

## Learner-constructed trails in museums

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Museums are diverse places of informal learning. Yet a few common factors affect all visitors' learning: their personal knowledge and experience; the physical context of the museum itself, including not least the museum's artefacts and any interpretation alongside them; the presence or absence of other visitors, docents or other facilitators; and any additional tools, including digital ones, which mediate or support the visitor to focus and make meaning.

Learners are widely regarded as actively constructing meanings, both individually and socially, in 'free choice learning' environments such as museums. Yet museum visitors also desire some structure in their inquiry and experience of objects, environments and ideas. While digital tools in museums enable visitors to actively navigate through content or even create their own investigations, they seldom allow for actual construction of lasting digital or physical artefacts. However, 'user-generated content' is now common on the Internet, and some museum professionals have called for allowing visitors to create their own museums or exhibits, or interpretations thereof.

A crucial factor in museum meaning-making is linkage — between objects, between contexts, between learners, and between different interpretations and ideas. Thus my research explores the concept of learning trails as one way of structuring learners' meaning-making by linking individual 'learning objects' in a conceptual framework to filter the plethora of information and stimuli in a semi-structured information space. Such an approach harnesses the activity that visitors already undertake (traveling between museum objects) and can be supported using technologies they may already be carrying such as mobile phones.

My focus is on design and analysis, not of technologies, but of activities which structure their use. As such it does not aim to evaluate specific learning outcomes, rather it focusses on the process of engaging in learning-oriented activities in museums, investigating learners' experience with the museum context, primarily through the concept of tool mediation. Attention is paid to the design of learner-constructed trails, the appropriate amount of structure, how technologies mediate the activity in terms of personalisation and contextualisation; and the role of context(s). Learning trails have been conducted and studied in art and design museums, history museums, and botanic gardens.

Some questions for discussion:

1. What other activities can support informal learning experiences?
2. How do mobile digital technologies mediate and support learners' experience of activities such as trails?
3. What is an appropriate model for the design and analysis of technology-mediated activities in informal learning contexts?
4. How to balance structure and freedom; and the content of cultural authorities v. that of learners?