japan  
*Gary –* No  
*Sandra –* I mean umm……it’s interesting that they have used the crane  
*Gary –* Yeah

Gary and Sandra were using the familiar to interpret the unfamiliar. While they knew a great deal about Japanese culture, other Asian cultures were still somewhat foreign to them. After the visit they explained that they knew that the crane was an important bird in Japan but they were unaware it was so prominent in other neighbouring countries. Gary mentioned that for him this part of the visit was simply about making comparisons. Throughout this section of the gallery the couple frequently made connections to experiences they had in Japan and objects they owned:
Sandra – That’s amazing up there there is a tea ceremony um thingo, but they are, come back up here, that’s exactly the same as we saw now current, and that’s China

Gary – This is Japan

Sandra – No not up here its not

Gary – This is Japan

Sandra – This section is but up here no…….well that’s a Japanese name but here China Ming dynasty……..and that is identical stuff to what we saw. The stirrer, the cup

Gary – Yeah but that is Japan, that is the tea ceremony

Sandra – I know, but it doesn’t say so, except rakou……..but China have the tea ceremony too

Gary – Here is a Japanese tea……..

Sandra – Yeah I know and I saw the Japanese tea room. Hey look did you see their screen; they have got a broken screen the same as we had

It has been argued that Western culture places a huge emphasis on ‘freezing’ holidays into photographs.13 But as the data just presented illustrates, travel experiences are also frozen in our memories and the experiences are often used as markers to separate periods in our life:

Holidays are marked out as extraordinary periods, stocked with valuable experiences, the gaining of knowledge, and the acquisition of sights and commodities. Selected sights and moments from holidays are recorded so that they can fit into personal life-stories and provide stimulating and satisfying memories in times of boredom or stress (Edensor, 1998: 137).

Data stored in memory is dynamic so the process of reminiscence can also influence our own understanding of the experiences we are recalling (Fivush, 1998). In other words, recollections drawn upon to use in a current experience will then be changed as a result of its interaction with the new stimulus and new experience, creating a new memory:

In the contest between varying accounts of shared experiences, people re-interpret and discover features of the past that become the context and content for what they will jointly recall and commemorate on future occasions (Middleton & Edwards, 1990a: 7).

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The meaning of the past is therefore constantly manipulated for its use in the present but this re-interpretation or manipulation of memory can sometimes be detrimental to the individual. In a 2006 television program *Insight*, Martin Conway, a world renowned memory expert, discussed this issue:

One of the questions which you've raised is are these really memories, or are they stories, are they kind of family experiences in which photographs have been looked at, things have been talked over and gradually that’s been incorporated into the person’s mind in a form that when it then comes to mind it comes to mind as a memory and so they really remember the experience, they have the feeling of remembering, if you want, even though its based upon some kind of story or mental construction (Brockie, 2006).

Schank and Abelson (1995) go as far to say that memory is simply memory of past interpretations. The role of stories and ‘reproductions’ in memory will be addressed in chapter five. Keeping on the theme of memory failure, Schacter (2003) refers to ‘seven sins’ of memory, one of which is misattribution and involves the following:

Assigning a memory to the wrong source: mistaking fantasy for reality, or incorrectly remembering that a friend told you a bit of trivia that you actually read about in a newspaper (5).

Memories of experiences when young often become blurred with memories of conversations about such experiences (Archibald, 2002). By using an example from a memory from his childhood, Bruner (1994) discusses the accuracy of the memory and that parts of his recollection couldn’t be true even though it is how he remembers the experience. He states that such inaccuracies occur as a result of providing continuity between the past and the present. It demonstrates how memory can be changed and manipulated as time goes on to the point where the individual actually believes the new details of the recollection to be true (Brockie, 2006). Schacter describes an extreme case of misattribution known as cryptomnesia which is recalling a past experience as something that you were a part of or that happened to you but in reality it was from a

14 His publication is concerned with faults of memory and the issues of forgetting. The first three sins he discusses (transience, absent-mindedness and blocking) are sins of omission and they deal with not being able to recall something at all. They have no real relevance to the discussion here. The remaining four sins are relevant as they relate to the manipulation of recalled experiences for different reasons. Including misattribution they are suggestibility, bias and resistance.
book you read or movie you had seen. Memories can even be planted in people’s minds so they experience them as if they were their own memories (Throsby, 2006). These memory faults indicate what can happen when past experiences and information from various sources come together. It also adds weight to the use of intertextuality to explain meaning-making by visitors, as they draw upon a myriad of sources, prior experiences and memories to interpret the museum and craft their own narrative of the experience. The purpose of this discussion is simply to demonstrate that memory is by no means infallible and researchers must be aware of such inaccuracies.

Remembering is an act of communication and is therefore not devoid of the influences of context and meaning which are critical components of both the encoding and decoding of memories:

Students have more trouble solving math problems in English class than they do in their math classroom. Why? The walls, desks, overheads, chalkboards, and even the math teacher are covered with invisible information. The content of the room becomes part of the context of the memory (Sprenger, 1999: 52).

Memory research has indicated that the context and the task influences what memories are recalled and that aspects recollected about an event may be different when recollection occurs in a different context (Middleton & Edwards, 1990b). This would definitely help to explain why the participants in this research recalled more detail with something in front of them that sparked the recollection in the first place, rather than in the week after the visit when they were answering questions about their conversations. Triggers are therefore crucial in the ‘remembering’ process:

When people are given prompts or cues related to the original event (such as words, images, sounds, smells, or a return to the original location), their memories increase in number and detail (Chawla, 1998: 387).

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15 Schacter (2003) discusses an experiment he conducted to test this fault of memory. It involved the American actor Alan Alda best known for his role in *Mash*. He was asked to meet Schacter in a park where they proceeded to sit down and watch a couple having a picnic. The couple were actors and Alan knew this and payed careful attention to the scene. The next day he met Schacter in his office where he showed Alan pictures from the picnic, some of which depicted scenes that didn’t actually occur while they were watching the couple the previous day. Afterwards Alan was asked for a yes or no response when Schacter read out scenes that happened at the picnic that he actually saw. On a few occasions Alan said yes to a scene that only appeared in the photos he had just looked through.
Senses such as sight, sound and smells can also trigger, sometimes involuntarily, stories and recollections of past experiences (Edensor, 1998). Such recollections generally have a strong emotional component attached and as previously explained the more extreme the emotion attached the more memorable the event will be (Christianson & Safer, 1996; Schacter, 2003).

Rehearsal is also a major influence on whether a recollection occurs in the future. The most common form of rehearsal involves talking to friends and reminiscing about the past. Due to the multi-site nature of my research, it was easy to pick up examples of memory rehearsal. The following conversation of group D occurred in the exhibition Never done: women’s work in the home showing women’s work in the Australian home over the past 100 years at the Powerhouse Museum:

Shelly – That’s an embroidery no, ahh a darning hoop thing yeah
Gina – Yeah, yeah
Jill – An ice-cream cone I used to call it
Gina – Mmm
Shelly – That’s what it looks like doesn’t it
Caroline – Darn socks
Shelly – That’s it yeah
Jill – There you go
Gina – I’ve got a plastic one at home
Caroline – George says to me now why can’t you darn them. I said I’m not darning the damn socks they are only $2 to buy
Shelly – Go and buy another pair, yeah
Jill – No exactly right. My mum used to sit there it seemed like every night but I’m sure it wasn’t
Gina – But you learnt to darn at school. Did you?
Shelly – No
Jill – Yes, yes cause I actually did do……
Gina – Sew buttons on
Jill – Yes, yeah
Gina – Do button holes

The group’s next visit as part of the research was to the Hyde Park Barracks museum where Caroline brought up the ‘darning’ story again:
Jill – Wonder if that lady came back as a museum studies student having known that it was her family?
Caroline – Oh it was, yeah
Jill – Or whether she did it unknowingly. Interesting isn’t it
Caroline – Oh darning socks
Jill – Mmm
Caroline – George always says ‘Are you going to darn that’. No it only costs $2 to buy
Jill – No exactly

Caroline’s recollection in the second instance was no doubt made possible because of the initial telling of the story at the Powerhouse Museum. It may also be the case that being surrounded with the same people on both occasions assisted the recollection. This example is a form of natural memory and according to Caine and Caine (1994) recalling information such as a list of words may require repetition yet we can easily remember the meal we had last night without repetition because our brain is extremely capable of storing large amounts of natural memory. They go on to state that in education we ignore the ability of the brain to remember events relating to life experience:

It is a matter of finding out how what is being learned relates to what the learner already knows and values how information and experiences connect. In essence, we have to come to terms with meaningful learning and the art of capitalizing on experience (Caine & Caine, 1994: 4).

Museums are very much guilty of not ‘capitalizing on the experiences’ of their audience, and this forms the central argument for the concluding chapters.

The examples from the data thus far begin to illustrate that museums act as ‘rehearsal spaces’ and while recollecting is a natural daily activity it could be that being in the museum setting increases the frequency of such recollections. While rehearsal is often the cause of forgetting information, simply repeating information for the sake of it without tying it to existing knowledge and experiences also leads to poor recall (Thompson et al, 1996). Thus it is crucial how well the information was encountered in the first place and whether it was in a meaningful context (Tessmer & Richey, 1997). Amanda Barnier, a psychologist and memory expert, discusses this issue:
We’re really good at meaningful material, the things that mean the most to us. So if, for instance, I tried to learn a list of words that made sense to me, that were important to me, I’d be able to remember them much better than, say, a list of scrambled letters or scrambled words. So if it is meaningful it is more memorable (Brockie, 2006).

There is an important differentiation to make between emotion and affect with the latter being very low level and more of an appraisal tagging response. It is an important differentiation as we can have a feeling about something or an experience without being emotional about it:

When we encounter an unknown object or situation for the first time, we appraise it, that is, we find out whether it is good or bad. In the case of ice cream we taste it. We like the taste and we tag the concept of ice cream with an affective tag that reads ‘very good’. The next time we encounter that object we do not have to go through the process of appraisal. We instantly know from its label that it is ‘very good’ (Webb, 2000: 17).

Webb goes on to say that every experience we have becomes tagged in the same way. Personal relevance is tied closely to affect. In the museum visitors tend to respond affectively to exhibits that they can picture themselves being a part of or that have a human component that we may be able to relate to. And, as was discussed earlier, the connections made by my participants can be both autobiographical, with very little emotions involved, or self-narrative that are deeply personal and emotional recollections.

**Connections with objects**

Place and locations are not the only strong evokers of memory; so too are objects. We all have objects that we are attached to, but in most cases don’t acknowledge the meaning of these objects until they are detached from our lives (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000a). Objects gain their importance as they can be mundane in the present but later on become connections to a world past by:
These material displacements, either by accident or design, then produce the object as a ‘memento’, a ‘historical artefact’ with which to define the world of which it was a part rather than (as before) through which to achieve ends with a particular time and space (Radley, 1990: 57).

Objects are both active and passive as they are cultural productions that in turn shape the identity of the user (Pearce, 1995). They have the ability to add to chaos in our lives or alternatively they can provide us with some sort of direction. They provide an index to our lived experiences and because meaning is not inherent in objects but placed upon them, the meaning can never be fully fixed or stable (Geertz, 1973; Hall, 1997b; Eberbach & Crowley, 2005). Objects are palimpsests which means that with each new era and context the object gains a new meaning which adds to, but does not replace, the old ones forming layers of meaning (Lidchi, 1997). This is similar to the way texts use and add to the meanings of other texts in the theory of intertextuality. The problem associated with many of the interpretation definitions is the implication that meanings are located within the resource that is being interpreted. For example, the definition of the National Association of Interpretation from the US:

Interpretation is a communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the inherent meanings of the resource (cited in Brochu & Merriman, 2002: 16).

The use of the word inherent implies that the meanings are a permanent or inseparable attribute of the resource. However heritage buildings, for example, have meanings that will change over time and are definitely not permanent. The meanings are placed upon the resource rather than existing within it as inherent implies.

Museums have often been criticised for taking objects out of their original context and creating a ‘representation’ of the world (Clifford, 1993; Moore, 1997; Preziosi, 2006). But does this representation or lack of original context have a major impact on how

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16 Different cultures use objects in different ways which means that the meanings imposed on them are different for different cultures (Sperber, 1979; Radley, 1990). This also means that not only do entire cultures remember objects differently but also individuals within cultures impose different meanings on objects: “One appropriate example is the safety-pin in contemporary Britain, which, according to who wears it – an infant, a grandmother or a ‘punk’ – changes its meaning” (Tilley, 1994: 72). Tilley also makes the point that it is in the moment of interpretation that the meaning may differ as well depending on who is interpreting and the context of the interpretation.
people engage with the object? The example provided by Clifford (1988) supports the contrary view. He refers to a young man looking for a particular fox skin that may have belonged to his grandfather in an American museum. When he finds it he begins to describe and explain specific characteristics of the skin:

Whatever is happening in this encounter, two things are clearly not happening. The grandson is not replacing the object in its original or “authentic” cultural context. That is long past. His encounter with the painted skin is part of a modern recollection. And the painted tunic is not being appreciated as art, as an aesthetic object. The encounter is too specific, too enmeshed in family history and ethnic memory (247).

It is not the original object in the museum that is important, rather the memory of and the connection to a similar object that is the critical component of the interpretation of the young man. During the pilot study Group D visited the Australian Museum where they encountered an Aboriginal dance suit. While looking at this suit Shelly made the following connection:

*Shelly – In New Guinea they call them Sing Sing’s and they have all this big colourful stuff*

Shelly spent her early years in PNG and so was again using the ‘familiar’ to interpret the unfamiliar. The question is would Shelly have made the same connection if the object, in this case the dance suit, was in its original context say in a cultural centre in central Australia? While its difficult to speculate I think the answer would be yes. This example, and that from Clifford, suggest that the relationship of the object to the individual is as, or more important, than the context of the object as the power of the object is in its ability to conjure rather than simply signify (Hein, 2000). Objects provide support for dialogue and learning and act as springboards and mediators for personal connections and conversations (Kwint, 1999; Morrissey, 2002; Paris & Mercer, 2002; Leinhardt & Knutson, 2004; Eberbach & Crowley, 2005). Roberts (1997) argues that because

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17 Shelly after the visit to the Australian Museum discussed her early life in PNG: “I was born on Manus Island which was a Naval island (my dad was in the navy) we came back to Australia in 1968 when I was 8 years old. I was quite young but I do remember a lot, it was a beautiful place. Very relaxed easy lifestyle. There were not many white families on the Island so it was a very close group. I remember lots of parties. I have never been back although I would love too, once New Guinea got their independence I am told the whole place changed and it is not particularly safe. I have heard that the Island now has a tourist resort (very basic). It’s a fantastic place when the war was over the army left all their equipment and we used to play on old army trucks and jeeps”.

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meaning is imposed on objects rather than inherent in them, our experience with objects is always mediated by the signs created about them, and to experience the ‘real’ object is to experience the sign system which provides meaning for the object:

Viewed in this light, the drive to provide interpretation for museum collections represents an attempt to restore the missing contexts out of which their original meanings arose and within which the ‘really’ existed (102).

The meaning created, however, is incomplete until the visitor ‘fills in the gaps’ (Pearce, 1994). Despite the sites attempts to ‘recontextualise’ the objects, visitors will frequently ‘restore’ the missing context with their own experiences:

Objects are known to people only as taken in by them through the frameworks that they have developed and bring with them. The idea behind the development of a museum exhibit, then, would be to make a place for people’s own ways of understanding and to work with them (Duckworth, 1990: 5).

Duckworth makes the point that sites need to ‘work with’ the visitors’ own understanding. Data, such as that produced from this study, indicate what meaning visitors make from objects and therefore how sites can help to facilitate these interpretations. Chapter six will deal with these issues in more depth.

According to Radley (1990) visitors do not fill the gaps by remembering or relating to events from their own lives rather they look for an understanding of other peoples past lives. While this may be true for some visitor demographics, the conversations from my research participants also illustrate that some visitors do interpret objects by finding personal connections, stories and memories conjured by the object and related to their own lives. Across the four groups and 16 site visits there were 57 examples of individuals connecting to objects that they had owned or owned by a family member or friend. Here are just two examples:

Group E (Powerhouse Museum)

Sam – Did you ever have those cups when you were a kid?
Melissa – Like…..
Sam – Me and my brother used to have one and we called them umbrella cups with a plastic base and you put the drink in and put the lid on and it was an umbrella and you had a space for a straw. It reminds me of that…………only for special occasions of course……..Is that candles, oh no that’s glass

Group A (Powerhouse Museum)

Sandra – So that’s what a fife looks like
Gary – Mmm..I played a flute in the policeman’s band and they were only about that long, about the size of the fife but they had the holes all down the side. And played across like the flute

However the most memorable conversation came with objects from the exhibition titled Never done: Women’s work in the home at the Powerhouse Museum. Group D’s entire conversation, about 20 minutes of it, was fascinating and it was difficult to select only a portion of it to present:

Caroline – Is that a meat safe hanging up?
Gina – Yes. No refrigeration
Caroline – No
Jill – No. My grandad had that
Caroline – Gosh I don’t know how they managed without refrigeration in the hot weather that you have here
Jill – And yet they did didn’t they Glennice
Gina – Yeah
Caroline – We never had fridges in England
Jill – What did you call them? The icebox. Didn’t you
Caroline – Ice chest
Jill – Ice chest
Gina – Yeah
Shelly – Yeah apparently the ice-man used to come around. Apparently, I don’t remember that but……..
Gina – Yeah the ice-man used to come around and put the big block of ice in the top

18 I asked Sam what she was looking at that made her think of these cups: “Ha-ha. Yes we used to love those cups. I was looking at some glass objects in the last area we went in that were colourful and looked as if a curly kids straw was poking out the top”.
19 I asked Gary whether he still played the flute or in the band: “No, to both questions. It was the Burwood Police Citizens Boys Club (as it was called in those days) Fife and Drum Band. It was actually a fife we played but was, and is, sometimes called a flute….. I stopped in 1952. When I started high school I could not get to band practice in time after school”.

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Shelly – How often?
Gina – Oh probably a couple of times a week. Maybe once a week. We used to keep………
Shelly – But in the summer it wouldn’t last that long did it
Gina – Yeah it used to. It was a solid block of ice
Jill – Yeah it did. My grandad still had it up at Inverell and it’s pretty hot up there and they still had one
Gina – Yeah. He used to have one. Then we bought a cow, my dad bought a cow. So then we get the kerosene fridge
Shelly – Mmm
Jill – To keep the milk
Gina – To keep the milk
Jill – Yes
Gina – And we used to have the milk in the bottom of the fridge in a big bowl and you’d have that much fresh cream on it. Mum used to scoop off the cream and we used to live off home made apple pie, blackberry pie cream

Obviously the theme and design of the exhibition contributed to the impact the objects had on their experience, but for this group more important than the context of the object were the memories associated with similar objects from the family home.\textsuperscript{20} Other research has also highlighted the personal nature of object interactions on the part of the visitor. Stainton (2002) found a significant proportion of conversations involved comparing African art objects to other cultures, which she referred to as cross-cultural comparisons. She referred to connections made to personal items similar to the objects on display as cross-personal associations. Leinhardt and Knutson (2004) found similar results from conversations they recorded:

It is quite amazing throughout our study of museum visitors to see the trajectories of conversations that begin with an object and end up in the recounting of a long-forgotten anecdote or personal memory. These personal moments, we feel, are just as important to the value of a museum experience as learning about the content of the exhibition per se (16).

This illustrates that museums, zoos and heritage sites are not simply places of learning in the precise sense of an expectation of shaping learning outcomes. Learning viewed from

\textsuperscript{20} Johnstone (1998) quotes from unpublished research that showed that younger visitors wanted to see things that related to their present experiences whereas older visitors wanted to see stuff from their past.
a broader perspective includes these personal connections. Yet Leinhardt and Knutson’s (2004) feelings towards these ‘personal moments’ is ironic considering that in their research analysis personal connections are not ranked highly as evidence of visitors’ learning. Making such personal connections may not be ‘learning’ as defined by those studies that measure increases and retention of facts, but I argue that these associations are at the core of meaning-making and therefore visitors’ learning.

Objects that are common and relate closely to our everyday lives tend to solicit the most responses as they are easily recognisable. Contrary to this, Rounds (2006) believes that museum objects do not have the same intimate connection as those objects we encounter everyday. However, it is the sight of an object which can conjure up recollections of similar objects that we do relate to intimately. As was portrayed in the rather detailed conversations of Group D at the Powerhouse Museum, recollections are often of objects that have been ‘removed’ from our everyday lives for some time. The museum object is thus a substitute for the original object:

In order to perceive and understand anything, we must provisionally separate it from other things while also relating it to them (MacLachlan & Reid, 1994: 40).

Visitors may connect to objects but they may also spot the differences in the object they are connecting to. As was shown in the earlier example of the fox skin in the American museum, it was not the same as the man’s grandfather’s skin but it was an object that resembled what he was looking for and that was enough. So although people connect to objects it is mostly the memories or stories relating to the objects that they connect to and the history that has been passed down (Johnstone, 1998). The object initiates these memories and it is important to acknowledge the importance of this physical trigger. Objects therefore act as validation for recollections, stories and personal narratives. These stories and recollections may themselves become a ‘prior experience’ and could quite possibly form part of a future story relating to the same or similar objects.

21 The research by Csikszentmihalyi and Rochberg-Halton (1981) involved interviewing people about what objects in their household they considered special to them. The focus was on objects within the household as they tend to have the most meaning for people. Following are the categories that were most referred to: furniture; visual art; photographs; books; stereos; musical instruments; television; sculptures; plants; and plates.
22 See also Johnstone (1998).
23 Pearce (1994) refers to an example of the jacket of a soldier in a museum to illustrate this point: “When the original owner told his story of the great battle, he referred to his souvenirs to bear out the truth of what he was saying, and to help him make his personal selection of the moments which he wished to
Prior knowledge and prior experiences

In a conversation between a mother and her son at a museum, the mother reads a label about something she didn’t know and calls her son over to read it. Leinhardt and Knutson (2004) refer to this as one of the most direct instances of learning they have come across in their research. How is it that simply reading something she didn’t already know can be classified as learning? Unless she remembers or uses this information in the future can this really be regarded as learning? And how long after the visit will this information be used, if at all? This is one of the difficulties with the visitor research, discussed in chapter two, that attempts to measure learning outcomes straight after the visit. Meaning is created by a mixture of prior knowledge and prior experiences but most importantly how this prior information is used in the present. At the heart of intelligent behaviour is the ability to recall or retrieve a memory or past experience that is relevant to the current situation. So it is not only what we already know that is important but also that we know how to be able to use this in making connections (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999a). It is a process of using what is familiar to us to highlight the aspects of new information that need further understanding (Gallagher, 1992). Prior knowledge is the material that fuels learning (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Lindemann-Matthies & Kamer, 2006).

The diversity in the visitors’ prior knowledge and experiences often leads to varied interpretation of the museum material (Falk & Adelman, 2003). Visitors at museums have even been compared to customers at a salad bar:

Visitors generally are happy to see that various ingredients, are offered and seem comfortable creating their own ‘salad of information and activities’ (Lindauer, 2005: 45).

So how do visitors use their prior knowledge and what connections do they make? This is an aspect of the visitor experience that has been discussed in past research but very rarely is it the focus of such studies. Kerstetter and Cho (2004) make a distinction between past experience (affective or emotionally based) and expertise (cognitively recall) (20). Stallybrass (1999) also refers to clothes as objects that invoke memories. More specifically he gives an example of a friend that had passed away and his inability to recall images and memories of this friend until he put on one of his jackets.
Leinhardt and Knutson (2004) make a similar distinction between appreciative knowledge (comes from academic sources) and experiential knowledge (comes from hands-on experience). A problem with these categories is that it is not always possible to distinguish between ‘experience’ and ‘expertise’ or ‘appreciative’ and ‘experiential’ knowledge. This can be demonstrated where comments relate to appreciative or expertise type ‘knowledge’ also involved connections to ‘experiences’. For example, Belinda (Group C) at the Powerhouse Museum was discussing the abnormality of a coat of arms she was looking at:

Belinda – Its not often that you see the emu on a coat of arms you know
Catrina – Really
Belinda – Mmm
Catrina – What do they normally have?
Belinda – The lion
Catrina – Oh
Belinda – Yeah NSW coat of arms is a lion and a kangaroo
Catrina – I always thought because the Supreme Court has an emu and a kangaroo
Belinda – Where in the Supreme Court? On the outside? But that’s Commonwealth
Catrina – Oh is it. Ok…………..Anyway I may have forgotten. I don’t know these things much
Belinda – Yeah I’ve been doing a bit of heraldry research lately
Catrina – Heraldry?
Belinda – Yes heraldry
Catrina – Old fashioned is it?
Belinda – Yes

For Belinda the experience of conducting the research was as important as the knowledge acquired through the research for the telling of this story. Our knowledge is based on our wealth of past experiences and is a reflection of our prior learning (Schank, 1990). It is for this reason that there is a preference for the distinctions made by

24 While not from a museum context, Kerstetter and Cho (2004) were concerned with the role of prior knowledge in tourists search for new information on destinations. They describe prior knowledge as a ‘multi-dimensional construct’ that comprises aspects of familiarity, expertise and past experience.
25 It is also worth noting what her research was for: “It was research into the history of heraldry and heraldic symbolism in English speaking countries……..It was for leisure – in my local history walks I talk about buildings a lot, especially public buildings, which often display a coat of arms”. The local history walks she talks about were often a source of frequent connections for Belinda throughout the four site visits. In fact, on a number of occasions the site visits for this group had to be arranged around her commitment to these local history walks.
Eberbach and Crowley (2005) who refer to out-of-museum references made by visitors and codes them formal (school and other academic experiences), informal (museums, TV and other media) and everyday (pets, home etc.). The strength of these categories is the focus on experiences rather than simply knowledge. Informal out-of-museum references were very prominent in the conversations of my research participants. For example, Melissa (Group E) while in the Islamic exhibition at the art gallery made the following connection:

Melissa – It’s more symbols rather than what I would think Arabic characters
Sam – Could you imagine trying to write in Arabic
Melissa – Yeah. There is this new story at the moment that in New York city they opened this first publicly funded Arabic school. And there is this huge outrage over it
Sam – Really?
Melissa – Yeah

Melissa later mentioned that she read about this the day before on the BBC news website. As Melissa knew she had a visit to the art gallery the following day, and knew that Sam would want to visit the Islamic exhibition as well, it is possible that she may have already made this connection and it was just a matter of expressing it at the art gallery. Schank and Abelson (1995) say that this is common practice: “Adults have views of the world that are expressed by ideas they have already thought up and have probably expressed many times” (9).

One of the more common sources of informal references was movies and television. The first example is from group C at the Powerhouse Museum:

Catrina – Early Sydney. We had such nice architecture then didn’t we?
Belinda – Mmm
Catrina – Wonder why we still don’t have some gracious architecture
Belinda – And so much of it is lost you know. Demolished and developing took over. Councils had their palms greased
Catrina – (inaudible)……….Look at that. Straight road……….People who rode in boats like that………wallpaper……….Age of enlightenment……….this is Broadbent, Frances Broadbent
Belinda – Oh yes. Did you see that film?
Catrina – Broadhurst beg your pardon
Belinda – Broadhurst
Catrina – Mmm
Belinda – Did you see the film?
Catrina – I did yes
Belinda – And they never found who killed her. Still an unsolved mystery
Catrina – Well many of them say who they think it was but
Belinda – Mmm. Insufficient evidence

Sandra and Gary (group A) also connected to a movie at the art gallery:

Gary – That looks like a scene from the movie Zulu
Sandra – It does doesn’t it (chuckles). I think it is just the guy in the middle with that helmet……..no I mean the guy in the middle there

Having not seen the movie I was interested to know why Gary had made this connection:

“The painting showed the English uniforms and the huts during the siege at Mafeking during the Zulu wars while the movie Zulu is about the siege at Rorke’s Drift during the same wars.………..It reminded Sandra of when she first saw it in PNG. She and her ex-husband were the only white people in a theatre full of natives. You would not appreciate this situation unless you had seen the movie.”

It was not just movies that were referred to by the research participants in their conversations but also current television programs:

Group D (Powerhouse Museum)

Jill – Design across time ok. Does anybody watch the Queens castle on Monday nights?
Caroline – I saw it last week and I can’t remember……..
Gina – I’m not home Monday nights
Shelly – No, no
Jill – And they had the man that changed the clothes whenever, like the daylight savings time it took him 16 hours to change all the clothes in the castle
Gina – Really
Shelly – Fair dinkum
Gina – Goodness me
Jill – It was just amazing. It really was interesting……..

Jill later explained what the television show was about:

“The show was a series on channel 2 about ‘Windsor Castle’. How it runs, and the various people that work there, and the jobs they do………..At the time, we were looking at silverware, and Chris and I were discussing how everything had to be perfect, all the cutlery exact spacing etc. We remarked that for Hospitality students, maybe they could do some training in Windsor Castle, to learn how to do things properly. The kitchen was run to such a tight schedule, and everything was timed to the second – quite remarkable.”

Group E, also at the Powerhouse Museum, made quite an abstract connection that appeared to have no relation to the exhibition content:

Melissa – Ooohh focus on Alesy, oh we will just, oh yeah we started then………………that’s it.
It’s the alien. I wonder what that’s called. The juicer. The really famous juicer
Sam – That was in um………………Kath and Kim the other night
Melissa – What this juicer?
Sam – Ye, (laughing). I didn’t know what the hell she was talking about
Melissa – Alesy juicer
Sam – Do you ever watch that?
Melissa – No……..I miss out. I just don’t have time man. So many things I want to watch

This may not be the most startling example of a personal connection from the data but what it does emphasise is how hard people tend to search for connections to their prior knowledge and prior experience regardless of how abstract or irrelevant these associations may seem. Although some recollections may appear at first glance to be completely random or irrelevant to the current situation, this is the working of the subconscious mind and that there would be some reason why we needed that information in that situation (Ableman, 1999). All sorts of recollections could be summoned relating to any type of experience we have but if they did it would be an unmanageable barrage. As such there must be a filter which selects only the most relevant or important recollections ‘to get through’ (Ableman, 1999). Creative and

26 Hall (1993) refers to ‘selective perception theory’ and that the meanings selected are never as random as the theory implies.
original ideas come from making connections between things which seem to have no connection and have been referred to as remote associations:

Our unconscious mind is not constrained by such logic. In the unconscious, anything can get connected up with anything else. Some of the time these chance connections yield the surprising insight – the aha! moment – when a remote association gives us a radically new way of reframing our problem so that a solution is obvious. The more material that we have floating around in memory, the better the odds that useful remote associations will emerge from the unconscious. Since we cannot anticipate what idea or bit of information might someday provide the key association, we best enhance our potential for creativity by acquiring a large and diverse store of ‘useless’ information (Rounds, 2004: 394).

Patients in a psychoanalysis context who recall distant memories in a way feel ‘powerless’ over the recollections because they are very disconnected and may come to them randomly, whereas more recent memories are easier to relate to current situations and the recollections can be constructed by the patient (Spence, 1982). Events tend to be stored in our memories in ways we never anticipated or in which we hoped to remember them. As mentioned briefly in chapter three, Abbott (2002) refers to connections or associations, where there is no direct evidence of the object they are looking at, as overreading:

Overreading is a phenomenon that is frequently cued by the masterplots in which our fears and desires are most engaged. It is what allows some people to flesh out an incident involving inexplicable lights in the night sky with a chain of events involving extraterrestrial beings. It is what allows others to load up a stranger with an unflattering moral character, cued only by the colour of his skin. Our minds seem to abhor narrative vacuums. We try to fill them in (82).

Abbott says that we find it difficult to remain in a state of uncertainty when reading texts and thus we attempt closure. Overreading is definitely a common strategy adopted by the research participants, particularly in relation to contemporary or abstract art which they had trouble interpreting. For example, Melissa and Sam (Group E) were trying to interpret a painting when Melissa finally found the following connection to help with this interpretation:
Sam – I still don’t understand what this means
Melissa – There’s this um series of paintings apparently they are quite famous but I didn’t know this at the time and its block, colours like two block, colours I think its by a Dutch artist. I’m not sure. But you have like orange and blue or red and purple or like they were sets of two colours and the top rectangles always bigger and the bottom one is small. And I saw the first one in a movie with, I think I saw the movie with you. It had Uma Thurman and a young guy. I can’t remember the actor and the young guy falls in love with Uma Thurman and it doesn’t work out, blah blah. Anyway so in that movie she (Sam laughs) it wasn’t a very, it wasn’t a very remarkable movie. But I saw it in the movie and I was like ‘What is that painting. Its just two colours one on top of the other, its nothing special’. Then when I went to the states last time I was in San Francisco they had one of the paintings the size of a wall about this big. And like, at the far end of this room and you walk around a corner and you walk into this room and you see this painting. It was just so gorgeous. It’s just like ohhh….And then I got it. Right there. This doesn’t even have that appeal. This is just…….

Melissa – I don’t know. Some things are just beautiful and some things are just not
Sam - (inaudible)
Melissa – I was just, just thinking that

In the post-visit correspondence Melissa elaborated on this story:

“The painting featured in a movie called, ‘Prime’. It has Uma Thurman in it and I saw it at the movies some years ago. In it, her character says that she loves this painting, which is basically two rectangles, with soft edges, in two contrasting colours. When I saw it in the movie, that’s all it looked like to me. I just didn’t get it. Then about a year later I was in the San Francisco Museum of Modern art by myself and I was walking through a few rooms of different styles of paintings when I turned a corner and walked into a room which had one of these paintings hung up on a far wall. It was huge – maybe around 3m × 2.5m and it was so beautifully lit up that I couldn’t take my eyes off it. Right at that moment I understood what they were talking about in that movie. It really was beautiful, but completely unexpectedly. It was by abstract expressionist painter Mark Rothko.”

Melissa’s strategy for interpreting this painting was to make a connection to a prior experience she had had with another painting. What this example also reinforces is the prevalence of intertextual forces with Melissa’s story relating to the ‘text’ of the movie and the ‘text’ of her visit to the San Francisco Museum. Overreading as an interpretive strategy is not limited to encounters with unfamiliar material but is also used to make
connections when looking at familiar material as well. Abbott states that ultimately overreading and underreading will always occur because narratives are full of gaps.27

In The Pleasure of the Text Barthes (1990) indicates that people construct their lives and make meaning from experiences by relating to all types of texts including film and books and this is supported by the examples from the research presented in this thesis. It is also a common occurrence with visitors at tourism sites. Neumann (1999) refers to his research on visitor experiences at the Grand Canyon and talks about how a little girl, while at the canyon, compared her experience to being on the same trail as the Brady Bunch.28 He tells another story about how he was at the canyon talking to a couple from New Jersey. Later another couple from Florida turn up. The male from the Florida couple asks the male from the Jersey couple whether he saw the movie with Danny Glover called Grand Canyon. The Jersey man said no. Neumann (1999) believes that by being able to make this connection, the Florida man had the following experience as a result:

Rather than being just another tourist hoofing it along the beaten track, he has stumbled onto a role in a scene worthy of a big screen (177).

Neumann reads way more into this experience than is really necessary. It is possible that the Florida tourist made the connection to the film as it is the only prior experience he has of the canyon. Again it is the method of making the unfamiliar a little more familiar: the process of overreading. And as Fraser, Gruber and Condon (2008) indicate tourists are not always looking to escape from their everyday life but ways to ‘conceptualise themselves’ through their travel experiences.

In his semiotics of tourism destinations MacCannell (1999) provides examples where seeing the tourism destination may be a little disappointing and the site may not be the critical element. Rather it is the markers themselves. One such example is an area in Iowa, U.S.A:

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27 Riffatere (1990) makes a similar statement: “In a response rendered compulsive…as soon as the reader notices a possible substitutability, s/he automatically yields to the temptation to actualise it” (77).
28 Neumann (1999) also refers to other movies or television programs that have featured the canyon and that tourists also recognise (namely Thelma & Louise and National Lampoon’s Vacation).
As a sight, it amounts to no more than a patch of wild grass, but it was recently provided with an elaborate off-sight marker by the motion picture industry. The fortuitous acquisition of this new marker apparently caught the promoters of the area by surprise as the following information in the brochure is over stamped in red ink: VISIT THE BONNI & CLYDE SHOOTOUT AREA (114).

He goes on to say that the visitors are aware that there may be nothing in the ‘site’ to see but are satisfied with the engagement of the marker. Rojek (1997) states that travelling to a tourist destination involves the unfamiliar and a method of interpreting the unfamiliar involves what he calls indexing. An index being “the set of visual, textual and symbolic representations to the original object” (53). The indexing can be factual information or fictional material and may originate from any source. The representations of indexing, he says, can be thought of as ‘files’ that are then ‘dragged’ to create images and symbols for the site through marketing and advertising. Rojek (1997) uses an example of conscious dragging by referring to a town in Poland which was used in the film Schindlers List:

Cinematic events are dragged on to the physical landscape and the physical landscape is then reinterpreted in terms of the cinematic events (54).

This town only became a tourist site as a result of the film. Edensor (2001) also refers to a town or region in Scotland that promoted itself based on the area where the movie Braveheart was filmed. Tourist numbers rose dramatically as a result of the movie including guided tours specifically based on parts of the film. Rojek (1997) uses an example of conscious dragging by referring to a town in Poland which was used in the film Schindlers List:

Cinematic events are dragged on to the physical landscape and the physical landscape is then reinterpreted in terms of the cinematic events (54).

This town only became a tourist site as a result of the film. What these examples illustrate is how people negotiate new experiences with material that is familiar to them. As individuals we are in a constant process of creating connections and making comparisons and if museums are to survive then acknowledging and catering for these associations is essential. Particularly in today’s society where our knowledge and experiences come from a variety of sources:

Everyday life is no longer typically negotiated in simple representational forms by reference to the relationship between representations and original objects. Representational files are multiplied, and with this arises the multiplication of opportunities for indexing and dragging (Rojek, 1997: 60).

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29 Edensor (2001) also refers to a town or region in Scotland that promoted itself based on the area where the movie Braveheart was filmed. Tourist numbers rose dramatically as a result of the movie including guided tours specifically based on parts of the film.

30 See also Morkham and Staiff (2002) who discuss the same idea in relating tourists to cinema goers.
There are, however, some researchers who have indicated that visitor’s connections to their prior knowledge are not as frequent or as common as suggested in this thesis. Stainton (2002) describes a study which involved recording conversations of visitors as they navigated an African art exhibition and found only a small percentage of personal related conversations. In analysing family conversations in a science museum Crowley and Jacobs (2002) also refer to the small number of connection references made compared to other categories of talk. The disparities in results between these studies and the research undertaken for this dissertation may lie in the focus of analysis. In the two studies referred to, data analysis involved formally coding the conversations based on the typologies of talk developed at the beginning of the research. This type of analysis is important for quantitative studies but was seen as a waste of time and resources for this research whose specific aim was to simply illustrate the type of connections made and how they were used in interpreting the museum. McManus (1989) states that visitor’s conversations are mostly related to the exhibit they are engaging with. The data collected for the current research contradicts this statement and suggests that making connections and associations to external information or material was an important aspect of the visitor experience. For example, the following conversation occurred at the Art Gallery of NSW while group D was in the Archibald exhibition looking at some sculptures:

Jill – That is spooky isn’t it……..That’s fabulous
Shelly – It’s very good. I wanted to touch them but it says do not touch
Jill – No
Shelly – But they are made of wire
Jill – That’s brilliant. I don’t know that I would like that figure but I would like one in the yard……..But maybe not that sort of figure. That would really scare the birds away wouldn’t it?
Isn’t that clever though…………That one is untitled, I wonder why
Caroline – Why? (inaudible)
Jill – Yeah that’s right (chuckling). I like these though. Very clever. Very clever. There was a lady up at Port Macquarie. I don’t know if I told you about them. They used to sell them in the shops but I haven’t seen them, I didn’t see them the last time we were there. And they actually have workshops to learn ho to do it. And it was the sort of method that these were. Figures that were that big. And they had Georgian ladies and……..

31 Stainton (2002) does clarify that it may have been the research itself that influenced the conversations of visitors. This is not the case in the data collected for my research as at no stage during the fieldwork were the participants aware of the research focus.
Shelly – I think you told me about them
Jill – ……absolutely beautiful. Fabulous. And you can put them outside whatever it’s done with and they have sprayed over the top with something. And……um they were fibreglass and you could stand them out in your garden all weather no problems. But they were beautiful. It’s very clever………..

While the initial part of this conversation surrounded the sculpture itself the remaining time was spent on Jill’s connection to the sculptures she had seen in Port Macquarie. A number of issues are raised by Jill’s response. Firstly, that the story constructed by Jill after the visit is more detailed than the conversation that took place at the Art Gallery which illustrates that a decision was made to leave things out that were not relevant to the original situation. This may have to do with the ‘audience’ of the story. Secondly, it further highlights the importance of ‘travel’ as a source of connections for people as the experience of seeing the sculptures occurred on a trip to Port Macquarie. Thirdly, that our current experience at a museum changes the way we remember and what we remember about such places. For example, the Port Macquarie connection came up again in one of Jill’s conversations in a later visit to the Powerhouse Museum. The group was looking at an old train carriage in the transport section and were discussing the human figures inside:

Shelly – What do you think these figures are made of
Gina – Oh maybe some sort of paper mache would it?
Shelly – I don’t know. I just love them (chuckles)
Gina – They’d be yeah……..
Jill – They are lovely
Gina - ……..some sort of paper mache or something like that I think. Have to be something light
Shelly – They are so good

In the post-visit correspondence Jill elaborated on this story: “12 months ago on a holiday to Port Macquarie, I was shopping, and visiting all the gift shops etc. In 3 of these shops there were these figures - of women. They were all dressed in clothing and different types of material, which was draped across their bodies, however, the finish was hardened - they had been sprayed with something. On the last shop I visited I asked the sales lady about these figures. She explained that the work was done by a local artist, and that this lady ran workshops for this technique in the old butter factory at Comboyne (inland from Port Macquarie). She explained to me that once the style and design was created, they were then coated with a fibreglass material, which became hard as it dried. These figures could be place inside, or even outside in the garden - they were quite magnificent. I have never seen these figures anywhere else. When I came back home, I enquired about this (Janice was going to ask her art teacher). I still have not found out any more, or if anybody does this work anywhere in Sydney. I had forgotten about it until I saw those figures at the gallery, so now I will chase it up again”. This issue will be discussed in chapter five.
Jill – Now when we were at the art gallery and we were talking about remember that figure……..um those statues of the ladies or the nuns they were
Shelly – Oh yes I do vaguely
Jill – Remember and I was talking about that work that I saw up in Port Macquarie………
Shelly – Oh ok
Jill - ……..well it was similar to this sort of thing
Shelly – Yeah I remember you telling me about that
Jill – So. And that was done with fibreglass

This suggests that during the original experience at Port Macquarie the event was encoded or indexed relating to sculptures or representations of human figures. Therefore in any new experience that contains representations of ‘human figures’, Jill is potentially reminded of the Port Macquarie experience and may use it to make meaning from the new experience. It also demonstrates how memories are dynamic and reconstructed. For instance, the original memory of the figures at Port Macquarie was changed while telling the story at the art gallery to incorporate the figures she saw there. The new reconstructed memory is then used at the Powerhouse Museum where a discussion takes place relating to human figures at both the Art Gallery and the original Port Macquarie experience. This is what learning is all about; the ability to make comparisons or differentiate between things we may have encountered in the past. This type of experience and connection was possibly far more ‘memorable’ for Jill than knowing who the artist is or any other factual element of the artwork.

Jill’s conversation about human figures and her recollections about the Port Macquarie experience had motivated her to look further into this art work when she got home from the art gallery. It was the second time during this visit that Jill had mentioned wanting to follow something up after leaving the site:

Jill – Paper figures. Plant father. Now what’s that um, I don’t even know how to say it (she tried pronouncing it). What is that? (one of the other ladies tried pronouncing it as well. They were saying gouache). What is that? It was on a painting on another level we noticed that. Is it a method or is it a type of paint. Have to look that up
Shelly – I think it’s like a thick past paint
Jill – Is it?
Shelly – I think. Like a base paint
Jill – Oh ok. I wondered
Shelly – I think but I’m not sure

True to her word Jill did look it up when she got home. She explained what it was:

“I had to ring the gallery to find out the exact word, as I couldn’t remember the correct spelling (should have written it down). I then googled it - and it is a type of water-based matt paint which dries very fast. It is used by lots of designers, sculptors etc. But it is also used for fine painting, and can be bought at art supply shops.”

In Jill’s discussion of the term ‘gouache’ she mentioned seeing it on another level in the art gallery. This is an example of what Allen (2002) calls inter-exhibit talk. She states that the lack of inter-exhibit connections is in line with other research but argues that it is an area that should be given more attention in the future. A case in point is Jill’s recognition of the term ‘gouache’ at the Art Gallery of NSW, one of only a handful of inter-exhibit related talk that took place across the 16 site visits. This adds more weight to the notion of visitors creating their own ‘narrative’ rather than following that created by the on-site interpretation. The results of Allen’s research show that the category of connecting talk (connections to other knowledge and experiences) was very low on the scale of conversations only beating strategic talk (talk related to strategies to ‘use’ the exhibit) in its frequency. Not only was she surprised by the results, but she also noted that when comparing the adult-adult and the child-adult dyads, the adult-adult groups had a higher frequency of connecting talk, the only category higher than those of the child-adult dyads. She provides the following explanation for this result:

The deviation from the pattern on other categories suggests a true tendency for adults to make more connections to their prior experience and knowledge than child-adult dyads. It is interesting that this effect was limited to connecting talk, and did not apply to conceptual talk. Perhaps parents felt that the stimulating environment of the exhibition supported immediate inferencing rather than storytelling (Allen, 2002: 283).

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34 The author developed five categories and sixteen sub-categories to code visitors’ conversations. The categories are perceptual talk (paying attention to something); conceptual talk (cognitive interpretations); connecting talk (connections to other knowledge and experiences); strategic talk (strategies to ‘use’ the exhibit); and affective talk (expressions of emotions). It is within the category of connecting talk that this sub-category of inter-exhibit talk is placed. The other two sub-categories within this category are life connections and knowledge connections. Allen (2002) found that life connections were more prominent than knowledge connections in visitor conversations and both more prominent than inter-exhibit talk.

35 Across the four groups and the 16 site visits there were 19 examples of inter-exhibit related talk.
Again this supports the findings that making connections and associations to prior experiences is an important interpretive strategy for adults.

Fienberg and Leinhardt (2002) were also interested with what visitors bring with them to a site and investigated the connection between visitor identity and the structure of the conversations at a particular exhibit. They call the structure of the conversations explanatory engagement. Their research involved recording the conversations of 10 visitor groups at a museum, as well as interviews before and after. They had two sets of groups; one group classified as having high knowledge with the content of the museum and the other group were randomly selected on-site. The research investigated explanatory engagement on four levels; listing (identification of objects); analysis (analysing features of objects); synthesis (using information from internal and external sources); and explanation (using analysis or synthesis to help a group member understand). The hypotheses of the study was that those individuals or groups with a higher level of knowledge with the content will have a deeper engagement with the exhibits and that this would result in more of what they call ‘expansion’ talk within their conversations. This would seem fairly obvious as the more interest and knowledge we have in something the more we can find and be willing to talk about it.

As Schank (1990) suggests, an expert is an individual who has many stories to tell in a subject area and has those stories indexed well to retrieve when needed. The results of Fienberg and Leinhardt (2002) were presented as percentages of the total number of ‘episodes’ coded and analysed in the conversations. When looking at the levels of explanatory engagement for the high and low groups both were similar in percentage for analysis but remarkably different for synthesis and explanation. Synthesis was more prevalent for the low groups and explanation was more prevalent for the high group. Nonetheless, they did acknowledge that all groups engaged in some form of synthesis with personal narratives even if it was more prevalent in the low groups. Furthermore,

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36 The groups with the ‘high’ knowledge of the content had a research participant with them during the museum visit. This immediately influences the conversations of that particular visitor. The ‘high’ groups were also given in-depth interviews a couple of days before the visit. However, the visitors recruited on-site were only interviewed briefly as they entered the museum. The second groups did not have a research participant.

37 Leinhardt and Knutson (2004) use the same categories of listing, analysing, and synthesizing, to code visitor conversations. They, however, make a distinction between synthesis and personal synthesis, the latter being more personal connections not necessarily directly related to the exhibition content.

38 This concept will be dealt with in more detail in the next chapter but for the purposes of this discussion it refers to the length of particular episodes within conversations.
they recognise that even though the low groups used synthesis in the form of personal stories, the stories were still in most cases related to the themes of the exhibit.

The research of Abu-Shumays and Leinhardt (2002) also adopts these four categories of analysis. This research was slightly different to Fienberg and Leinhardt’s as it involved investigating the experiences and conversations of two docents in three exhibitions, one of which was the workplace of the participants so they were very familiar with the context.39 The hypothesis was that the docents, through their experience of working in museums, would interpret through the lens of their docent duties. The results show that in the exhibition where they worked there was 85% of explaining type conversation. In the other two exhibitions the majority of the conversations were analysing or synthesizing in nature. What this suggests is that the more prior experiences with a site or content of that site the more ‘explanation’ type conversation will take place:

It is in a familiar environment that they fluently interpret objects, whereas in less familiar environments their activity is more focused on identifying (Abu-Shumays & Leinhardt, 2002: 72).

While exploring how historians interpret texts and documents differently depending on their familiarity, Leinhardt and Young (1996) conclude that one of two schemas is used to read texts: identify or interpret. But as was demonstrated earlier in this chapter, to even identify an object requires some form of prior knowledge or prior experience and therefore involves some sort of interpretation. To simply say that identifying can occur without interpretation is misleading:

In viewing a programme, the concepts in and through which the text is expressed are ‘replayed’ or ‘reworked’ in terms of the concepts belonging to the reader, so that even identification involves interpretation (Wilson, 1993: 47).

39 This study was based on research conducted on the way historians read familiar and unfamiliar texts. Abu-Shumays and Leinhardt (2002) summarize this research: “Historians interpreted documents through their own perspective on history. These activities were more explicit and therefore visible when historians read a text that was unfamiliar to them. However, when historians approached a text that they already knew, these activities became implicit, because the explicit processes of identifying and interpreting the document had already occurred during previous readings. Having historians respond to texts that differed in their level of familiarity helped to highlight implicit practices as well as to point out the practices that were general across different levels of prior experience and familiarity” (56).
A major concern with the studies that code conversations into categories is the artificial nature of the typologies developed, as the categories themselves to some extent then determine the outcomes of the research. A more specific concern with studies that used the four categories is the hierarchical nature of the categories. Conversations were coded for the highest level of talk where explanation is considered the most complex. So a conversation coded as explanation may have also included synthesis, listing and analysis elements. Leinhardt and Knutson (2004) state that while listing and making personal connections does relate to learning, it is a lower level of learning than say analysis or explanation. Similar sentiments are expressed by Abu-Shumays and Leinhardt (2002) who believe that all visitors are capable of more complex interpretive actions than simply listing and having ‘affective’ responses to objects. Furthermore they state that visitors can learn how to do this by asking questions such as ‘What does this object mean to me?’ The conversations of my participants suggest that visitors already do this. Comparing an object to a prior experience is a way of explaining a connection to the object or something important in their lives. It is naïve to think that ‘explanation’ in a conversation or ‘expansive talk’ will result in the individual storing the information or using it for future purposes. If anything making personal connections is more likely to be remembered and used in the future. Refreshingly, Eberbach and Crowley (2005) take a different approach to explanation in visitor conversations:

Explanation- in which visitors attempt to understand and extend an immediate experience, to cast an immediate experience in terms of cause and effect, or to connect an immediate experience to prior learning (318).

This differs to the other studies where explanation is elevated above prior learning and is a more appropriate view of how visitors make meaning. What this section has demonstrated is that visitors make meaning in more than one way:

Some groups come to the museum with deep knowledge of the content being offered there, whereas others came with an interest that was fostered more by informal experience or simply an openness to new ideas (Fienberg & Leinhardt, 2002: 207).

However, both of these ideas are founded upon the individual’s prior knowledge and prior experiences regardless of whether their ‘expertise’ is classified as ‘high’ or ‘low’.
The research of Silverman (1999) investigated visitor pairs at a museum:

This study suggests that half of those who were highly educated still valued a combination approach to meaning – valuing equally the artist or museum’s intentions, as well as their own personal meaning (11).

The different meanings that emerged were either related to the curator’s intentions, their own personal connections or a combination of both. And although the less educated visitors made more connections to ‘personal stuff’ it may not have been attributable to a lack of expert knowledge. From the data collected for this thesis, it can be argued that all visitors use personal narratives regardless of their familiarity with the content. It is the nature of the narrative that is different depending on the level of expertise. For example, take a painting of a well-known location, such as Paris. Visitor A, who has some experience and knowledge of art, makes connections to the style of the painting based on the information he/she picked up in an art class. Visitor B, who is ‘low’ in art expertise, tells a story of when he/she went to Paris on a holiday. Both visitors make connections to prior experiences and use personal narratives, but the narratives are different.

The current research demonstrates that connections are made regardless of the level of understanding the visitors have with the material they are looking at. What must also be acknowledged is in this hypothetical example the interpretations of both visitors is highly dependent on the group they are visiting with. So visitor B, who is low in art expertise, may be visiting with a friend who is very knowledgeable in art and the conversation and the meaning made through his/her own connections is altered as a result. Thus the social interaction that occurs during a museum visit can be influential on the individual’s own meaning-making.
“Human beings are storytellers by nature” (McAdams, 1996: 27).

“People may make meanings privately, but they also make meanings by embodying and representing them externally – in word, image and object. Moreover, they make meanings as they exchange their representations with others in interaction” (Stevens & Martell, 2003: 26).

“An understander has a list of beliefs, indexed by subject area. When a new story appears, he attempts to find a belief of his that relates to it. When he does, he finds a story attached to that belief and compares the story in memory with the one he is processing. His understanding of the new story becomes, at that point, a function of the old story” (Schank, 1990: 72).
Research in the social sciences aims to develop an understanding of how the individual makes sense of the world by empathising with them. Investigating and analysing the evaluative aspects of people’s stories is a way of achieving this empathy (Elliott, 2005). People’s everyday stories are a function of the narrative meaning that is used to organize our experiences (Polkinghorne, 1988). The evidence in the previous chapter shows that visitors to various sites make meaning by interpreting new information with information and experiences of the past. This involves ‘recollecting’ or ‘telling’ other people, or ourselves, about these experiences:

To interpret means to react to the text of the world or to the world of a text by producing other texts (Eco, 1990: 23).

Visitors to museums interpret the site by creating stories from past experiences. These stories, or intertexts, come together to create the overall ‘visitor narrative’ which in turn becomes a story to tell in the future. This chapter will explore more closely these ‘tellings’ and the role of narrative and stories in not only the visitor experience but life in general. There are three key features of narratives: chronology of events or temporality; meaning of events or point of view; and narratives designed for audiences and social situations (Ochs & Capps, 1996; Elliott, 2005). It is this last feature that will be the major focus of this chapter.¹

Stories and narrative

Every day we are drawn towards stories whether it be through movies, books or even television. We are also constantly constructing stories of our own and we seem to be born with a narrative consciousness (Caine & Caine, 1994; McAdams, 1996; Abbott, 2002). Our stories become embodied in us through interaction with our everyday experiences (Abbott, 2002) and are our way of connecting the intangibles of recollections, experiences and sense of time to the tangible aspects of life (Caine & Caine, 1994; Edensor, 1998; Potteiger & Purinton, 1998; Culler, 2000). We tell stories not only to transmit identity but also ‘to make sense of the world’:

¹ The chapter title is based on a statement by McCormack (2004) who refers to research as ‘storying stories’.
They provide a structure for what happened; they allow us to relate the event to other similar events; and if possible, they enable us to apply lessons learned in earlier contexts to the present events (Read & Miller, 1995: 147).

Cognitively speaking, the narrative mode searches for connections between events. It is both a mode of reasoning of events and a way of representing these events (Robinson & Hawpe, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1988; Richardson, 1990; Abbott, 2002).

It is our relationship with time that may be responsible for our fascination with stories as stories are used to organize time (Scholes, 1982; Richardson, 1990; McAdams, 1996; Abbott, 2002; Staiff, personal communication, April 17th, 2007). We experience time by relating the past and the future in the present:

Experience does not automatically assume narrative form. Rather, it is in reflecting on experience that we construct stories (Robinson & Hawpe, 1986: 111).

Narrative is a representation or re-presentation of an event and conveys a story (Abbott, 2002). In a sense telling a story is a form of retrospective meaning-making (Chase, 2005). So the museum experience itself does not become a narrative until the participants reflect on it and tell people about it. They are, however, in the process of creating a narrative during the visit.

Stories do not exist in the universe rather they are constructed by individuals internally from the information in the external environment (Archibald, 2002). Even when we are given facts and figures we begin to form them into a story (Staiff, personal communication, April 17th, 2007). But narratives are more than simply a ‘chronology’ of events as they are used to convey emotions and interpretations of the events and the experiences (Polkinghorne, 1988; Chase, 2005). Narrative consists of the product, which is the story, and the process which is the act of telling the story (Potteiger & Purinton, 1998). The ‘process’ is often referred to as narrative discourse:

Narrative is the representation of events, consisting of story and narrative discourse, story is an event or sequence of events (the action), and narrative discourse is those events as represented (Abbott, 2002: 16).
Abbott describes the narrative discourse as ‘malleable’ which can be manipulated and changed to suit the situation, purpose and context, an issue that will be explored when looking at the social nature of narratives. As was argued in the first chapter, research regarding learning has tended to preference the product over the process. Theorists who deal with knowledge have also neglected how people use knowledge rather focusing on what knowledge people have:

It is this discussion of the use of knowledge that the idea of knowledge as stories becomes significant (Schank & Abelson, 1995: 2).

In other words, people’s knowledge is displayed in the stories we tell. Schank and Abelson (1995) argue that the majority of human knowledge is founded on stories created from previous experiences and that any new experience is interpreted from these past stories. Knowledge is the experiences and stories of the experiences, and intelligence is the use of these stories and how to tell them (Schank, 1990).\(^2\) The event-based memory that was discussed in chapter four, functions by categorising experiences into events and disconnecting them from other categories of events. We therefore use stories to reconnect the different categories. In a sense we store in memory knowledge related to particular events (event based memory) without trying, but when it comes to story-based memory it requires the telling of the stories in order for them to be remembered:

The consequences of this process are interesting when one considers what we tell and why, because we are, quite unconsciously, making decisions about what we remember (Schank & Abelson, 1995: 41).

This raises all sorts of questions about the validity of our memory and the experiences and stories we tell.

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\(^2\) Scott (1995) criticises Schank and Abelson for ignoring other aspects of knowledge in their equation of how the human mind works such as in the case of music, skills and cognitive motor coordination. She states that storytelling is just one component of a broader mental system. She further criticises Schank and Abelson for making the comment that ‘all experience is a kind of story’ and that this ignores the non-narrative and non-linguistic tasks we use in experiences. She uses an example of a person going to the dentist and that the wallpaper on the walls of the dentist may not form part of the ‘story’ told of this experience but it may not also be lost either. But Schank and Abelson (1995) don’t argue that such information is ‘lost’ because it doesn’t form part of the story of ‘yesterday’s trip to the dentist’. They argue that it becomes part of the ‘script’ or ‘story’ of the dentist and his office. Scripts were discussed in the last chapter.
Language is but one vehicle through which meaning and narrative is communicated and allows for connections to be made between objects and other individuals (Morrissey, 2002). It is for this reason that narrative is crucial to a discussion of the process of learning:

In part, we give things meanings by how we represent them – the words we use about them, the stories we tell about them, the images of them we produce, the emotions we associate with them, the ways we classify and conceptualise them, the values we place on them (Hall, 1997a: 3).

This is especially true in places that themselves employ narrative as an organizing device and as a self-definition: for example, museums as story-telling places. Understanding narrative requires a shared understanding of the language used and therefore the audience will influence the meaning made from the story.

**Shared narratives and the influence of the ‘audience’**

The stories we tell depend heavily on those listening to our story. We have gists of stories stored in memory so it is a process of expressing this gist for the appropriate audience and in the appropriate context (Schank, 1990; Schank & Abelson, 1995). In other words, communicating is all about selecting an appropriate story and being able to tell it. Research on audiences of television and film has, in particular, shown that meaning is negotiated through the social interaction and conversations they have with other viewers (Silverman, 1990). Because narratives depend on the location and the audience, telling a story becomes a ‘joint production’ between speaker and listener (Chase, 2005; Riessman, 2008). Through this joint production stories are never heard without some form of mediation on the part of the listener (Abbott, 2002). This mediation generally involves the listener ‘mapping’ the speaker’s stories onto their own similar stories therefore creating their own narratives (Ochs & Capps, 1996). The active role of listeners is often displayed in the responses they provide:

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3 There are also non-verbal narratives. For example, paintings, sculpture, film, and photographs.
Through gesture, and well-placed ‘uh-huhs’ and ‘okay’s, the listener – not just the speaker – is investing in and supporting the task. If the task is to make sense of, make meaningful, or make enjoyable a visit to a museum exhibition, then it is all participants that contribute in multiple ways (Leinhardt & Knutson, 2004: 9).

Meaning taken from the story is dependent on the listener, similar to the way meaning is made from texts by readers as examined in chapter three. According to Orr (1990) it is for this reason that for a story to be successful there must be shared cultural aspects between narrator and listener. A story is only effective if the listener is impacted in some way (Robinson and Hawpe, 1986; Staiff, personal communication, April 17th, 2007). Again similar to the way readers take different meanings and interpretations away from texts, listeners will not necessarily pick up on the messages intended by the speaker.

Understanding becomes a process of index extraction whereby the person doing the understanding searches for elements of the story they are listening to, or whatever they are looking at, and matches them with indexes used to label old stories in their memory (Schank & Abelson, 1995). Of course this is not a conscious process but if you analyse your own conversations you quickly find that you will be searching or coming up with stories of your own experiences that match or contradict those of the story being told to you. When we hear a story we ask all sorts of questions in our minds while we search for a similar story from our memory. To understand a story means that we have concluded that there is a particular point to that story and that the point has been related to stories of our own. It is for this reason that Schank and Abelson (1995) refer to conversations as nothing more than responsive storytelling. In other words conversations are a back and forth process of stories, each one triggering the next:

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4 Jensen and Kolb (2002) refer to five streams of meaning-making from conversations: reassuring and reflecting (hearing others stories); expressing and interacting (being heard by others); attending and appreciating (being aware of others stories); interacting and conceptualising (differing with the stories of others); and listening and analysing (comparing with other peoples stories). All five streams are examples of listeners matching the narrator’s stories with stories of our own. As Schank (1990) points out: “An understander has a list of beliefs, indexed by subject area. When a new story appears, he attempts to find a belief of his that relates to it. When he does, he finds a story attached to that belief and compares the story in memory with the one he is processing. His understanding of the new story becomes, at that point, a function of the old story” (72).

5 Tannen (1984) refers to ‘story rounds’ in conversation which relates to clusters of stories that have similarities in content. The structure of a conversation will determine which type of story is told. So if the conversation is advisory in nature (relating to experiences we have learnt lessons from), then advisory stories will be told.
With regard to its beginning, a story may be triggered by something said in the conversation, which may or may not be topically coherent with that talk in progress. By connecting the story to prior talk, storytellers propose that there is a relationship between the prior talk and the story, and that the story is therefore appropriate (Psathas, 1995: 21).

Graesser and Ottati (1995) state that Schank and Abelson’s idea of ‘story remindings’ do not appear to be a trait common to all conversations in all settings. However it appears to be very important in certain social group dynamics and in certain settings like museums. It was certainly an aspect that was very prominent throughout this research and was particularly noticeable in the conversations of Group D. This may have been a result of the number of individuals in the group (4) or attributed to the relatively short history of the group as a social unit. The following example of ‘story remindings’ occurred during a visit to the Powerhouse Museum:

Gina – Do you remember newspaper done like that on the mantelpieces? 6
Jill – Yes………I do
Gina – Where you used to have, and they bought in………..
Jill – I do remember that
Gina - ……..that um other plasticy stuff……
Jill – Yep
Gina - ………table bags or whatever, what was that called?
Jill – Yeah um………
Gina – That they used to put on the tables instead of a tablecloth and you just wipe it down.
What was it called?
Jill – Yep. Don’t know
Gina – But you used to have, on your mantelpieces you used to have to clip it
Shelly – I have seen that yeah
Jill – Mum would change that I don’t know how often but she’d go through and change it twice a year or something like that 7
Gina – Yeah
Jill – And it would all go yellow………
Gina - Yeah from the smoke

6 Gina mentioned after the visit that this was a childhood memory from about 60 years ago.
7 I asked Jill how long ago this experience was: “Yes, I had forgotten all about this custom. Newspapers were used to line the shelves of the cupboards, and also on the open shelves and mantelpieces above the fireplaces. I remember Mum doing this when we lived in Camden – so this was probably about 47 years ago”.

111
Jill - .......because newspaper does
Shelly - Yes
Gina -Yeah, yes
Jill - And the um the light and sun .........
Shelly - Yeah just the air and whatever else. The environment yeah
Jill - But how simple was it when you think about it ......
Shelly - Mmm
Jill - ......that was really a form of recycling
Shelly - Yeah I remember a while back they were doing that decoratively and putting it in their cupboards. Not newspaper though they were putting hole punches and ......\(^8\)
Jill - Oh ok. Do you know the difference must have been then, I don't ever remember the print coming off newspapers
Gina - No not like it does now
Jill - Now you couldn't use that because it all comes out of it doesn't it
Gina - Yeah
Caroline - I remember the print used to come out of newspapers more than it does now I thought
Jill - Do you think? Oh I didn't think it did
Caroline - Yeah
Shelly - I don't, when my mum used to wash the floor we had to, we weren't allowed to walk on the wet floor, so she would put newspaper down so we could walk across the floor
Jill - Yes my mum did too
Shelly - Yeah but I don't remember the print coming off
Jill - No I could ..........
Gina - They used to use newspaper for everything
Shelly - But she used to dry it even sometimes with the newspaper
Gina - Yeah
Jill - Yeah. Yes. No I don't ever remember it coming out
Gina - Newspapers very good for cleaning windows
Shelly - Yeah that's right cause it's got all the um metho in it or something. Some other chemical in it
Jill - Mmm. No I think its something about the, especially your local papers. Like the gazette ........
Caroline - Yeah well that's probably cheap printing
Jill - Yeah it's dreadful ........

\(^8\) I asked Shelly if this was something she read or whether she knew someone who had done it: “This is something I read somewhere how it had come back into vogue but it was with some other sort of paper and people would make there own patterns in the paper with a hole punch. I don't know if it went to far though a lot of work for something that wasn't going to last for too long”.
This conversation suggests that very little was known about each other’s childhoods and was something that did not often come out in normal conversations within the group. It illustrates the power of the museum and its objects in facilitating such conversations and the crucial role of social interaction in the learning of individuals. It is this aspect of facilitating conversation and social interaction that I believe should be at the core of museums and will be discussed at length in the next chapter. A second example comes from group C and occurred during their visit to Taronga Zoo:

Catrina - Have you ever seen them in the wild?
Barry – Yes, yes, yeah
Belinda – Yeah. They kick up a terrific racket you know
Barry – We were um in the Warrumbungle walking track…….. 
Belinda – Yes, yes the Warrumbungle
Barry - ………one was walking along the track towards us and just climbed up a little tree like that and sat there and looked at us yeah 9
Belinda – Oh really walked on the road, on all fours, oh. We saw them up in the trees at our camping site at the Warra, we heard them first and thought what on earth could be kicking up that racket and it was these koalas.

Both these examples show the responsive nature of conversations and how one story can trigger a similar story by another member of the group suggesting that communicating and remembering are very closely linked. The power of this shared narrative is its ability to evoke emotions, memories of place and senses by tapping into embodied narratives. As a reader it is easy to visualise the objects and stories contained in this dialogue. It is probably also the case that the ladies in group D were visualising the memories when engaging with the objects or hearing the stories of their compatriots.

9 After the visit Barry mentioned that the experience occurred about 5 years ago and he remembers the following: “The experience was the surprise of it. We rounded a corner on the track and here was a koala walking along the track towards us. We stopped and the koala came right up to within a metre and climbed a couple of metres up a small tree beside the track. I don’t think it came so close because it was conditioned to humans, so it was a great feeling to encounter a wild animal without fear on either side”. I asked Belinda how long ago her experience at the Warrumbungle was and what else she remembers of the event: “About 20 yrs ago on a camping holiday……………The spectacular scenery and fascinating geology of the Warrumbungles with great climbing, bushwalking, views”. 
Crouch (2002) refers to close-up space that we engage with physically and with which we tell stories. In contrast, the far-off space is where our vision or imagination is activated. He states that the two spaces interact with each other and describes the experience of tourism as an ‘inscribed surface’ with which the tourist engages. He argues that those analysing tourism interactions assume that the tourists simply ‘read’ or ‘consume’ the tourist space and that this completely ignores the ‘imagination’ component. The tourists ‘feel’ the space through their interactions and the same applies to the museum experience. Visitors do not simply consume but they interpret, visualise and feel through their memories and prior experiences. These visualisations or ‘feeling’ of prior experiences and memories are represented in the stories they tell:

Once we acknowledge the subject as embodied and tourism as practice it is evident that our body does encounter space in its materiality; concrete components that effectively surround the body are literally ‘felt’. However, that space and its contents are also apprehended imaginatively, in series and combinations of signs. Furthermore, those signs are constructed through our own engagement, imaginative enactment, and are embodied through our encounter in space and with space (Crouch, 2002: 208).

These embodied visualisations, such as those triggered in Group D’s conversation, is the real power of the museum. It also highlights one of the major characteristics of personal event memory, that being the use of ‘sensory images’ during the recollection, that allow the individual to relive the event (Pillemer, 2000). It is not so much the present state of a location that is vital in recalling memories, rather the vivid images of the location in the past or some other trigger.10

Both group D’s and group C’s conversations illustrate that our recollections occur in the form of narratives (Staiff, personal communication, 2nd May, 2006). Storytelling is vital as it creates neural pathways necessary to remember things:

Our memories are comprised of the stories we tell, and the stories we tell comprise our memories. In a sense we can see the world only in the way that our stories allow us to see it (Schank & Abelson, 1995: 60).

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10 The examples in Appendix E illustrate how visiting a place can bring back vivid memories.
The link between memory and narrative is clearly supported by memory experts who suggest forming information into stories when trying to remember lists and other such items (Brockie, 2006). Events become solidified in memory through the stories we tell of these experiences to ourselves or the people around us. By not telling these stories often enough the chances are the event will be forgotten. So in effect we are remembering the story of the experience that we have constructed rather than the event itself:

A narrative is not a replication of an experience occurring in time, but a crafted account of something happening (Scott, 1995: 168).

Furthermore the representation involves a process of selection by the person doing the representing. It is for this reason that Bruner (1994) questions whether people actually experience the events the way they tell them. Because our stories are reconstructions of our experiences we begin to believe our stories at the expense of the original event: “In this way stories shape memory profoundly” (Schank & Abelson, 1995: 34). If a particular interpretation of a story is told often enough it will become part of the index for that memory. The new index then becomes the representation of the original memory and event which is part of that memory:

For the story form affects the organisation of experience just as surely as it affects memory recall (Bruner, 1994: 48).

Stories of autobiographical nature are told for a particular purpose and not simply to ‘maintain’ the facts that are within the story (Gergen, 1994; Bruner & Feldman, 1996; McAdams, 1996). This is even more the case in museums where stories have been triggered by objects or conversations on objects, and thus the story is used to make meaning from that situation. The following conversation from Group E’s visit to the art gallery is a good example of a story about a past experience told for a particular purpose:

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11 Scholes (1982) also states that narratives refer to events not from the present situations but reproductions of past experiences. During recollections of past experiences individuals do often unconsciously use elements of language from the present tense: “The speaker momentarily relives the event, and this mental reliving accounts for the unplanned use of the present tense” (Pillemer, Desrochers & Ebanks, 1998: 147). Most examples of such shifts in language relate to events where ‘danger’ was involved or extreme excitement and the use of the present tense in recalling events is a method of adding imagery to the recollection. This also relates to the notion of scripts referred to in the last chapter. Not telling a story about an event doesn’t necessarily mean we forget the event but the experience may be stored as part of a script of similar types of experiences.
Melissa – That’s what I love. I really, really like that idea that all this stuff is what you classify as Islamic art is actually influenced from Roman periods and Hindu art.

Sam – But that’s why they should do more of that stuff. And also cause it would show that there is all different types of Islam. Like………Cause I will never forget that guy in Turkey and he’s like um………

Melissa – In a museum.

Sam – No he got really drunk one night and he just started saying everything. He was the owner of one of the (inaudible) we were staying at. And he was like ‘Oh you we totally…..we are Muslim and stuff but we don’t like Egyptians and like all the Arabs and stuff’. I was like but it’s the same religion.

Melissa – Mmm. It’s all different. Yeah………Have the same belief system but everything else is different 12

Sam told the story of ‘the guy in Turkey’ not to maintain the events of that experience but to illustrate the point that cultures in Islamic countries are not homogenous. The story was told for a purpose and was used in the personal meaning-making between Sam and Melissa. Even though these narratives are about past events they serve a purpose for the present situation:

As texts of experience, stories are not complete prior to their telling but are assembled to meet situated interpretive demands (Gubrium & Holstein, 1998: 98).

People may tell the same story more than once but with a different purpose each time based on the context and the audience involved.

Our recollections also tend to express why the events in the story are so memorable (Edwards & Middleton, 1986) or to justify the use of the story in the social situation. Our stories are so influenced by who the listeners are that they in fact ‘shape’ what we remember (Singer & Salovey, 1993; Schank & Abelson, 1995). The audience can also shape the meaning we make from a situation. In a social group the prior knowledge does not rest just with the individual but becomes available to the entire group and can result in multiple routes towards meaning-making (Ash, 2002; Leinhardt & Knutson,

12 Sam elaborated on this event in the post-visit correspondence: “The actual event was in Turkey, while staying at Bergamon in an ‘authentic Ottoman house’ owned by this guy and his mother. At the time we were the only people staying there and he was rather excited he’d just been to the markets and wanted to celebrate with his new Australian friends over a glass or two of Raki. I think what sparked it was looking at the variety of origins that the Islamic items had, and how the general ‘western’ world considers all Islamic states to be the same while in reality each place is conceptually and physically very different.”
Fienberg and Leinhardt (2002) refer to the ability of a group to recognise that an individual has knowledge for a particular subject and is then sourced for information as they are seen as the expert. The group may know before the visit that they have an individual who is an expert or it may simply come out during conversations. For example, during the pilot study with two friends, John and I knew before we visited the war memorial that Daryl had an interest in modern history so he was treated as the expert in this environment. Leinhardt and Knutson (2004) refer to examples of men and their families visiting the Henry Ford Museum in America and the father’s, due to their interest and prior knowledge in cars, are viewed as the knowledgeable member of the group. In this sense we are all ‘tour guides’ at some point in our lives where our knowledge is seen as useful in social situations (MacCannell, 1999).

It is actually a process of learning about members of the social groups as well: “Individuals learn about each other while they learn through each other” (Morrissey, 2002: 285). This was illustrated in the earlier example of Group D’s conversation at the Powerhouse Museum where each member traded stories of their childhood. Elements of each individual’s identity had not surfaced in conversations in other social settings. It is this type of learning that is as, if not more, important than the measurable cognitive learning outcomes prioritized by so much visitor research. The crux of social interaction is recalling stored past experiences that serves to create inter-personal bonds (Fivush, Haden & Reese, 1996). The powerful mediating qualities of the social group result in meaning-making that cannot be fixed or held entirely by one side of the dialogue, be it the museum or the individuals involved.

Individuals in a social situation have the ability to shape the experiences of other members of the group. For example, James (2007) refers to the impact of a tourist group on the decision to climb or not to climb Uluru. The following conversation of Group D at Taronga Zoo is also an example of such shaping. The ladies were seated watching the chimps at the time:

Shelly – Remember, Jill remember when we went to Jamberoo and that man was bowling and he had that really long hair on his arms (Jill laughing, Inaudible) reminded me of him (laughing)
Jill – Yes I do, that’s right

Crowley and Jacobs (2002) refer to ‘islands of expertise’ as the collection of shared knowledge and experiences regarding particular subjects or areas of interests of visiting groups.
Caroline – What?
Shelly – When we went down last, the other year when we were playing pennants down at Nowra……..
Caroline – Yeah
Shelly - ……..and we went down early and played bowls at Jamberoo……… ..and um……..they had um they were playing lawn bowls there as well and there was this man there and he had this hair on his arms and was like this. It was red wasn’t it? It was really long and it was blowing in the wind (laughing) it really was (Caroline laughing)
Jill – I’ve never seen anything like it
Shelly – It was terrible

While both Jill and Shelly were involved in the original experience, it was only Shelly that made the connection. Being reminded of this past experience may have changed the way Jill was interpreting the current experience. Schank and Abelson (1995) refer to these memories shared by friends or family as ‘co-biographical memories’. As Edwards and Middleton (1986) state “we can be reminded by people as well as of people” (455). The actual process of joint remembering influences future memories of these past events and it may be that the next time Jill, or Shelly for that matter, thinks of the Jamberoo experience they are reminded of this current zoo experience as well. Of course it depends on the way this experience is told and the way it is told in the future. Another important point to make here is that the connection by Shelly may only have come about because Jill was a part of that past experience. In other words, would the recollection have occurred if Shelly was visiting with other friends? The same question that was brought to my attention during the pilot stages of the research. After visiting a portrait gallery and a war memorial with John and Daryl I noticed that we were relaying stories and recollecting about past events that all three of us had been involved in. The question was this: would we have told different stories and made different connections if we were visiting with a different social group? The answer, obviously, would be ‘yes’.

The research described by vom Lehn (2006) focuses on how visitors engage with museums and how the social interactions are displayed physically. They used video

14 Middleton and Edwards (1990b) refer to the way groups of people recollect experiences as a social group. They refer to a number of elements that are evident in the conversations of groups who recollect something jointly: Tags of ratification (e.g. “doesn’t he”); overt agreements (e.g. “That’s right I remember”); default continuity (e.g. every new contribution to the conversations builds on previous contributions to make a sequential narrative); overt requests (e.g. asking for other members of the group to provide information about the event they are recalling).
cameras to record these interactions and they found that the social interaction between two people influences how an individual engages with an exhibit:

Considering their actions as a pair reveals the dynamics of their approach to and viewing of the piece; their actions arising in and through social interaction. Having encouraged her husband to come over and view the exhibit she provides him with a particular way of seeing the exhibit, ‘interesting. We’re probably the only people that noticed that very unusual (1346).

A similar situation occurred between Sandra and Gary (group A) at the art gallery:

*Sandra – You deserted me again, deserted me again. That’s amazing up there, there is a tea ceremony um thingo, but they are, come back up here, that’s exactly the same as we saw now current, and that’s China

*Gary – This is Japan

*Sandra – No not up here its not

*Gary – This is Japan

*Sandra – This section is but up here no

Based on my observations during this visit, and other visits, Sandra would often call Gary back when he walked away from an exhibit. While one can agree with vom Lehn that the social interaction influenced what the husband, in both cases, was looking at and paid attention to, there is nothing to suggest that the husband then viewed the object in the way she did, nor made meaning the way she did. Unlike the example earlier where Shelly verbalised a connection that Jill then took part in as well. The physical social interaction that vom Lehn describes does not necessarily tell us about how the individual visitor understood what they were looking at and whether this changed as a result of the social interaction. Of course there is nothing to say that Jill’s ‘meaning-making’ was definitely changed as a result of Shelly’s connection either.

Leinhardt and Knutson (2006) conducted a study of the conversations of grandparents and children in a variety of museums in America. They refer to one group where the

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15 During pre-visit conversation before entering the art gallery (the first time I had met them) Gary stated that they had different interests when it comes to museums and galleries and that this can lead to them separating during a visit.
Grandparents act as storytellers to their grandchildren regarding trips they have made overseas and how they relate to the objects they are looking at:

The grandfather introduced what we saw many times, namely, taking the advantage of the inherent permission, or even invitation, given by the museum to share one’s history in small anecdotal chunks with the other members of the group (Leinhardt & Knutson, 2006: 241).

Grandparents as ‘storyteller and traveller’ is not a role confined to adult-child interactions. What Leinhardt and Knutson fail to mention is that the grandparents may also conduct the same conversations if they were with friends or other adults. The authors focus on the grandparents ‘travel connections’ in assisting the learning of the grandchildren but neglect the fact that the storytelling of travels is probably also the way they are able to make sense of and negotiate the museum for themselves. Their research does however highlight that in different situations with different people we perform different social roles and this affects what we attend to in the museum. Hirst and Manier (1996) were interested in identifying roles within family recollections and whether the roles influence the resulting recollection. They describe three roles performed while recollecting: narrator, mentor and monitor. While the narrator generally tells the story, the monitor also plays a role by supporting or contradicting the story told:

When contradicted, the person telling the story can revise his or her account. The subsequent recollection becomes an interplay between the perspective of the monitor, who simply questions a statement, and the perspective of the person telling the story, who articulates the revised narrative (Hirst & Manier, 1996: 286).

The authors continue and state that a similar situation occurs when the mentor provides ‘facilitating’ comments:

The perspective or internalized schema of the mentor no doubt partially motivates his or her facilitating remarks, but the perspective of the narrator (or other family member currently telling the story) shapes the narrative response to these probes (286).

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16 McAdams (1996) also refers to the different roles we play in different social groups and situations.
While the roles within the group were not fixed the members may have ‘default roles’.17

The social dynamics of the group can dramatically affect what connections are made and what past experiences individuals may draw upon and ultimately what learning occurs. In the final section of chapter four the research of Fienberg and Leinhardt (2002) was discussed. The focus was on the expansions within the visitors’ conversations, specifically looking for elements of ‘explanatory engagement’:

We wanted to see whether there was a link between visitors’ identities and the location of the expansions in their museum conversations – that is, whether the places where they tended to engage in expansions were located in, or were focused on, topics where they had a special interest or some form of background knowledge, or whether expanded conversations were randomly distributed throughout a museum visit (Fienberg & Leinhardt, 2002: 179).

They found that the length of conversations and comments ranged from very brief to very in-depth and that the visitors synthesizing and analysis can occur in even the briefest of conversations. Despite this they were still only interested in the expanded sections as they “indicate some level of increased knowledge and/or interest on the part of one or another member of the group” (170). As a result the brief episodes were somewhat neglected. This questions the premise that for learning to occur, or some increase in the knowledge, there must be expansive talk in conversations. Sometimes, however, it is the smaller episodes that are the most interesting.

The most obvious example was presented early on in chapter two: Sandra’s comment and subsequent post-visit story of ‘Dick Quilty’. In the Sandra and Gary example the line “Quilty….that name haunts us doesn’t it” was, for the two of them, a complete story as they had shared the past experience relating to the comment. What is important is that a connection has been found and that some form of meaning-making has taken place. What is not important is the length of the conversation surrounding the connection or association and that narrowing the analysis to only expanded portions of conversations may miss the most personal and meaningful elements of a visitors 17

Kelly (2007) states that through her research she found that not only is the learning image of individual’s fluid but that it is a response to social circumstances.
experience. Leinhardt and Knutson (2004) refer to the ‘shared experience’ of visitors resulting in this lack of expansion:

In many cases, group's whose members shared a similar level of background knowledge with each other spoke in a similar kind of shorthand. This abbreviated talk meant that there was less in the way of extended explanation taking place in those groups than there was in family groups or in groups in which one participant with special knowledge was invited to be expert, to enlighten and explain concepts to the rest of the group (68).

This shorthand was particularly evident in a lot of the conversations with Sandra and Gary, compared to group D whose conversations were very much of an expansive nature. Such differences can be attributed to the amount of time they have been together or the level of past experience the group has had as a social unit. The abbreviated talk illustrates the difficulty with analysing conversation among people who are friends or family:

Because some of the participants knew each other well and had histories and connections among them, meaning constructed in their talk is perhaps a bit harder for a conversational analyst to grasp, because the meaning does not reside only in the immediate conversation but has been created over time (Tannen, 1984: 33)

A plethora of authors discuss the important role the family or other social groups play on the learning of individuals in the museum context (Knez & Wright 1970; Blud, 1990; Boud & Walker, 1990; Silverman, 1990; Falk & Dierking, 1995; Fyfe & Ross, 1996; Caulton, 1998; Hein, 1998; Ellenbogen, 2002; Stainton, 2002; Fasoli, 2003; Black, 2005). Despite this overwhelming support for the role of social interaction in the visitor experience Packer and Ballantyne (2005) believe that research has yet to show what difference and influence the presence of a social group has on the learning of individuals:

Evidence from our previous research with almost 500 adult visitors to informal learning settings suggests that the relationships between the social and educational aspects of the visitor experience are not clear cut. Although many participants reported having discussed, or at least shared, information with their companions, there was little evidence that this social interaction led to increased learning. For
example, visitors who came in company and those who came alone gave equivalent reports of having experienced learning (178).

The problem here is that the evidence of learning is restricted to cognitive elements and this ignores the social identity learning that may be occurring. Going back to the example of group D at the Powerhouse Museum discussed in chapter four (p85), if this conversation was analysed for cognitive learning outcomes then it could be said that no learning occurred. If instead we treat learning in a much broader sense, then we can say each individual is now far more knowledgeable about each other. Is this not learning? Dierking (1998) believes it is:

That social interaction not only results in the transmission of new information but also serves to maintain social relationships and forge new social bonds, often through the communication and shared reinforcement of known or shared information, such as memories and experiences (68).

But how could one ‘measure’ this through post-visit questionnaires when learning is viewed by the researcher, and possibly the visitors themselves, as cognitive outcomes or factual recall? The evidence and process of the learning and meaning-making occurs on-site and this can only be captured through a record of the conversations that take place.

Packer and Ballantyne (2005) investigated the differences in learning between individuals and social groups. They relied on observing the visitors as they interacted at the site then had a brief interview with them afterwards. They excluded participants who spent less than 4 minutes in the exhibition, immediately assuming that learning is dependent on the time needed to engage with the exhibition. This is not always the case:

As an indicator, time has the problem that it does not account for a trade-off between short but intense moments of looking at some part of an exhibition but not talking, and spells of long detached pauses where nothing related to learning appears to be going on (Leinhardt & Knutson, 2004: 8).

The goal of Packer and Ballantyne’s (2005) research was to establish whether there was a ‘learning advantage’ with solitary and social visitors. The only way of determining whether learning occurred was to ask the visitors themselves. They state that:
Only 53% of visitors who came in pairs or groups agreed that the social context had contributed to their learning, compared with 73 per cent agreement in relation to the entertainment aspects, and 65 percent in relation to the restorative aspects (178).

The biggest problem relates to how learning is defined and what evidence of learning is being sought. What the visitors themselves do not realise is that during the visit they may have frequently made connections to prior knowledge, recollected about prior experiences, and gained further insight into the lives of the people they are visiting with. But they may not have reported this because they do not necessarily consider it as learning. Rather they view it as a natural part of their everyday social competence.

While it is recognised that social interaction is vital in the museum experience it is often not well catered for (Pinus, 2000). This social aspect is so important to the visitor experience that Fienberg and Leinhardt (2002) suggest that visitors should make the effort to visit museums with friends or family that will allow them to learn more by engaging with them. This is going too far. To suggest that visitors ‘seek’ out particular people to visit with to learn more is an unrealistic expectation. It ignores the reasons why people visit in the first place and for what purpose. Indeed what is evident is that individuals will share recollections and stories regardless of whom they visit with as this is a natural part of any social interaction and that the museum may simply be one such arena where this social engagement takes place (Holmes, 2004). Fienberg and Leinhardt (2002) found that some of the visitors talk was content focused and at other times it was narrative and story like in nature. They therefore conclude that meaning-making occurs in more than one way. The same can be said of the research conducted for this thesis. But what appears to be the case is that the periods of conversations where ‘narratives’ and ‘stories’ occur are generally when visitors use their past experiences and knowledge. What this suggests is that any analysis of prior knowledge must include narrative analysis and vice versa.

This chapter has positioned meaning-making as a socially distributed activity:

We argue that the major reason stories are so important is because they are fundamentally about human action. They provide a way to think about and describe social interaction, which is central to human concerns (Read & Miller, 1995: 142).
Storytelling is therefore vital to the functioning of social groups and how they interact and relate to each other. So is making connections in the mind of the individual at the heart of meaning-making, or does it lie in the telling of these connections to people? Are we placing too much emphasis on the importance of interpretation on the individual and ignoring the impact of the social unit? These are difficult questions to answer.
Chapter 6

Mobile, unpredictable and socially constructed: Implications for learning in the museum context

“The museum is the sum not of the objects it contains but rather of the experiences it triggers” (Samis, 2008: 4).

“Social experience is like intertextuality. It is a vast interlocking potential of elements that can be mobilised in an unpredictable number of ways” (Fiske, 1989: 58).

“If a visitor was moved by a crystal decanter that reminded her of a family heirloom, did it matter that she did not learn something further about the Waterford line that had produced it?” (Roberts, 1997: 70).

“Why visitors come, with whom they visit and for what reasons, what they already know, what their interests are, what their prior museum experiences are, and what subsequent reinforcing events occur in their lives play as great a role in learning— if not a greater one— as anything that happens inside the museum” (Falk & Dierking, 2000: 8).
The notion of visitors making their own personal meanings is still strongly opposed by some in the museum industry. Meszaros (2006) in her work is one such example. She argues that the reader-response theories, adopted from literary studies, has led to the loss of authority of texts and resulted in the promotion of what she calls “whatever” interpretation. Meszaros targets the work of Lisa Roberts, in particular her view that visitors will create their own meaning regardless of the site’s intentions:

Now, in most circles, this would simply be called a failure! Museums certainly do not spend billions and billions of dollars collecting things (objects, stories, histories, ideas), conserving and cataloguing these things, carefully researching, publishing, crafting messages, and writing the storylines for these things, only to have visitors make up ‘whatever’ stories they please, stories that have nothing to do with the things and their stories (Meszaros, 2006: 12).

But who decides what stories are relevant and not relevant? Does the museum have the right or even the ability to control the stories that visitors tell? And does it really matter that visitors create ‘whatever’ stories? Previous chapters have demonstrated that although visitors do tell stories and make connections that have nothing to do with ‘things’, as indicated by Meszaros, in many instances it is the ‘things’ that trigger stories and provide the opportunity for visitors to make the connections. This, I argue, is the real power of the museum. Learning is a transaction between the learner and the environment rather than an interaction, as both are involved and changed as a result of the relationship (Kolb, 1984; Roberts, 1997; Falk, 2006). Even though visitors construct their own meaning it is very much influenced by the context of the information or object:

Things have meaning because of the frame within which they are placed: thus a brick might be used to build a wall, smash a window, warm a bed, or prevent a car from rolling away. In each case it is the same brick, but its meaning derives from its context of use (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000a: 117).

Objects therefore have meaning placed upon them by those who design the context in which the object is a part (a point that was argued during chapter four). Supportive learning environments do not occur naturally and are always designed and constructed by people (Schauble et al, 1998). Context can both inhibit and enhance the learning
process but it is always operational. So while the prior experiences and prior knowledge of visitors is very influential in the meaning created, it is often the museum content that triggers the connections to these prior experiences. Meszaros (2006) argues that promoting the ‘whatever’ interpretation in fact “justifies its failure to communicate, but also it absolves itself of any interpretive responsibility for the meanings it produces and circulates in culture” (13). Acknowledging that visitors create their own meaning does not coincide with a reduction in the museum’s communicative responsibility. Nor does it down play the research or knowledge generation role. What Meszaros is insisting upon is a perfect relationship between the scholarly activities of the museum and the visitor experience and this is highly ambitious. Far from promoting visitors above the site, Roberts (1997) in fact argues for an important role for museums which includes a narrative view of education:

First, a narrative view of education suggests that visitors’ experiences are shaped as much by who they are as by what museums are like. Second, it suggests that museums may have a far broader impact on people’s lives and psyches than is typically acknowledged. At their most basic, museums communicate. In communicating, they ignite memories, activate emotions, and spark interchange. What visitors do with these possible responses is part of the narrative they craft. What they craft may or may not have anything to do with the messages institutions intend (137).

Chapters four and five portrayed how memories were ignited and how interchange was sparked between individuals. So rather than viewing the museum as having ‘interpretive’ responsibilities, as suggested by Meszaros, their role is one of facilitation:

But our denial of absolute truth, and museums’ role in making this the basis of their interpretive agenda does not lead to a ‘whatever’ interpretive approach. I have argued that museums are inevitably educational institutions, and thoughtful education is about helping visitors learn something (Hein, 2006: 20).

The research presented in this thesis has few implications for exhibition and interpretation design. However, it is in a position to comment on the way learning is viewed and defined in the museum context. The data confirms Roberts’ (1997) suggestion that museums have broader impacts on visitors’ lives than just knowledge.
acquisition. It has demonstrated the power of learning through social interaction and highlighted that the outcome of the visitors’ experience is an overall narrative crafted by the individual and the social group that is deeply personal, highly unpredictable and very difficult to anticipate by those designing exhibitions. To treat learning as purely knowledge acquisition is reductive and ignores the complexity involved. While Roberts (1997) argues for an expanded role of education in the museum that is based more on interpreting stories and narratives rather than ‘explaining’ objects, I argue for an expanded role of learning (impact on the visitor) that is based less on information related outcomes as a result of the interaction with objects and more about the complex experience and connections that people have as a result.

Visitor learning: An intertextual construct

Viewing the visitor experience as an intertextual construct promotes the idea that visitors are not empty vessels to fill with knowledge. Nor will their on-site experience necessarily consist of information-based learning. Rather it is a dialogue between the site and what the visitors bring to the site. This dialogue has been modelled in Figure 6.1 (p130) and is based on the communication model developed by Hooper-Greenhill (Figure 3.1 on p58) in combination with Allen’s definition of intertextuality (quoted on p60).

In intertextuality the author and the reader are equally as important as each other (Hatten, 1985). The stories and other material that visitors bring into their conversations at the site are the ‘intertexts’ and come together to form the overall meaning constructed. This is represented on the bottom half of the diagram in Figure 6.1. Allen (2000) refers to this as the realm of text reading. That is, the point at which the readers engage with the text. As has been demonstrated throughout previous chapters, visitors while reading the site bring with them and use a variety of prior experiences and knowledge as well as forming expectations and motivations. For example, in the case of Taronga Zoo the negative images held by some of my research participants towards the zoo’s display of animals not only influenced their decision not to visit in the past but also influenced their on-site experience.¹

¹ This will be addressed in more detail in chapter 7.
Figure 6.1: The museum visit modelled as an intertextual experience
These intertexts, or stories, memories and associations are themselves intertextual constructs as they too were originally based on previous experiences and memories and were more than likely transformed for use in previous situations. It is important to reinforce the point that the stories and recollections used by visitors are not simply reproductions of prior experience but reconstructions. Texts operate in a similar way:

Texts do not just utilize previous textual units but that they transform them and give them what Kristeva terms new thetic positions (Allen, 2000: 53).

Like all texts, the museum content is developed and operates through a system of codes and traditions. This is the realm of text production and can be seen on the top half of the diagram in Figure 6.1. Information, knowledge and experiences are drawn from various sources and various people within the institution, and ‘transformed’, or reconfigured, to suit the intentions of the institution:

Museums present not just straight information, but information that is interpreted and communicated in a particular manner based on particular assumptions and decisions. By omitting any mention about the decisions behind the determination of an objects meaning, museums exclude visitors not only from an awareness that knowledge is something that is produced but also from the possibility that they themselves may participate in its production. Inasmuch as museum educators represent visitors’ perspectives, they have paved the way for interpretations that both address alternative contexts of meaning and reflect upon publicly – to visitors – the basis for and decisions behind selecting those contexts. Thus stated, the work of interpretation becomes an act of empowerment, because it provides visitors with both the knowledge and the consent to engage in critical dialogue about the messages museums present (Roberts, 1997: 79).

In other words, what the museum presents to visitors is but one interpretation among many possibilities (Uzzell, 1994). Despite this, some museums still privilege their own narratives over the visitors or at least fail to acknowledge that there are other ways of thinking about the content they present (Samis, 2008). McLean (2007) expresses disbelief at how important or privileged some in the museum industry perceive themselves:
I’ve even heard colleagues comparing themselves to medical doctors and equating visitor-contributed content with ‘gardeners operating on one’s children’ (12).

So although there has been a shift in authority from curator, or educator, this empowerment is not always manifested in exhibition design (Roberts, 1997).

Research suggests that visitors seem interested to learn about why certain interpretations are preferred over others in curatorial design (Leinhardt & Knutson, 2004). This is not surprising considering the popularity of ‘behind the scenes’ experiences as represented in the extra sections added to movies on DVD’s. MacCannell (1999) refers to the ‘behind the scenes’ experiences in tourist settings as ‘back regions’. He argues that the increasingly popularity of such experiences is generated by the ‘desire for the authentic’. Furthermore he argues that rather than being authentic these back regions have been deliberately set up for visitors:

It is always possible that what is taken to be entry into the back region is really entry into a front region that has been totally set up in advance for touristic visitation (101)

Narrative based interpretation that Roberts (1997) argues for includes presenting stories of how these sites are managed and designed. It is stories of this nature that make the Hyde Park Barracks Museum so interesting. The museum is run under the auspices of the guiding principle that it is a museum about its own history:

Everything you see is part of the history of this place. From the limewashed brick of the original convict ward, to the galvanised steel air-conditioning duct that controls the museum’s environment. From the lowly rats that stole many possessions, to illicit objects hidden away from official eyes, to the lofty wig that adorned a judge in session. Looking back over 185 years we open chapters of history, trace people's lives, peel back layers of building fabric: doorways, fireplaces, ceilings, paint and plaster, objects made and unmade, hidden and revealed. This room at the north-west corner of level 1 is a summary of the museum journey ahead and a journey into the Barracks’ past (Historic Houses Trust, 2009).

The museum includes exhibitions displaying how the conservation and archaeological work has, and still is, been carried out.
Returning to the model in Figure 6.1, the meanings/messages to be communicated by the museum, and the characteristics of the visitors, come together in the middle to form the network of textual relations. Obviously there is a difference between the potential meaning (the meaning that the museum produces) and the realised meaning that the reader creates when attending to the museum content (Gjedde & Ingemann, 2008). What the model reflects is that the meaning created is a product of the museum and visitor interaction, something that has been documented in the media reception literature, particularly relating to TV audiences:

What television delivers is not programs but a semiotic experience. This experience is characterized by its openness and polysemy. Television is not quite a do-it-yourself meaning kit but neither is it a box of ready-made meanings for sale. Although it works within cultural determinations, it also offers freedoms and the power to evade, modify, or challenge these limitations and controls. All texts are polysemic, but polysemy is absolutely central to television’s textuality (Fiske, 1989: 59).

The intertextual relations are not inherent in the text or the viewer and are only evident in the interaction between both. Within the network of textual relations the visitor is not only engaging with the museum content but other related and non-related texts, including the memories of prior knowledge and prior experiences. The visitor experience itself is also influenced by other external forces such as time available for the visit, weather conditions (if the site is outdoors) and so forth. In the diagram the network is bounded by permeable lines and is penetrated by various forces similar to the process of osmosis. The meanings that visitors construct and take-away from their visit are not stable but fluid, dynamic, and mobile. In fact intertextuality was first adopted by poststructuralists with the aim of dispelling this idea of ‘stable meaning’ and objective interpretation (Allen, 2000). The model emphasises the notion that visitors are not shut off from the rest of the world during their visit to a museum.

The result of the interaction between site and the visitor is the creation of a visitor narrative that, as Roberts (1997) stated, may or may not have to do with the site’s intended meanings. As indicated in the model, this narrative adds to the individual’s collection of prior experiences and prior knowledge and has the potential to be stored in memory for future use. For instance, elements of the narrative created at one museum
may be used in the creation of the narrative at another museum or similar site. An example of this occurred in Jill’s (Group D) story (discussed in chapter four) about the ‘human figures’ she encountered at Port Macquarie and her subsequent reference to this story during her visit to the Powerhouse Museum. This was a good illustration of the intertextual qualities of learning in the museum and is the crux of learning: not just recalling facts and figures but using information for future purposes. Thus evidence for learning may not appear straight after the visit but weeks, months, even years thereafter. This has implications for the way learning is researched in the museum context. Firstly, researchers cannot predict when this learning will be used and therefore it is likely to go undocumented. Secondly, even if researchers were able to document long-term information related learning how can this be attributable solely to the museum visit? What about other exposure the individuals may have had with the subject matter from other sources? The museum is but one source in the life-long learning of visitors and research that attempts to isolate the learning from a museum visit overlooks that individuals may learn more on reflection and interaction with other information:

While a learning event may mark a watershed moment in an individual’s life, it is more likely represented in a series of cumulative events that may affect knowledge, attitude, and skills, which have the potential to eventually link with changes in behaviour. This temporally and spatially distant connection between free-choice learning events and behaviour (Ardoin, 2009: 70).

Ardoin states that there is a spatial and temporal distance between the site experience and any eventual learning and behaviour change. In investigating visitors’ experiences at the Grand Canyon National Park, researchers found that in responses on the telephone 6 months after the visit, the participants referred not only to the on-site material but other sources in responding to the questions about what they learnt from the visit (Benton, 2008). How are individuals expected to distinguish between what they picked up at the museum and subsequent interaction with other material? Research has demonstrated the fallibility of memory when determining the ‘sources’ of information from prior experiences (Schacter, 2003; Throsby, 2006). For example, the situation where remembering a specific childhood event is actually remembering the story of the experience told to us by our parents rather than the event itself. This raises questions about the validity of learning related research that seeks to isolate the information supposedly ‘remembered’ from the site itself.
Definitions of interpretation, such as those presented in chapter one, neglect to mention that visitors engage with texts outside of the museum context. And despite what has been written by Roberts, Hooper-Greenhill, Pearce and others, many museums fail to appreciate that they are but one component of the lifelong learning of individuals. The end result is an experience that occurs in a vacuum and neglects the interests of the average visitor and the useful frameworks used in the construction of personal meaning:

Most people lead fairly parochial lives and their interests centre round their families, their work, their hobbies. Essentially these interests are small-scale, domestic and personal. Museums that represent the world through large-scale universal themes do not speak to those people who do not experience the world in this way (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999c: 262).

While most in the museum world now acknowledge the polysemic nature of the museum experience, learning related research still treats the visitor’s experience as a knowledge transaction with the meaning simply made in response to the museum content. For example, although the National Museum of Australia have prioritized, on the surface, learning based experiences, as opposed to education based, the following still occurs:

We would also argue, however, that, this shift in ambition has not yet been accompanied by an increased understanding of how visitors learn in museums and, in particular, in exhibitions. Discussions about maximising learning opportunities and outcomes for visitors often seem to fall back on questions about what kind and how much information – in the sense of generalized knowledge – visitors will acquire from their engagement with the museum (Wehner & Sear, 2010: 151).

The theory of intertextuality, and the research undertaken for this thesis, raises all sorts of questions about the validity of learning related research. If meaningful experience for visitors includes social interaction, connections to memories, and the use of prior knowledge, all of which occur during the visit, why restrict research to information related outcomes measured after the visit? Learning outcomes are often pre-defined, narrow in focus and ignore the complexity of the visitor experience:
This is a very important fact since virtually all research methods for assessing learning, in both museums and schools, have been based almost exclusively on measuring fairly major, fundamental changes in knowledge structure, rather than the more subtle reinforcement of pre-existing known things. Thus, much, if not most, of learning, has remained effectively undocumented (Falk & Dierking, 2000: 29).

Often what people most remember about their visit are the social aspects (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Holmes, 2004) and this is not always reflected in the learning research conducted. If learning is socially constructed, how do researchers distinguish between what an individual learnt from the museum and what they may have picked up from a story of someone they visited with? The outcome related research might not provide museums with a true indication of the impact their interpretation has on individual visitors. So the point is not that outcome related research is completely flawed just that it might not be the most appropriate approach for museums (Leinhardt & Knutson, 2004). Outcomes are not the sole indication of whether learning occurred or did not occur as the power of the experience need not lie in what knowledge can be taken away.

Intertextuality, hypertexts and convergence culture

To ignore the intertextual qualities of visitors’ learning is to ignore the natural way we process information. Jenkins (2008) refers to the convergence culture where consumers are encouraged to engage with and make connections with information from dispersed media outlets:

Convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others. Each of us constructs our own personal mythology from bits and fragments of information extracted from the media flow and transformed into resources through which we make sense of our everyday lives (Jenkins, 2008: 4).

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2 Similar criticisms have been made against the Australian Federal Government, which has proposed a national measurement system in education to rank schools based on their academic achievements. Teachers and many students are opposing the system as they believe there are many aspects of a student’s schooling, such as social competencies and other life skills, that cannot be picked up by these academic specific measurements (Brockie, 2009).
In his analysis of convergence culture Jenkins refers to the film *The Matrix* that promoted audiences to interact with other media platforms attached to the film:

> The filmmakers plant clues that won’t make sense until we play the computer game. They draw on the back story revealed through a series of animated shorts, which need to be downloaded off the web or watched off a separate DVD. Fans raced, dazed and confused, from the theatres to plug into Internet discussion lists, where every detail would be dissected and every possible interpretation debated (Jenkins, 2008: 96).

By integrating the multiple texts, and not restricting the narrative to one medium, the film is about opening up avenues and creating opportunities for interpreting and bringing together different narratives. Jenkins refers to *The Matrix* franchise as a form of transmedia storytelling where the story is played out across the different platforms (DVD, internet and computer games) and each contributes to the overall story:

> What the Wachowski brothers did was trigger a search for meaning; they did not determine where the audience would go to find their answers (Jenkins, 2008: 126).

The museum environment is very much suited to this type of storytelling. In a sense it already occurs with the narratives that visitors themselves craft. Our world is becoming more reliant on ‘collective intelligence’ and although Jenkins refers mainly to younger consumers (they are the ones searching for the hidden meanings and connecting texts within *The Matrix*) this was a common strategy of meaning-making employed by all the research participants in this study regardless of age or the site involved.

Viewing the museum as a text which can be read is not a new concept. It is, however, no longer relevant to consider this reading as linear in the traditional book sense. The way visitors negotiate the museum is similar to the way we ‘read’ the internet. While surfing the World Wide Web individuals pick and choose a direction, based on the information we relate to or which satisfies the present situation. The hypertext, as a concept, has amplified our ability to search for information and bring together narratives from different texts. It is not that hypertexts have changed the way we engage

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3 This is an issue for all texts, not just museums.
with information, but that we have created hypertexts as it suits the natural way we search for this information:

Strictly speaking, then, hypertext lexia are simply a new twist on an old narrative condition. That they permit readers to some degree to arrange the narrative discourse, and to distribute its parts differently in different readings, does not itself violate the essential narrative condition, so long as there is a story to be recovered (Abbott, 2002: 30).

Reading in a linear manner is not necessarily ‘passive’ as our mind can still wander, and our memories can still be activated. But hypertexts and digital technology provides easier access and more opportunities to create and bring together pieces of the text to create an overall narrative:

Hypertextual linking fractures the textual surface, turning the otherwise continuous and linear narrative into a discontinuous assemblage of textual fragments that can be folded, unfolded, and refolded in a variety of ways (Odin, 2003: 453).

As a result it is the reader that is actively engaged in bringing together the interrelated narratives. It is, as Odin suggests “performative in nature and writes itself as it is read” (Odin, 2003: 464).4

The concept of hypertexts has major implications for learning in the museum where new digital devices, such as iPhones, iPods and various PDA’s are being introduced at a rapid rate and are the norm rather than the exception. In the UK, the Tate Modern Museum has a multi-media guide that provides access to games, commentaries, videos and photos (Tate Modern Museum, 2009). The Museum of Modern Art in New York also provides portable audio guides. In addition they offer free Wi-Fi within the museum to allow visitors to access the museums resources through their own devices, such as iPods and iPhones (The Museum of Modern Art, 2009). The San Jose Museum is one of the first to actually use Apps products as their own portable devices. They too provide access for visitors to use their own device (San Jose Museum of Art, 2009).

4 The theory of intertextuality as applied in literary studies illustrates that books have long been based on this idea of hypertextuality with references to other literature outside of the text through the use of footnotes and bibliographies. See Landow (1994) who makes the link between literary meaning and hypertexts and also to the work of poststructuralists like Roland Barthes.
The capabilities of these devices means visitors, in addition to their own memories, now have greater access to external texts’ limited only by their imagination. Not only do they have access to the video and audio provided by the museum, but with Wi-Fi they have access to limitless resources. This has implications for the authority and control of the museum over the narratives that are crafted and makes learning even more unpredictable, mobile and less confined to the engagement with museum content. What is critical is that technology is not treated as some external force that can enhance or impact the visitor experience. Rather, technology is something that is knitted into who we are as human subjects and has a type of agency in its relationship to people (Lister, Dovey, Giddings, Grant & Kelly, 2008).100

Intertextuality, convergence culture, and hypertexts, disrupt the notion of the linearity of the text. Modelling visitor learning as an intertextual construct is not to simplify the process but to emphasize its unpredictability and complexity. It locates the museum and its ‘interpretation’ as just one text among a network of sources available for visitors to draw upon. While making meaning from a museum experience may involve information based learning, it is much more than that. Learning in the museum is about recollecting with family, connecting to prior experiences, reinforcing prior knowledge, and unearthing aspects of the lives of close friends. It also challenges the assumption that museum interpretation will lead to an improved understanding of the site and the content communicated. Interpretation, therefore, cannot be easily used to shape outcomes.

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100 This is in opposition to Falk & Dierking (2008) for example, who treat hand held digital devices as a vehicle for enhancing visitor learning and meaning making.
Chapter 7

A message in a bottle: The difficulties associated with visitor learning at zoos

“Visitors are often overhead exclaiming how similar an animal’s behaviour might be to that of a relative. Over two hundred years, records of visitors’ responses to the animals have reflected a range of interests: concern about the apparent happiness or misery, parental instincts towards a newborn animal, a combination of fear and superiority in the vicinity of lions, tigers and other species capable of killing humans, the vague thrill at the thought of the batoc that a loose carnivore might cause, the familiarity of a popular zoo ‘character’ and the fun of watching animals with human features imitate or try to carry out human tasks in a clumsy way” (de Courcy, 1995: 104).

“Topics must be derived from visitor-interest studies, not from what is interesting to staff who have been immersed in the formal study of wildlife conservation for many years” (Holzer, Scott & Bixler, 1998: 60).

“Most reasons given for visiting the zoo suggest that people come with more of a desire to enjoy an experience than to achieve specific goals. This tends to make the task of educating both easier and harder: easier because people are open to potentially interesting experiences and harder because they are not necessarily motivated to learn” (Milan & Wourms, 1992: 130).
If learning is intertextually and socially constructed, and unpredictable, and meaning-making is dependent on prior knowledge and prior experiences, then the ability of interpretation to shape outcomes, get across messages and change people’s behaviour, attitudes and values is severely hampered. On the whole, museums and art galleries have embraced the idea that visitors will not necessarily learn what they intend (even if much of the visitor research in these institutions has yet to follow). Interpretation at zoos and similar sites, however, is still heavily centred on delivering messages to visitors. The current study has demonstrated that the visitor’s meaning-making process is not glaringly different at the various sites. In other words, visitors do not appear to consciously adapt their learning strategies. Connecting to prior knowledge and experiences was just as important at the zoo as it was at the museums and the art gallery for the research participants. To some extent ‘learning outcomes’ or knowledge acquisition is more difficult to achieve at the zoo because of the relaxed outdoor nature of the site, and the lure of the animals. Ironically, this is the one site where messages are actively promoted and the site where visitors’ prior experiences appeared most prominent. This chapter will discuss what an intertextual view of learning may mean for the zoo.

**Prior knowledge from media representations and news reports**

Zoos, since their early inception, have always had to justify their survival. One such justification is that they are often the only contact people have with animals and their related conservation issues (Moscardo, 2008). It may be the case that for many people the physical contact with animals is only available at the zoo, however it is unlikely that they have not been previously exposed to conservation issues. Like visitors to museums, art galleries and heritage sites, zoo-goers arrive with a certain stock of knowledge:

This stock of knowledge is built up from various sources, although media representations are likely to be particularly important. Thus the visitor arrives at the gates of the zoo ready primed for the experience (Beardsworth & Bryman, 2001: 87).

There is a chain of thought that the media representations, such as television and film documentaries, are competitors for zoos and are not only discouraging people from
visiting but making zoos redundant as educational resources (Croke, 1997; Frost & Roehl, 2008; Smith & Broad, 2008). Some argue that aspects of the zoo such as ‘captivity’ and ‘crowds’ often result in viewers feeling closer to the animals than watching nature documentaries (Montgomery, 1995). Other research suggests that the behaviour of animals in a zoo is more natural than that of animals on documentaries and that visitors look forward to seeing animals they have seen on television or film. For example, staff at the Werribee Zoo in Victoria noticed an increased attention in the Meerkats due to the show Meerkat Manor being shown on Australian television (Smith & Broad, 2008).

Whether documentaries are preventing or encouraging visitors to zoos is not the issue here. What is important is that the zoo is not the only resource people have for learning about animals. In a recent interview on Australian television with the documentary film maker Sir David Attenborough, it was stated that over the years his shows have had a total audience of 500 million worldwide (Hayes, 2008). During the pilot stages for the current research while testing the methodology at a wildlife photography exhibition at the Australian Museum in Sydney, approximately 75% of the visitors used in that stage of the research made some connection to a David Attenborough documentary. He was also referred to on a number of occasions during the major fieldwork at Taronga Zoo. This reinforces the notion that the site visit is but one in the life-long learning of visitors (Balmford et al, 2007; Sterling, Lee & Wood, 2007).

**Negative images and animal captivity issues**

The data collected at Taronga Zoo, more than the other three sites, illustrated the intertextual nature of meaning-making and how the ‘learning’ experiences are influenced by images, perceptions and experiences from external sources. Prior animal experiences appeared to influence the research participant’s visit to the zoo. For Barry (group C) his previous encounters with non-captive animals made a visit to the zoo less appealing:

> “Having seen tigers in their own environment in India I don’t think I could bear to see one in an enclosure no matter how well set up.”
Belinda (group C) made similar comments:

“When you’ve seen plenty of lions, leopards and cheetahs range out on the open savannah, the thought of seeing them in such a confined environment loses its appeal. Tigers – well I saw a better, more open display at Adelaide Zoo and Dubbo.”

For Barry and Belinda not only did their wild animal encounters affect their visit to the zoo but also images and perceptions of Taronga that they had developed over time. For example, Barry commented on what he remembered from his last visit to Taronga Zoo:

“Not a lot but I do remember being rather upset with the small cages and amount of concrete involved. I think I came away with rather negative feelings about the zoo.”

So much so that he had not been back for thirty years. These negative images not only kept Barry from visiting the zoo but also framed the way he viewed Taronga during this visit. Rather than looking forward to his trip to the zoo he was more interested to see if there had been improvements. He was left with the following impression after the visit:

“Only somewhat less negative. Taronga has certainly improved. It’s good not to see animals in bare concrete cages as they used to be displayed. And it’s good to see lots of educational information around. But I am still generally negative towards zoos in general.”

Barry’s comments on the addition of educational material is surprising considering he, and the group as a whole, engaged with very little of Taronga’s interpretation. And while he enjoyed his visit to the zoo, he attributes this to his companions. Belinda also commented on the improvements to the zoo but she too was still a little disappointed:

“Parts of the zoo were lovely and lush with vegetation when compared to my last visit, but then there were still the awful desolate sections dominated by swags of uninspiring wire fencing/netting, leafless tree stumps, dusty ground surfaces and brutalist concrete structures half trying not to look like concrete structures.”

The plight of captive animals was a common theme in the conversations of three of the four participant groups. Gina (group D) recollected about the “poor elephant in his
enclosure on a very hot day and no shade” from her last visit to Taronga. This group also conversed about the improvements to the zoo enclosures:

*Gina – Down the bottom on the rocks*
*Jill – Oh isn’t be gorgeous*
*Shelly – Lovely isn’t be*
*Gina – Yeah*
*Jill – Yeah………….It’s a worry when they do that because they look like they pace don’t they………*
*Shelly – Yeah*
*Jill - ……….they want to get out. Oh here he is*
*Gina – Cages are good for people to come and see the animals but you don’t like (inaudible) do you*
*Jill – No, no. I must admit (inaudible) walk with them. It’s far better than I remember them to be*
*Gina – Yes*
*Jill – Least they’ve got green (inaudible). They never bad that*
*Gina – Yes*
*Shelly – Yeah they’re not (inaudible) like when we were young*
*Jill – Used to be just cages weren’t they*
*Shelly -Yep*

Members of both group C and group D are over the age of fifty so its not surprising that their previous visits to Taronga Zoo, mostly as children, are tainted with negative images, as it was a time when animals were kept in small concrete cages. However, Melissa and Sam (group E), both in their mid twenties, also had negative memories of the animals at the zoo:

*Sam – Why do they have, oh no*
*Melissa – Why do they have what?*
*Sam – Chains in their, I don’t think it looks very nice. And I’m sure it’s not good for the elephants*
*Melissa - (inaudible)*
*Sam – Hanging. Like this thing here is better*
*Sam’s Mum – Tyres is that what you are saying?*
*Sam – No I don’t like, cause it reminds me of um did you ever see the orangutans when they were in those tiny little cages?*
From the discussions with this group, they were very conscious and concerned about animal welfare in general and so it is not surprising that any form of perceived animal cruelty would be prominent in their memory. Reade and Waran (1996) conducted two studies into how people perceive zoos, one using respondents on the street and the other with respondents visiting a zoo. They found that the 20-39 age group had very negative impressions of the zoo regardless of whether at the zoo or not. They suggest that:

Other age groups are perhaps less aware of issues regarding captive animals, and may be influenced by the traditional view of zoos as merely places of entertainment (116).

They also state that the respondents involved in the study on the street may not visit zoos frequently and are thus unaware of the improvements to zoos as well as the following:

It may have been that they were more influenced by adverse media attention and the increasingly strong moral stance against captivity in general (Reade & Waran, 1996: 116).

Or, as was the case with my research participants, they had such strong images from their own zoo experiences that prevented them from visiting.¹ The point to be made

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¹ Unlike the participants in my research Clayton, Fraser and Saunders (2009) found that only a few people in the study expressed sadness or sympathy towards the animals. However, they do acknowledge that the negative perception of zoos is a realistic situation.
here is that any chance of these visitors picking up on the zoo’s conservation or educational messages is impinged upon by the perceived image of the zoo and the ‘animals in captivity’ issues. Barry’s situation in particular highlights that even though there had been improvements to the zoo, which he was grateful for, he still held strong negative views of zoos in general. How is a zoo expected to change an attitude he has held for thirty years in one three-hour visit?

It is not only visitors’ own experiences with the zoo that shape perceptions: media reports are also influential. Not long before group C visited the zoo there were reports of animals dying unnecessarily at Taronga Zoo and the Western Plains Zoo that had tarnished the image of both zoos for weeks (AAP, 2007a; 2007b). Group C had seen the media reports and discussed it on-site:

Catrina – Oh this is where they give them to you to hold in your arm when they do it, if they do it.

Wildlife encounters (laughs)

Belinda – Yeah koala encounters. Did you bring your camera?

Barry – Yeah I find that a bit of a worry all this sort of um…….

Catrina – Yeah

Belinda – The what, handling them?

Barry – This handling stuff and people….cause there has been a bit of controversy hasn’t there about the zoo making more and more money out of that sort of thing.

Belinda – Yes, oh well because there was this series of investigative reports in the herald about the deaths………..

Barry – Yes, yes

Belinda – ……of animals. Was it at Western Plains where they had, where did the elephants die?

Catrina – Here you can, can purchase the (inaudible) of an animal here. If you wish too (obviously not listening Belinda and Barry’s conversation)

Belinda – And there was a whistle blower who came forward and said what they do up at Dubbo

Barry – Yes

Belinda – Apparently they encourage people to bring their own food to feed the lions………

Barry – Yes, yeah

Catrina – Have you been to Western Plains zoo?

Belinda - ……..and the other big cats

Barry – Yeah it’s not good for the lions

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2 Taronga Western Plains Zoo is located in Dubbo roughly 400km North West of Sydney. It was opened in 1977 and developed as an open-range zoo to complement the restricted facilities of the Sydney site (Taronga Zoo, 2009a).
Again the question is raised: what hope does the zoo have of getting their conservation messages across when visitors are having conversations about serious allegations of animal cruelty reported in the media?

The display of animals has always been the dominant role of the zoo (Benbow, 2000). It has also been the dominant reason for people visiting the zoo. This makes it challenging for any form of zoo ‘education’ (Hyson, 2004). It appears that learning about the animal and their habitats may be a by-product of their zoo experience (Holzer et al, 1998; Clayton et al, 2009). It is possible that the impact of zoo interpretation is limited to raising awareness of animal conservation issues:

Perhaps zoological parks are better suited for fostering generic educational benefits such as environmental awareness and stewardship, rather than learning specific information (Morgan & Hodgkinson, 1999: 236).

One only needs to look at health campaigns as a counter-argument. What could be more powerful and emotional than some of the smoking images on television or on packs of cigarettes and yet how successful are they in preventing people from undertaking an activity that is so detrimental to their own lives? How can zoos promote conservation messages and garner support for the animals or habitats that have no connection or impact on visitors own lives or home environment? Cavill and Bauman (2004) conducted a review of the studies that have evaluated health campaigns on the impact of knowledge and attitude change related behaviours. Most of the evaluations found that simple awareness of the issues were the only outcomes of the campaigns. They came to the following conclusion:

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3 All the women from group D before the visit felt that it would be more relaxing than their visit to the art gallery. After the visit they noted that the most enjoyable aspects were the outdoor nature of the zoo and the people they were visiting with. Sam (Group E) also mentioned expecting a more relaxed visit at the zoo than the art gallery. Melissa expected the following: “While the art gallery was about appreciating another culture and another person’s talent (the artist’s) the zoo is about just observing animals that are already part of nature”. Sandra (Group A) mentioned that she did not expect it to be an educational experience: “I expect it to be more enjoyable and entertaining rather than educational as I tend to not read every info plaque”. In the research of Milan and Wourms (1992) one third of the visitors visited because of their companions.
This is a long process, and campaigns should not be expected to lead directly to behaviour change. Rather, campaigns should aim to influence antecedent variables in a stepwise process……………..The central point to note is that behaviour change is neither a likely nor a necessary early outcome of mass media campaigns. Rather, a valid outcome is a positive change in any of the antecedent variables, such as beliefs, social norms or intention. This is slightly at odds with the traditional notion of social marketing which tends to focus on behaviour as an outcome (Cavill & Bauman, 2004: 773).

Behaviour change models, such as those related to health issues, require long-term sustained strategies that do not translate well to the zoo visit. It has long been recognised in health education that repeated exposure to health messages is required for behaviour change to occur (Hornick, 2002; Cavill & Bauman, 2004). Is the strength of the zoo in attempting to influence what occurs in the lives of visitor’s once they leave the site or in the power to facilitate the experience they have with the animals?

**Facilitating and supporting visitors’ experiences**

Visitors no longer need sites to be ‘interpreted’ in the traditional sense of the word. What is needed is support for their own questions and interpretations. Zoo visitors often require, and would like, someone present to answer their questions (Price, Ashmore & McGivern, 1994). For example group E had questions they wanted answered while watching the giraffes:

*Melissa – This things on its head……..they’re not functioning are they? There too little horn things (Sam laughs)*  
*Sam – Functional*  
*Melissa – You know*  
*Sam – They’re there for a specific reason*  
*Melissa – They’re there for aesthetic reason………If you see a ranger around you can ask him these questions*

Zoo keepers, or zoo staff, are ‘untapped resources’ and face-to-face interpretation is an underutilized source of information for visitors (Croke, 1997; Holzer et al, 1998).
Anderson, Kelling, Pressley-Keough, Bloomsmith and Maple (2003) found that having a docent near the exhibit increased the time spent by visitors at that exhibit. The Dallas Zoo has designed the reptile exhibition to allow visitors to see how the staff manages the animals:

Windows have been placed along one wall, of the services area to allow visitors to see the keepers feeding the animals, cleaning the cages and undertaking medical care and research. Descriptions of the activities are relayed over a public address system. Video recordings, regular lectures and question and answer sessions contribute to the experience. The staff have noticed that visitors now stay longer and respond to the information presented to them (de Courcy, 1995: 144).

De Courcy (1995) found that while visitors at zoos may read signs, they benefit more from informal conversations with staff of the zoo:

On one occasion in the Melbourne Zoo a party of schoolgirls assigned to watch zebra for a lengthy period became bored until the subtler movements of the animals were explained to them by a guide. The girls’ approach altered immediately, they now had something to watch and the time passed quickly (258).

A similar situation occurred during the research conducted at Taronga Zoo. Jill and Shelly (group D) were walking past an exhibit and noticed a monkey playing with a bottle. The following conversation was provided in chapter four but it’s important to revisit it here for this discussion:

*Shelly – Here is a little monkey. There’s a monkey there*

*Jill – (inaudible)*

*Shelly – Oh is it. Oh I can see him in there but he’s not very visible*

*Jill – Oh yeah. Yeah I can see him*

*Shelly – Yep*

*Jill – He’s got a bottle hasn’t he?*

*Shelly – Oh yeah he’s playing with it*

*Jill - (inaudible) did he get a bottle*

*Shelly – Somebody must have thrown it in*

*Jill – Ob*

*Shelly – People are rascals aren’t they*
Sandra and Gary (group A) during their visit to Taronga, walked past the same exhibit and noticed the same monkey playing with a bottle. However, unlike Jill and Shelly, Sandra and Gary found a keeper nearby and asked her what she was doing. The keeper explained that the bottle, which contained food inside, was given to the monkey as part of a stimulating strategy to keep he/she occupied and mentally active. She said they monitor their behaviour to see what techniques work and what don’t. Gary asked the staff member whether the monkey smashed the bottle to get to the food. She explained to Gary that some primates can unscrew the cap fully but this monkey was not that smart. The same monkey and the same behaviour in both examples but two completely different experiences for the two groups.

Not only did Sandra and Gary remain at this exhibit longer, but also they now had a better understanding of the lives of the animals at the zoo. This example reinforces the notion that visitors are interested in the ‘behind the scenes’ aspects of sites, discussed in the previous chapter. Taronga itself has also embraced this idea as it runs events where visitors can sleep at the zoo, and members of the Zoo Friends program can participate in regular tours of the veterinary areas of the zoo that are not open to the public (Zoo friends, 2009). Yet there is very little of this type of interpretation accessible to the regular visitors. The power of the keeper visitor interaction is not the scientific facts and figures but the personal experiences and relationships the staff develop with the animals (Montgomery, 1995). Influencing visitors’ attitudes towards animals, or educating visitors on animal biology, are very difficult through the static interpretation that is often delivered at zoos. Zoos may be better served at concentrating on the experiences visitors have with the animals themselves.

Zoos frequently state that by having visitors engaging with the animals on an emotional level they are more open to conservation issues (Fraser et al, 2008). Often the most powerful emotional experiences visitors can have with animals is something they can relate to in their own lives: for example, death (Benbow, 2004). Fifi, a chimp who had been at Taronga zoo for 40 years, had died in the week leading up to group C’s visit. Her death received newspaper and TV coverage and Belinda had been exposed to this media coverage before visiting the zoo:

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4 Taronga runs two types of sleepovers: ‘Roar & Snore’ involves a night’s stay in a luxury tent with views of Sydney Harbour. Guests have the opportunity to wake to the sounds of the zoo and participate in behind the scenes activities; Zoosnooz is designed for school groups to camp and experience the animals at night with activities specifically tailored to the school curriculum (Taronga Zoo, 2009b).
Belinda – And did you hear, did you read that Fifi died during the week

Barry – Fifi?

Belinda – Yeah the chimpanzee

Barry – Oh right yes

Catrina – Most ancient chimpanzee

Belinda – Actually at the age of 60. And apparently they only last till the age of 40 but because of diet and good health and not being attacked by anything she survived to 60. And all the other chimps were grieving for her

Barry – Yes

Belinda – So that’s a bit sad

The article in Figure 7.1 describes how the other chimps were mourning Fifi’s death. On the day of group C’s visit the chimps were not behaving as they normally would by being boisterous and energetic. They actually appeared sad as shown in Figures 7.2 and 7.3. It was as if they were grieving like humans. According to the staff at a Cameroon chimpanzee rescue centre, which had a similar experience, this is exactly what they were doing:

The normally lively and noisy animals stood silently in line with their hands on each others shoulders for comfort. They then watched, apparently in quiet contemplation, as the elderly chimp, aged in her 30s, was buried. Staff said that the moment gave a rare insight into how chimps react when one of their family dies, showing very human-like emotions (Szczupider, 2009).

The behaviour of the Cameroon chimps is best represented in the photo from the article shown in Figure 7.4.
Figure 7.1: Newspaper report on the death of Fifi

Clan gathers in an emotional farewell to Fifi

Chimps in mourning

By STEVE GEE

They share more than 90 per cent of human DNA. And like a family grieving one of its own, Taronga Zoo’s troupe of chimps have shown the most human qualities as they mourn the death of 38-year-old matriarch, Fifi.

For about an hour after the primate passed away on Thursday, the 18 chimpanzees, who share the enclosure, virtually closed ranks, surrounding her body in a poignant gesture of shared heartache.

They each had their moment of quiet, some petting and sniffing the fallen ape, while others simply sat in silence.

“It was as if they all wanted to say goodbye,” headkeeper Melissa Beaven said yesterday.

“Normally they are very boisterous, but it was very quiet. They didn’t want to leave her,”

Ms. Beaven said even before Fifi’s body was discovered, keepers knew there was a problem.

“You could judge by the rest of the group’s behaviour that something had happened,” she said.

“They were all very close to her. They spent a bit of time sitting next to her.

The much loved primate, who celebrated her 38th birthday in May, died on Thursday. A great grandmother, she had shown no sign of illness apart from arthritis and minor age-related ailments.

Because of the cold, keepers allowed Fifi to stay inside her enclosure on Thursday and it was only when they entered to give her an afternoon feed of fruit that her body was discovered.

Ms Beaven said the chimps spent the hours leading to her death filing in and out of the enclosure, as if paying their final respects.

“She made herself a big comfortable nest of paper in the night house and it looks like she basically went to sleep in the early afternoon, so it was nice and quick,” she said.

Ms Beaven said the chimps were quieter than usual yesterday. It was clear they missed Fifi.

“She has been at the zoo for over 40 years so she has had an important role to play within the community,” Ms Beaven said.

Source: Gee (2007)
Figure 7.2: Taronga Zoo Chimps

Source: Ashley Harris
Figure 7.3: Taronga Zoo chimps

Source: Ashley Harris
Figure 7.4: Chimpanzees at Cameroon Rescue Centre grieving for Dorothy

Source: Szczupider (2009)
The coverage of an animal’s death is not uncommon in zoos:

Individual animals at zoos may become familiar to regular visitors, and in some cases, people feel great affection toward them. This was a familiar phenomenon throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, especially for well-known megafaunal mammals. The responses to the deaths of these animals included the reporting of the death in the press, including the name given to the animal, the cause of death, notable characteristics of the animal, and events during the animal’s life. The reaction of the public to the death of a well-loved animal can be intense and mournful (Benbow, 2004: 390).

For regular visitors, or visitors who are familiar with the animal, it can be the last chance to say goodbye (de Courcy, 1995). Let us assume that there were visitors to Taronga zoo that day that had not read the article or seen the news of Fifi and were maybe wondering why the chimps were behaving the way they were. What questions did they ask? How were these visitors expected to understand what was going on? There was no indication by the zoo, no signage or other communication, to make visitors aware of what the chimps were experiencing. This is quite perplexing considering the death of an animal like Fifi actually hits at the heart of what zoos are trying to do: foster emotional connections to the animals. Visitors to the zoo may not have strong backgrounds in animal biology or prior knowledge in conservation issues. What they are more likely to understand, regardless of their cultural background, is the concept of death, grieving and family all of which are represented by the death of Fifi the chimp (Benbow, 2004).

Does the power of the zoo lie in the information-related content presented to visitors or is it in the experiences that visitors can have with the ‘characters’ and personalities of the animals such as the chimps? Based on the data collected for this research the answer would be the latter, suggesting that zoos would benefit from work carried out in other institutions. In the world of museums and art galleries, innovative techniques that concentrate on fostering ‘experiences’, as opposed to outcome related learning, are being employed.
Chapter 8

Empathy, embodiment and experience

“Gazing at particular ‘sights’ is inflected by all sorts of other visual, as well as multisensual, awareness. In this complex and multiple engagement with the world a more multilayered semiotics may be imagined. Places and their contents are seen from numerous angles and are apprehended as fractured but recomposed in mental processes. However, they are not recomposed as ‘set pieces’, as theatre in relation to horizon and ordered importance, but understood in more complex and unsettled and energetic ways and in combinations and associated with complexities of feelings” (Crouch, 2002: 212).

“The foundational definition of museums will, in the long run, I believe, arise not from objects, but from ‘place’ and ‘storytelling in tangible sensory form’” (Gurian, 2006: 45).

“Are we not far better at providing the inspiration to want to find out more – through the aesthetic pleasure and/or excitement of discovery that our collections, exhibitions and programmes provide?” (Black, 2005: 149).
How do museums broaden their view of learning, place less emphasis on learning outcomes and foster experiences? Some argue that the soul of the museum need not lie in its objects but in the storytelling and the narrative (Roberts, 1997; Gurian, 2006). There is already imaginative, powerful and challenging work being conducted in museums and art galleries that embrace this storytelling approach. The Australian Museum in Sydney held an exhibition in 2009 entitled *Egyptian treasures: Art of the pharaohs* that illustrates the strength of such an approach. The following excerpt is taken from the sign introducing the exhibition:

Listen to an Egyptian master craftsman show his young apprentice the full range of tomb decorations while imparting valuable lessons about the symbolism of Egyptian art. The story of Neferho and Ramose is based on real people who lived about 350 BCE. Their lives, language and work practices are drawn from the many artefacts and writings once entombed with this ancient society.

The curators give the visitors a feeling that they themselves are the ‘apprentice’ invited to join Ramose on his journey to becoming a master craftsman. The visitor requires very little background knowledge to follow this journey. Throughout the exhibition visitors are asked to make comparisons between ancient Egyptian society and their own culture:

Even back in ancient Egypt, workers were taking ‘sickies’. Pendura did not show up because he wanted to go drinking with his mate.

Ancient art in modern hands: The ancient and the modern pieces placed side by side in this exhibition speak a silent dialogue. It is an interesting conversation between the ancient world. How much has changed and how much has stayed the same?

Rather than telling visitors what to think, the exhibition asks questions and invites or facilitates comparison making. Ancient graffiti, for example, is discussed as a vital part of daily life as opposed to the modern form of graffiti that for most people has such a stigma attached. A similar comparison was made by the curators of another temporary exhibition, *A Day in Pompeii*. In this case the concept related to Roman society:
Some of it political, with candidates putting themselves up for the local council, and some of it advertising the daily gladiatorial events: animals fights in the morning, public execution of criminals by various means at lunch, and gladiators in the afternoon. ‘Graffiti was the broadsheet of the day’ (Stephens, 2009).

If an exhibition were to be designed around the themes and ideas presented in this thesis, then *A Day in Pompeii* would be that exhibition.

**A day in Pompeii**

The exhibition was held at the Melbourne Museum from June to October 2009. It traced the fateful day that Mt Vesuvius erupted and buried the city of Pompeii for over 200 years (Melbourne Museum, 2009). Yet the exhibition does much more than simply describe the explosion. Through well-crafted stories, the designers set the scene and context of the city and its people. The first part of the exhibition depicts aspects of Pompeii society such as the measurements of weight, the currencies used, dining out at restaurants and wine bars, public entertainment such as fighting, toilets and bathing practices, and the businesses that people worked in and owned. The interpretation constructs and exploits the notion that the people of Pompeii functioned in a society not all that dissimilar to our own:

> Until 79AD, its citizens lived normal lives and probably shared with us many of the same needs, hopes and dreams (Exhibition sign).

The exhibition then turns to the actual eruption of Mt Vesuvius. A short 3-D movie is presented which gives a computer-generated view of the city and traces the 48 hours during which the volcano destroyed the town. There is no narration and no text, just a re-creation of the sights and sounds of the city during the eruption. After leaving the theatre there is a long hallway with a large timeline displayed on one of the walls detailing, in text, the specific events of the eruption, similar to the content of the movie only in a different format. There is then a small section for those interested in the science of volcanos, and the archaeological processes associated with uncovering the city. It is the next part of the exhibition where the full impact of the volcano becomes
clear. The following passage, taken from the museum website, provides the best
description of this section:

In 1860, the Italian archaeologist Giuseppe Fiorelli noticed that long-decomposed
organic material had left voids in the volcanic ash which covered Pompeii, and
devised a way to fill them with plaster. This technique produced startlingly realistic
casts of human beings and animals frozen in their death agonies, which continue to
disturb and intrigue us today. Some of the most poignant examples are an
embracing couple and a writhing dog, chained and unable to escape — true
snapshots of mortality, miraculously preserved intact for nearly 2,000
years. These figures are both moving and powerful, unwilling messengers
from the distant past who in their deaths have provided us with a unique window
on their ancient lives (Melbourne Museum, 2009).

The body casts of people and their animals in the final moments before they
perished are breathtaking, as illustrated by the photos in Figures 8.1 and 8.2. The
experience is brilliantly set up by the beginning of the exhibition through the
stories of the daily lives of the people of Pompeii. Left speechless my thoughts
turned to the recent natural disasters of our own time. The tsunami in Samoa
(which had occurred in the months preceding my visit to the exhibition), the
earthquake in Haiti, and closer to home, Black Saturday and the Victorian
bushfires. The eruption has even been compared to the terrorist attacks in New
York:

One can’t help rerunning the contemporary imagery of the World Trade Centre
falling; the explosion that preceded it, the clouds of dust that followed. In Pompeii,
the surges of hot gas and layers of raining ash continued into the next day and it
was all buried – for the next 17 centuries – under almost seven metres of material
(Stephens, 2009).

In recent years there has been a deluge of images in the media surrounding natural
disasters. The whole climate change debate and what influence human activities are
having on the environment are ever present. This exhibition plays on these current
issues with the design team aware that people are very curious and fearful of what the
natural world can do to us.
Figure 8.1: Crouching man body cast

Source: Melbourne Museum (2009)

Figure 8.2: Body cast of guard dog

Source: Melbourne Museum (2009)
Whether it be Victorians fleeing bushfires in 2009 or Pompeian’s fleeing a volcano in 79AD, all faced the same questions: do I stay and fight to save my house and possessions? If not what do I take and what gets left behind? It is in the final moments that people ask themselves these questions, and the body casts depict these final stages of human life:

It is a blessing their faces can’t be seen in much detail. We can imagine, though – all too well – their trembling, sick-to-the-stomach fear at the prospect of being incinerated as the heavens cracked open. What must it feel like to know you are about to die? (Stephens, 2009)

The exhibition trail guide (Figure 8.3) given to visitors as part of the admission to the exhibition, provokes visitors to ask themselves these sorts of questions. Rather than ‘interpreting’ for visitors, the exhibition facilitates an experience. It also helps to promote empathy.

An exhibition of this kind must be harrowing for victims of natural disasters and Melbourne Museum curators were well aware of this fact:

Almost 2000 years later, we in Victoria could weep for them; we have seen this sort of tragedy………For this reason, the museum is displaying these casts sensitively, with adequate warning for those who might be unduly disturbed (Stephens, 2009)

For me it had a very personal and emotional impact as I had, five years earlier, experienced the wrath of a bushfire. Fortunately, my father’s house was saved but we had already made the tough decision to leave and decided what we could take and packed the cars appropriately. A change of wind was our saviour. While my situation lacked the impact of Mt Vesuvius or the Black Saturday bushfires, I was still able to sympathise with the plight of those in both disasters.
Figure 8.3: Exhibition Trail Guide

People of Pompeii

Our trail will introduce you to some of the belongings of the people living, trading, working and entertaining in this seaside town.

10,000 – 12,000 people lived in the town of Pompeii in 79 A.D. Around 20% of them are estimated to have died as a result of the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

People didn’t understand what was happening but had to make the decision to leave or stay.

Aurei (Gold Coins)

Some bodies found in Pompeii had aurei next to them. These valuable coins were usually kept in a strongbox in the home and not used for everyday trading.

In the face of disaster, the men of nobility, soldiers and shopkeepers probably would have taken their gold coins with them.

So who survived and who died and why?

Carbonised Bread Loaf Replica

Many bakeries were found around Pompeii. This replica of bread left to blacken in a bakery oven is a sure sign that someone, probably the baker, left in a hurry.

What else would people have tried to save?

Did working early in the morning give the baker an indication on the day Vesuvius erupted that all was not well?

Was this person overtaken by poisonous gas?

Source: Melbourne museum
*A Day in Pompeii* still has all the elements of a traditional museum exhibition: it is simply the way the exhibition is contextualised that is so powerful. For example, a loaf of bread, kept intact through the disaster, was presented in the following manner:

This carbonised loaf, found in an oven at Pompeii, must have been left unattended when Vesuvius erupted.

While I was looking at this object I overheard two ladies next to me laughing at the thought of someone leaving the oven on. Probably something they themselves had done at some stage throughout their life. A simple comparison but one that visitors ‘get’ that requires very little effort. Being able to relate to the lives of others, however, is not a given:

The fact that we share with others a similar body, and consequently similar physical modes of engaging with objects, does not necessarily mean that we share the social and cultural frameworks within which our bodies and our selves are enmeshed. A physical action that may seem impossibly difficult to us may have been a piece of cake for someone else (Wehner & Sear, 2010: 153).

In developing an exhibition for the National Museum in Canberra, Wehner and Sear (2010) were hoping to facilitate visitors’ resonation with Australians from eras gone by:

We envisaged objects working to stimulate visitors’ engagement with others’ lifeworlds through embodied and imaginative responses; but we also recognized that this engagement had to be framed as an open-ended process. It had to raise questions about understanding others’ experience, rather than suggesting that visitors could simply and instantaneously imagine what it was like to be someone else (154).

Raising questions about other’s experiences and embodied responses are a major component of the success of *A Day in Pompeii.*

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1 So successful, the exhibition attracted 332,679 visitors during its run at the museum, which made it “the most popular temporary exhibition held in an Australian museum” (Families Wild About Museum, 2010).
Despite this success two questions must be asked: does this exhibition slip too far into theme-park type entertainment? What role does scholarship play in these sorts of exhibitions? Smith (2009) believes the exhibition lacks necessary elements of scholarship, and is critical of the content of the exhibition for two reasons. Firstly, that the exhibition provides very little discussion of Pompeii (the town and its people) in the larger context of Roman society. Is this broader historical context that important? Is it even the aim of this exhibition? There is a reason why it is called *A Day in Pompeii* as the focus is not on the entire history of Pompeii, let alone the role of the town in Roman Society, it is about one event: the eruption and the impact on the lives of those who lived in the city. As those organising the exhibition state, *A Day in Pompeii* aims to “give people a glimpse of daily life in the Roman city, from the food they ate to the houses in which they lived” (Leung, 2007). Even Smith (2009) premises his criticisms by stating “Museum exhibitions are limited in the level, complexity and type of content they can effectively deliver”.

Black (2005), in the quote provided on the title page of this chapter, indicates that the strength of museums and their exhibitions is in the power of inspiring and encouraging visitors to engage more with the content after leaving the site rather than bombarding them with information and giving all the answers during their visit. If a visitor were interested in the role of Pompeii in the Roman Empire, would they not look it up when they got home? Or even during the exhibition if they had the appropriate technology? There are still opportunities to learn facts about how a volcano erupts, and memorise dates of when the events occurred. But the exhibition does not rely on these components to create the empathy that one feels after viewing the body casts.

Smith’s (2009) second criticism of *A Day in Pompeii* is the constructed notion that “the people of Pompeii were just like us”. He says this “risks representing past societies as simply middle Australia with Italianate décor, ignoring fundamental differences in our societies and values.” Does Smith truly believe that visitors are naïve enough to think the people of Pompeii were just like us? The central idea is that although they lived 2000 years ago, and although they lived in another part of the world, the struggles they faced were similar to our own.
A Day in Pompeii makes no assumptions. You may have a detailed knowledge of Roman history; you may know that a volcano erupted and destroyed a city; you may know that a city called Pompeii once existed; or, as was the case with the friend who accompanied me, you may have no related prior knowledge at all. The feeling of connecting to the people and understanding the struggles of their final moments is not hinged upon a certain level of knowledge. It demonstrates that it is possible to relate the past to the present. It is an experience that is potentially accessible by all: potentially because as has been the theme of this thesis, nothing is certain when it comes to visitors’ experiences.

Concluding remarks

This thesis has demonstrated that learning and the visitor experience is more than an acquisition of knowledge and includes memory, imagination and social engagement. The educational power of museums is limited by what visitors choose to learn and what they choose to experience. A visit to Taronga Zoo is more than biological facts and conservation messages. It is also about remembering the penguins on a trip to New Zealand, or the lions on a safari in Africa, or the dangers of ostriches seen on a TV documentary. Just as a visit to the Powerhouse Museum is more than the science behind a steam powered locomotive. It is also about remembering days spent as a child on train platforms as your Dad performed his duties as stationmaster, or remembering the task of memorising the periodic table for school chemistry classes. A Day in Pompeii shows us that a museum visit can be more than dates associated with the rule of the Roman Empire. It can be the experience and the empathy achieved through the harrowing images of the final moments of another human being before their life is taken away.

Visitors to museums feel the space through their imagination, memories and stories. However, the museum experience involves more than the cognitive domains of memory and knowledge. It is, as Crouch (2002) argues in relation to tourism, a full body experience:

I present tourism as mediated by our bodies in an animation of space that combines feelings, imagination and sensuous and expressive qualities (207).
The 3-D movie presented in *A Day in Pompeii* is an example of this embodiment: no text just the sights and sounds of the recreation. While this thesis has argued for a non-reductive and complex view of learning and meaning-making, the notion of embodiment further highlights the complexity of the museum experience. Although vision is important, it is more important to understand the interaction of all senses working together in experiencing the museum or the tourist site (Crouch, 2002). The role of smell for instance was touched on briefly in relation to Taronga Zoo, but is it as important at other sites? And how does it affect what the visitor is looking at? What are visitors thinking of when engaging their sense of touch? What sorts of things remain unarticulated? Individuals are always ‘doing things’ through space and events:

Embodied knowledge of space would suggest an ongoing patina of flows occurring through the complexity of human activity. This is profoundly different from the knowledge that is implicit in the gaze, and the processes of which the gaze is composed. Moreover it goes beyond merely mentally constructed knowledge of, to a ‘knowledge through’. We may call the process one of lay knowledge. Applying this interpretation to tourism would deliberately avoid a notion of knowledge as product or end point, but informed, informing, and continuing to inform, unstable, fragmented, and valued (Crouch, 2002: 217).

Crouch argues for a view of the body as subject as opposed to object. In other words, it is active and involved “rather than acted and gazed upon” (209). This reflects the view of interpretation and the role of visitors in the museum experience this thesis has argued for. The process of experiencing the site is more significant than the product of the visit. But also that the experience with the content does not end after leaving the site.

Crouch (2002) argues that in tourism there is a need to study more rigorously, embodiment and sociality. The same could be said of museums and visitors’ experiences. In the case of *A Day in Pompeii* understanding what others may have gone through in another life is still learning. But it is learning that cannot be ‘tested’ for or measured after the visit. You do not need a survey or questionnaire to know what dominates the media and what people are resonating with. What would be the learning outcomes of visiting an exhibition such as *A Day in Pompeii*? If museums are moving into the arena of powerful storytelling and exhibitions such as this, then the validity of outcome related research must come into question. If empathy and embodiment are outcomes of the
visit how are these measured? Furthermore, are the connections that people make and the memories that are triggered a result of vision, other senses or a combination? If visitors make their own connections to objects what does this suggest about the authenticity of the real object? Or even the context of that object? Does the authenticity affect the meaning visitors make from the objects? Are social relationships reinforced, strengthened or changed as a result of a visit to the museum? These are the sorts of questions that will guide visitor research in the future.

Gurian (2006) refers to museums as institutions of memory and that this is one of their strengths:

What they have in common is that they represent or store the collective holdings of the past. What unites these organizations is the responsibility to care for the memories of the past and make them available for present and future use (89).

This thesis has tried to demonstrate that it is visitors as much as ‘interpreters’ or ‘curators’ that contribute to these institutions being places of memory. The current research has documented the prior knowledge and prior experiences visitors introduce into their conversations that make the visit more personally relevant. Using these aspects as evidence the thesis has challenged the view of interpretation as a necessary component for visitors to understand the site. Therefore suggesting that researching the visitor experience is better served at investigating the how of learning as opposed to the what.

This thesis has been concerned with the experience of the visitor; an experience that is not defined by categories or pre-defined outcomes but an exploration of how visitors truly interact and engage with the museum space. It is an interaction that involves experience, empathy and embodiment. This research has positioned the visitor interaction as intertextually and socially constructed and demonstrated that everyone has a story to tell.
References


Appendices

Appendix A: Details of the participant’s site visits
Appendix B: Information sheet
Appendix C: Example of the pre-visit question sheet
Appendix D: Hooper-Greenhill’s holistic communication model
Appendix E: Memories of visiting a place
### Appendix A – Details of the participant’s site visits

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GROUP</th>
<th>SITE</th>
<th>DATE OF VISIT (2007)</th>
<th>TIME SPENT AT SITE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Art Gallery</td>
<td>April</td>
<td>More than 2 hours (recorder ran out of space so time spent is not accurate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Taronga Zoo</td>
<td>May</td>
<td>5 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Powerhouse Museum</td>
<td>August</td>
<td>4 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Hyde Park Barracks Museum</td>
<td>September</td>
<td>2 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Art Gallery</td>
<td>April</td>
<td>55 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Taronga Zoo</td>
<td>July</td>
<td>2 hours 50 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Powerhouse Museum</td>
<td>November</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Hyde Park Barracks Museum</td>
<td>November</td>
<td>1 hour 30 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Art Gallery</td>
<td>May</td>
<td>3 hours</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Taronga Zoo</td>
<td>July</td>
<td>4 hours 10 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Powerhouse Museum</td>
<td>August</td>
<td>4 hours 15 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>Hyde Park Barracks Museum</td>
<td>October</td>
<td>2 hours 20 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Art Gallery</td>
<td>September</td>
<td>2 hours 40 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Taronga Zoo</td>
<td>September</td>
<td>2 hours 30 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Powerhouse Museum</td>
<td>October</td>
<td>1 hour 30 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Hyde Park Barracks Museum</td>
<td>November</td>
<td>1 hour 10 minutes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix B - Information sheet

Let me begin by thanking you for indicating your interest in this research. My name is Ashley Harris and I am a research student at the University of Western Sydney. I am undertaking a PhD degree which requires me to research a topic for three years and produce a written thesis about the research at the end. I have chosen to investigate and compare the visitor experience at a variety of sites across Australia. More specifically I am interested in how visitors personalise their experience in order to make meaning from the site.

This stage of the research involves recording visitor’s conversations as they experience the site and recording the general direction taken while on-site. I will provide you with the necessary equipment to record your conversations, ask you to sign a consent form and you are then free to experience the site as you would normally. After your visit, I will ask you if you would like to be involved in some follow-up correspondence which involves me contacting you via email, telephone or mail and asking some simple questions relating to your visit here today and your conversations that were recorded. Elements of both the recorded conversations and the follow-up correspondence may be analysed and used in the final thesis. However, you will never be identified personally and all the recorded information will be stored securely and not accessible to anyone outside of the university. Your privacy will be respected at all times.

You do not have to take part in any of the research or you may wish to only take part in the on-site research without future correspondence. If you do choose to participate you can withdraw at any point without explanation. In this case the information obtained from you will only be used with your permission.

It is hoped that with your assistance this research will give sites a better indication of how visitors conduct their experiences and what they find meaningful when on-site. If you agree to participate and provide your contact details you will be given updates on the research and at the completion will be provided with a summary of the major findings. If you have further questions at any stage, please feel free to contact me. My details are:

Ashley Harris
Phone: 0417262592
Email: as.harris@uws.edu.au
Alternatively you can contact my supervisor’s:

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Or

Associate Professor Robyn Bushell  
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Penrith South DC NSW 1797  
Phone: 4736 0113  
Email: r.bushell@uws.edu.au

Thank you for your co-operation!

Ashley Harris

NOTE: This study has been approved by the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics Committee or Panel (indicate Committee or Panel). The Approval Number is **HREC 06/188**. If you have any complaints or reservations about the ethical conduct of this research, you may contact the Ethics Committee/Panel through the Research Ethics Officers (tel.: 02 4736 0883 or 4736 0884). Any issues you raise will be treated in confidence and investigated fully, and you will be informed of the outcome.
Appendix C – Example of the pre-visit question sheet

1. Have you visited the site before? If so when?

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2. What do you remember about your previous visit?

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3. What do you expect to do and get out of your visit today?

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4. Do you believe there is a routine to follow or expected type of behaviour when visiting art galleries? If so please explain.

   ..............................................................................................................................
5. Any other comments before you go in?

ENJOY YOUR VISIT!
Appendix D – Hooper-Greenhill’s Holistic Communication Model

Source: Hooper-Greenhill (1994a)
Appendix E – Memories of visiting a place

“Years ago, an older friend told me about an experience with his elderly mother. His parents were of the doughty World War I generation of eastern Montana homesteaders who settled on hard scrabble land near Roundup. While his mother remembered well and eloquently and told him stories of the homestead beyond the time limits of his own memory, he wanted to know more. So on a spring weekend, he drove his mother from Billings on the Yellowstone River, northeast to the dry land his family had simultaneously embraced and battled. Once out of the car and on the very ground that had once been home, his mother was transported back in time, traversing the now barren land and describing the place in present tense as it had been years before. With a torrent of reminiscences precipitated by the outlines of what was once her house, chicken coop, and even the undulating landscape so intimately a part of her just a half a century earlier, she could reveal that life to her son. My friend was overwhelmed by the mnemonic power of this place. His mother’s ability to recall fact and feeling was intensified, magnified, focused by standing on the ground that was the crucible of her memory and the story of herself. She stood upon the memory place of her young womanhood, her childbearing, her marriage, and widowhood – but now from the perspective of her old age and impending death” (Archibald, 2002: 66-67)

“A friend regularly gives me postcards depicting my hometown of forty, fifty, or more years ago. Most recently she gave me one entitled ‘Ishpeming, Mich. Lake Angeline Basin’. My childhood home was within, literally, a stones throw of Lake Angeline. The lake I remember was rimmed with the ruins of iron-mining operations that had ceased years earlier. The postcard perplexed me; there is no lake in sight. Instead it is an industrial scene with mine shafts, stockpiles of iron ore, trams, railroads, smoke, and a deep pit in the foreground. Despite the fact the postcard title implies that this picture is of some place that I should know well, it is an unfamiliar scene. But as I study the image, looking for an familiarity, I recognize the outlines of the background bluffs, and they match exactly my indelible mental image of where I played as a boy. I can see the road that I know well, winding sideways up the hill where I walked in the spring picking dogtooth violets and jack-in-the-pulpits. I begin to sense that there is something intimately familiar about the scene. I look intently. There, on the edge of this desolate picture of a mining and smelting operation, is a house. Its cream colour jumps out
against the green trees. It is my house. I remember the profile, and then I remember my older brothers brushing barn red paint over the cream colour when I was about 10 years old. The arrangement of the chimneys confirms my recognition. But in this image, the house is not perched near the blue water of Lake Angeline but instead near a deep mine pit. And yet it fits. My father told me that at one time the lake was drained so that the iron ore underneath it could be mined. He cautioned me about huge drop-offs hidden by the water. In this picture, I could see that the water I knew had disappeared.

The presence of the bluffs and of the house confirm my memory of my childhood home. Yet this image is not just a memory confirmation; it also reinforces the history of the place as my father described it and in doing so extends my knowledge of my own place backward in time, to years long before I was born. The postcard supports my own memory, but only because it contains enough familiar elements to confirm that it is my home place. The rest of the scene is disjointed, alien, but I am able to connect the dots and restructure the place through time. Thus, I can understand how radically my place changed, and I now have a story that begins in one place before my time and continues into the present. The Lake Angeline postcard serves to extend memory into a past before my birth, but I can connect the scene to a place and events within my own memory. At the same time, the postcard image changes forever the way I think of the place, and hence my memories of it. For example, the ruins that I knew around the edges of the lake as a boy and that I imagined to be antiquarian and even antediluvian relics of all kinds of fanciful edifices, are now forever associated with the mundane mining and melting facilities they once supported” (Archibald, 2002: 72-73).