

# The role of the learner in the construction of meaning at Tate Britain

## El rol del visitante en la construcción de significado en la galería Tate Britain

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Recibido: 9 de marzo de 2012

Aprobado: 11 de julio de 2012

### Abstract

The debates on the interpretation of art that developed in the field of art theory and criticism beginning in the 1960s have influenced the theory and practice of museum education and questioned traditional practices. As a consequence, in recent years, there has been a radical redefinition of the role the viewer must play in interpreting works and exhibitions. The article discusses how and to what extent this turn towards visitor/learner agency in the interpretation has affected educational discourses and practices at Tate Britain gallery. This study is part of a wider investigation analysing how different agents involved in school programmes at Tate Britain conceive of art and interpretation.

**Key Words:** museum, education, art, interpretation.

Arriaga, A. Aguirre, I (2013): The role of the learner in the construction of meaning at Tate Britain. *Arte, Individuo y Sociedad*, 25(2) 203-218

### Resumen

Los debates sobre la interpretación del arte desarrollados en el campo de la teoría y crítica del arte a principios de los años 60 han influido la teoría y práctica de la educación museística poniendo en cuestión prácticas tradicionales. Como consecuencia, en los últimos años, se ha dado una radical redefinición del rol que el visitante debe jugar en la interpretación de obras y exposiciones. El artículo discute cómo y hasta qué punto este giro hacia el protagonismo del visitante en la interpretación ha influido los discursos y prácticas de la galería Tate Britain. El estudio es parte de una más amplia investigación que analiza cómo los diferentes agentes involucrados en los programas escolares de la Tate Britain conciben el arte y la interpretación.

**Palabras Clave:** museo, educación, arte, interpretación.

Arriaga, A. Aguirre, I. (2013): El rol del visitante en la construcción de significado en la galería Tate Britain. *Arte, Individuo y Sociedad*, 25(2) 203-218

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The debates on the interpretation of art that developed in the field of art theory and criticism beginning in the 1960s have influenced the theory and practice of museum education and questioned traditional practices in which teaching strategies were used to present unique interpretations of exhibitions. The idea of the openness of the work (Eco, 1962) and the shift in authority of the interpretation from the artist's intentions to the text/object and, finally, to the reader/audience (Barthes, 1967) have been transferred to educational discourse. Thus, practitioners and researchers involved in museum education, such as Barret (2000), Hooper-Greenhill (1992, 2000b), Garoian (2001), McLean (1999), Roberts (1997) and Wallach (1998), have proposed developing practices that, in the words of Elizabeth Reese (2003, p. 33), "*nurture multiple 'knowledges' rather than knowledge, facilitate multiple interpretations rather than a single interpretation, and encourage interaction among numerous narratives rather than the presentation of a single narrative*".

In this context, which seeks to promote alternative forms of interpreting and experiencing collections (Roberts, 1997) as well as to provide a polyvocal interpretive treatment of objects (Padró, 2005), one of the main strategies and goals to be argued has been the negotiation between the narratives provided by museums and brought in by visitors. The aim of such educational practices is to challenge traditional narratives, allowing other voices to be heard (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999, 2000a, Reese, 2003; Roberts, 1997; Padró, 2003, 2005).

From this perspective, educational practices should rebel against the traditional dichotomies among the producers, translators and consumers of knowledge and the interpretations made by visitors must be considered as valuable and meaningful as those proposed by the institution (Padró 2003, 2005).

In consequence, in recent years, there has been a radical redefinition of the role that the viewer must play in interpreting works and exhibitions. Educators, influenced by the shift created by post-modern, constructivist and post-structuralist theories, have slowly, at least in their discourses, moved visitors towards the centre of meaning-making (Mayer, 2005), giving visitors an authority on the interpretation, which, until now, has been denied to them.

The book *From Knowledge to Narrative: Educators and the Changing Museum* (1997), by Lisa Roberts, has become a reference that clarifies how the paradigm shift from modernity to postmodernity has affected education in museums. Roberts

declares that the shift towards viewer's protagonism in the construction of meaning seeks to legitimise "*personal experience as a source of meaning different from but no less valid than curatorial knowledge*" (Roberts, 1997, p. 70)

## **1. The object of the study: Discourses and practices of interpretation at Tate Britain**

How and to what extent has this shift toward visitor/learner protagonism in interpretation changed educational practices in museums? To reflect upon and obtain information to answer this question, we decided to conduct a case study at Tate Britain.<sup>1</sup>

Among other things, Tate Gallery has been valued for the creation of curatorial proposals that consider how to respond to new ways of creating and understanding art. These proposals grant the spectator greater agency in the construction of meaning and engage him/her in alternative ways of interpreting the artists' creations (Marsh, 2004). It is of interest to observe how these curatorial ideas have been translated into educational discourses and strategies.

This article provides an account of how the role of the learner in the interpretation is defined in educational discourse and practices at this gallery. To draw conclusions, we compared the institutional discourse of Tate Britain, the discourse of the educators and the educational practises conducted by these educators for the purpose of highlighting similarities, differences, disagreements and coincidences regarding the role of the learner in the construction of meaning.

### ***1.1. The collection of data for the research***

To understand the gallery's institutional stance regarding the role of the learner in the interpretation of works of art, we analysed different voices, both documentary and personal, that shape the institutional standpoint and that may provide us with information. In the first case, the following documents were selected for in-depth analysis:

- *The Art Gallery Handbook: A Resource for Teachers* (Charman, H., Rose, K. & G. Wilson, 2006b).
- An internal Tate Gallery document titled *Interpretation Policy*.

In addition, to allow for the possibility of researching other, initially unforeseen, issues, we considered it necessary and of interest to compare the opinions set forth in these documents with interviews of three individuals who are responsible for different programmes at the Department of Learning ("Department of Interpretation and Education" at the time the research was developed).

Likewise, to know the educators'<sup>2</sup> "own voices" and their opinions and viewpoints on the role of the learner in the interpretation of works of art during educational activities, we interviewed five educators and analysed these interviews.

Finally, educational activities that were performed at the gallery were observed

and recorded, specifically activities for school groups that the museum offers as one-day visits. We considered this an appropriate method for identifying how educators put into practise what they affirmed in their discourse. In this regard, five educational interactions were analysed in depth.

## ***1.2. The role of the learner in interpretation in the educational discourses of Tate Britain***

In the analysis of data obtained from fieldwork, we observed that educational discourses at Tate Britain, where, at different levels, there is an interest in valuing the visitor's interpretations, reflect a strong inclination to provide the visitor with a relevant role to play in the construction of meanings.

Evidence of this objective is found in the section of the Department of Learning that addresses the design of interpretation resources, which has developed several methods by which the voices of the spectators can be introduced as legitimate interpretative texts. This is the case with the *Write Your Own Label* program, which allows anyone to submit his/her comments regarding exhibited works of art for potential placement next to the works as an explanatory leaflet for the public. Another example includes the experiences developed in exhibits, such as the Turner Award Exhibit, where rooms (*Comment Rooms*) are reserved to allow visitors to write their comments regarding works and exhibits.

With this type of mediation policy, this public gallery intends to provide an institutional space for the voices of the citizens that, to some extent, can be developed such that the diverse audiences can feel represented and the museum can distance itself from its typical characterisation as an elitist institution.

As a result of this institutional course of action, the texts and interviews analysed indicate that several requests have been made to promote a "personal response" in the interpretative practises of the learner. In *The Art Gallery Handbook*, there are numerous references to the idea that in educational activities, the learner must not limit him/herself to only consume meanings that are created by other voices. This idea that the learner must take a leading and active role in meaning-making is shared by the majority of educators and by the interviewed Heads of the Department of Learning. There are even educators who assert that one of their main functions is to make the learners aware that within them resides a fundamental source of interpretation, as can be understood from the following excerpt of an interview:

Peter: [Regarding educational objectives] *To let children know that they are allowed to have an opinion about art, that is something that is a personal thing; and that they can look at art and they can decide what is about, and whether they like it or not.*

However, the manner in which the *personal response* of the learner is understood characterises the direction of his/her participation, as we have observed that this idea of "personal response" varies greatly from one discourse to another and from one practise to another. Logically, this variation in the conception of a personal response noticeably affects the way in which the institutional principle of letting the learner be heard is performed, as we will observe.

## 2. Our findings: Different ways of understanding the learner's contribution

In certain parts of the analysed documents and the conducted interviews, we observed that learner contributions are considered to be the result of a critical analysis and discussion process that originates in personal contexts, memory and the associations that learners make:

*In practice, the meaning-making process of engaging with an artwork begins with initial pupil responses, based upon their own personal contexts, memories and associations, then moving towards a critical analysis engendered through an activity. This results in a situation in which background information provided by the teacher and other sources enriches experience and deepens understanding. (The Art Gallery Handbook, p. 85).*

Along with this idea of a personal response in which the goal is to reach critical reflection, we have found other stances that emphasise a more emotional response, as we observe in the intervention of the Head of the Young People's Programmes when she explains the characteristics of the *Ways In* framework<sup>3</sup>, the "method" that Tate proposes for approaching the interpretation of works of art in *educational contexts*:

R. Sinker: *The method that's name is Ways In...it allows perhaps a number of different ways of thinking about the work from a personal perspective, and how you emotionally respond to it.*

Following the proposed openness, when one of the educators discusses the same framework, she relates the idea of a "personal response" to what the learner "thinks", not to his/her emotions:

Laura: (Discussing the Ways In framework) *The first idea is that you first have your own response, which is based on "what does it makes you think of".*

Moreover, we have found other cases in which the contribution of the spectator seems to be restricted by the answer to what one educator calls "subjectivity", that is, a perceptive selection that is derived from the answer to questions such as "*What do you see?*"

*I would ask them, 'What can you see? What is your response?' That is certainly the way I would start, by just drawing out their personal response to what they see... You start with the personal responses to watch what is relevant in the work you are looking at. But it is still coming from them. If they notice the bird in the sky, you speak about the bird in the sky.*

### 2.1. Educational practices: The learner's contribution as observation

This way of understanding the personal response of learners is the approach that we most often have found in the educational activities analysed because in many of them, the learner's contribution is limited to observation, identification, recognition

and the description of visible aspects of the work of art.

In fact, on more than one occasion, when the educators we observed begin the tours, they warn their students that the most important activity they will be performing in the museum is “looking”:

*Peter: I'm so glad you said "look" because that's the most important thing to do in an art gallery. So that's what we're going to do today. We're going to be looking.*

In most of the cases we observed, the way to initiate interaction with the artworks on guided tours is by offering questions that invite the learners to observe, identify and recognise what it is represented in the works of art. This is the case when one of the educators approaches the floor mosaics of Boris Anrep:

*Laura: We've got pictures on the floor! Have a look at the pictures and see if you can recognise anything.*

Likewise, another educator questions visitors about The Saltonstall Family, a painting by David Des Granges:

*Peter: I would like to know what it looks like. Could you start by telling me all the different things that you can see in this painting?*

This educator repeats this method of initiating an interpretation of a work of art when he stands in front of a painting by John William Waterhouse, The Lady of Shallot:

*Peter: OK, tell me about this painting. What particular things can you see in this painting?*

We have found another didactic strategy that introduces a slight difference in what can be understood by personal response, which educators refer to as a “non-informed contribution” and which must not be limited in any way. That is, it is a contribution that must not be questioned and, least of all corrected, by the educator, which is observable in the following excerpt of an interview with the educators.

*Laura: And to a certain extent, I mean, this isn't strictly true, I would say there are no wrong answers. I am not looking for the right answer; I am looking for your answer.*

This last means of understanding personal response has appeared several times in the interviews that were analysed. Nevertheless, in the activities that we have had the opportunity to observe, the personal response has been sought through didactic strategies that oriented the sense of the answer, that is, that expected some predetermined answers.

One of the few observed moments that exemplified this practice that permits any answer was when educators allowed the students, when faced with non-realist or abstract works of art, to imagine the similarities between the forms represented in the

works and the forms of visible reality.

The following is what occurred, for example, when, in front of a work by Tony Cragg, Laura asks learners to describe what they see and invites learners to invent any similarity between the artist's installation and elements of reality, considering elements such as mountains, pyramids, castles, towers and cream cones to be correct answers.

Laura: *What's that?*

Learner: *Mountains*

Laura: *Ah, they look like mountains, don't they? What do you think they look like?*

Learner: *Pyramids*

Laura: *They really look like pyramids, don't they? So we think they look like pyramids. We think they look like mountains. What else?*

Learner: *Castles.*

Laura: *They do look like castles, don't they?*

Learner: *Towers, towers, towers!*

Laura: *Do you think they look like towers?*

Learner: *They look like ice cream cones.*

Laura: *They also look like ice cream cones, don't they?*

However, the contribution of the learner is again limited to the observation of the manifested aspects of the work and recognition of what it represents. In fact, as we have commented before that these strategies that invite learners to observe, identify, recognise or describe are the approaches that are repeated more often throughout the tours. Therefore, often, the seeking of objectivity in the act of seeing becomes the aim and outcome of the didactic experience.

### ***2.1.1. Doubts, criticisms and concerns in relation to practices based on “just watching”***

Practices based on “just watching” are usually quite common in art museums. In fact, in recent years, there has been a trend towards this direction<sup>4</sup>, which can be observed in recent articles (Blume et al., 2008).

Various researchers have expressed doubts, criticisms and concerns in relation to these types of educational and interpretive practises based on “just looking”. Some believe that hidden beneath the apparent innovation, dialogue and involvement of the viewer, these kinds of practices maintain a traditional notion of education (Kivatinetz and López, 2006).

Others believe that this kind of strategy, which reduces the encounter with works of art to the mere perception and description of the elements that are “in” the work, neglecting reflection about the reference frameworks that are “outside” of the work, promotes a traditional and overly simplistic idea of art as mimesis or representation and of aesthetic understanding as identification (Arriaga, 2008).

Along the same lines, Hernández (2002) considers that these practices deprive the students of the experiences they can have with art and limit their understanding, as these strategies do not consider that the images are part of historical, social and



cultural contexts and that do not accept the generalisation of the aesthetic qualities that are favoured by the perceptive vision.

Furthermore, Canadian researcher Cheryl Meszaros (2007) considers that when educators do not offer resources and information, they reduce and impoverish visitors' opportunities to produce personal interpretations because, in her words: "*without received ideas, without traditions of meaning-making and without prior knowledge to draw upon, there is no way to generate an individual interpretation*" (Meszaros, 2007, p.18). In this sense, Helen Charman (2006a, p. 33), a former education curator at Tate Modern believes that personal responses to works of art provide fertile ground for exploration but that if they are treated unreflexively, "*they can stymie interpretation as the art work is submerged beneath the poetry of personal association, reaching a discursive dead end*". As E. Louis Lankford (2002, p. 141) reminds us:

*Constructivist theories of learning and recent research into aesthetic experience suggest that most people actually benefit by instruction in various means of engagement with art and that engagement is most fulfilling when it actively challenges, builds on, and extends the knowledge, aptitudes, and abilities of museum visitor.*

## **2.2. Educational practices: The learner's contribution as speculation on the "meaning" of the artwork**

In the observations of educational activities at Tate Britain, we found that, in some cases, "looking" became the necessary point of departure towards more complex forms of the interpretation of meaning. This occurs when, in some of the educational interactions, aside from working on observing the manifest, literal aspects of the work, the educators encourage students to speculate about the meanings the work contains, understanding the artwork as a message or sign that must be "revealed" and not only as a visual representation.

However, depending on what is considered to be the "meaning" of the work of art, the learner's contribution to the interpretation process takes different forms. For example, we have observed that some educators consider the subject of theme represented to be the the meaning of the work of art. Consequently, among other possible options, educators ask learners to speculate about the story told by the work of art as educator Peter does in front of *The Saltonstall Family* by David Des Granges:

*Peter: Who's the lady in the bed then, if the mum is holding the baby?....Do you think he is looking after her?.... Which of the two women do you think that man was married to?*

or as Jane does in front of a work by Henry Fuseli:

*Jane: What is the narrative?What is going on? Who are the characters? What can we see?*

In more cases, educators encourage visitors to speculate on the meaning of the artist's formal, procedural and material choices, understanding that the message that needs to be revealed through the interpretation is the same as the artist's intentions.



The following excerpt from an interaction led by Mary in front of the work of Richard Long, *White Water Line*, is an example of this.

*Mary: The original piece, when he made this, it wasn't paint. He used white clay that he found somewhere west of the country. He was walking and he came across white clay, which he mixed with water and he made this out of it. Why do you think he used white clay? Why not use paint or lacquer? Why to use a natural thing?*

This same educator guides learners to reflect on artist Jacob Epstein's formal, procedural and material choices and subsequently asks them to speculate on what he wanted to tell us about war with his sculpture *The Rock Drill*.

*Mary: It's exposed, isn't it? Your ribs are like a protection over all your organs, but in this case, it's open. What do you think that means? Any ideas?. What's the posture of this person like? What does that tell us?. They're not full, the arms are missing. So what do you think that suggests?. What's this artist trying to tell us about war then?*

From this perspective, understanding the artwork as a bearer of messages requires an effort of approximation that may not be achieved exclusively through the use of perceptive abilities. Interpretation must not depend only on the information acquired via the senses, but rather, it must also be complemented by the knowledge provided by experts or mediators. That is why educators introduce contextual information as a source for the interpretation of works of art. For example, when interpreting *The Rock Drill* by Jacob Epstein, Mary provides information on the historical period the work was produced in.

*Mary: This was actually made in 1914, the first year of the First World War. Can you tell me anything about it that looks like it could have to do with the war?*

When interpreting Richard Long's "*White Water Line*", she provides information about the artist, his creative process and the themes he is interested in, with the aim of providing tools to enable learners to speculate and decipher the message of the work

*Mary: He is interested in the ground. And he's also interested in walking. In some of his other work, he'll go out to the countryside and he'll go on long walks, and he'll collect things on the way.*

Jane also introduces information about George Stubbs' trips, traumas and life details to interpret his work "*Horse Devoured by a Lion*".

*Jane: Stubbs apparently actually went to North Africa, and he saw a lion jumping on the back of a horse, and this event totally traumatised him because he painted it again and again and again.*

### **2.2.1. Doubts, criticisms and concerns in relation to practices based on “Just watching”**

If we compare the dynamics of these activities with the examples that were previously presented in this article, we observe that the contribution of the learner changes significantly. The first kind of practice only required the learner to recognise what the work represents and in this case, the learner’s role and responsibility in the search for an answer is greater. The learner, apart from observing and analysing the visual aspects of the work of art, must use contextual information to reflect and attempt to find the meaning of the work or art. Therefore, we can conclude that his/her contribution is more reflexive and informed than in the practices that were analysed at the beginning of the text.

It would appear, therefore, that learners hold greater authority in the interpretation of works of art, but their performances have to match the instituted meanings. In other words, successful learning occurs when the meanings “discovered” by learners coincide with those accepted by the educator.

In fact, when learners do not find the meanings that are considered correct, educators provide the final solution and convey the correct interpretation of the work. For example, after finishing the reflection on Turner’s work, *Avalanche in the Grisons*, the educator explains to the group of students the artist’s intentions when painting this work.

*Jane: What Turner’s up to here is that he wanted, in his brush marks and the way he painted a scene, he wanted to give you a sense of, not just describing it. He wanted you to get a sense of what it actually felt like. So it’s very subjective. So he’s using this style to help communicating the power of the storm, the force of nature. So it’s that sort of very subjective experience of the power of nature that Turner is trying to communicate.*

In this sense, we can state that with these types of activities, learners barely participate in the construction of meaning. In fact, they are working from a concept of art and interpretation that implies that meanings are not constructed but rather “revealed”, “found” or “decoded”. The learner’s contribution is therefore limited to “guessing” predetermined messages, using both the observation of the work and the contextual information introduced by the educator. Thus, the authority of interpretation returns to the educator or the creator of the narrative that the educator transmits, which is usually the artist’s or expert’s interpretation.

Beneath the apparent involvement of the viewer, interpretation in these activities is still not far removed from how, for many years, it was understood in traditional museum activities.

### **2.3. Educational practices: The learner’s contribution as informed elaboration or conceptual reflection**

On occasion, complementary information can be introduced with a critical and exegetical goal that is different from what we have observed thus far. Among the five activities we analysed, we found that one of the activities in particular gave rise to a

different kind of learner contribution.

Although the process of approaching the interpretation of works of art may seem similar to other activities discussed, what is sought in these cases is to generate or build less evident relationships between the work and its interpretations, leading the learner beyond the supposed message of the work.

An example of this kind of approach is the activity conducted by Jane. Although it is similar to other activities, it represents a slightly different and more complex position towards the role of the learner in the interpretation process.

This activity is the response to the request of a school teacher to use the tour to introduce the characteristics of Romanticism in visual arts to a group of students, comparing works of the Romantic Period with works of the Classical Period. The aim is to complement and enrich what the students have learned in their literature class at school.

This proposal made by the school teacher fully determined the interpretive approach of the activity. Therefore, the purpose of interpreting is not to identify what is represented in the works or to discover the meanings hidden in them but rather to understand what aspects or characteristics of romanticism appear in the choices that were made by the artists of the Romantic Period.

Despite the works being considered the expression of the artist's intention at some moments during the activity, the educator seems to understand that the meanings of works of art are not simply produced by the creators of the image but are also activated from an existing cultural repertoire, which takes meanings from culture and communicates meanings about culture. Therefore, instead of stopping the process of interpretation at the stage that attempts to discover what the artists wanted to communicate, the activity goes a step further and aims to reflect on what the artist and his work reflected about this historical period and style. The educator uses the works to promote the understanding of something that is beyond the works themselves and thus, they become triggers for conceptual reflection and debate as well as tools to learn about various subjects, in this case, curricular ones.

Jane begins by proposing that the students compare a landscape by JMW Turner with a classical landscape by Claude Lorraine and pay attention to how nature is presented in every one of the works:

*Jane: We're going to explore different types of romantic painting and this is the first work we're going to be looking at; it's by Turner. And the first thing I'd like you to do is, I'm going to hand out another image, and I'd like you, in pairs, to look at this image [pointing at the one of Turner], and have a look at this other image that I've got here that I'm going to pass around, which is by Claude Lorraine. One of the things about Romanticism is that we find a very different attitude to representing the natural world and nature. And I'd like you to have a think. I'd like you to compare the vision of nature in this image and the vision of nature in Turner's image. Because it is very much the key to the nature of Romanticism.*

Her interpretation strategy continues with the proposal to conduct a similar comparative analysis of the ways in which to look at and describe nature in the works of Stubb, Turner and Constable. The suggested comparison when viewing the work

of Constable makes it clear that Jane seeks to go one step further, from establishing relationships between the artists' choices and intentions and Romanticism to investigating the connections that these works have with the the works of romantic literature that are studied at school.

*Jane: It's what Constable was interested in. But does it make you think of anyone that you've begun to look at school? This vision of the sort of specialness of nature and the landscape, the British landscape.*

The kind of observation that encourages Jane is no longer a mere description: to see, in this case, is not just looking; it is to think, and it is not a free look; and it is a much more sophisticated/elaborated look. The gaze is reflective and is placed in parallel to critical reflection. Therefore, the educator can use "to look" and "to think" in similar ways, as occurs in the following interaction:

*Jane: How did you feel they differed as interpretations of nature and the natural world? What did anybody think?*

The comparison involves beginning with the observation; however, in this case, the aim is not to identify things but rather to compare styles or different ways of approaching certain subjects. What is proposed is a much more complex gaze that activates a higher level of cognitive skills. Somehow, in proposing the comparison of the works, the educator joins two of the strategies we have mentioned in other positions, observation and speculation.

### ***2.3.1. Doubts, criticisms and concerns in relation to practices based on critical reflection***

The activity we have just discussed is an example of the relevance that contextual information can acquire when it is used in a rich and complex way. In some cases, it is the teacher who enters the information; in others, the teacher calls on the knowledge that students have acquired in literature class at school to understand certain characteristics of the Romantic style.

In this context, a correct interpretation or one of particular relevance will be the one that successfully meets this goal. However, in cases in which students do not identify the appropriate relationship between the data provided by the work of art and the background information introduced, it is the teacher who ultimately develops an interpretation that explains what the works reveal about the Romantic style.

We observed this, for example, when Jane extends and completes the interpretation of Henry Fuseli's work that was initiated by the students, explaining what the work tells us about Romanticism and the Gothic fiction.

*Jane: One of the things you find is they're often set in big, old castles, people are trapped in dungeons, some seedy old man has trapped or caught a beautiful, virginal, innocent woman. Those are particular traits that you find. And this is what we've got here. So Romanticism isn't just one thing, it isn't just the landscape, it's also this type of subject*

*matter. The dark, the sinister, the scary, the thrills. So they're not beautiful, light, pleasant stories, they're stories about the dark, violent, the unsettling.*

Therefore, although the original intention is to generate opinions in the audience, the dynamics of activity pushes the learners and the educator to seek a meeting point with a predetermined and instituted interpretation. However, it is noteworthy that from this perspective, the contribution of the audience is much more complex than in the other activities that were analysed because it demands a more relational use of the information. Information is not something to learn and reproduce but is important for constructing the meaning of the work.

While the expected answers may be predetermined, in this activity, it is clear that the teaching-learning process is more flexible than in the cases discussed above and the relationship between the student and the teacher takes a more dialogical character because the knowledge that the students already possess is considered and involved in the process of interpretation and learning.

For example, when the educator ask students to find links between the works of John Constable and the poet William Wordsworth, one of them presents the productions of both artists as a reaction to the historical context created by industrialisation.

Learner: Because he's very, glib, very British. He doesn't go over the top. He's not interpretive. And also, I think it is a reaction to the sort of industrialisation because he is trying to hold on to the countryside, when everyone else was moving to the town.

### 3. Conclusions

As was explained at the beginning of the article, both Tate Britain's educational documents and agents involved in the design and implementation of educational activities show the desire to provide the visitor a relevant role to play in the construction of meanings in the process of the interpretation of works and exhibitions.

However, as often occurs in education, the way in which these programmatic goals are implemented depends largely on the educator's own actions. In this regard, we have been able to observe different conceptions of art and interpretation that give rise to many other means to implement the educational proposals at Tate Britain.

In the majority of cases, the student contributions in the practices observed have been focused on a perceptive selection or a guessing game of the meanings already pre-determined by the educator.

However, in a few cases, the practices observed have been closer to the complexity and richness of the ideas presented in the institutional and the educator's discourses about how to approach interpretation in the context of educational museum activities.

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## Endnotes

1. This study is part of a wider investigation, a doctoral thesis (Arriaga, 2009), that used comparative analysis, observation and discourse analysis to study how different agents involved in school programmes at Tate Britain conceive art and interpretation.
2. Melinda Mayer, in her doctoral thesis "Precious minds and precious objects: Implications of the new art histories for art museum education" (1999) and in the article "A Post modern Puzzle: Rewriting the Place of the Visitor in Art Museum Education" (2005), examines how museum educators, based on discourses of post modernism and the new art history, wrote and rewrote theory and practice regarding the role of the museum visitor in meaning-making.
3. Educators have been given fictitious names to guarantee their anonymity and confidentiality throughout the research study.
4. The "Ways in" framework, proposed in the *The Art Gallery Handbook*, presents four perspectives from which to approach artwork: a personal approach, one that analyses the work of art as an object, another that focuses on the subject of the artwork, and one that analyses the context of the artwork.
5. The clearest example of this is the approach to the interpretation of works of art known as *Visual Thinking Strategies*, an approach that, with the intention of overcoming educational practices that legitimated the curator's art-historical interpretations, has promulgated a kind of mediation based solely on what the viewers find in the works.



