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EDITORIAL ANNOUNCEMENT — THE NEW DESIGNS FOR LEARNING

By this issue we present some changes of the journal. It will still have its profile on design and learning, and it will still be edited from Sweden and Denmark. However, its institutional basis has changed. In Sweden, LearningDesignLab has moved to the Dept. of Computer- and Systems Sciences (DSV) at Stockholm University in Kista, and in Denmark ILD – Forskningsslab I IT og Læringsdesign has moved to the Dept. of Learning and Philosophy at Aalborg University in Copenhagen. To celebrate these changes, we have decided to give the journal a bit of a new graphical profile. There have also been some changes in the Editorial Board, as well as in the Advisory board. And we have engaged Versita to help us with getting articles into all relevant data-basis.

In this issue, we have invited Professor Gunther Kress at Institute of Education in London to be co-editor for a special issue on multimodality, design, and meaning making in museums.

Staffan Selander & Birgitte Holm Sørensen
Introduction to the special issue on museum identities, exhibition designs and visitors’ meaning-making

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Recently a group of scholars from Sweden and (a smaller group) from the UK, came together and worked on a project “‘The Museum, the Exhibition and the Visitors: Meaning making in a new arena for learning and communication’ (funded by the Swedish Research Council - Vetenskapsrådet). As the title indicates, the frame set for the project was large and ambitious. At the largest it was an attempt to look at a the change which has affected museums over significant slice of history, and tracking in outline what that change had been about; at the smallest level, looking in great detail how one might document the processes of learning in an exhibition. In between these two poles, the project examined various aspects of two contemporary museums: the Museum of National Antiquities in Stockholm, and the Museum of London, in London, UK. In that space between the meta-level historic sweep, and the micro-level of individual learning was the interaction of curators and visitors, seen through a lens not so much of communication than of learning – or rather, in the light of our sense of the histories of this institution, learning seen as the fundamental instance and purpose of communication in this site.

Clearly we needed to draw on the understandings brought by historians of the Museum, on ethnographers who were engaged with Museums; scholars whose background might be seen as Museology (as a hybrid/species of Sociology and Cultural Studies); of Sociology; and inevitably, given the focus on ‘learning’, scholars whose business it is to think and know about education. The project drew on researchers from Stockholm University, the University of Umeå, Halmstad University College, and from Institute of Education in London. Inevitably, given that the project happened while all around there
was profound social change, museums were urged by their paymasters (the various government agencies, local and national) to respond to these. At the same time profound changes in media technologies were taking place at an accelerating pace. Both were beginning to affect museums in far-reaching ways. In relation to the latter, the London Knowledge Lab (LKL), with its focus precisely on the effect of the ‘new technologies’ in environments of learning, was a very good place to involve in the project.

The profound changes in what museums are and what they are expected to achieve, led to a range of different kinds of questions: from ‘why should we have museums?’ to ‘for whom do they exist?’ to ‘what should museums focus on and present? and ‘how should museums construct their exhibitions as environments for learning’? Contemporary political demands as well as new technologies raise the question of exhibition designs as much as the role of the object in a world that is both physical and digital. One large political and social question concerns the role in conditions of intense social diversity and fragmentation. How can the museum address an audience that brings with it into the museum an unknowable degree of difference? Do the new technologies offer any means of tackling such issues?

So the question becomes one of communication conceived in its aspect as a process of learning. At that point the various disciplines which we had brought together needed some means of intellectual cohesion and coherence, some theoretical cement. Social organization founded on hierarchies did not face or need to deal with the problems that surround learning now. Transmission models of teaching met metaphors of learning as acquisition; the power of institutions saw to it that authority was not challenged: where it was not accepted, then its internalized rejection and refusal acted, just as much as its acceptance, to buttress the hierarchical models of learning. The agency of the visitor – at least ostensibly – exhausted itself in ‘absorption’; and the multiple choice questionnaire which was offered to some visitors (to school-children, certainly) contained the truth of the exhibition disguised as a riddle.

We realized that if this project was to achieve anything useful and plausible it needed more than the recruitment of fancy new gadgets (which we did recruit); it needed a plausible theory of communication. That theory would move away entirely from the early 20th century assumptions about communication, founded on power and hierarchy (epitomized in the middle
of the century by the Shannon and Weaver model of Sender-code-receiver model; though earlier also the foundational assumptions of the stimulus-response models of behaviourist psychology). Those models conformed with the hierarchically ordered, structuralist nation state and its economy. The contemporarily plausible, apt model, would recognize that it is the interpreter who, in communication, guarantees the success or otherwise of the interaction. Communication happens when a participant in the interaction has interpreted what she or he has taken to be a prompt in communication and for interaction.

In the classroom it means that it is learners who decide and define whether communication has taken place or not. It is their interpretation of the teacher’s presentation as prompt which is central and crucial. In the museum, it is the visitor, whose interpretation of (elements of) the exhibition guarantees communication – and thereby learning. This moves away entirely from the multiple choice questionnaire which had set the agenda and attempted to engage the visitor in some faux action-as-evaluation.

In that context, our innovative move was to make the response of the visitor central. We devised a simple practice that would give us insight into what the visitor had taken as prompts and how she or he had interpreted those prompts. This corresponded at one stroke to the givens of the contemporary period in which the interest of the consumer decides engagement in the question: what? and shows interpretation in how an element of the exhibition is transformed/interpreted. We have used the term signs of learning for these elements. In several of the papers in this issue that notion is explained and developed.

This notion arises out of the notion of ‘agency’ used in the theoretical and methodological frame of social semiotics. Here the ‘interest’ of the agent is central in the always motivated formation of the sign: and that interest can then legitimately be the subject of hypotheses about the interest giving rise to the interpretation, and its meaning. In the context of the classroom, this theoretical frame offers the possibility, at last, of a genuinely learner centred pedagogy. In the Museum, the approach places visitors and their interest at the centre, in the context of a plausible theoretical frame and replicable methodology. We think this presents a fundamental shift in direction.
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