

Chapter 5

Beyond the act of seeing: meaning making in museum education

Susana Gomes Da Silva. Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation - Modern Art Centre. Lisbon

5.1. Starting points and paradigms

A paradigm is very powerful in the life of society, since it influences the way we think, how problems are solved, what goals we pursue and what we value (Gablik, 1991: 2-3).

During the last decades, the knowledge and information society has been witnessing and taking part in a “paradigm shift” (Silverman, 1995: 161), which responds to the challenges of postmodernity and implies changes in the concepts of knowledge, communication and information. This shift is catalyzing changes in a wide range of disciplines and institutions dedicated to what Silverman (1995: 161) termed “the nature of information change and knowledge shaping”, in which museums are clearly included. Consequently, museums have been confronted with the need to rethink their role and, ultimately, their own identity and relevance as spaces of knowledge construction. This situation represents both a challenge and an opportunity for museums to develop new strategies that promote the relationship between audiences and collections, rethinking and readdressing the spaces and forms for this encounter.

The emergence and consolidation of Museum Education¹ as a cross-disciplinary and fundamental field of studies for the development of a solid and structured educational approach to the challenges posed by contemporary society is a clear response to this transformation process, reinforcing and validating the awareness of museums’ educational value, as well as contributing with concepts and tools that have been helping to outline new paradigms guiding museums’ activities, new starting points and new relationships, namely in the context of education departments and their roles.

¹ *Museum Education* [in Portuguese “Educação Museal”] is still a strange term within museum studies in Portugal. This situation seems to result, on the one hand, from the fact that most programmes in museum studies still consider education as a peripheral academic area, which has not contributed to the publication of studies that could promote the creation of a glossary that could, in turn, establish and systematise the recent educational concepts used in museum studies in Portugal; and, on the other hand, from the still extremely poor situation of education departments in Portuguese museums that, despite their growth in recent years, still only exist in 48% of national museums. (Maria de Lourdes Lima dos Santos (coord.): *O Panorama Museológico em Portugal* [2000-2003], OAC/ IPM/ RPM, 2005.)

5.2. New paradigms, new dynamics

Museum staff increasingly argue that the educational role of the museum is significant. Yet just what the educational intention of the museum might be, how the institution considers education, how it believes that people learn, and what education consists of, are frequently vaguely defined if defined at all (Hein, 1998: 14).

The paradigms in force regarding the concepts of knowledge, information and communication have profound effects in any educational practice since they define the framework within which all boundaries and rules are established, where centre and periphery are delineated, good practices are outlined and consolidated, just as their assessment, integration and exclusion systems.

Therefore, it is important to identify some of the driving forces implied in the definition of the above-mentioned paradigm shift, and reflect on their key contributions and implications for the field of museum education and, consequently, for museums' educational spaces.

5.3 Knowledge, communication and meaning making

According to the postmodern paradigm, knowledge can no longer be conceived as being independent from the act of knowing, as being produced for the passive consumption of individuals. Instead, it must be regarded as the result of an active construction, a meaning-making process made by the learner and "influenced by the social and cultural norms, attitudes, and values that surround the communicators." (Silverman, 1995: 161).

In this way, knowledge cannot be dissociated neither from its own construction nor from the communication process itself, since communication is perceived as "a process of negotiation between two parties in which information (and meaning) is created rather than transmitted" (Silverman, 1995: 161). This emphasises the role and *authority* of individuals in the making meaning process, which allow them to interpret and experience the world around them.

This significant identification of the concept of communication with the process of knowledge construction enables a new approach to educational spaces, since these are increasingly conceived as communication interfaces in which the relationship between the public and the institution is made in a dialogic perspective of sharing and partnership, rather than in a 'unidirectional' transmission mode.

In fact, focusing on communication as a process of negotiating meaning reinforces precisely that *in between* space between communicators and contents, the space of their continued dialectics. Under permanent construction and negotiation, it is this space for dialogue and interaction that shapes the experience of visitors/learners and assigns meaning to it.

Thus, one of the challenges faced by museum education departments and policies is precisely to contribute to the creation of these spaces for encounters and sharing, promoting and consolidating the museum environment as a forum and arena for the debate, construction and negotiation of discourses, points of view, experiences and meanings.

This perspective implies a structural change in the way museums relate to their collections and audiences, since their focus should no longer lie on museum objects but on their communicative potential, a potential that proceeds from the fact that these objects fundamentally represent cultural concepts and ideas. Within this field, by attracting communication, discussion and shared meaning making, education departments can and should play a crucial role, by taking the contributions of critical constructivism as an educational framework for their practices and programmes.

To that end, it is increasingly necessary for museum education to become a consolidated field of study and reflection – in its broad and comprehensive view of education - and for its contributions to be fully integrated into the theoretical and practical training of museum professionals, namely - but not exclusively - professionals from education departments and museum educators.

5.4. Learning as an active construction

The need for each museum to develop a learning and education policy that clarifies the way it conceives knowledge – i.e. what is possible to be learned - and how individuals learn is a basic and crucial aspect for the creation of effective education programmes capable of responding to the diversity of audiences and to the challenges of contemporary society. Based on the above-mentioned paradigm, the field of museum education has been consolidating the constructivist learning theories that define individuals as being active agents in the construction of their own educational experiences, based on their previous knowledge, skills, life experience, cultural background and personal motivation (or disposition to learn).

This perspective reinforces the role and responsibility of each learner in his/her own learning process, while the *educator* and the educational institution should essentially provide the best environment and conditions for the acquisition and development of the skills needed for this learning to occur. Therefore, the role of the educator is more to facilitate and enhance the learning process, rather than to be the single source of knowledge. As Hernández (2000: 50) says, "the goal of all learning is to establish processes of inference and transference between one's existent knowledge and the new problems-situations that are posed to the learners." This ability to transfer responds to two factors: "individuals' mental organisation of knowledge and their level of self-awareness regarding their own knowledge" (Prawat, quoted by Hernández, 2000: 50). Therefore, understanding is organised around three key concepts: individuals' basic knowledge (prior knowledge), the strategies they employ (and create) to learn, and their disposition to learn (their motivations and expectations) (Hernández, 2000: 50).

In a way, the empowerment of individuals is the driving force behind the change in educational paradigm and, hence, behind the change in the relationship between museums and visitors. Once individuals are understood as active agents of their own

learning, the role of museums is then to enhance the possibility for multiple readings that will allow individuals to widen and potentially transform their prior knowledge, namely by creating cognitive challenges and stimulating personal and collective interpretation. This has consequences not only for the work of education departments but also for all museum areas, since all “contact areas” (exhibitions, buildings, services, signage) are communication spaces that convey statements about how knowledge, learning and individuals/learners are understood.

Hence, to acknowledge individuals as autonomous beings in their construction of knowledge implies to no longer consider the museum as the single source of knowledge in a unilateral transmission system, in which the transmitter controls the entire message and its process of apprehension. In fact, to acknowledge the active role of learners in their own learning process forces the museum to adapt to this complex, dynamic, bilateral - and idiosyncratic – process of knowledge construction and negotiation. This presupposes an epistemological perspective that conceives knowledge as a subjective production – the result of individuals’ construction - and learning as a rich and complex contextual process of interpretation.

By interpretation we mean the way individuals make meaning out of things, "a mental process carried out by the individuals, corresponding to the creation of meanings for the world that surrounds them, therefore implying the development of analysis, critical thinking and summary skills, capable of framing the continuous process of change, adaptation and extension [of knowledge, readings and versions] that lifelong learning implies" (Gomes da Silva, 2001: 115).

In this sense, interpretation becomes one of the central aspects of educational work and becomes intertwined with the idea of long-term – lifelong – learning, therefore requiring a wider and continued view of educational work in order for it to be effective, which again calls for a reassessment of the relationships museums establish with their audiences.

5.5. Museum experience, prior knowledge and “memory construction”

Museums in general, and exhibitions in particular, have the potential to amplify, expand and restructure the mental and conceptual schemes of visitors (Falk *et alii*, 1998; Falk and Dierking, 2000). This amplification and restructuring results from an open and active interpretation process, on which the field of museum education should focus in an increasingly aware way: an interpretation process that begins with objects and the relationships we establish with them, that is capable of creating challenges that lead individuals to raise questions and solve problems, therefore restructuring and consolidating prior knowledge that allows them to make new meanings and learn. In order to do this, it is necessary to address the museum experience as a whole, an experience that can trigger new learning and lasts much longer than the moment in which it occurs.

Visiting a museum is a global experience that relies as much on each individual's expectations and *personal agendas*² (Falk *et alli*, 1998) as on the actual activity performed in the visited space. This experience thus works as an important link between the past (prior knowledge, expectations), the present (the moment when contact takes place) and the future (the projection of the experience onto individuals' future life).

Individuals arrive at the museum with a series of prior interests and motivations, based on their life experience, knowledge, social, economic and cultural *status*, all of which will necessarily influence their experience inside the museum and, naturally, their learning. Included in a temporal *continuum* largely transcending the visit itself, this moment of contact and construction makes much more sense for individuals if included in an *experiential* logic, rather than in a strictly cognitive one. For this reason, some authors (Falk and Dierking, 1992) have chosen to consider the different types of potential learning that take place within museums as a whole, including them in a wider process called "museum experience".

This experience – understood as the overall learning, emotions, sensations and experiences undergone as a result of the interaction with objects, ideas, concepts, discourses and the museum's spaces - is shaped by the intersection of three key contexts: personal, social and physical. For Falk and Dierking, it is precisely in this intersecting space that the experience constructed and defined will endure in the memory of individuals, enhancing the construction of long-lasting, meaningful and effective learning. This learning process, an integral part of the overall experience, will therefore result from the combination of individuals' cultural, social and emotional heritage, their biographies, agendas and the experience that the visited institution (with its objects, collections and services) is able to provide them with. It is precisely in this hybrid space of confluence and confrontation of ideas that the work of museum education is fully accomplished, becoming a real interface where all *places from where we depart* (Hernández, 2000) are combined.

We believe it is here precisely that one of the most interesting and promising challenges for museum education departments lies: the possibility and the ability to become spaces where different views and voices concur within a dynamic platform in permanent change.

Some key ideas on the challenges and objectives of education services today

- To contribute to the creation of spaces for encounters and the negotiation of meaning.
- To create communication and intercultural interfaces.
- To facilitate meaningful, effective and long-lasting experiences within a view of lifelong learning.
- To contribute to a more diverse and multivocal idea of knowledge, based on the paradigm of critical constructivism.
- To help build up a dynamic museum, open to change.

² *Agenda* is here understood as the set of motivations, interests and expectations of visitors when they visit a certain place, i.e. the reasons that make them include a visit in the overall group of activities set out in their *personal agendas* and that determine the priority, duration and interest associated to the event.

5.6. Museum education at the Modern Art Centre

La postmodernidad, entre otras reflexiones, ha abierto la importancia de mirar el «arte» como una representación de significados. Esto supone que frente a las obras no hay miradas ni verdades absolutas, o aproximaciones formalistas (que se consideran como una categoría socialmente construida) sino que dependen del tiempo, el lugar y el contexto. Esto hace que el lenguaje del arte quede sujeto al escrutinio de los códigos simbólicos y de las convenciones culturales. Ello condiciona y posibilita las diferentes formas de interpretación (Hernández, 2000: 129).

The Education Department of the Modern Art Centre José de Azeredo Perdigão (CAMJAP), created in July 2002, was born from the will to endow the museum with a space for the interpretation of its collection and exhibitions, as well as for the communication with audiences, so as to deepen and develop the existing premises on which the mission of the institution was already grounded:

- a) To disseminate and study modern and contemporary art, with a special focus on Portuguese art, by regularly presenting artworks from the Centre's permanent collection and organising temporary exhibitions.
- b) To develop the interest of visitors in modern and contemporary art by means of educational activities, dissemination and entertainment, and specific programmes for attracting audiences.³

Having emerged at a time of internal restructuring⁴, the new education department presented itself as an opportunity to create a space that was simultaneously capable of widening - and, in a way, reassessing - the objectives defined by the institution, and of responding to the current challenges faced by museum education. Regarding this second aspect, the education policy and future programmes were to be framed within the broader movement of renewing and reinventing the role of education services as spaces for the construction and sharing of knowledge, which we have been referring to.

Therefore, with the clear purpose of amplifying its initial aims, CAMJAP's Education Department sought to structure its mission around four main axes:

³ Internal document from the Modern Art Centre José de Azeredo Perdigão (CAMJAP, 2000).

⁴ In 2001, CAMJAP went through a structural reorganisation that led to the extinction of some services and to the creation of others. Thus, the former Children's Art Centre (CAI), a structure created in the 1980s as an outcome of the movement of Education through the Arts in Portugal, was completely restructured and integrated into CAMJAP's new Education Department. In a way, this restructuring enabled the creation of an educational space directly connected to the museum and based on the current principles of museum education. The former CAI used to work independently, in a building of its own, and was never established as a space for the interpretation and development of the collection. Ever since its creation, CAMJAP's Education Department was conceived as *the* space for direct work with the collection and temporary exhibitions.

a) Dissemination and interpretation of modern and contemporary art (based on the collection and exhibitions), following a multivocal and intercultural perspective, integrating the arts within the challenges and issues of Visual Culture and its role in contemporary society.

b) Development of diverse and cross-cutting education programmes, based on a *critical constructivist* view of education, capable of allowing different views and readings to concur and of contributing to widening the access to these programmes.

c) Creation of spaces for the reflection, dialogue and debate on modern and contemporary art and their associated fields of study.

d) Creation of spaces for the reflection, promotion and debate on museum education and its contributions to museums' current education practices.

Based on these aims, the Education Department has, from its very start, sought to develop varied programmes including gallery talks, workshops, courses and debates directed not only at the school community (teachers, educators, students from all education levels) but also at other audiences (children, teenagers, adults, families, people with special needs, seniors, experts, non-experts, and so on), consolidating itself as a vital space for communication and interrelationship within the museum.

We see Art as a cultural concept including both the set of *artistic* expressions and productions that characterise it, and the system that classifies them as such. In this way, we reinforce the "importance of seeing 'art' as a representation of meanings" (Hernández, 2000: 129) within a specific cultural, historical, social, economic, political and symbolic context. Therefore, we try to promote a "contextualised" and informed 'gaze' that is capable of reading artistic (and museum!) objects in their various discursive and symbolic dimensions and spheres. Mainly working with a collection of modern and contemporary art, we are chiefly interested in linking artistic production to the problems of contemporary society. We see artworks as open doors for the reflection and debate about the world that surrounds us, a world where visual and material culture produce identity discourses and practices from which individuals outline and construct their own worlds of reference.

As Hernández mentions, this view "makes the language of art become dependent on the scrutiny of symbolic codes and cultural conventions" (Hernández, 2000: 129). Therefore, one of the challenges for CAM's education programme is precisely to create activities that contribute to the development of strategies and tools for reflection and for the construction of "reading" (decoding) processes, making these strategies and tools visible. Above all, we are interested in moving beyond the act of seeing, beyond the art objects, developing a visual literacy that is crucial for interpreting and understanding the visual culture in which we are immersed.

5.7. The Project *Look, See, Interpret*: promoting the confrontation between ways of seeing

The construction of meaning depends on prior knowledge, and on beliefs and values. We see according to what we know, and we make sense of meaning according to what we see. In this way we construct our meanings, and do not find them “ready-made” (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999: 13).

The importance assigned to active knowledge construction, taking individuals’ prior knowledge as its starting point, has been the basis for all educational programming. This has contributed to the development of an educational approach structured around key issues and a permanent dialogue process.

In this sense, as gallery talks are one of the most sought activities by almost all audience segments, the Education Department has focused on developing diverse thematic talks and itineraries, based on a set of wide-ranging key issues and on an active, participative dialogue. It thus wishes to promote plural readings of the collection and its artworks, and address all audiences starting with children of the age of 3.

Although all programming seeks to reflect the above-mentioned aims, some specific programmes such as *Look, See, Interpret*, emerged as a direct response to the wish to create an educational experience focused on the very interpretation and “reading” processes, the starting point to understand and explore the collection. In the following pages, we will try to highlight some of this project’s structural features, rather than presenting a full outline of the activity. We are mainly interested in stressing some of its structural pillars, as well as the strategies developed to explore both the reading/decoding process and the negotiation of meanings. These are fundamental issues in order for interpretation to succeed as a form of knowledge and of confrontation between different ways of seeing.

5.8. Addressing the interpretation processes

The project *Look, See, Interpret*, mainly a dialogical gallery talk (lasting 90 minutes on average), is developed around the key concepts of interpretation and understanding and is based on five crucial ideas:

- The act of seeing as a tool for knowledge and “a place” (Hernández, 2000). from where we read and interpret the world
- Problematization as a crucial process of knowledge construction.
- Knowledge as meaning making.
- Learning as transformation, experience and transgression.
- Visual Culture as a rich and essential world of reference.

Especially designed for school groups over the age of 6, the project aims at offering an activity that, although lasting a short time, can still provide long-lasting moments of reflection capable of developing and widening participants’ prior worlds of reference. Always based on prior knowledge, the gallery talk aims at working on individuals’ prior concepts and representations of *museums, collections, art and museum objects, modern and contemporary art and their issues*. Furthermore, it intends to raise *self-awareness regarding the interpretation and discovery processes used by each and every participant* to respond to the challenges of the art and museum experience.

Therefore, this is a project that aims at developing moments of meta-learning, enabling participants to discuss and reflect about the strategies used to solve the problems with which they are faced, using artworks as the starting point for this reflection.

5.9. Two guiding questions

Two key questions guide the entire project: Is it possible to see without interpreting? and How do we take part in artworks?

These two questions allow us to develop work on artworks, understood as representations of cultural ideas and concepts, capable of being “read” and completed by the “view” of each *viewer*, while strengthening their active role in that confrontation between different ways of seeing.

The choice of these questions was guided by two main concerns: they were to move beyond the immediate content of the collection and to approach artistic production and its objects from the point of view of the “reading” process itself. This would allow us, on the one hand, to stimulate flexible “views” and readings, not restricted to the stylistic and chronological confines that museums often impose. On the other hand, it would enhance the discussion of key concepts, crucial for exploring the collection from the point of view of visitors’ worlds of reference (interpretation, gaze, art, value, memory, representation, identity, the role of artworks, among others).

The gallery talk includes four stages: raising questions/problems; discussing and solving problems; summarising the main ideas discussed; and raising new questions. And is structured around 4/5 key ideas/questions: What is the difference between looking, seeing and interpreting, if any? Is it possible to see without interpreting? What happens when we interpret? Are we part of the artwork? If so, how and why? These are some of the questions that lead us through the gallery talk, allowing us to organise different moments of discussion and interpretation of the selected artworks. New questions are raised as a result of participants’ answers and references, which makes debates extremely diverse and enriching, integrating each group’s concerns and interests with the educator’s aims.

5.10. A shoebox to collect ideas

Envisaged for visitors in different age groups, the gallery talk changes slightly according to the age and specific characteristics of the group. In fact, while the key questions are a structural axis that remains pretty much the same, the specific problems raised with each group are different. Therefore, for the age group between 6-10, the gallery talk uses a shoebox to collect ideas, where participants store all the ideas they consider important enough to take home. These ideas are the product of their interpretation of the artworks and problem solving.

Written down by the museum educator on small pieces of paper, the ideas are collected according to criteria developed by the group, reflecting the thoughts, concerns, expectations and challenges experienced by the young visitors throughout the entire visit. This resource allows several moments for summing up ideas and “visualising” the knowledge generated throughout the visit. Visitors are thus

confronted with their own knowledge and discourse as a primary source of information, as well as with the transformation of the concepts discussed during the visit. For groups over 10 years old, the collection of ideas gives way to a more fluid structure of open questions and debates about the artworks. These are developed by crossing several elements - the use and consolidation of participants' discourse as a primary source and crucial starting point for any discussion, the handling of objects and the interaction established with objects, images and quotes from various sources - that allow the widening of views and versions on the artworks analysed. While for the younger ones it was necessary to establish value criteria for the collection of ideas, the first exercise with the older groups was to challenge them to establish their own criteria for classifying the art and museum objects (e.g. as common, artistic, unique, an original/reproduction, and so on) by handling and directly observing objects of everyday use in a museum setting.

5.11. Discovering contemporary art with a shoe mould and a poem

The distribution of different types of objects (a shoe mould, a blank canvas, a blade from a potato masher, a mirror, a palette, a used paint brush, a poem by Pablo Neruda "*Ode to the Little Objects*")⁵ was the starting point for the visit. This allowed to arouse curiosity in participants and to challenge their knowledge and misconceptions of museums and the world of art, as well as of the main theme and concepts of the gallery talk before the visit actually began. This was also as a crucial moment to identify participants' individual and collective expectations, motivations and references (their personal agendas), which are essential to achieve the purpose of the visit. Moreover, the act of questioning was immediately set as a strategy and model, reinforcing the active role of the participants/viewers in shaping the meaning of the things surrounding them, empowering their readings as knowledge construction (How could these objects be part of a museum collection? Which ones would they choose to create a collection? Why? In what type of collections would they be included? Could they be part of an art collection? How? What would have to happen to a particular item for it to be included within a museum?).

This short exercise of building a collection from the distributed objects (with all that implies in terms of defining the selection criteria, constructing a comprehensive and explanatory discourse, creating value systems and criteria for selecting the objects) works as a moment of introduction and diagnosis. In a playful and relaxed way, participants address and reflect about concepts and issues pertaining to collections and their discourses, creating a first set of (shared and discussed) principles for reading

⁵ These objects and other items were selected because of their relationship with some of the artworks exhibited in the galleries and included in the gallery talk. An example is Lourdes de Castro's boxes of objects (blue box; diptych; wooden box - 1963), an artwork in which the assemblage of objects of everyday use raises important questions on the concept of art and museum object (How do these objects differ from the ones we have at home? What kind of changes do they undergo when they enter the museum space? What can they tell us?). The objects also allowed to question the ideas of value (and the construction of value criteria) and memory (Do objects have a memory? What can they tell us about the world in which they were produced?).

the museum and art objects included in the visit. These principles will often be confronted with each other and called into question during the visit.

The choice of curious, surprising, unusual objects stimulates reflection as a way of overcoming the strangeness caused by them. Likewise, the choice and use of objects that are expected to exist in a museum allows, in a way, to work on the preconceptions, prejudices and representations that individuals bring with them when they visit a museum and, more specifically, a modern and contemporary art centre. The combination of both worlds (the known and expected with the unknown and surprising) widens the possible views, contributing from the very start to broaden the possible readings. To change the elements supporting and stimulating a (informed) 'gaze' is therefore a way of diversifying the potential starting points to approach artworks. It is also a way of promoting the establishment of associations between elements of different worlds (by contrast, comparison, identification, differentiation and selection), thus including the artworks of the collection in the much broader world of Visual Culture. Hence, a poem, an object, an image or an advertisement work not only as stimuli but also as documents that explain the associations established. For this reason, a series of relevant support materials for working with the artworks are made available during the whole visit, within this logic of interpretive multiplicity.

5.13. Disquieting artworks for active minds

An approach based on key concepts (collecting, value, memory, representation, etc.) allows individuals to be confronted with the systems they use to construct their own readings, making these systems visible. It also promotes reflection and deconstruction as tools that foster learning in a constructivist and constructive way. With the aim of promoting this work, the five artworks belonging to the collection and making up the visit were selected, above all for being able to enhance the confrontation between different views and readings, and to raise cognitive challenges that demand varied interaction strategies and problem solving. Their selection was essentially guided by some of the criteria put forth by Hernández (2000: 149): to be disquieting (owing to the difficulty to classify them or their visual impact), to relate to values shared by different cultures, to be open to multiple interpretations, to be close to the world of references and the *life of people* (as products of a society that is close to us and with which we share references and disquiet), and to make the *viewer* think. In a way, we are mainly interested in being able to trigger the feeling of disquiet as a driving force for discovery and the will to learn more (motivation), working in an environment that is at once familiar and unknown to the visitor, that will allow to build bridges and relationships using prior knowledge as a starting point, but with the aim of reaching further, making novelty (and its degree of unknown) challenging enough to be able to transform the prior structures of knowledge.

5.13. Taking part in and negotiating meanings

The structure being discussed, based on a set of broad questions open to multiple answers, establishes from the very start that the relationship of the visitor with the museum and the educator is an active, critical and balanced one. In this context, the

work of the educator is to open and manage discussions, to promote reflection, to raise questions, to mediate, to redistribute the questions raised throughout the group, to help summarising and consolidating learning, making it clear that the active role belongs to each one of the individuals involved in the process (process included) and that an effective construction process only takes place when this role is carried out by everyone. The meaning assigned to things is personal, since it is linked to individuals' prior mental structures and to the type of ideas at the basis of their interpretation of their experience of the world. However, it is also social in the sense that it is influenced by those *others who are meaningful* to the individual (family, peer groups, friends, colleagues) and who form the interpretive community (Hooper-Greenhil 1999: 11) which the individual belongs to. In this way, it is essential to create moments of discussion and problem solving that involve individuals as a whole, bringing into question the social practices that shape the discussion itself. If the interpretive process is both personal and social, it requires the development of strategies for discussion and negotiation, so that it is able to generate effective change, i.e. effective learning. Thus, the process of negotiating meanings is also enhanced, which enables the creation of shared networks of meanings and common platforms of understanding. To introduce themes and problems by raising questions addressed at individuals works as a stimulus for the sharing of knowledge and mutual help, as well as a form of diagnosis that allows to identify prior knowledge, worlds of reference, dominant strategies, expectations and motivations.

This allows to work on knowledge construction on the basis of a common platform of understanding in which educator and learner take part on equal terms – the educator adds readings and layers that do not replace but rather complement and enrich the learner's previous readings. The way the main questions (open to multiple answers) unfold depends on what the group brought into discussion during its interpretation exercise, promoting the development and interrelationship between different strategies (descriptive, interpretive, analytical, critical). The encouragement of debate and of differing, well-grounded views and versions is carried out, as already mentioned, by distributing other visual and written elements to be used in the interaction with the artworks and by dividing the group into working teams.

5.14. Creating active and conscious constructors

As we have seen, combining different sources and documents encourages research as a way of solving problems and promotes the interconnection of data as a way of widening the possible readings and justifying them. Therefore, throughout the visit the group is often divided into small working teams, while documents to relate to the artworks and draw contrasts between them are distributed in a differentiated manner. Promoting different versions, grounded in the documents distributed, thus works as a platform to enrich and consolidate the group's levels of interpretation and understanding.

However, to do is not necessarily to learn if the activity required is not included within a cognitive challenge that raises questions and endows the experience with meaning. "In order to promote real learning, educational activities need to involve the mind

(*minds-on*) as much as the hands (*hands-on*) and to allow reflection on the activity carried out, on what is learned and how it is learned"(Gomes da Silva, 2003: 23).

To promote small working groups within museums, based on the relationship between different materials and the artworks exhibited, allows to combine both concepts: learning-by-doing and doing-by-thinking. This encourages the active participation in the construction of grounded readings, thus involving individuals in that very construction (*hearts-on*). The involvement of individuals in the construction – and grounding – of readings of the objects empowers the visitor as an active and conscious constructor whose ‘gaze’ completes the artwork. Therefore, the question of the *viewer’s* participation in the artwork becomes extremely relevant within this interpretation process.

5.15. “Eyes alone are not enough”

If meaning making depends on prior knowledge, our values and beliefs, is it possible to see without interpreting? Quoting Hooper-Greenhill once again, “We see according to what we know, and we make sense of meaning according to what we see.” (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999: 13). The *Look, See, Interpret* project intends precisely to widen the way we see and learn by promoting the development of strategies to interpret the world around us, which can also be used outside museums. Interpretive strategies exist prior to the act of reading and therefore determine the way things are read. Museum visitors are confronted with objects that already have a series of previously determined reading strategies, which direct visitors’ readings. Depending on what we are looking for, what we see has a certain meaning. This reinforces the idea that the interpretive strategy determines the meaning of the object and, in a way, how the object is understood and, inclusively, what counts as an object (Hooper-Greenhill, 1999).

To promote an activity centred on the interpretation processes helps visitors develop an informed and critical ‘gaze’, whose validity and usefulness transcends the mere *space* of the visit. The project *Look, See, Interpret* has sought to become that place of introduction to seeing and reading artworks as representations of cultural ideas and concepts - a place of confluence, negotiation of meanings and active participation. That is maybe why, at the end of a visit, 7-year-old Beatriz raised her hand and said decidedly:

-I would like to keep three more important ideas in the box: “ to see carefully we have to be interested”, “artworks are meant to make us think” and “eyes alone are not enough”.

And, when confronted with the last question – Are we part of the artworks? – she answered without hesitating:

-Of course, we've been talking about them for so long! Without us they would seem to be missing a piece.

Bibliographical references

- DIERKING, Lynn D. (1992): *The Museum Experience*, Washington, D. C.: Whalesback Books.
- FALK, John H., y Lynn D. DIERKING(eds.) (1995): *Public Institutions for Personal Learning: Establishing a Research Agenda*, Washington: American Association of Museums.
- FALK, John H., y Lynn D.DIERKING(2000): *Learning From Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning*, Lanham/Nueva York/Oxford, Walnut Creek: Altamira Press.
- FALK, John H., y otros (1998): «The Effect of Visitors' Agendas on Museum Learning», *Curator* 41/2 (June), 107-120.
- GABLIK, S. (1991): *The reenchantment of art*, New York: Thames and Hudson, pp. 2-3.
- HERNÁNDEZ, F.(2000): *Educación y Cultura Visual*, Barcelona: Octaedro.
- HEIN, George E. (1998): *Learning in the museum*, London and New York: Routledge.
- HOOPER-GREENHILL, Eilean (1999): *The Educational Role of the Museum*, 2nded., London and New York: Routledge.
- HUSBANDS, Chris (1992): «Objects, evidence and learning: some thoughts on meaning and interpretation in museum education», *Journal of Education in Museums*, 13, 1-3.
- SANTOS, Maria de Lourdes Lima dos (coord.) (2005): *O Panorama Museológico em Portugal [2000-2003]*, Lisboa: OAC/ IPM/ RPM.
- SILVA, Susana Gomes da (2003): «Museu e Escola: por uma relação privilegiada», *Revista I Fernão – Revista da Escola Secundária Fernão Mendes Pinto*, 17, ene., 20-25.
- SILVA, Susana Gomes da (2001): «O valor educativo do museu», *Educar Hoje–Enciclopédia dos Pais*, vol.IV, Lexicultural-Activ. Editoriais, Amadora, 112-115.
- SILVERMAN, L. (1995): «Visitor Meaning-Making in Museums for a New Age», *Curator*, 38/3, 161-169.