Conversations in an Art Museum:

Collaborative Learning as an Approach to Art Interpretation

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

Art Education

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts (Art Education) at
Concordia University
Montréal, Québec, Canada

March 2006

**Canada**

# Abstract

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This research is an inquiry into the use of collaborative and constructive learning as an approach for adult learners responding to contemporary artworks in a museum setting. My goal was to see if this approach could be effective in assisting uninitiated viewers to confront the interpretive challenges posed by contemporary art and in helping them to form meaningful responses. To explore these concepts, I enlisted 10 adults of varying ages to undertake, in pairs, a series of interpretive activities at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. Central to these activities was the use of dialogue as a reflective and collaborative tool. I observed, facilitated and tape-recorded their discussions and also conducted individual follow-up interviews with each participant, all of which to determine whether learning had taken place and what kind, and whether their responses had been enriched by the activities.

In constructive learning, meaning is constructed out of and in relation to the learner's experience and lifeworld, and as such is relevant and alive to the learner. In collaborative learning, the knowledge, experience and imagination of learners are combined to create new insight; moreover, through dialogue, meaning unfolds in ever expanding and surprising ways, just as language itself is a living and evolving medium.

The results revealed that most participants were able to enter into collaborative learning relationships and to construct thoughtful interpretive responses to artworks

through the course of their conversations. Most found the activities enjoyable and enriching. While the activities could be refined and adapted to suit different situations, this approach to learning proves to be a viable model for museum education.

# Acknowledgements

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Chapter 1: Research Question and Rationale

## Research question

How can dialogue be used as a reflective tool and as a vehicle for collaborative learning to facilitate and enhance adults' interpretive response to contemporary artworks?

## Terminology

Interpretive Response: Any response to an artwork which results from a thoughtful encounter, in which the viewer is moved, changed in some way, or gains insight.

Meaning: In this thesis, I am concerned with the constructed meaning embedded in viewers' responses to artworks. Meaning, in this sense, does not refer to definitive interpretations which can be backed up by critics, museum curators or the artists themselves; rather the meaning created by the participants in this study refers to any thought (in this case, spoken) which reveals the significance of the artwork in relation to the viewer, to the viewer's society or the world at large, to the world of art, to its function in a social, historical, political or any other context, or to the definition and function of art in general; or which adds to the viewer's self-knowledge or self-definition in relation to others, to her/his society and the world at large, or to the artwork in question.

## Rationale

My own experience as a gallery visitor and as a learner has been my starting point for this research. I have often noticed how, when encountering a problem of understanding, the opportunity to share ideas through dialogue with another person opens up unexpected new avenues. The possibilities for new insight are suddenly multiplied by the creative powers of not just the two heads, but of whatever seemingly magical chemistry is reacting and blending in the space that exists somewhere *between* those two heads. Each time this happens I am reminded of how this potential remains largely untapped in educational environments. The old, transmission model of learning still dominates, and too often as learners we find ourselves isolated with our own thoughts, trapped by the boundaries of our own imagination. Sometimes the simple act of putting those thoughts outside of ourselves, exposed to the scrutiny and reflection of others, can produce small miracles.

From my own experience I know that learning through dialogue is certainly applicable to the interpretation of art. Contemporary art often presents challenges for the uninitiated art viewer, and I chose to explore dialogue and collaborative learning as an approach to help deepen and broaden adult viewers' interpretive experience. In gallery or museum settings, viewers are not generally encouraged to use their creative or reflective powers to arrive at meaningful responses to artworks. We have come to rely on the insight of an art expert to inform us of the 'right ' way to interpret an artwork, based on its historical, formal, or ideological content. While having access to this kind of insight can be enriching and educational, it should not be the only recourse available to art viewers. For one thing, such expert insight is not always available, and for another, I

would argue that this approach perpetuates the elitist world that art has come to occupy (and perhaps always has), inaccessible and often having little relevance to people's daily lives (Lippard, 1990). Moreover, such reliance promotes a passive approach to learning, and does not empower viewers to trust the value of their own insights and observations. If, on the other hand, viewers can be taught to make use of whatever resources they carry within them and to apply these to their encounters with artworks, they may gradually come to have confidence in their ability to construct meaning that is satisfying and personally relevant.

As noted above, one way to build understanding is through dialogue, an obvious vehicle for collaborative learning. Although educators often prompt learners to expand their thinking by asking them questions, it is less common that they have learners engage each other and enter into a dialogue in a spirit of collaborative learning. This approach to learning could easily intersect with the creative process involved in responding to an artwork. Thus, I approached this research as an inquiry into the use of a set of activities centred on dialogue and designed to promote reflection and collaborative learning. The fieldwork involved 10 participants trying out these activities in a museum setting where I observed and, to a small degree, facilitated their interaction.

My participants were adults of a wide age range, from their 20's to 70's, with most of them over 50. I had a couple of reasons for choosing to include older adults, who are defined in the literature as 55 and older (Kauppinen, 1990). Older adults are becoming an ever increasing visitor group at North American museums (Falk & Dierking, 2000), and museums will need to spend more time learning how to engage this population. At the same time, because of the youth-oriented nature of North American

culture, this age group receives the least attention of any. Research attests to the overall physical and psychological health benefits of social and intellectual stimulation as people age, and of the benefits of creative activity in particular (Hickson & Housley, 1997). My research responds to the above factors and reflects the fact that the North American population of baby-boomers has reached that "older adult" stage.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

## 1. Models of Constructive and Collaborative Learning

Introduction

A defining condition of being human is that we have to understand the meaning of

our experience. For some, any uncritically assimilated explanation by an

authority figure will suffice. But in contemporary societies we must learn to

make our own interpretations rather that act on the purposes, beliefs, judgments,

and feelings of others. Facilitating such understanding is the cardinal goal of

adult education. (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5)

In this section I will consider contemporary approaches to adult learning. Central

to this discussion is the reality that even though transmission models of learning still

prevail in most educational institutions and noneducational institutions where education

is part of the mandate, much of the contemporary literature on adult learning emphasizes

models of constructed knowledge (Peters & Armstrong, 1998). Traditional teaching

approaches rely on the transmission of information from teacher to student, whereas in

models of constructed knowledge, learners participate in the interpretation of meaning

and the creation of knowledge. Furthermore, a model of constructed knowledge

considers the emancipatory value of an educational approach where learners gain

empowerment, self-awareness and agency in the world, and where the development of

voice plays a central role. I will consider how, in such models, dialogue can engage

learners in the process of constructing knowledge, and the relationship between learners

further enhances the learning process. Here I venture into the arena of collaborative learning, where the power of learners working together reveals the possibilities of expanded creative thought. Finally, I will explore how an approach to learning using collaboration and constructed knowledge are well suited to older adults and seniors.

In the subsequent section, I will apply the concepts of constructed meaning and collaborative learning to situations of art interpretation. Indeed, museums and galleries are beginning to add such an educational approach to the more traditional methods of didactic panels and docent monologues.

<u>The traditional paradigm of learning and its alternatives</u>

As the above quote by Jack Mezirow (1997) makes clear, the principal responsibility of adult educators is to help learners become autonomous thinkers. Constructivist models of teaching and learning place emphasis on the learner's ability to draw on their experience and knowledge to construct meaning that is relevant to them, to engage in critical reflection and to expand thinking. Although these models are slowly attracting more attention in educational institutions, the dominant paradigm of education continues to centre the teacher as the source and transmitter of knowledge, and to treat knowledge as a commodity and the learner as an empty vessel waiting to be filled (Peters & Armstrong, 1998). An objective body of knowledge is seen to exist *outside* of the learner, and is linearly transmitted to the learner who passively accepts it (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994). Constructivist models of learning, on the other hand, position the learner as "active in the process of making sense of experience," and knowledge is relative to the knower's own context and subjectivity (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994, p. 49).

This context, or lifeworld, includes a) learners' historical, social and linguistic location, including their race, ethnicity, political predilections, class, age, religion, and other such identifying factors, b) their creative ability and inclination to construct knowledge, and c) their emotional disposition, "commitments, . . .desires and interests" (Code, 1991, p. 46). Thus, constructed knowledge is also experientially and emotionally connected to the learner, as well as involving their active participation.

Moreover, the construction of meaning and the development of thought are inextricably bound with the use and development of language. Social participation and communication have been found to be key to cognitive development (Vygotsky, 1975). Language is not simply developed or used to report and describe what is already known; language is an integral part of the process by which learners stabilize what cognitive psychologist Lev Vygotsky has identified as the shifting between word and thought that occurs in internal speech. This process is described by Vygotsky (1975):

> The relation of thought to word is not a thing but a process, a continual movement back and forth from thought to word and from word to thought. . . . Thought is not merely expressed in words: it comes into existence through them (125). Thought undergoes many changes as it turns into speech. It does not merely find expression in speech, it finds its reality and form. (126)

In putting our thoughts into language, we form and transform them.

This process of cognitive development through spoken language is also instrumental in the evolution of "voice," that is, the expression and development of a sense of self. Women who were interviewed about their own cognitive development and preferred learning conditions frequently used metaphors of voice, such as "gaining a

voice" or "being silenced," when describing the unfolding of knowledge as well as self-concept (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger & Tarule, 1986, p. 18, 24). Being able to speak about what matters to an individual is central to learning and to this development of voice (Tarule, 1996). In environments where teachers shift the focus from their own knowledge to that of their students, learners experience the emergence of consciousness as they access, shape and develop their own ideas. In these environments, the teacher is like a midwife who helps students to draw out the knowledge they already possess and to expand on it (Belenky et al., 1986).

Ideologies of emancipatory pedagogy commonly embrace the notion of voice and voices in dialogue as connected with empowerment (Tarule, 1996). An environment in which learners participate in the creation of meaning acknowledges the importance of empowerment for all who endeavor to learn and to exist in the world. Paulo Freire's pedagogical model expresses the connection between the emergence of consciousness and empowerment in the learning environment and beyond. In the "banking system" of education, teachers are the "narrating subject," while students are the "listening object" into which teachers "deposit" information (Freire, 1990, p. 57). Nowhere in this paradigm is there space for the voice of the learner. This system spills over into the larger society to create "cultures of silence" (Finkelpearl, 2000, p. 277) where those with less power are rendered voiceless. Freire's model, on the other hand, focuses on the empowerment and agency of all involved: students become student-teachers, and teachers become teacher-students. All participate in teaching and learning, and all are responsible for the learning process.

In situations where students are expected to passively accept knowledge, they never have the chance to see or experience the way knowledge is created. In the banking system, the thinking process is the private and unattainable domain of the teacher. The teacher presents only the polished, finished, unarguable product of her/his process, when in reality the process itself, which remains hidden, is messy, imperfect and often painful. Students need to see that the process is arduous and flawed and in fact mirrors that of their own. They need to know that their teachers are not infallible or omniscient, that thinking is an evolving process, and that uncertainty is part of the tentative process of coming to know something (Belenky et al., 1986). When both teacher and student are involved in the creation of knowledge, the process becomes outward, demystified and attainable (Freire, 1990).

The central vehicle in Freire's model is dialogue, where all participants have a voice (Freire, 1990). Students and teachers, as "critical co-investigators in dialogue," develop critical consciousness through active reflection (p. 68). This consciousness becomes the tool with which to "intervene in, and transform, the world" (Deniston-Trochta, 1999, p. 89). In contrast, in the banking system of education, knowledge is owned by teachers who then decide what knowledge they can or should give to their students. This process encourages the submerging of students' own consciousness, creative power, and choice (Freire, 1990). Students must meekly accept the choice of the teacher, but they can never truly call this knowledge their own, as it has not been consciously and critically considered, nor related to the reality of their lives and the world around them.

Implicit in this approach is the

assumption of a dichotomy between man and the world: man is merely *in* the

world, not *with* the world or with others; man is spectator, not re-creator. In this

view, man is not a conscious being (*corpo consciente*); he is rather the possessor

of *a* consciousness: an empty "mind" passively open to the reception of deposits

of reality from the world outside. (Freire, 1990, p. 62)

This system of learning serves to inure students to a passive approach to being in the

world in general. Moreover, living passively and mutely in the world restricts one from

living in community with others. Through voice people express their relationship to

others:

Voice is meaning that resides in the individual and enables that individual to

participate in a community. . . . Voice suggests relationships: the individual's

relationship to the meaning of her/his experience and hence, to language, and the

individual's relationship to the other, since understanding is a social process.

(Britzman, as cited in Connelly and Clandinin, 1990, p. 4)

Through voice, individuals make sense of experience while relating it to those around

them. In Freire's terms, consciousness evolves through voice and in dialogue with

others, and as learners begin to see themselves as knowers in relation to the world, and as

part of an evolving, changing world. How we perceive ourselves in the world is an

important factor in how we choose to act in and with the world; in identifying ourselves

as evolving and transforming with our community, we are empowered with the

knowledge that we have agency and can effect change in ourselves and our environment

(Freire, 1990).

So the constructing of knowledge must be seen as a process of continual transformation, mirroring that of the emergence of consciousness and of "becoming" human in the world (Freire, 1990). Just as knowing and knowledge are not sterile or static, so the reality of the world is not fixed or existing outside of and separate from human beings and their relationship with it.

### Collaborative learning

Relationship in and with the world implies relationship and interchange with others. Where dialogue is involved in learning, an environment of collaboration encourages opportunities for the construction of knowledge and meaning. To involve collaboration implies the unfolding of a rapport between learners and their ideas, where dialogue is the main tool of interaction. Because collaborative learning is interactive, the combined learned knowledge of the group is different from and greater than the sum of each individual's learned knowledge. The combined knowledge exists as an entity unto itself for each individual to interpret and draw from (Peters & Armstrong, 1998). Words spoken by one learner are interpreted by another and the meaning is forever changed. In the back and forth of dialogue, described by Peter Elbow (1986) as a process of 'cooking,' ideas are evolved and extended: "the process provides a continual leverage or mechanical advantage: we each successively climb upon the shoulders of the other's restructuring, so that at each climbing up, we can see a little farther" (p. 41). The context is being constantly revised as new information is added by individuals, and new interpretations are offered. Ideally, no one person owns the constructed knowledge or

monopolizes the focus, but rather the group's individuals use and build on the new knowledge.

In a collaborative environment, each individual's own context and lifeworld add a different element to the interpretation process, as do the particular established and developing relationships between individuals (Peters & Armstrong, 1998). While learners are enabled to develop and voice their unique identity in the construction of relevant meaning, an exchange of worldviews is also made possible. Participants are exposed to diverse perspectives as they encounter others' experience and knowledge backgrounds. Differences of opinion not only illuminate the diversity to be found amongst human beings, but afford the opportunity to question and widen the boundaries of one's own beliefs. Moreover, problem solving is enhanced by the contribution of diverse points of view (Gerlach, 1994). In the end, the many variables present in collaborative learning multiply the possibilities for discovered meaning (Peters & Armstrong, 1998).

Collaborative learning is an experience-based learning approach, which means that the most important component is the knowledge and experience the learner brings to the process. Adults in particular have a wealth of experience from which to draw upon. Moreover, as mentioned above, the experiences from within the learning context provide new material on which to base observations and reflections. In the experiential learning model, these observations and reflections provide the basis for generalizations about the nature of the experience, and these guide and are tested out in new situations, inside and outside of the specific learning environment, providing more concrete experience. Thus, the individual is continually transforming. Experience is the basic learning ingredient,

but the interaction between experience and reflection is essential to the process (Kolb,

1984). In collaborative learning situations, dialogue is the vehicle for reflection, and the

key to experiential learning.

In Mezirow's theory of transformative learning, dialogue is a means of promoting

critical reflection on the underlying frames of reference that influence one's "intentions,

values, beliefs and feelings" (Mezirow, 1997, p. 6). In being exposed to the various

points of view of others, one has the opportunity to assess differing perspectives on

competing interpretations. The analysis with others of diverse but related experiences

can lead to "a common understanding that holds until new evidence or arguments present

themselves" (p. 6-7). The researchers of *Women's Ways of Knowing* identified that many

of their adult female subjects prefer a learning setting which offers the opportunity to

learn interactively with others using a process of "connected knowing" where, in an effort

to be open to the ideas of others, learners deliberately try to expand their understanding

"into positions that initially feel wrong or remote" (Clinchy, 1996, p. 209). A

collaborative setting offers this possibility, and dialogue fosters increased understanding

amongst learners from potentially greatly varying backgrounds and experiences.

In an environment where collaborative learning is valued, authority in its

traditional sense must be negotiated amongst teachers and students. Most adult learners'

and teachers' primary experience of learning involves the teacher as the authority on the

subject matter, responsible for passing on what they know to students who may be eager

to absorb all they can from that available source of knowledge. This model of how

knowledge is "obtained" is an enduring one, and may require a major shift in

expectations on the part of both teachers and students (Peters & Armstrong, 1998).

Teachers may be unwilling to give up their position of power, may not feel secure enough to take the risks involved in setting out into new territory, or may find it hard to let go of preconceived agendas, established by either themselves or the institution for which they work (Belenky et al., 1986; Peters & Armstrong, 1998). Unlike a situation involving an established curriculum, people learning through collaboration cannot know what the knowledge outcomes will be. Students come with their own sets of expectations; they may consider hearing about other students' ideas and experience to be a waste of time, since they are not those of the "expert": the source of content, evaluation and approval (Peters & Armstrong, 1998). They may not be willing to take responsibility for their own learning, in which they themselves shape the content of the learning by being an ongoing, active participant in the creation of knowledge, and by offering their own lifeworld experience and insight to the process.

In a collaborative learning situation where there is a teacher involved, s/he must not be viewed as the primary source of information. Such a perception can have the effect of undermining the confidence of the other learners who may tend to view what the teacher says as their sole object of interpretation. Teachers should instead see themselves as co-learners involved with the others in the construction of knowledge. They may have facilitator skills and experience, but ideally this role can eventually be shared amongst learners. Even if a teacher has specialized knowledge in the topic of learning, this must not be seen as more important than anyone else's contribution (Peters & Armstrong, 1998). The following additional guidelines are set out by Peters and Armstrong (1998, p. 82-4), developed from their work with graduate and undergraduate students:

- It is best to establish an environment of collaboration in the learning setting as soon as possible. Emphasis is on learners becoming active in the process and on reflecting on the process, as opposed to having the process of collaborative learning explained to them and then being expected to apply it. The latter would contradict the spirit of collaboration and the need to diffuse the source of knowledge.

- The facilitator can help learners to be aware of interactions that promote collaboration, as part of the process of reflection.

- All learners must be shown "positive regard" for their contributions to the learning process, in an effort to build trust amongst participants, and respect must be shown for everyone and everything that is said. Facilitators can model this attitude for other participants.

- Focus should be kept on the knowledge that is being built *between* learners, in an effort to counter the privileging of individual learning that is present in most traditional approaches.

- As part of the process of reflection, participants may want to look at the relationships forming between them and how they affect the collaborative process and help to constitute the learning that is taking place.

Finally, the process of collaboration involves a "boundary-less" field of inquiry, where learning can be open-ended and free from the constraints of anticipated end results. All participants are responsible for their own learning, and for moving the inquiry forward.

An environment of exchange allows interaction to become improvised and energized (Zelman, 2002, p. 40).

Characteristics and needs of adult learners

More than ever before the pursuit of lifelong learning is being heralded as a key to the overall well-being of people as they age. Education research extends into the learning habits of all ages of adults, including those referred to as "older adults," that is, in the age group above 55 (Kauppinin, 1990). Whereas younger adults and those in the work force are more likely to be found in formal learning contexts, from universities and colleges to work-related training environments, older learners, while also participating in these learning situations, are more likely to be found engaging in less formal educational opportunities as they retire and are freer of the responsibilities associated with work and family. Not only is continued learning important for all from a developmental (emotional, physical and spiritual) point of view, but in a world where the rate of change of technological and societal trends is constantly increasing, it becomes more and more important for adults to know how to learn and to adapt to transition. In the following section I will consider the particular characteristics and needs of adult learners, including those of older adults, and how experiential or constructive and collaborative models of learning are well suited to the learning styles of this population.

Caffarella and Barnett (1994) identify several factors which affect the learning needs and inclinations of adults. Adults of all ages can most benefit from educational environments where learners assume responsibility for their own learning, diversity is embraced, past knowledge and experience is valued and drawn upon, and where

affiliation needs are addressed. Models of constructive and collaborative learning can provide a context for these approaches, and meet the particular needs of adult learners.

For example, adults in general appreciate an approach which acknowledges and allows for the use of experience and prior knowledge. As compared with a group of children or 20 year olds, a group of adults represents a large diversity of experience. This diversity can be shared amongst learners in an atmosphere of collaboration. Experience becomes the frame of reference and part of the content of learning, as the focus can be on whatever has meaning for the learner, who determines what is to be learned. Moreover, the older an adult gets, the more attached to certain worldviews and values they may become, making it crucial for them to construct knowledge which is relevant to them, rather than to simply receive new knowledge. Therefore, learning activities whose outcomes are more open-ended will afford the most opportunity for adult learners. However, since people often strongly associate their experience with their personal identity, some adults in a group may feel threatened by and challenge each others' differing experience-based "truths." To avoid this scenario, emphasis needs to be placed on the use of experience as a point of departure for new learning (Caffarella & Barnett, 1994).

Older adults are characterized as being generally more reflective (Kauppinen, 1990), and as having the capacity to accept contradiction, ambiguity, and the relativistic nature of reality and knowledge (Bolton, 1990; Kauppinen, 1990). The recognition that polar opposites can exist side by side in life, and can actually enrich life, is characteristic of older adult thinking (Kauppinen, 1990). Adult learning also tends to be more oriented

to problem-solving, as opposed to subject mastery (Bolton, 1990). These inclinations are useful in constructive and collaborative learning.

Older adults may also have certain needs resulting from diminishing physical and sensory functions, all of which must be considered in the design of learning activities, especially those outside of a regular classroom setting. Decreased mobility, a slower pace, and less stamina for standing or even sitting for long periods are some of the realities of aging. Hearing and vision loss may not only impede learners' sensory perception, highlighting the need for clarity of lighting and sound (for example, a speaker should directly face the listener when speaking), but educators must also be sensitive to the fact that such losses can also lead to a lowering of confidence, especially in a participatory, group setting. Short-term memory capacity is known to decrease with age, which can make it difficult for older learners to absorb a lot of new information. Constructive and experiential learning, however, emphasize the relating of new information with that which is already known, thus facilitating new learning which is not dependent on memorization (Gibbs & Boughton, 1998).

Adults tend to have more developed interpersonal skills, and are often ready to assist others, both useful attributes in a collaborative context (Spigner-Littles & Anderson, 1999). Moreover, in environments where connection to and support for other learners are emphasized, adult learners have the opportunity to have their affiliation needs met. Collaborative learning situations allow for learners to "form relationships that encourage learning" (Caffarella & Barnett, 1994). This is consistent with the findings of Belenky et al. (1986), in which the "connected knowing" approach was favoured by many of the women in their studies.

Once adults enter into their post-retirement or senior years (in North America, 60 or 65 and older, depending on when retirement is chosen or imposed), there are added reasons for seeking out lifelong learning opportunities. North American seniors, as well as facing the normal physiological changes that are inevitable with time, and coping with possible illness or environmental injuries, are hindered from continued participation in active living by stereotypes (their own as well as others') of what role they should play in society. While research of the early to mid 20th century tended to conclude that cognitive abilities peak in youth and then gradually diminish with age, research from the 1970's onward has pointed towards continuing cognitive growth in adults as they age as well as the development of those different mental capacities cited above (Kauppinen, 1990). Often, the desire to make sense of past and present life experiences is an incentive for adult learners (Caffarella & Barnett, 1994; Kauppinen, 1990). This has been identified by Erikson as the psychosocial task of the later years of life, described as the *integrity* stage (Wolf, 1998). As a consequence of new understandings of aging and the elderly, the meaning of "old age" has been transformed from that of a time of slowing down, withdrawing from the world and quietly awaiting death, to the concept of "productive" or "successful" aging. We now understand that even the process of physiological aging, while inevitable, can be slowed down when people involve themselves in positive psycho-social environments and active intellectual stimulation. Indeed, more and more seniors are choosing continued intellectual development in any number of learning pursuits, ranging from creative endeavours to involvement in politics to the learning of new technologies (Lamdin & Fugate, 1997). As well, various studies attest to creative

activity's beneficial effects on quality of life and sense of well-being for older adults (Hickson & Housley, 1997).

Adults who have had past negative learning experiences may see themselves as poor learners, and may approach new learning situations with trepidation. An experiential learning environment affords the opportunity for increased confidence for such adults. They are able to use their experience from all the different realms of their lives, including ones in which they feel more accomplished and confident and where they have been learners in other contexts, not just those involving formal schooling (Caffarella & Barnett, 1994). An emphasis on collaboration also diminishes the need for competition amongst learners and may further reduce anxiety in the learning environment.

Finally, it is important to recognize that adults come from diverse cultural and social (educational, religious, and economic) backgrounds, with a variety of learning experiences and styles and a complexity of life situations, past and present (Caffarella & Barnett, 1994). While experiential and collaborative learning environments afford a great deal of flexibility of process and outcome, educators must nevertheless be aware that this learning approach will be difficult for some to adapt to. While some may happily embrace it, having negative associations with their traditional-style experiences (Bolton, 1990), others may have more difficulty letting go of expectations based on past experience made up entirely of a traditional, transmission-oriented approach to learning (Caffarella & Barnett, 1994). Moreover, in an experiential and collaborative atmosphere where adults direct the course of their own learning, values and belief systems may be challenged and reoriented, a process which can be rife with emotion and vulnerability. Educators must be sure to model and foster an environment of respect and care.

One type of informal environment where adults encounter opportunities for learning is the art museum or gallery. In fact, with the general aging trend of the North American population, "all-adult groups are becoming a more numerous and more important museum audience, with older adults representing a huge, virtually untapped source of new museum visitors" (Falk & Dierking, 2000, p. 102). In this thesis I am concerned with the art museum or gallery as a site for experiential learning and constructed knowledge with collaboration as the basis of participation. In an art-experiencing situation, where viewers have been conditioned to look to "experts" for the meaning of an artwork, a participatory and experiential environment is a large step towards encouraging the viewer's own construction of meaning. In the following section, I will consider how encounters with art objects can be excellent opportunities for collaborative, experiential inquiry.


Art museums and galleries as sites of experiential and collaborative learning

Approaches to art interpretation using constructivist models of learning are gaining popularity in museum art-education programs (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994). Educators are realizing the value and potential of involving viewers in active and participatory learning, and are beginning to experiment with educational tools which go beyond the passive role associated with listening to docents or reading didactic panels. Not only are our ideas of learning continually evolving, but museums are under pressure to justify their existence and need for government support and are therefore constantly trying to find new ways of attracting new audiences and of turning visitors' experience into "connected, engaging, integrated activities that lead to growth" (Hein, 1998, p. 3).

Various studies attest to the fact that visitors to museums use a variety of sources of information and experience to construct meaning. It has been shown that visitors often make meaning and associations which are not anticipated or intended by museum staff (Hein, 1998). Visitors may have a high level of knowledge about the content of a museum exhibition or be relatively uninformed about the subject matter; both categories of visitors draw on information from other exhibitions or from the personal narratives retrieved from other areas of their lives. Sometimes the contributed information provides direct insight or knowledge about the content of the objects or works being considered; on other occasions the information or story retrieved has peripheral or associational meaning. Both kinds of assisting information have the potential to enrich the engagement and educational experience of the visitor (Fienberg & Leinhardt, 2002).

That visitors arrive with a rich variety of contexts from which to construct meaning is further supported by the theory that a range of learning modalities are employed with which to interpret and engage with exhibitions. Gardner has suggested that there are at least seven intelligences or ways to process and organize phenomena, including linguistic, musical, logical-mathematical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. People are capable of all these modes of cognitive processing, yet are more inclined towards some than others (Hein, 1998).

To be able to engage with the contents of an exhibition, visitors must find therein a connection to their own lives. According to motivational theory, the museum visitor's motivation to learn often stems from the desire to "construct, elaborate and relive their personal experiences" (Paris, 1997, p. 22-23). Visitors are inspired to reflect on what they see when it enables them to learn about themselves, to make sense of their

experiences, and to affirm the self. People can best achieve a sense of fulfillment when learning relates most strongly to their sense of self, that is, their "awareness of personal needs, interests and abilities" (Falk & Dierking, 2000, p. 21). The construction of personal meaning as a result of reminiscing and reflection on experiences can also lead to "restorative feelings of peacefulness," representing the often neglected emotional element of learning (Paris, 1997, p. 23). At the core of all learning are memories, which are not permanent entities, but, like knowledge, are continuously being built upon and reconfigured into new patterns, as understanding is extended in personally relevant ways (Falk & Dierking, 2000).

Also important to the motivation to learn is the learner's ability to choose the level of challenge comfortable to them, rather than have someone else choose it for them. This is particularly relevant to museum-based learning, as museums and galleries present a high degree of self-selection regarding the level of challenge and engagement available to visitors, incorporating objects and exhibits with enough depth to allow for a wide range of challenge for heterogeneous audiences (Falk and Dierking, 2000). Here we find an echo of Freire's insistence on the learner's choice of, and involvement in their own learning as a way of being in and with the world (Freire, 1990).

Thus, as with all learning, learning in the museum requires the pre-existing context of the outside world; meaning and motivation depend on relevance to the visitor's background and experience (Fienberg & Leinhardt, 2002). The learning context is different for each person; therefore, each individual's learning will be personally constructed (Falk & Dierking, 2000).

Learning in museums and galleries as a social activity

The theory of learning as a social activity was initially propounded by Vygotsky in the 1920's but not taken up seriously by other researchers until the second half of the 20th century. Socio-cultural theories of learning hold that intelligence develops as a result of language-based interactions between people rather than between individuals and their environment (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Hein, 1998). Though these theories have only recently begun to be considered in research on museum education, the fact that most visitors to museums and galleries come in pairs or groups (only 5 – 20 % come individually) makes these environments excellent sites for collaboratively heightened learning (Hein, 1998). Thus, visitors have the added benefit of an intersubjective experience of learning. Both classical theorists and contemporary researchers of learning recognize the principal of socio-cultural theory in which "meaning emerges in the interplay between individuals acting in social contexts and the mediators – including tools, talk, signs, and symbol systems – that are afforded by culture, environment and history" (Hein, 1998, p. 149). Each visitor brings with them their own personal narrative, as well as knowledge and expertise, whether related to the content of the exhibition or otherwise. The museum, then, "provide[s] a platform on which meaningful conversations can be built, using the tools that people bring with them to extend and enrich the knowledge among group members" (Fienberg & Leinhardt, 2002, p. 210). Consequently, not only is each visitor's experience and learning uniquely extended beyond what their individual outcome would have been, but also their *ability* to learn is enhanced. It can also be noted that the acts of participation and collaboration themselves provide vehicles for learning about interaction in communities (Hein, 1998).

Various studies have documented the kinds of language and interactions which signify incidents of constructed learning amongst people in art and artifact-viewing situations (see, for example, Fienberg & Leinhardt, 2002 and Soep & Cotner, 1999). Rather than discuss these here, I will present them along with the discussion of my findings in the chapter containing my analysis.

In the above sections, I have explored various dimensions of constructed learning, to culminate in the social and collaborative possibilities of learning in museums or galleries. Next, I will consider various approaches to interpretation, this being commonly the goal in responding to an art object. Some approaches, including formalism on which much of our present day academic thinking on interpretation is based, do not consider the reality of the viewer to be of much, if any, importance. The following section will explore the influences on our present day approaches to art interpretation and consider how we may configure responses to art which include the concepts of constructive and collaborative learning.

## 2. The Nature of Interpretation and the Place of Constructed Knowledge in Interpretation

### Introduction: What does it mean to respond to an artwork?

It seems reasonable to assume that no one interpretive or responsive approach to art can be true for all people, objects and circumstances. Although it has been documented that in academia today, most approaches to art interpretation are based on the formalist concerns of 20th century modernism, it must be remembered that "the

ascendancy of particular theories of art can be related to social values and aesthetic priorities at given times and places" (Hamblen, 1991, p. 11). The previous section's discussion would suggest that interpretation is a very subjective act; however, many theorists would conclude that constructed knowledge is too subjective, personal, and associative, allowing meaning to stray too far away from the object in question and into the world of the beholder, infusing the object with meaning which isn't there. Can there, however, be such a thing as an objective truth which can in some way be uncovered? Historically, there has been no shortage of inquiry into these problems. The formalists would insist that meaning is to be found in the formal qualities of the object, divorced from any extrinsic, contextual associations, and that response involves an aesthetic experience which transports the viewer away from everyday reality. Others have asserted that the only correct meaning to be found is that which is as true as possible to the original, authorial meaning. Does meaning reside in the object itself, the creator of the object, or in the object's beholder? Or does it lie somewhere in the space between all three, or in some other configuration? In the following section I will attempt to explore some of these questions, and to find a comfortable place for the location of meaning.

### Aesthetic experience and Modernist theories of interpretation

Since the later decades of the 20th century, most explicit instruction in the topic of art interpretation has been based on the formalist concerns of the modernist era (Hamblen, 1991). The 20th century modernist era of art practice lasted for several decades and encompassed a rapid progression of artistic styles and schools. During this time, the meaning in an artwork was to be found in the work's formal characteristics, and content,

including subject matter, narrative, and representational elements, was of little concern (Wolcott, 1990). Emphasis was placed on innovation of form and the artist's personal style. The focus of meaning in an artwork was the object itself, considered an autonomous entity where meaning resided, static and fixed, to be extracted and digested (Wolcott, 1990). To engage with an artwork, the viewer assumed a disinterested stance, where all personal and contextual associations were discarded.

The idea of the disinterested viewer can be traced at least as far back as the philosophical writings of the age of the Enlightenment in the 18th century. In Immanuel Kant's writings on taste and aesthetic judgement, he stressed that although not everyone will judge an object similarly, all *would* if they were to assume a disinterested stance in relation to the object. That is, if the viewer could put aside all associations of time, place, personal realities and extrinsic purposes of the object, and consider the object "in-and-of itself," s/he would arrive at the correct, universal aesthetic judgement arising from a heightened state of sensory awareness (Hamblen, 1991). Later on, in the 19th century, the focus shifted to the idea of the aesthetic attitude, whereby any object could become an aesthetic object if the viewer perceived it with the proper, aesthetic stance. With this development came the shift in focus to the viewer's *experience* of art, which, with the writings of John Dewey and Monroe Beardsley in the 20th century, came to be known as the aesthetic experience (Wolcott, 1990). Both of these writers concerned themselves with the defining and explaining of the aesthetic experience.

Beardsley, whose writings on the subject continued well into the late 20th century, described a state or process where, with attention fixed on the object of interest, the viewer loses all sense of time and experiences a sense of wholeness and self-expansion

(Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). In Beardsley's theory, focus is on the inherent qualities of the art object in question, and the aesthetic experience is an emotionally intuited perception of the object's form. For the artist as well as the viewer, the perceptive or creative act is one of ordering the elements that make up the whole. The work of art, then, becomes the experiencing or creating of this wholeness of form, immediately felt, and not easily described or pinpointed (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Wolcott, 1996). Moreover, the object refers only to itself and to nothing outside of itself (Wolcott, 1990).

Beardsley was developing his views of aesthetic experience at the time that modern art and its accompanying theory were becoming increasingly focused on formalism. In modernism, the aesthetic experience was envisioned as an end in itself, originating in the formal qualities of the artwork. In the field of art education, such key theorists as Ralph Smith and Elliot Eisner were influenced by modernist tendencies and favoured an approach to art interpretation which focused on the formal and sensual elements of artworks and how the perception of these made the viewer feel (Wolcott, 1990). From their writings were developed procedures for art criticism and interpretation for use in learning environments.

Recent approaches to art interpretation

One of the first schemes to be widely recognized and used in school art programs was put forward by Edmund Burke Feldman and is still used today as the basis for interpretation in many art classrooms (Gooding-Brown, 2000; Hamblen, 1991). His method consists of a four-step procedure which attempts to mimic the process by which professional art critics arrive at the interpretation and evaluation of art (Feldman, 1970).

Feldman's approach relies primarily on the "perceptual, ostensibly intrinsic, qualities of the art work" and grows out of the modernist, formalist tradition of aesthetic experience (Hamblen, 1991, p. 8).

In her use of the word "ostensibly," educator and writer Karen Hamblen identifies a problem inherent to the formalist approach, namely that it relies on certain assumptions of universality of perception, for example that of the concepts of balance, symmetry, and colour, and their attendant meanings. Such configurations of meaning tend to have been constructed within a western, Eurocentric context, and are not universal at all. Hamblen (1991) also asserts that, "the visual immediacy of the aesthetic experience has been found to be highly dependent upon cultural expectations that such and such objects might afford aesthetic contemplation based on learned perceptual conventions" (p. 11). Moreover, such an approach and others like it discourage the viewer's subjective responses and encourage the focus away from meanings derived from the language of everyday life. Studies have suggested that to overcome the tendency to use personal associations in interpretation requires a fair amount of training, further suggesting that the aesthetic experience as a product of formalism is not a universal phenomenon (Hamblen, 1991).

A contemporary researcher who has delved into the meaning of aesthetic experience is Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2000). His descriptions, based on studies of the kinds of responses experienced and anticipated by visitors to museums, are not unlike those of Beardsley, but include four categories of a more tangible quality. They comprise knowledge gain, emotional experience (including curiosity, fantasy and exhilaration), sensory perception and stimulation, and communication (including introspection and self-discovery). None of these types of experience on their own defines an aesthetic

experience as described by both visitors and museum professionals; rather, they are elements of something like Beardsley's less definable phenomenon which Csikszentmihalyi (2000) describes as "a magical transformation of experience," where "the various dimensions of consciousness meld together and we are no longer aware of 'thinking,' 'feeling,' 'seeing,' or 'communicating' as separate processes" (p. 398). Ordinary sense of time is suspended, and one escapes the predictability and limitations of everyday life.

Csikszentmihalyi, then, combines a range of possible types of common responses to art with the transformational elements of the aesthetic experience. The description allows for both subjective and objective learning, and the focus is on the experience of the viewer and not necessarily on the inherent qualities of the art object. Moreover, this account does not exclude the use of personal associations and context. Csikszentmihalyi (2000) admits, however, that this often hoped for experience of transformation is rarely achieved by gallery and museum goers.

Postmodernist theorists, on the other hand, insist that the relation of the artwork to the social and historical context in which it was created and to the context of the viewer are necessary elements of interpretation. Central to the interpretive act is attention to the artwork's "non-exhibited" qualities and to the phenomenon of its own existence in the contemporary world (Wolcott, 1996, p. 74). Moreover, a multiplicity of viewpoints can be considered relevant in the interpretation of an artwork. These may include the viewer's own lifeworld, the artist's identity, as well as the social, political and historical context of the work. Using a configuration of viewpoints, viewers *construct* meaning, integrating their individual experience with the work (Wolcott, 1990).

Jane Gooding-Brown (2000), for example, argues for approaches to art interpretation which consider the social construction of the object, as well as of that of the viewer and of interpretation itself. This opens the way for the viewer to begin to apprehend the complex relationship which exists between themselves and the artwork as "an object in the world" (p. 38). Gooding-Brown's objective is to use art as a means of valuing and understanding the differences between self and others, and to uncover the processes by which certain voices dominate and others are marginalized. For her, the focus is not on rational, linear concepts of knowing, but on those which are "partial and interested and 'irrational'" (p. 39).

Interpretation and the field of hermeneutics

The question of the meaning of interpretation has long been the subject of inquiry in the philosophical field of hermeneutics, and we may here find some insight into the nature of art interpretation. Although in the broadest sense hermeneutics has traditionally concerned itself with the interpretation of literary and historical texts, more recently a "text" has come to take on a much broader meaning, and an object of art can be also viewed within this same inquiring light. Insofar as a text is a configuration of signs conceived of and produced by one or more human beings and is intended to be beheld and understood by other human beings, the same can be said of an artwork which can, in this sense, be treated as a text which employs language. Indeed, as the philosopher of hermeneutics Hans-Georg Gadamer (1976) asserts:

> every interpretation of the intelligible that helps others to understanding has the character of language. To that extent, the entire experience of the world is

linguistically mediated, and the broadest concept of tradition is thus defined – one
that includes what is not itself linguistic, but is capable of linguistic interpretation.
(p. 99)

The question of interpretation can be approached from the point of view of the
search for, or existence of, objective knowledge, or truth. Viewers of art are often
inclined to want to know the artist's intended meaning, and consider this to be the
definitive meaning or the "truth" of the artwork. The education theorist E. D. Hirsch
(1967) writes that an interpretation of a text is more or less valid depending on how
closely it resembles the author's intended meaning. In other words, Hirsch argues, there
is an objective truth that resides in the text, that being the author's intended meaning, and
the reader has a moral imperative to discover, as accurately as possible, what that is.
Although Hirsch admits that an interpreter can never be absolutely certain of what an
author means, he suggests that "in hermeneutics, verification is a process of establishing
relative probabilities" (p. 236), in other words, of arriving at the most *probable* textual
meaning, that is, the one which is closest to that originally meant by the author. This
original meaning exists, unchanging, regardless of any acts of perception by the reader.

According to Hirsch (1967), the author's meaning, including the implied or
unsaid meanings, can be arrived at through the consideration of the text's context. This
context is determined by the explicit or more obvious signs within the text, as well as by
the author's own inclinations which are based on her or his "mental and experiential
world" (p. 223). In this sense, the reader must know something of the author's life and
the environment in which s/he lived or lives. Finally, all these factors must fit together as
a whole. Once the interpreter has established as closely as possible this original meaning,

then there exists the opportunity for the reader to "respond" to the text, and to uncover its personal significance. But this individual response is invalid if it is not based on the original meaning.

Gadamer (1976), on the other hand, holds that in the interpretation of an artwork, as in that of historical events, the interpreter must leave behind the mind of the author/artist. Likewise, "a hermeneutics that regarded understanding as the reconstruction of the original would be no more than the recovery of a dead meaning" (Gadamer, 1975/1960, p. 149). Instead, the interpreter must enter into a "living relationship" with the object of interpretation (p. 149). The viewer apprehends, rather than the world of another, his or her

> own world to which he [*sic*] comes to belong more fully by recognizing himself
> more profoundly in it. There remains a continuity of meaning which links the
> work of art with the world of real existence and from which even the alienated
> consciousness of a cultured society never quite detaches itself. (1975/1960, p.
> 118)

The artwork has the ability to "speak to the self-understanding of every person, and it does this as ever present and by means of its own contemporaneousness" (Gadamer, 1976, p. 102). The interpretation of an artwork, then, involves an encounter with the self; it presents an experience which must be "integrat[ed]...into the whole of one's own orientation to a world and one's own self-understanding" (1976, p. 101-2). Moreover, the completely detached or disinterested stance required for the aesthetic experience of Kant or the modernists is not possible even for the "alienated consciousness of a cultured society." The art object is, more than any other linguistic or non-linguistic tradition, able

to be relevant in every contemporary context, and will continue to be relevant in every future context (Gadamer, 1976). For Gadamer, it would seem, the interpretive act is one which has substantially more to do with the receiver than the originator of meaning. Interpretation can be construed as a conversation between the text and the interpreter, in which the common object uniting the two is the "object of which the text speaks" (Gadamer, 1960/1975, p. 341). More on this subject will be presented below.

Theorists of the postmodern era have also questioned and even completely discarded the author as the location of meaning in a text. Roland Barthes (1977), for example, proposes the "death of the author" in his seminal essay wherein he suggests that the meaning of a text resides with the reader and not with the author: "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination" (p. 148). In this sense, readers become the site of signification, using all that they bring with them in combination with all that the text presents, to construct meaning. The work is no longer a closed, fixed system, but one in which meaning is fluid, contradictory and evolving. For Hirsch (1967), however, the result of changing, multiple interpretations is the loss of any possibility of objective knowledge of a text; there exists only "temporary validity" which can never be tested (p. 212). A text can have meaning for the individual, but its original meaning must first of all have been determined.

### The paradigm of objectivity

Feminist philosopher Lorraine Code (1991) questions the validity and use of objective truth as a way of knowing. She traces the roots of our need for objective, empirical knowledge once again to the Enlightenment era of 18th century Europe, when

the desire for objective truth and rational thought was a reaction to the existential turmoil of the times. Objectivity became the paradigm of knowing, and scientific inquiry and empirical knowledge became the model of objectivity. Subjectivity became associated with chaos – the realm of the emotional, and of unpredictability and unreliability. In the model of objective knowing, a disinterested knower is distinct and disassociated from the object of knowledge, and unaffected by it. In this arrangement we may recognize the philosophical ideals of formalism, that is, the removal of art from everyday reality, from the emotional, social or political context of the artist or viewer, and the oft quoted tenet of "art for art's sake."

There are various objections to the paradigm of objectivity. Although objectivity appears to offer a semblance of clarity and control over the world, it can be argued that the world is never so easily definable, and is characterized by fluctuation and uncertainty. Even the concept of dichotomy, on which the subjective/objective definition is based, is an artificial construct, as dichotomies are never as absolute as assumed, encompassing much overlap and gray area. Code (1991) argues that if the aim of knowledge and inquiry is to understand and experience the world around us, then a paradigm of knowledge should reflect the mystery and perplexity of the changeable world. Therefore, she proposes, a paradigm of knowledge could be that of the knowing of another person, characterized by the unknown and the unpredictable, and in constant flux as knowers interact with each other and relationships evolve with every new experience and encounter.

Code's new paradigm of knowledge can be compared to the ideas of Martin Buber who developed a theory of knowledge which is based on "relational truth," in

which truths are "disclosed through the knowing, loving, believing and other relationships of everyday life" (Murphy, 1988, p. 95). Truth is neither objective nor subjective, but relational, to be found in relationships where interaction is reciprocal. In both Code's and Buber's models, communication must be part of the configuration as it is necessary for the existence of relationship. The concepts of collaborative and connected knowing have a place in this constellation. Dialogue itself could be considered to be a paradigm of knowing. The way in which the knowing of another person unfolds parallels the progression of dialogue between two or more people, as described above by Peters and Armstrong (1998). We create the potential to know the other, and to know ourselves, being also in constant flux in relation to the world around us.

For Buber, the very nature of language itself is relational – that is, it does not exist outside of its need to be heard. Murphy (1988) explains Buber's position eloquently:

> language...expresses the 'being-with-one-another' which is present between its speakers and its hearers. Their dialogic being is actualized in the language they intend and utter; it manifests itself in the living texture of their speech. (p. 165)

The relationality of Buber's model of knowledge is further extended by the fact that language is charged with the possibility, inevitability even, of disagreement, conflict and contradiction, since speakers can never use language with identical meaning. It is this ambiguous nature of language which makes it ripe for "living, dynamic spokenness," in which resides the potential for new meaning and understanding, and for the evolution of language itself (Murphy, 1988, p. 166). This understanding of language as dynamic and ambiguous parallels the fluidity and imprecision of the interpretive act. It also recalls one of the central themes of collaborative learning, that of the unpredictability of outcomes,

the possibility for challenge to previously held understandings, and the ebb and flow of expressive interaction.

Language and dialogue are also central to Gadamer's (1960/1975) writings on the hermeneutical experience. He likens the interpretation of a text to a conversation between two people. The text and the interpreter are the two partners in conversation, with the object, or meaning, of the text being the thing that unites them. As with a translator of a text in a foreign language, the interpreter must become involved with the text's meaning before s/he can convert the "written marks" (p. 349) into a language which is intelligible to the beholder. In interpretation, as in conversation, the two partners must find a common language. This common language is not merely a tool with which to achieve understanding, "but, rather, coincides with the very act of understanding and reaching agreement" (p. 349-50). Understanding takes place in a linguistic form,

> not that the understanding is subsequently put into words, but in the way in which the understanding comes about – whether in the case of a text or a conversation with another person who presents us with the object – lies the coming-into-language of the thing itself. (p. 341)

In this process, that which is expressed becomes common to both partners. Gadamer also emphasizes the place of the interpreter's own thoughts in contributing to the "re-awakening of the meaning of the text" (p. 350), which are at the same time called into question or "put at risk" (p. 350) and help to make the meaning of the text her/his own. In a conversation, both partners must be open to understanding and to finding value in what is initially alien to them, a concept which recalls the learning mode of "connected knowing" (Clinchy, 1996) discussed above.

The reciprocal nature inherent to the building of meaning between partners in interpretation or conversation is closely linked to the way constructive learning takes place in collaborative learning relationships. Each partner, or interpreter, contributes of themselves, and understanding "takes place in the medium of a language which would allow the object to come into words and yet is at the same time the interpreter's own language" (Gadamer, 1960/1975, p. 350).

Code, Buber and Gadamer point to relationality and language as central to the act of knowing and of finding meaning. Interaction is the locus of meaning, and meaning is as dynamic as language itself. As the key to collaborative learning, interaction also promotes "social relationships, forging new sociocultural bonds and reinforcing old ones" (Falk & Dierking, 2000, p. 99), all of which provides the basis for community.

### Where then, and what, is meaning?

There can, of course, be value in the discovery of objective truths (if they do, indeed, exist – a question beyond the scope of this paper); the discerning or revelation of an artist's original intended meaning can be like an "aha" experience, where curiosity is satisfied and the niggling sense of "not getting it" can, once and for all, be quelled. Similarly, there can be much value in learning about the literary or artistic concerns of a particular era and how they reflect or helped shape the social and political environment of the time.

As another avenue, postmodern approaches to art interpretation contain great potential for critical inquiry, wherein the artwork is used as a tool with which to uncover the many different discourses surrounding its creation and location in the world. Such

approaches seem quite useful for classroom inquiry or other settings where sustained investigation can take place over time; no doubt they can also be adapted to a museum environment where visits tend to be brief and occasional. My intention, however, was to explore a stimulating approach which could be used with a minimum of outside information. I sought an approach which would allow the viewer to truly engage with the artwork, and which would maximize their opportunity to find and express their own voice and meaning.

What about the possibility of the aesthetic experience? Many of us have felt the wonderful sensation of being "transported" by an artwork, as we escape the stresses and trivialities of everyday life and are carried away in blissful contemplation. However, as attested to by Csikszentmihalyi's visitor studies (2000), and by my own experience, most of us are visited by those occasions only rarely. I wonder if a more realistic and attainable kind of "aesthetic experience" is the one to be found when one is intensely engaged in a dialogue with an artwork and another person. In my own experience, and in those of many of the participants who took part in the interpretive response activity of this study, an experience of art viewing can be greatly deepened when it is shared with another. Of course, this will not always happen, and much depends on the particular circumstances of the encounter; however, the occurrence of an engaging and enriching conversation about art between people who are willing is more likely than that of the aesthetic experience described by Beardsley or Csikszentmihalyi.

All of the approaches to interpretive response to art mentioned in this section have value as sources of enrichment, pleasure and educational potential. In order to answer the questions of what is meaning in art and where does it reside, we have to ponder what,

anyways, is the object of learning, and what kind of learning experience is desired. If I am to take a constructivist and collaborative approach to learning, which is the intention of this thesis, then I must conclude that meaning is not an objectively configured form of truth that exists outside of the experience and lifeworld of the individual, and that can be arrived at with the gathering of facts. If the underlying object of learning is to participate in the creative act of being, to construct oneself within the world, to gain agency, and to form and participate in relational communities, which I find that it is, then meaning must be something which originates with and is significant to the experience of the self. Meaning can also flourish in the interactive space of dialogue between two or more people. As the object of this research, I chose to explore an approach to interpretive response and to learning which places the experience of the learner at the centre of her/his inquiry into meaning, and which allows knowledge to grow out of dialogic relationship.

Chapter 3: Research Methodology and Procedure

## **Introduction**

In designing the fieldwork for my research study, I developed a model with which I intended to emphasize the principals of constructive and collaborative learning. I wanted my participants to have full opportunity to be responsible for their own learning, and to be able to develop a voice of their own with which to discover meaningful responses to artworks. I hoped that such an opportunity would increase their confidence in their own creative potential when faced with the challenge of interpreting contemporary artworks. I also wanted them to experience the power of learning with others, not only from the combined contribution of different voices and experience (Peters & Armstrong, 1998), but also in the potential, inherent in collaborative learning, to foster relationship and community (Falk & Dierking, 2000). And I wanted the learning process to reflect the unpredictability, fluctuation, and ambiguity that characterize the relationship of person to person and the dynamic and living quality of the language that is central to that relationship (Code, 1991; Murphy, 1988). In the use of collaborative learning, I was also tapping into the fact that most visitors to museums come in pairs or groups (Hein, 1998), and are therefore already well positioned (and probably to some extent already using) such an approach.

I set up my activities to maximize participants' experience of an interpretive process which was alive to them and which took into account their own experience of the world and self-understanding (Gadamer, 1975/60; 1976), as opposed to emphasizing the

disinterested stance of formalism (Hamblen, 1991), and the questionable paradigm of objectivity (Code, 1991).

As the participants in my model were adult learners, I designed the fieldwork activities to allow them to draw from their deep wells of prior experience and knowledge (Caffarella and Barnett, 1994). Indeed, the literature on museum education points to the fact that this is generally what people do anyway (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Fienberg & Leinhardt, 2002). I was also counting on their capacity as adult learners to tolerate the existence of ambiguity and contradiction as part of their learning process (Bolton, 1990; Kauppinen, 1990); therefore, I did not present them with an approach by which they would arrive at neatly contained interpretations. Moreover, I gave them no information about the artworks or artists they were apprehending, as I wanted them to rely as much as possible on their own powers of interpretation, and to not be tempted to defer to the opinions of an "expert" in the field. I also considered that as adults, they were likely to have highly developed interpersonal skills, thus allowing for positive interactions between them (Spigner-Littles & Anderson, 1999).

In an effort to allow for the participants' own construction of meaning, I envisioned my own role as that of a facilitator/observer with a minimal amount of contribution to the process (Peters & Armstrong, 1998). As consistent with the motivational needs of museum learners (Falk & Dierking, 2000), I allowed for a certain degree of choice when it came to the selection of artworks with which participants would engage. Finally, the design of my activities is a response to the need for new and engaging approaches to education for adult museum visitors (Hein, 1998).

## Methodology

What: This research comprises a) fieldwork in an educational setting where I was facilitator and observer, b) an analysis of the fieldwork results, and c) a literature review. The fieldwork involved museum-based activities for adult participants. The main objective of the activities was for participants to learn and practice tools to use in the facilitation of meaningful interpretive response to works of contemporary art. The activities emphasize collaborative learning through the use of dialogue and discussion. They incorporate questions which take into consideration the dimensions of art response as identified by Robinson and Csikszentmihalyi: cognition, emotion, perception, and communication (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Also considered are such questions as, "what is art for?" and "whose interpretation is most valid?"

Who: I recruited 10 participants by approaching people known to me from various milieux and asking them if they were interested in participating in my research project. One participant is related to me, three are past co-workers, one the husband of one of these, four were sudents who were taking a class in which I was the teaching assistant, and one is a friend of one of these students. These 10 adults, at the time of the fieldwork, ranged in age from their 20's to their 70's. All have an interest in art, but had had no extensive training or experience in contemporary art at the time of the fieldwork. The following participant information was obtained from a preliminary questionnaire (Appendix I):

1. Number of participants per age category:

Age 20 – 30: 1

    31 – 40:  1

    51 – 60:  4

    61 – 70:  3

    71 – 80:  1

2.  Number of participants with the following educational background:

High School:    0

College:       1

University:    9

3.  Number of gallery or art museum visits per year:

none:  0

1 – 3:  5

4 – 8:  3

9 + :   2

4.  Kinds of formal exposure to art (art-making or viewing) experienced by participants
    at the time of the fieldwork:

Four participants said that they had a sustained art practice on a non-professional basis
over a period of at least several years, and all four had taken studio courses in either
academic or non-academic settings.  One participant had taught art to children.  Six
participants had taken one or more art history course at a CÉGEP or University level.

5.  Reasons identified by participants for attending galleries or art museums, and what

they hope to experience:

Six participants identified a desire to experience how artists express themselves and

curiosity about what they have to say as motivation for attending museums or galleries.

The desire to educate themselves about either history, culture, ideas, or self, was listed by

4 participants.  Two mentioned anticipation of being inspired, either in general or in

relation to their own artwork, as motivating factors.  The experience of pleasure was

sought by 3 participants, that of an emotional or spiritual encounter by 2, and a desire to

see original versions of previously known reproductions was listed by 1 participant.

Where and When:  The fieldwork activities took place at the Musée d'art

contemporain de Montréal, at the exhibition entitled *Où*, a group show of contemporary

Canadian art, during the summer of 2004.  The follow-up interviews took place via

telephone.

Artworks chosen to respond to by participant pairs from the exhibition *Où*:

1.  Title:  *Générique* (*Generic*)

Year:  2001

Artist:  Alexandre Castonguay

Materials:  Two computers and software, projector, amplifier and loud-speaker, video

surveillance camera.

Description: Technology-based work consisting of 2 screens. One is a large wall-sized screen, situated in a large room separate from the main gallery space, on which is projected backgrounds of alternating images: a green leaf motif, a blue rippling water motif, and a red fire motif. As viewers move into the room, the white outline of their bodies are electronically sensed and projected in real-time onto the screen. Accompanying this is a series of electronically produced sounds which are triggered by movements of the viewer, and which change in intensity and type as viewers' movements speed up or slow down. The other screen resembles a TV monitor and is located, torso-height, on the wall of a small, adjacent room with gray padded walls. Viewers' movements and the silhouettes of their bodies are also sensed and projected onto this screen, but in different colours on a black background. There is a time delay in the projections and also an after-image shadow effect.

Chosen by 3 participant pairs.


2. Title: *Ntarama* (from the series *Real Pictures*)

   Year: 1995

   Artist: Alfredo Jaar

   Materials: 44 cotton-covered boxes with printed text. 44 Cibachrome prints.

   Description: Installation situated in a small room off the main gallery space. Black boxes measuring 5.2 x 28 x 22.4 cm each are assembled in a neat pile measuring 57 x 56 x 44.8 cm. On top of the boxes are a series of texts which relate the factual story of a woman who, with her daughter, escaped the slaughter of 400 Tutsi men, women and

children by a Hutu death squad during the Rwandan genocide. Each text corresponds to a photograph in one of the boxes; the photographs are inaccessible to viewers.

Chosen by 1 participant pair.

3. Title: *Three Gorges Dam Project, Wushan #11, Yangtze River, China*

Year: 2002

Artist: Edward Burtynsky

Materials: Chromogene development proof, 4/5.

Description: A large, 101.6 x 127 cm colour photograph featuring a scene from the dismantlement-in-progress of a town on the steep banks of the Yangtze River. The background depicts the spectacular, rugged landscape of the Yangtze River gorge, while the foreground features partially demolished brick buildings and a huge concrete culvert. Several men are standing within the remaining walls of a building.

Chosen by 1 participant pair.

## Procedure

The fieldwork involved 5 pairs of adult participants. I worked with one pair of participants at a time to carry out the following set of activities:

1. Before meeting at the museum, participants were asked to fill out pre-questionnaires (see Appendix I and II) to determine certain personal background information, what kinds of formal experiences they had had with art-making or viewing, what they want to

experience when they visit art museums or galleries, and some of their beliefs about art's function and the location of its meaning.

2. Before visiting the exhibition and looking at artworks, I met with the participant pair (3 pairs in the lobby of the museum, 2 pairs at a café close by) and initiated a discussion amongst the three of us based on some of the ideas expressed in the questionnaire in Appendix II (see Appendix III). As part of this discussion, I explained the approaches to learning that I was exploring for this research, i.e. collaborative learning and constructed meaning. This discussion was tape-recorded.

3. Upon proceeding to the exhibition *Où*, each pair of participants was asked to choose (based on interest) an artwork from a pre-determined list of works in the exhibition.

4. Working with their chosen artwork, the two participants discussed the work together using the activity question sheet (see Appendix IV). Each participant was given the question sheet, and each pair were told they could start to answer the questions whenever they wanted during their response to the artwork. They were also told that they could choose which questions they wanted to answer, that there was no need to answer a question if it did not seem relevant to the work. I made myself available to help facilitate discussion if necessary. Discussions were tape-recorded.

5. After an interval of 1 – 3 weeks, I conducted individual follow-up interviews with each participant via telephone (see Appendix V). As we spoke, I made written field notes of their responses to my questions.

6. As part of the activities, I had asked each participant if they would like to do a follow-up activity on their own, which would be as such: "Within the next two weeks of the visit to the museum, visit an art exhibition or artwork with a friend and, based on what we did at the Musée d'art contemporain, explore the work together. Take notes of your observations/responses to the work. In a telephone or in-person interview, I will ask you to tell me about the experience (e.g. was it enjoyable, did you learn from it, was it a satisfying viewing experience?)." All participants said they would be interested in doing this; however, only 2 were able to in the end. For this reason, I decided not to consider this data as part of my research.

## Nature of the Data

Data obtained from this research is qualitative. I analyzed tape-recordings and field notes to gain insight into the experience of the participants, and related my perceptions of the results to relevant theoretical writings to obtain a broader understanding. Of note was what participants said, the level and kinds of interactions they had with each other, and their individual participation level. From the analysis of the conversations I determined whether constructed and collaborative learning took place, and whether dialogue was instrumental in the learning. I also analyzed my function as facilitator/observer, as well as the design of the activities themselves and the kinds of

questions used. The follow-up interviews were also analyzed to ascertain participants' interest, learning and satisfaction levels, as well as whether they felt they had learned skills which would assist them in future encounters with contemporary art.

Chapter 4: Discussion of Findings

## **Introduction**

In this chapter, the main goals are to determine whether learning took place during the activities undertaken by my participants, and what kind, and whether the participants engaged with the artworks they were looking at. The bulk of my analysis is based on the actual conversations which took place between participants while they were responding to artworks. My concern here is not so much about the brilliance or insightfulness of particular interpretations of the artworks, but more to do with whether or not the participants were aided by the interpretive response activities and the collaborative format, in finding responses which had meaning for *them*, and which were created relative to their own context and subjectivity (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994). For example, was their knowledge about or interest in the artwork enhanced (Fienberg & Leinhardt, 2002)? Were there opportunities for self-understanding or self-definition (Falk & Dierking, 2000; Gadamer, 1975/1960)? Were the participants involved in the construction of knowledge in which they collaborated with one another to solve problems (Gerlach, 1994) and to create new and different ideas out of their combined knowledge (Peters and Armstrong, 1998)? Were individuals' underlying frames of reference brought to light and challenged (Mezirow, 1997)? These are the kinds of learning that I am interested in discovering amongst the participants involved in this interpretive response activity.

This chapter also presents a review of the overall design of the interpretive response activity, also in light of the questions posed above. Of particular interest to me

is the effectiveness of the question sheet used by participants as an aid to their response process, and the usefulness of the pre-visit discussion. As well, I will consider my role as facilitator/observer in the process. Finally, I will review the ideas provided by participants themselves in the follow-up interviews, to add to my own conclusions about their learning outcomes.

## Analysis of the Conversations

The following section is concerned with the analysis of the conversations which took place between participants while responding to their chosen artworks. My purpose here is to identify instances of constructive and collaborative learning. The conversations between participants about the artwork lasted between 30 and 45 minutes. Of that time, 5 – 15 minutes were spent in self-initiated discussion, that is, before participants began responding to questions on the question sheet. The majority of examples I use below are taken from the conversation section where the question sheet was in use.

For my analysis of the conversations, I am calling upon two sources which identify the occurrence of constructed learning by pinpointing certain qualifying linguistic features. I have also devised my own set of indicators by which I determined the presence of both constructed and collaborative learning episodes. While I am searching for signs of language which lead the participants to evolve their response to or interpretation of the work they are viewing, I am also interested in the many other forms of meaning which are created in situations of constructed learning, in particular those which I have discussed above in previous sections, and which often overlap with the process of interpretive response. These would include the expansion of interest or

knowledge about subjects either related or peripheral to the artwork itself, and the expansion of understanding between individuals, as seen by forms of connected knowing (Clinchy, 1996) or Buber's idea of relational knowing (Murphy, 1988). I will briefly discuss each type of linguistic indicator and its rationale, and then apply it to my specific data.

Joyce Fienberg and Gaea Leinhardt (2002) looked at the kinds of conversations that took place amongst visitors at a history museum. They identified varieties of talk which expanded ideas and consequently increased the knowledge or interest of the visitors. These researchers noted that visitors having a low level of previous knowledge about the exhibition content more commonly used various forms of personal stories to make the objects they were viewing more meaningful. Amongst the bases of interaction they identified, the use of prior knowledge, the sparking of memory, and personal stories are three indications which seemed to be useful to my participants. Sometimes the information used was tangential to the artwork in question, that is, it wasn't about the work itself, sometimes it was directly related to it; in either case it was instrumental to the constructive process (Fienberg & Leinhardt, 2002). Often these devices were woven together with other linguistic strategies to form rich resources with which to create meaning. Whether both participants were familiar with the story or information related, or only one of them, the result was an expansion of meaning and connection for both participants. Stories and memories sparked often seemed to produce a nostalgic pleasure for the teller (Fienberg & Leinhardt, 2002). The category of stories identified by Fienberg and Leinhardt overlaps with narrative as identified by Soep and Cotner (1999) and discussed below.

Elizabeth Soep and Teresa Cotner (1999) studied the linguistic strategies used by novice adult art viewers to shape meaning contexts with which to interpret an artwork. Their study isolates different speech strategies which show evidence of the use of language as a creative, constructive tool. The authors emphasize a Vygotskian use of language; that is, they see language as not simply an expression of thought, but as a mode through which meaning is produced. The four linguistic, interpretive strategies Soep and Cotner identify are contrast, negation, speculation, and narration. In observing how the conversations played themselves out between my participants, I noticed that while all four of these strategies were in ample evidence, speculation and narrative were particularly present in the creation of meaning, both as simple utterances and as promoters of dialogue which furthered meaning development *between* individuals. As utterances, these examples constitute the evidence of knowledge construction in the Vygotskian sense of how ideas are formed through the use of language; as elements of dialogue, they are part of the "cooking" process described by Elbow (1986) in which ideas are evolved and extended through the building of one person's thought upon another's. I will briefly discuss the function of each strategy and then see how it plays out in my participants' discussions.

Narrative

Humans use stories, or narrative, as a way of processing their experiences in order to discover their meaning and significance (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Falk & Dierking, 2000; Soep & Cotner, 1999). We name experience through stories, and "in the telling of these stories, reaffirm them, modify them, and create new ones. Stories lived

and told educate the self and others" (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000, p. xxvi), reflecting not only events, but "personal and social thought worlds" (Stout, 1997, p. 106).

The telling of stories reflects a process of meaning-making through the selecting, organizing, and patterning of occurrences which are most relevant to us. From our particular context, we imagine the motives and consequences of our experiences, and their connection to our lives. Stories also have a way of making things real and memorable (Stout, 1997).

Soep and Cotner (1999) identify narrative as "an ordering of meaning and not just a sequence of events," where "even small fragments of talk embedded within non-narrative sequences can bear the features of activity, causality, meaningful sequentiality, and resolution characteristic of stories" (p. 363). Moreover, these researchers identify instances where their participants attributed human characteristics to material, and created characters that were human or animal or that sprung from formal elements in the work. Their participants imagined scenarios in which these characters figured, taking on human experiences such as emotion and intent.

Interestingly, two participant pairs in my research used narrative quite extensively in their discussion (5 or 6 segments each within their respective 30 and 40 minute discussions), while the 30 to 45 minute conversations of the other three pairs only contained from 0 to 1 instance of narrative. This could be due in part to the particular artwork that was the focus of the discussion; the two pairs who used narrative extensively both chose the Castonguay piece; however, the third pair who responded to that artwork used narrative only once, very briefly. My guess is that it is more a question of

personality and the style of meaning construction particular to those people. The following will illustrate some of the uses of narrative in the forging of meaning.

Sue and Nicole are discussing the piece by Alfredo Jaar, *Ntarama*, which features closed boxes containing, according to the work's identification label, photos:

Sue:     You question whether the photos are there or not.

Nicole:   Yes.

Sue:     Lately what I've been doing is taking all my photographs from albums and putting them into boxes and each box contains 35 years of my life and my family's life, and it's heavy and thick and rich, so, if he has these photographs in here, it'd be overwhelming for someone to look at them.

Nicole:   Probably. Maybe that's – he was thinking about that. (Darley, September 1, 2004, p. 4)

In this example, photos in boxes remind Sue of an event in her own life (a personal story) which she relays to Nicole. In the process of doing so, she compares the impact of her own photos to that of the ones in the artwork, and arrives at a possible reason for the artist choosing to conceal his photos. Nicole considers this possibility, and is perhaps influenced in the way she views the question of the photos' existence.

In the following excerpt, Lana and Harry are discussing Alexandre Castonguay's interactive work (*Générique*) and the images of themselves which are projected onto the large screen:

Lana:   I wonder if it's being recorded, or if it's just picking up images and that's it.

Harry:  I wouldn't have thought of that.

Lana:   Like an eye witnessing people. Really it's the opposite of what you'd expect

from a painting or art – 'cause usually art doesn't look at you! You look at it.

(Darley, July 28, 2004, p. 3)

Here Lana attributes human characteristics and intent to a machine ("an eye witnessing people") and personifies art ("usually art doesn't look at you!"). From this idea she uncovers another implication of the work, and opens up the broader spectrum of art's meaning and purpose.

Participants Judy and Richard, on the other hand, seemed intent upon creating a narrative as a means of explaining the artwork. A thread of a developing narrative runs throughout their discussion of Castonguay's *Générique*, surfacing at intervals and interspersed with other forms of commentary. Here are a few examples:

Richard: I still think the social significance is that – this represents earth, nature and how

we've taken ourselves out of it. That's why these ghostly figures . . . have

nothing to do with it. We've taken ourselves out to make sure we have nothing

to do with it.

Judy:   They're still white, meaning I guess there's something spiritual about it.

(Darley, August 27, 2004, p. 2)

A few minutes later:

Richard:  I still think it's about how we've taken ourselves out of nature. (Darley,

August 27, 2004, p. 3)


Later still:


Richard:  The noise I just don't – it's just the background noise to man.

Judy:      I wonder if it's the sound of...

Richard:  No – it's just the sound, the sound of zzzzz...

Judy:      Did they ever put a microphone inside a woman when she became pregnant?

(laughs). (Darley, August 27, 2004, p. 5)


And finally:


Richard:  Are we, in this society, by all this stuff, are we being lulled into complacency

so that we can be completely scrutinized?

Judy:      Privacy – is there any privacy.

Richard:  That's it. Everything can be controlled.

Judy:      Computers playing with information, it's what you project –

Richard:  How you hear sounds –

Judy:      How you're being projected by something that's watching you, to other people,

and you get to see it, you get to see what other people see.

Richard:  That we're basically, to other people, we're just those shapes.  (Darley, August

27, 2004, p. 6)

In building an ongoing narrative throughout their discussion, Judy and Richard develop

ideas about humans' existence in contemporary society, our distancing from nature and

the insidiousness of a computerized and impersonal society where because of technology,

there is no privacy.  Richard, particularly, seems to keep the thread running by returning

to previous comments, and Judy builds off his commentary to add her own particular

take: "They're still white, meaning there's something spiritual about it," or "Did they

ever put a microphone inside a woman when she became pregnant?"  Finally, in the last

segment, she adds the idea of how one is perceived by other people, which Richard also

takes up.  Computers are also anthropomorphized as "something that's watching you."

Diane and Ramona are the other pair to use narrative extensively, and are also

responding to Castonguay's *Générique*.  Sometimes it is directly related to the artwork, in

creating meaning about the piece, but other times it is used very differently from Judy

and Richard.  Ramona in particular is often reminded of a story from her life, sparked by

the artwork or by a comment from her partner, Diane.  Some examples follow:

Ramona:  The thing that I noticed first of all when I came in here, and why it really

appeals to me, is movement.  I've always been fascinated by movement.  I

once watched an old man sweeping a floor and realized I was mesmerized by

his hands and the movement of his hands.  So coming in here, I know that this

really appeals to me.  (Darley, August 13, 2004, p. 1)

Ramona recalls a defining moment in her life (in the form of a personal story), and further defines herself in relation to the artwork ("why it appeals to me"). The story also adds depth to the artwork, for both herself and Diane, as it reinforces and adds meaning to the movement (of hands and other body elements) inherent to the work. In the second example, Diane adds her own reaction to Ramona's story:

Ramona: . . . And my image was either a runner, the body in movement, or a horse galloping. Ever since then, I've always looked for both, and admired, or loved looking at both, and guess what?

Diane: What?

Ramona: I got to see a horse galloping last night!

Diane: Really? Why?

Ramona: Because I took my grandson to see someone who owns a horse. And she had the horse gallop. I always like a horse galloping without a rider.

Diane: Oh dear, it makes me think of dead presidents though, I don't know, they have the . . .

Ramona: Oh, it makes me think of freedom! Funny how different we are, eh? Oh because of the procession . . .

Diane: The presidents, yes. Pulling the funeral bier, or whatever. (Darley, August 13, 2004, p. 1-2)

Here, Ramona's story sparks quite a different association for Diane, a more negative one based on her prior knowledge. Again, the story enhances the notion of movement, but for Diane it may not be such a positive addition. The interaction does, however, provide the opportunity for connected knowing, where learners try to broaden their understanding to include others' ideas with which they may not initially feel comfortable (Belenky et al., 1996). Ramona possibly recognizes this opportunity when she says, "funny how different we are." Ramona's story creates a context in which to discover difference and to embrace the challenge of adaptation (Connelly & Clandinin, 2000).

Speculation

Soep and Cotner (1999) write that the linguistic strategy of speculation can be indicated by the use of modal verbs, that is, "could," "would," "might," etc. Their participants imagined "what if" scenarios, "indicating the contingent and inter-related nature of aesthetic interpretations" (p. 361). The use of modals, according to linguists, points to the imagining of other worlds, or the possibility of alternative scenarios. Soep and Cotner found that some of their participants focused on the process involved in the creation of the artwork, thereby speculating on the choices of the artist, and possible different options that could have arisen. My participants used speculation to wonder about the artist's choices and to suggest alternative ones, to imagine the artwork in different contexts, and to guess at technical processes involved in the work. The following examples illustrate these and other instances of speculation.

Sheila and June are viewing Edward Burtynsky's photograph of the *Three Gorges Dam Project* in China and discussing the artist's choice of location of the photo:

Sheila:     It could be purely monetary. I can't imagine someone going up there, and

clambering with all that crap, to take that picture unless he's being very well

paid for it by someone, somewhere in the world. Because there're other –

much closer down the river – so that place must've meant something to him.

June:       It could be that he took a series of photos.

Sheila:     Yes ...

June:       And we're just seeing one. (Darley, August 26, 2004, p. 6-7)

Sheila's speculation serves to heighten the impact of the photo by pointing to the

incredible task of reaching the site. June builds on Sheila's speculation about the motive

of the artist by proposing one of her own, that there actually exists a series of photos

(about which, in fact, she is right).

Nicole and Sue use speculation in several instances throughout their discussion to

envision alternative scenarios for the artwork , as can be seen in the following example:

Nicole:     Well, there's the artist's installation – that I don't really like. Those boxes, if it

was [sic] long it would just be like a coffin. (Darley, September 1, 2004, p. 3)

Later on in the discussion, this comment is picked up again by Sue:

Sue:        I think he could improve on this installation – if he had another set [of boxes]

here, it'd be more coffin-like.

Nicole:   Yes.

Sue:      The fact that it's so structured, he put a lot of thought into it – it's so

          categorized.

Nicole:   Yeah.

Sue:      He could have had these photos, boxes –

Nicole:   Anywhere –

Sue:      Helter-skelter. He's put thought into it, he's organized it. (Darley, September

          1, 2004, p. 7)


Whereas Nicole doesn't seem to like the fact that a small change in the arrangement

could result in a coffin-like shape, Sue thinks this would be an improvement. Sue takes

up Nicole's idea and reconfigures it into something that had a different meaning for her –

an enhancement. Both Nicole's initial idea and Sue's shifting of it sharpen the impact of

the work, where they visualize a stark and tangible object which has a close association

with death, a strong thematic element of the work.

        Harry and Lana speculated often about the technical configuration of

Castonguay's *Générique*, and alternative locations and contexts for the artwork, among

other things. Below is an example of speculation which sparks a discussion about the

work and the nature of art.


Harry:    I think that goes back to what we were saying before, how whoever is in front

          of this artwork has a huge say in what's going on in it. If there was no one in

          here there'd just be the background and the music.

Lana:      Hmm – and then would it be art?

Harry:     Oh boy, don't ask me that.  Um.  I found it was more interesting when more

people walked in – there was a bit of depth, 'cause the further you are from it,

the smaller you are.  So that ...

Lana:      It makes me think of what we were saying before about what does it mean to

interpret a work of art.  We said, if the viewer wasn't there, it wouldn't mean

anything.

Harry:     I think there is that connection going on here.  No question, there's a camera on

the people looking at the artwork.  You said, the viewer becomes the art, that's

exactly what it is ...  (Darley, July 28, 2004, p. 13)


By envisioning the work without any audience, Harry begins an exchange about what

makes an artwork art.  By considering the implications for the artwork at hand, they are

taken to the question of all artworks, and the importance of the viewer in making

meaning is confirmed in both cases.  Here, the specific informs the general, and vice

versa.


### Use of Prior Knowledge

Fienberg and Leinhardt (2002) site the use of prior knowledge as an important

tool used by museum visitors to help build meaning with objects of interest.  This was

also prevalent amongst my participants, as they brought their knowledge from diverse

lives to help inform themselves and their partners.  Below are some examples.

Here Harry and Lana are discussing the movement involved in one of the screens in Castonguay's piece:

Lana:   I dunno, this seems more fun, maybe 'cause there's more room.

Harry:  Could be.

Lana:   So it feels like one of those video games popular right now, the moving ones, where you move around.

Harry:  Like a virtual reality thing.

Lana:   Yeah, where you actually move.  You change things by moving around.

Harry:  Oh yeah, yeah.

Lana:   You use your body.

Harry:  Instead of a joy stick.

Lana:   Apparently in clubs they're doing this kind of thing – I saw a show – where you could dance and you could see yourself dance, so it's using the similar ideas used in pop culture, like clubs and entertainment.  (Darley, July 28, 2004, p. 15-16)

In this segment, Lana relates the artwork to her knowledge of popular culture, and by doing so adds to the potential meaning of the work.

In the following, Judy and Richard discuss the outlined figure images in Castonguay's *Générique*:

Judy:   Oh my God, it's making me think of – you know at a crime scene – the white

tape.

Richard:   That's it.

Judy:      Yeah, the chalk.  (Darley, August 27, 2004, p. 2)

Here Judy adds a possibly sinister element to the work with a prior knowledge reference.

### Other Devices

In this next section, I will explore the use of meaning-building devices which I identified myself as contributing to the engagement with the artwork, the construction of meaning, and the evolution of thought between my participants.  In the listing of these, I have concerned myself with instances where dialogue and the construction of meaning were encouraged *between* participants.  However, there are also occasions when the employment of a device has the effect of furthering the development of thought in its originator (for example, when someone answers their own question), or when the utterance just hangs in the air undeveloped.  In these instances, it cannot be forgotten that the simple voicing of an idea can have the effect of evolving thought in the speaker.

I have divided my selections into two groups: the "A" group comprises a number of devices used by one participant to directly engage or push the other to develop meaning.  They are: a) asking the other for clarification, b) showing the other something about the artwork they may not have noticed, c) asking a question, d) expressing a contrast of opinion to a comment or observation of the other, e) confirming a comment by the other, and f) encouraging the other to offer or go forward with their comment.  The "B" category of interaction involves a kind of exchange which appears to happen organically in the conversation; that is, one person builds off of the other's comment

without any direct prompting or soliciting. I call this, simply, "building." The style of interaction varies between participant pairs. While some engaged extensively in the "A" category of devices, directly engaging or soliciting responses from their partner, others used less of these and the dialogue relied principally on the organic back and forth of building. Still others used a combination of both. Below I give a brief explanation of each device, and present some representative examples.

Group A

a) Clarification: In asking for clarification, the speaker sometimes articulates their interpretation of their partner's comment, which could represent a completely new direction of thought. In other cases, the question is simply expressed as "what do you mean?" In any event, the respondent is encouraged to further develop their idea. In the following, Diane and Ramona discuss the moving images on the screen of Castonguay's *Générique*:

Diane:     It's not ugly movement, it's not square. It's fluid, it flows. It's not square or angular, or ugly, right?

Ramona:   I'd like to hear your interpretation of an ugly movement! . . . I guess maybe you're talking about actions or movements that are hostile? Or aggressive?

Diane:     Well, that's a point, I didn't think of that. I was just thinking of those that are very angular. This has sort of completeness – it doesn't seem to end anywhere, it just goes on and on. (Darley, August 13, 2004, p. 1)

By Ramona asking Diane to clarify her meaning of "ugly," she pushes Diane to expand on her original comment with the idea of "completeness" and continuity.

b) Showing: Often in the course of the conversation, one participant points out either an aspect of the work itself the other has not noticed, or a way of seeing that has not occurred to them. In either case, this kind of talk both allows the speaker to articulate, and thus "know" and possibly develop this thought, and the hearer to expand their own creative process with the new information. Below, Harry and Lana are again discussing the images on Castonguay's large screen:

Harry:  Yes, to me it's like camouflage – makes me think – standing still, you disappear – we're not there.

Lana:   Yeah! That's a really good point. Intriguing! At first when you said "camouflage" I thought you meant pattern, 'cause this reminds me of camouflage, the colours, but I see what you mean, it's more like I'm hiding. (Darley, July 28, 2004, p. 2-3)

In this instance, Harry points out to Lana a way of interpreting the image which had not occurred to her. Lana furthers the idea with the notion of "hiding."

c) Questioning: To ask a question is to involve ourselves with possibility and to examine what we know. The answers to questions are not so important as is the posing of them (Eiserman, 2002). Questions can play many roles. For example, they can be a direct way

of soliciting information from another person, a way to articulate and define a problem

for one's own better understanding, a way of putting out possibilities (like speculation),

or they can be rhetorical. In the following example, Richard and Judy have discovered

that a "surveillance camera" is listed amongst the materials for Castonguay's *Générique*,

and questions become part of their exploration of meaning:


Richard:  Well, who's being surveilled?

Judy:     Well, he's doing two things, he's using a surveillance camera which is

          normally negative, and transforming it into something playful, but it's still bad.

Richard:  Are we being lulled into complacency because of this playfulness?

Judy:     It's true.

Richard:  Are we, in this society, by all this stuff, are we being lulled into complacency

          so that we can be completely scrutinized?

Judy:     Privacy – is there any privacy.

Richard:  That's it.  (Darley, August 27, 2004, p. 6)


In this sequence, Richard asks several questions, seemingly not only as a way of

communicating his thoughts and asking for Judy's input, but also to develop the answers

to his questions himself. Judy doesn't directly answer his questions, but they seem to

help carry the train of thought. Through the combination of these strategies, they both

seem to become more certain of the interpretation they are developing. Judy adds both

her own take, as well as some confirming statements to encourage and strengthen

Richard's.

d) Contrast of opinion: This discussion element often, but not always, has the effect of prompting the other person either to rethink their point of view or to strengthen it, and it often results in an expanded way of thinking. Here, June and Sheila are discussing what makes the Burtynsky photograph of the *Three Gorges Dam Project* art:

June:    But it's the way it was composed too, not just snap, snap, snap.

Sheila:  But he didn't compose it, it was already composed for him.

June:    No, but he could've been standing . . .

Sheila:  Yes, it's true – he had to stand in a certain area. (Darley, August 26, 2004, p. 9-10)

Here June prompts Sheila to consider another way of seeing the artistic composition of a photograph.

e) Confirming: Conversations are often marked by indications from the hearer that they are understanding the speaker and encouraging them to go forward (Soep & Cotner, 1999). Words such as "yeah," "uh huh," and "sure," are amongst a great variety used by the participants in this study. In the following scenario, Harry confirms Lana's statement twice:

Lana:    Really – it's the opposite of what you'd expect from a painting or art – cause usually art doesn't look at you, you look at it.

Harry:     Exactly.

Lana:      In this case, it's looking at us.  Sort of.

Harry:     Oh, very much so.  (Darley, July 28, 2004, p. 3)


The second time Harry confirms Lana's statement, he also strengthens it, where Lana has

modified it somewhat with her "sort of."


f) Encouraging:  Although many of the modes of speech listed here serve to encourage

the other speaker, for example, confirming, questioning, and asking for clarification, I

noted instances within certain pairs where the encouragement seemed explicitly intended

as a prompt when one person was reluctant or lacking conviction.  In the following

example, Diane and Ramona are comparing the two screens that are part of the

Castonguay piece:


Diane:     The other one is more mysterious, isn't it, do you find it more mysterious?

Ramona:  How do you feel?

Diane:     Yeah, I do.  This one is open, to the world.  The other is, as you say, with

           ghost-like figures.  (Darley, August 13, 2004, p. 2)


When Diane looks to Ramona for agreement, Ramona encourages her to say more, which

prompts Diane to expand on her original comment.

As mentioned above, some pairs used these devices extensively, while others relied more on the organic flow of the conversation, as we are about to see below. My feeling is that the variations are due mostly to the different personalities and talking styles of individuals, and to the blending of these between speakers. Also having an influence could be the specific artwork in question, as some may lend themselves more than others to particular kinds of talk. How well the individuals in the pair knew each other prior to the activity at the museum does not appear to be a factor in the frequency and types of linguistic strategies used.

Group B:

The second category considers a type of collaborative learning which I have called "building." This simply refers to the seemingly organic process whereby one participant makes a comment and their partner responds with a comment which further evolves the idea in some way. This can continue in multiple back and forth developments, in the process identified by Elbow (1986) as "cooking," in which "we each successively climb upon the shoulders of the other's restructuring, so that at each climbing up, we can see a little farther" (p. 41). The sequences of building between participants were instrumental in the creation of meaning, and often contributed to the development of their interpretive response to the artwork. Below are some examples of building in action:

Sue and Nicole are discussing Jaar's *Ntarama*. By the "secret box," Nicole is referring to the boxes that are part of Jaar's piece, said to contain photographs of a story from the Rwandan genocide.

Sue:   [reading from the question sheet] "What is the mood and how is it created?" There's secrecy, and I think that a lot of this type of genocide has been swept under the carpet.

Nicole:   And it's unbearable to look at, and ugly.

Sue:   And it's possible they don't want the general population to know all of this.

Nicole:   So it *is* a secret, in a secret box. (Darley, September 1, 2004, p. 5-6)


In this sequence, Nicole and Sue construct a possible reason for the hiding of the photographs in the boxes – an issue which was, for them, the topic of much discussion.

In the next example, Judy and Richard discuss the significance of Castonguay's title:


Richard:   "Generic" today is not special, run of the mill.

Judy:   Standard.

Richard:   Not high level, not low level, right in the middle.

Judy:   It's representative.

Richard:   It's your standard, basic.

Judy:   In a way that's kind of true, 'cause we just walked into it, like we're just this fuzzy image.

Richard:   All the images are generic cause you can't really tell...

Judy:   But you can if you really... but in generic you can still recognize yourself in there. It's a good generic. You make sure you know it's you – he's giving you

all the cues to know it's you. We're all generic, we're all just people, we have

no identity, except that you do recognize yourself.

Richard: By shape only.

Judy: But still you know who it is. (Darley, August 27, 2004, p. 4)


There is a certain amount of back and forth to establish the meaning of "generic," and

then Judy and Richard discuss how it can be applied to the screen images. There is also

here some contrast of opinion, as Judy emphasizes the individuality inherent in the

images, while Richard seems more focused on their lack of definition.

In the next sequence, again referring to the Castonguay piece, Lana begins by

recalling an observation made by Harry a little earlier:


Lana: Actually, the water started looking like something else, when you mentioned

the static. It made me think that maybe it looked like not water, but like

electrical currents or something – but I'll have to see it again.

Harry: Yeah!

Lana: Yeah?

Harry: That's interesting, because the static's electric too.

Lana: Well, that's what I thought, I thought energy.

Harry: So definitely electricity, motion, all that stuff.

Lana: Cool. (Darley, July 28, 2004, p. 6)


Harry's earlier comment has prompted an image of electricity for Lana; Harry then

makes the connection more explicit by articulating it himself, and finally ties the concept of motion into the configuration as well.

With the above examples I give an idea of how the dialogues often flowed in a spontaneous back and forth building of meaning. While I singled out "building" as an organic process, not particularly spurred on by deliberate prompting of one or the other participant in a pair, very often this type of dialogue was also interspersed with one or more of the specific linguistic devices discussed above.

While space does not permit an extensive account of just how the dialogues went, the above analysis provides a few examples of the many instances and ways in which the creation of meaning took place in a collaborative spirit. The styles of interaction were unique to each participant pair: some exchanges seemed to be pushed forward by the interjection of personal narratives; others by a strong need to find a definitive interpretation of the artwork; still others by a high level of curiosity and pleasure in the work itself. To be sure, the collaborative element was present to a greater extent between some partners than others, but from my standpoint as an observer/facilitator, I witnessed a rich evolution of meaning and thought in all five of the participant pairs. The following section considers the role of the question sheet in the creative and collaborative process.

## The Question Sheet

The activity I devised for the use of my participants at the Musée d'art contemporain included a list of questions (Appendix IV) designed to assist them in their interpretive responses. As part of my research, I wanted to gauge the effectiveness of this

list as a teaching aid. How my participants would use the questions, whether there were too many or too few, and whether they would enhance or hinder the process of meaning construction, were some of the questions I was eager to explore. The following is a consideration of the use of this teaching tool with regards to its attributes, defects, and possible improvements and future uses. I am not so much interested in the answers to the questions on the question sheet, but in the kinds of interaction they prompted, if any, and whether they assisted viewers in having a meaningful response.

### How Participants Used the Questions

Participant pairs had been told that they could start using the question sheet whenever they wanted during their response to the artwork, and that they could choose whichever questions seemed relevant. Participant pairs had self-initiated discussions of between 5 and 15 minutes before they began to use the question sheet.

The way the questions were used varied quite a bit between participant pairs. In some instances, the questions themselves prompted only yes/no answers or briefly elaborated responses. In these cases, I often prompted the participants to further explain, and sometimes this resulted in a discussion between the two participants, while other times in simply an elaboration by the original respondent. On the other end of the scale, a question could set off a domino effect of one topic leading to another, sometimes to as many as two or three different in-depth discussions. Some participant pairs' use of the questions was somewhere inbetween these two extremes, or a mixture of the two. In some instances, the questions were read aloud and then answered by the same person who then went on to the next question without waiting for their partner's response. In

other instances, where one member of the pair was more reticent, the other would prompt their partner to give their opinion. In still other scenarios the introduction of the questions seemed to allow for more involvement from a less forthcoming participant. Sometimes a question would already have been answered in the self-initiated discussion, but usually the response would be reiterated, and would prompt some further discussion of the subject. Some participant pairs went systematically through all the questions, while others picked and chose the ones that stood out to them.

Most likely, the differences in responses to and uses of the question sheet are mainly a function of the personal differences between individuals. There are huge variations in the manner in which people interact with others, depending on their background, experience and personality. Moreover, the particular chemistry to come into play between any two people is wildly unpredictable. As Peters and Armstrong (1998) point out, the nature of the relationship between collaborative learning partners plays a significant role in the learning process and content.

It is also possible that some artworks lent themselves more to discussion than others. For example, the Burtynsky photograph of the *Three Gorges Dam Project* is a work which offers the viewer a kind of instant access because it depicts immediately recognizable subject matter, although there are still a number of questions about exactly what is going on in the image. When compared to, for example, Castonguay's *Générique*, the Burtynsky photograph is a more familiar and predictable art form (although Sheila and June's discussion of it did include the question of what makes it art). The Castonguay, on the other hand, required much navigating just to discover how it worked. The participants who chose it were unfamiliar with technology-based art, and

had to work hard to construct meaning (although they all did); these participants may have been more likely to embrace the use of the questions to help them.

From my observations, this learning tool worked well with most of the participants. In the instances where it did not seem to prompt interaction or responses that went beyond surface consideration, there is no definitive answer to be drawn from this research as to the reasons why. As I have suggested above, different personalities, learning styles, and the combinations thereof would have some bearing on the effectiveness of the question sheet, as well as possibly the particular artworks in question.

### The Type and Number of Questions

The questions were chosen to cover a range of possible emotional, intellectual and sensory responses, as well as to draw upon the personal experience of participants and to engage them in questions about the meaning and purpose of art. In retrospect, there are some changes I would make. Question #3 is, "Considering what you have discovered from the above, what could the artwork's meaning or significance be? The following may help you:" and this is followed by a list of possible functions the artwork could fulfill. For future use, I would keep the list of possible functions, because I think these help viewers to consider the wide range of roles that art can play, but I would omit the first part of the question, because it reinforces the idea that there is a definitive interpretation, and such a concept discourages the possibility for numerous and fluid interpretations, which is a goal of constructive learning. I would perhaps replace it with a question which emphasizes meaning that is relative to the viewer.

In question #2, I would place less emphasis on the description of the artwork itself. Too much emphasis on this can serve to keep the artwork at a distance from the viewer, and distract them from their initial, personal responses to the work (Geahigan, 1999).

The questions could also be worded or set up in such a way as to better encourage discussion between partners. For example, some of the questions emphasize a more singular, introspective stance, as in question 1d): "Do you like/dislike it?" Lana, interestingly, upon seeing this question, automatically translated it to "Do we like it?" which seemed to work very well for her and Harry, but would not work for everyone. In the future, I might try something like having partners alternate asking each other the questions. This also serves to place one learner or the other in a facilitator-type role, which would de-emphasize my facilitator role and encourage more autonomy of thinking. I will say more on this issue in the section on my role as facilitator/observer.

Finally, I would consider the length of the question sheet. Obviously people have to be willing to spend the time to use this sheet in its entirety. Most of the participants in my research reported in the follow-up interview (see Appendix V) that the length of time spent was fine, that they were happily surprised that they could spend that much time with one artwork and that it was a rewarding experience. To consider using this type of tool for regular visitors to a museum or gallery, however, would require shortening it considerably, unless it was used within the context of an extended workshop activity. I think the conclusion to be drawn is that the question sheet was an effective tool for collaborative and constructive learning in my particular set-up, but that adaptations could

be designed for other situations. For example, 1 or 2 questions could be posed for discussion for each of selected works in a given exhibition.

### The Nature of the Learning

The kinds of learning prompted by the use of the question sheet are mirrored in the analysis of the discussions as explored above. Most of the examples used in this analysis were taken from the period of discussion in which the question sheet had been taken out and was in use, as this constituted the largest segment of the discussions.

One question which I found provoked many interesting responses was question #6: "Is this art? Why or why not?" In many of the responses, participants discussed the nature of art and sometimes reconfigured their notions of art as a result of their encounters that day. This is valuable in that it prompted participants to define their previously held beliefs, and in some cases, to question their underlying frames of reference, an important outcome in Mezirow's (1997) concept of transformational learning.

Overall, I would conclude that the questions did play a significant role in encouraging dialogue in many instances. Many examples can be cited where the response to a question elicited a comment from the respondent's partner, opening up a brief or extensive exchange. How long the self-initiated discussions (which took place before the question sheets were brought out) would have lasted had the question sheets not been available is difficult to determine, as participants knew in advance that they were to use the questions at some point, and in all but one case (when I suggested they get them out), chose when to begin using them. The questions provided a useful guide

for the participants in this project who, for the most part, were not used to discussing

contemporary art. They further encouraged collaboration by de-emphasizing the role of a

teacher/facilitator who could otherwise have been asking the questions, thereby taking

focus away from the interaction between learners. My role as facilitator and observer in

the whole process will be the focus for consideration in the next section.

## My Role as Facilitator/Observer

My position in this research project was not particularly well defined from the

outset, a situation which provided me with an opportunity for learning. I occupied both

the place of facilitator of the activities at the museum, as well as the researcher and

observer of these activities. As an observer I cannot pretend that I was objective and

disinterested; indeed, I had both an interest in the successful unfolding of the project, as

well as my own biases of being which formed the context from which I viewed the

proceedings. Moreover, as a facilitator of collaborative learning, I had all of my own past

experience of transmission model education to put aside to make way for a forum which I

had experienced only in relatively small intervals. On top of this, I also had the function

of observer to cloud my position as facilitator. To the two roles of facilitator and

observer, I added that of learner. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this review, I will try

to separate the three roles to determine how they unfolded throughout the process, and for

this discussion, I shall mainly be concerned with my role as facilitator.

As facilitator, my main goal was to assist in the process of constructive and

collaborative learning. In a collaborative learning environment, to facilitate such a

process means that the conventional teacher/student relationship is replaced by one of co-

learners involved in the construction of knowledge, with equal input and authority of voice (Peters & Armstrong, 1998). The difficulty of this was that I was not a co-learner in the same sense as the participants, because I was observing their interaction in order to see how it unfolded, which meant that I was not participating myself on an equal basis. This immediately set me apart, and this fact along with the participants' knowledge of me as a researcher in the field of art, as well as the one orchestrating the whole thing, placed me in a position of having knowledge that my participants did not. For example, it was assumed in some cases that I knew more about the artists and artworks than did my participants, which was at times true. Then it was a question of whether to share my knowledge. I did indeed do so at times, and with different motivations. At times I succumbed to the desire to be seen as knowledgeable, at other times I wanted to help them to push their response forward by providing some information. For example, I directed participants' attention to their being responsible for the creation of sound in the Castonguay piece when it did not seem that they were going to discover this on their own. Or, I reminded participants to check the title of the work they were looking at. On the other hand, I also at times asked participants to fill me in with their own outside knowledge. While it is not unreasonable for a facilitator to contribute their knowledge as long as it is not considered authoritative (Peters & Armstrong, 1998), as I was not a true partner in collaborative learning, my input was not on equal grounds with that of the others.

In short, I was neither a true observer, nor a true facilitator. Given this imperfect scenario, I tried my best to follow the principals of collaborative learning (Peters & Armstrong, 1998). For example, I modeled positive regard for all contributions to the

learning process, in an effort to encourage the development of each person's voice. I attempted to emphasize knowledge built *between* learners, by urging the input of both partners in a pair. I applauded learning that was related to the experience of the learners. In those exchanges where participants entered easily into a collaborative learning partnership, I was more of an observer, although I still periodically interjected. In cases where dialogue did not flow so easily, I entered into the role of facilitator and interjected quite frequently to try to increase the flow or to ensure equal participation. This less than "hands-off" position I found myself in, however, did not serve to help foster the participants trust in the collaborative process by equalizing all roles.

My reasons for interjecting varied, and included prompting a participant to elaborate on an answer, encouraging responses from a less active participant, offering suggestions or hints when learners seemed "stuck" with a problem, supplying outside information when asked of me, asking for clarification on outside knowledge supplied by a participant, clarifying a question on the question sheet, and asking a question to push the discussion further. These to me were the obvious actions of a facilitator, based on my own past experiences as an educator; however, the role of facilitator was not equally shared as it would be in an ideal collaborative situation (Peters & Armstrong, 1998). Therefore, I was in the position of neither true collaborative learning partner, nor true observer.

In spite of my own nebulous role in the process, and the fact that my function may not have been very clear to my participants, I did witness collaborative learning in action during these activities. The other positive outcome concerns my own learning in this process. I found the entire fieldwork experience to be not only totally enjoyable, but also

filled with learning opportunities for myself. From the interactions with my participants I learned much about looking at art, as well as about collaborative learning and facilitating. As a researcher, I have concluded that if I do further fieldwork with collaborative learning, I will choose to inhabit *either* the role of facilitator/co-learner, or that of observer, rather than trying to straddle both chairs at once, although I am aware that it is never possible to fully separate the two.

## The Pre-visit Discussion

This discussion was about the nature and purpose of art and the meaning of interpretation and (based on questions in Appendices II and III). Its goal was twofold. First, I wanted the participants to think about and open their minds to the many possibilities concerning the nature and meaning of art, in order to deepen and broaden their experience and engagement with the art they were about to see. Second, I hoped that they would consider, if they hadn't already, the many sources of interpretation available for responding to an artwork, including oneself. To further emphasize this last point, I briefly explained to them the underlying concepts of my research, namely constructive and collaborative learning, and how these could be applied to art interpretation.

The discussions were lively and provocative. Although there is no real measure of their effect on the participants' experience of the art-viewing, the fact that the participants engaged enthusiastically in the discussion topics leads me to believe that the conversations achieved the first part of their goal. As for the second part, everyone agreed that meaning could be found in a number of places, including the viewer's own

construction, art critics' interpretations, and the artist's intention. However, the degree of *importance* and authority of the artist's intended meaning varied between participants. From the pre-visit discussion to the follow-up interviews, all participants maintained their original opinions on where the source of meaning in an artwork is to be found, and what role the intended meaning of the artist plays.

As far as explaining to the participants the idea of constructed and collaborative learning, Peters and Armstrong (1998) suggest that this should not be done when trying to establish a collaborative learning environment, because it is counter to the goal of de-emphasizing the "teacher" as the source of knowledge. Instead, learners should be involved in the collaborative spirit right from the start. I chose to ignore this principal because I felt that I needed to provide my participants with a context for what they had agreed to take part in, and secondly, for the sake of expediency.

The pre-visit discussions were stimulating and revealing, and could in themselves be very useful and educational in any setting where art response is a focus. They provided an opportunity for participants to define and articulate ideas about questions which we often assume we have answers to and which are shared by others, but which are rarely critically examined and articulated. By their philosophical nature, they provide much scope for exploration and connection to both practical and ideological applications. I have to admit that I was a little disappointed that some participants still were quite intent on knowing what the artist's intended meaning was, before and after the museum activities. However, the fact that this information was still important for some, even though they were able to find their own meaning and were often quite happy with that, leads me to question why that might be, exactly what role this source of information

plays in people's art-viewing experience, and how they use this information. These are all questions for future consideration.

## Correlation of Participants' Background Information and Learning Outcomes

I examined the participants' background information gleaned from the pre-visit questionnaire (see Appendix I and Methodology) to see if these responses had any correlation to the ease with which participants entered into collaborative learning relationships, their ability to construct meaning and the kinds of meaning they made. Frequency of annual visits to galleries or art museums, age, education background and amount of formal involvement with art making or viewing does not appear to have any relation to these propensities. There are, in a couple of cases, quite possible links between what participants identified they hoped to experience during visits to galleries or art museums (question # 3) and the kinds of meaning they constructed from their encounters with artworks during the fieldwork activities. For example, Sheila indicated on the questionnaire that she liked to appreciate talent when she visited galleries, and in her response to the Burtynsky photograph, she concentrated many of her observations on the detail of the image and the technical accomplishment displayed by the photograph. Ramona wrote, in response to question # 3, that she liked to learn about her own reaction to art. Her response to the Castonguay piece included many references to her way of perceiving the world (for example, "I personally find movement of any kind beautiful" [Darley, August 13, 2004, p. 1]), as a way of contextualizing her reactions to the work. More generally, those who listed curiosity and the pursuit of pleasure as motivations for going to art museums did certainly display these sentiments in their responses to the

artworks, but so did most of the other participants as well. The responses to questions # 2 and 3 do not appear to have any correlation with participants' ability to enter into collaborative learning relationships. The latter seems more dependent on the personalities of individual participants and the combinations thereof; however, this study was not designed to venture into this particular realm of variables.

In the final section of the analysis, I will consider what the participants themselves had to say about their experience of the activities, and how they described their own learning outcomes.

## The Follow-up Interviews

To add to my own conclusions about the learning experiences of the participants, I also consulted the follow-up interviews I conducted with each participant individually to determine what their own impressions of their learning were. In response to questions #6 and 7, of the 10 participants, 9 said they'd learned something or changed their ideas about ways of looking at art (the 10th person said it had reinforced what she already thought). Amongst the things people reported having learned in this category were: how to think things through, that spending that much time with an artwork can be very rewarding (5 people), that one can learn a lot more by talking about it with someone and building off each others comments (3 people), that there can be a lot more to say when you're with another person, that an artwork can have many different meanings and there are many different ways of looking at an artwork, that one can learn experientially from an artwork, that one can interact with an artwork, that one can learn on one's own (as opposed to from a teacher) (2 people) and that this can be more fun and provide more

freedom, that learning about art can be a community experience, that it can engage all of the senses, and that one can always be more open to new kinds of art (2 people). Five people said that this experience had changed their views about contemporary art (question #12), making them more open to it, while the other 5 said they had already been open to it. Although there was no direct question about it, 4 of the participants reported having learned about their partners, while 2 mentioned they had learned something about themselves. In answer to question #5, 9 people said they had learned about the artwork they were looking at. One person reported that she did not go to museums to learn, that she preferred just to experience looking, to like or dislike what she saw and then to leave.

In hindsight, I would have asked the participants directly whether they were satisfied with what they'd learned about the artworks. Given that I didn't, however, I attempted to ascertain something close to this information by the comments and answers to other questions, which I will summarize here. One person reported resoundingly that what he got out of the experience was "the ultimate result," and so I would assume that he was satisfied. For the rest, I considered what they had to say about the importance of knowing the artist's intention, since this had been a topic of our pre-visit discussion, and since they did not have access to this information before or during the visit. Two people said that they would like to have known more about the artist's intention, but that it wasn't crucial. Another 2 said that while the artist's intended meaning was always interesting to know, it wasn't that important. One participant reported that the artist's intention was always important to know. Another stated that she would hope that she had understood what the artist's intention was (by which I interpreted that she felt she had). One said she would like to know this artist's intention, another stated that both her own

and the artist's were important, and finally, one said she didn't like to interpret or to probe into an artwork. There can be no definitive answer to the question of satisfaction, but some idea of one possible element of satisfaction can be gathered by these responses.

I would conclude from the responses to the interview questions that participants also felt that they had learned from this experience. I would also guess, although I didn't ask them this directly, that from the amount reported on learning about ways of looking at art, that at least some would feel an increased level of confidence when approaching new or different art forms.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and Implications for Further Study

This research was carried out to determine how, with the use of dialogue as a reflective tool, collaborative and constructive learning can be applied to a museum environment where adult viewers are developing interpretive responses to contemporary artworks. This approach was meant to help demystify the process of interpretation for adult viewers who do not have a background in contemporary art, and who may otherwise feel intimidated or unequipped to come up with responses. My main concerns were to discover whether participants would engage in collaborative and constructive learning and if this approach would help to enrich and deepen their experience with contemporary artworks. The following are my conclusions to this inquiry.

In the analysis of the conversations, through the use of certain linguistic strategies I determined that indeed, in most instances participants' responses to the artworks they had chosen to look at were deepened and broadened through the collaborative building of meaning. The majority of participants easily formed collaborative learning relationships, and through the use of dialogue, combined their prior knowledge, experience, and all else that they brought with them as individuals, to build on and create new and expanded meaning. Together they formed questions, articulated ideas and solved problems posed by the mysteries of the artworks they apprehended. They expanded their knowledge of one another and were exposed to each other's sometimes contrasting ideas and diverging frames of reference. They spoke of their own experience of the artworks and surprised themselves with how much they had to say without needing to rely on the voice of an authority. From the follow-up interviews and the reports of their own learning, I can

surmise that the participants in this research will have learned some new skills with which to approach and respond to contemporary art. It would have been ideal to have interviewed the participants at a much later date to determine whether they had been able to apply what they'd learned to subsequent visits to museums or galleries, but such is the limitation of this study. In hindsight, I would also have questioned participants more directly about their own levels of satisfaction concerning their responses to the artworks.

Although the specific set-up of the response activities could be altered and refined depending on time constraints and particular circumstances, the question sheet proved to be useful in providing a framework through which participants could engage in conversations about the artworks. One thing that this research cannot determine, however, is whether museum visitors would use this tool independently of a facilitator or without the context of a study in which they were being instructed to do so. Further studies would be required to determine this. The pre-visit discussion produced thoughtful and stimulating interchange, and could be a useful approach to questions about the role of art and the location of meaning. The role it played in facilitating participants' responses to and engagement with artworks is unclear, however, and further research would be needed to determine whether this kind of discussion helps to open up viewers' minds towards contemporary artworks and to a constructive learning approach.

The ease with which the participants in this study entered into collaborative learning relationships did not seem to be dependent on their age, education level, or even their previous relationships with one another, but the study did not explore these or other possible contributing factors in depth. Future research could examine questions to do with the varying backgrounds of adult visitors to museums. For example, how does

cultural background effect people's willingness and ease with which they enter into collaborative relationships with others? Do those whose backgrounds emphasize community and collectivity find this an easier task than those from cultures which value individuality above collectivity? One could also explore age and education level to determine whether these demographics play a role in adult visitors' ability or willingness to construct knowledge.

I structured this research to consider scenarios in which viewers' access to information about artworks and artists was limited to that which was supplied on the identification labels accompanying each work. I chose to work within this limitation because I wanted the participants to have the maximum opportunity to rely on their own construction of knowledge, without being tempted to defer to other information. Further research could explore whether viewers' levels of satisfaction would be altered by the addition of outside information, and how this would affect their own construction of knowledge. It would also be interesting to consider how different sources of information, for example, the artist's own words versus those of art critics or educators, could affect outcomes of constructed learning and satisfaction levels.

Finally, as noted in my discussion, in future research involving participants, I would, from the outset, be clearer about my own roles as facilitator, observer and researcher. Perhaps a more thorough inquiry into the literature on qualitative research would help me in this respect, and I have already gained a certain amount of insight from this experience.

As an overall approach to adult learning in response to works of contemporary art, I am satisfied that collaborative and constructive learning through dialogue constitute a

viable and desirable model for a museum environment. Further research could be extended into how visitors to museums could use this model in different configurations, for example, independently of a facilitator. In the larger picture, I see a great need for research into how museums and galleries can refocus their education agendas to encourage constructive and collaborative learning as a means of engaging visitors. It is my feeling that a large part of the bewildered alienation that many viewers and potential viewers of contemporary art feel is not a result of something inherent to the artworks themselves; it is rather the social and historical context in which art has been positioned which fosters an elitist aura around contemporary (and even, for some, more traditional) art forms. This is a complex situation with many components, including the failure of museums and galleries to present artworks in such a way as to encourage viewers' ability to relate them to their own realities. As well, the environments which house art, especially those comprised of large, austere, cathedral-like halls, may promote silent awe and admiration, but possibly to the detriment of the average visitor's comfort and ease with which to navigate their contents and connect them to their own lives. Moreover, most educational tools in art museums are of a didactic nature, an approach which further acts to still the imagination and initiative of many visitors. Exactly how museums can promote interaction amongst adult visitors, and encourage them to use their own experience and knowledge to construct meaning is a huge question for much further thought. My research presents the use of collaborative learning in a museum setting as a viable approach, but this approach needs to be further explored considering other learning situations and configurations.

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*Appendix I*

**Participant information**

1.  How often do you go to galleries or art museums?

    never                      ☐
    1 – 3 times per year   ☐
    4 – 8 times per year   ☐
    9 + times per year     ☐

2.  What kind of formal exposure to art (art-making or viewing) have you had in the past?  Eg. courses, workshops, etc.

3.  Why do you go to galleries or art museums?  What do you hope to experience?

4.  Age:        20 – 30 ___
                31 – 40 ___
                41 – 50 ___
                51 – 60 ___
                61 – 70 ___
                71 – 80 ___

5.  Education Background:    High School ___
                            College      ___
                            University   ___

*Appendix II*

**Pre-Visit Questionnaire**

|  | always | never | some-times |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. An artwork should teach us something. | | | |
| 2. An artwork should add beauty or pleasure to the world. | | | |
| 3. An artwork can be said to contain meaning. | | | |
| 4. The artist's interpretation of an artwork is the most valid interpretation. | | | |
| 5. An artwork should move us emotionally. | | | |
| 6. An artwork should mimic realistically the visual world. | | | |
| 7. An artwork should provide insight into or comment on some aspect of society or humanity. | | | |
| 8. An artwork should display technical accomplishment. | | | |

*Appendix III*

**Preliminary Discussion Questions**

Participants will refer to their Pre-questionnaires (Appendix II), which address some of these questions.

1. What are some different functions of art?

2. How important is it to be able to read the artist's intention from a work?

3. What does it mean to interpret an artwork?

4. What does it mean to respond to an artwork?

*Appendix IV*

**Interpretive Response Activity** (each participant will have a copy of this)

With your partner, discuss the following questions as they pertain to your chosen artwork. You need not respond to a question if it does not apply to the artwork. (Time: aprox.30 min)

1.  What is your initial reaction to the artwork? Consider, for example:
a)  Is there an emotional impact?
b)  Is it thought provoking?
c)  Does it remind you of anything?
d)  Do you like/dislike it?

2.  Can you identify what in the artwork inspired your initial reaction? Consider, for example:
a)  What is the mood, and how is it created?
b)  What is the subject matter? How do you know this?
c)  How do the formal elements relate to the above aspects of the work (eg. colour, line, shape, texture, composition (the way different elements are arranged in relation to one another), rhythm, order/disorder, size)?
d)  Is there a story contained in the work? (explain)
e)  Does it have any personal or social significance? (explain)

3.  Considering what you have discovered from the above, what could the artwork's meaning or significance be? The following may help you:

Does this artwork:

a)  record history

b)  teach or inform you about something

c)  give pleasure or entertainment

d)  display technical accomplishment

e)  offer insight into the human condition

f)  make a political or social comment

g)  express or elicit emotion

h)  transport you to another place, time, realm..

i)  mimic the visual world

j)  tell a story

k)  have a personal significance

l)  present a particular worldview

4.  What are 3 or 4 questions you could think of that this artwork inspires?

5.  Pick 2 questions you would like to try to answer, and explore these. It is not so important to actually arrive at a definite answer as it is to just explore possibilities.

6.  Is this art? Why or why not?

*Appendix V*

**Follow-up interview questions**

1. Did you enjoy these activities?

2. Were they too long/long enough?

3. Which part(s) did you like the best? The least? (explain)

4. Did you learn something from the activities? If so, what?

5. Did you learn about the artwork you were looking at?

6. Did you learn about new ways of looking at artworks in general?

7. Did this change any of your ideas about the ways we should look at art?

8. Was anything missing from these activities?

9. Can arriving at one's own conclusions about the meaning/significance of an artwork take the place of learning about the artist's intention?

10. How important is it to know what the artist's intention is?

11. Is there one correct way to interpret/respond to a given artwork?

12. Does this experience change your views about contemporary art? (explain)

13. For you, how does learning collaboratively with another person compare to more traditional ways of learning on your own?

14. How does this art-viewing experience compare with past, non-assisted viewing experiences?

15. Would you use any of the approaches we used today on your own (or with friends) in future visits to art galleries?

16. What should museums/galleries do to assist viewers?

*Appendix VI*

## CONSENT FORM TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

This is to state that I agree to participate in a program of research being conducted by Catherine (Kate) Darley of the Department of Art Education of Concordia University. She can be contacted at (514) 270-1269 or (email) kdar@alcor.concordia.ca.

## A. PURPOSE

I have been informed that the purpose of the research is as follows:
To observe how adult viewers respond to and make sense of contemporary artworks using dialogue as a tool for reflection and collaborative learning.

## B. PROCEDURES

The research will be conducted at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal. The following procedures will be enacted:

1. Upon meeting at the museum, participants will be asked to fill out pre-questionnaires.

2. At the museum, participants will take part in a discussion based on some of the ideas from the pre-questionnaire. This discussion will be tape-recorded.

3. At the museum, participants will work in pairs on a pre-determined activity. The activity involves the discussion of a contemporary artwork, guided by a set of prompting questions. The researcher will be available to help facilitate discussion if necessary. Discussions will be tape-recorded and the researcher will take field notes of observations.

4. At a subsequent date, participants will be interviewed about their impressions of the experience, either in person or by telephone.

5. Each participant will be asked to do a follow-up activity within approximately two weeks of the first activity (timing flexible), which involves visiting an art exhibition or artwork with a friend and exploring a chosen artwork together, based on the activity done with the researcher. Participants will be asked to take notes of their observations/responses to the work. In a telephone or in-person interview, the researcher will ask the participant to tell her about the experience (e.g. was it enjoyable, educational or satisfying?).

**Time commitment required (travel time not included):**

Pre-questionnaires:          5 – 10 minutes
Museum meeting/activity:     1 ½ - 2 ½ hours
Follow-up interview:         20 - 30 minutes
Follow-up activity:          30 – 60 minutes

Note: During the museum visits, participants may be required to be on their feet for up to an hour, depending on availability of seating.

## C. CONDITIONS OF PARTICIPATION

- I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time without negative consequences.
- I understand that data from this study may be published.

## D. CONFIDENTIALITY

Please check one:

___I **agree** to have my first (given) name used in any written results of this research, published or unpublished.

___I **do not agree** to have my first name used in any written results of this research, published or unpublished.

I HAVE CAREFULLY STUDIED THE ABOVE AND UNDERSTAND THIS AGREEMENT. I FREELY CONSENT AND VOLUNTARILY AGREE TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY.

NAME (please print)

_____

SIGNATURE

_____

*If at any time you have questions about your rights as a research participant, please contact Adela Reid, Research Ethics and Compliance Officer, Concordia University, at (514) 848-7481 or by email at* areid@alcor.concordia.ca.