

HOW IS “MEANING MAKING” DEFINED IN PUBLICATIONS LISTED IN THE PSYCINFO DATABASE (APA PSYCNET) BETWEEN 1991 AND 2025?*

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Abstract

Analysis of the 65 entries in the PsycINFO database (APA PsycNet) provided some descriptions of the meaning-making process and the identification of some of its components that can support future research, but which also raise questions that could guide such research.

Keywords: *Meaning-making processes, meaning-making components, mental operations, museums.*

1. Introduction

Silverman (1995) considers the introduction of the concept of meaning-making in the museum field to be a paradigm shift. One is tempted to agree with him, as this introduction means that museum visitors cease to be mere receivers and memorizers of information. As they move through exhibition halls, they are transformed into producers, or if one prefers, creators of meaning.

Furthermore, since 1995, the number of publications associating meaning-making and museums has literally exploded (Hutchinson and Eardly, 2020; Taylor, 2006). Indeed, the general databases Google Scholar and Eric, consulted in September 2025, show 1,500,000 and 413,274 entries respectively! However, a quick analysis of the first 25 pages of both databases reveals that, in more than three-quarters of cases, meaning-making is used as a buzzword whose meaning is vague, fluid, or, at best, equivalent to learning, cognitive functioning, or even expression of emotions. So, seeking to define what meaning-making truly means for the museum world cannot be considered an act of pedantry or a way to alleviate boredom; it is, in fact, a worthwhile endeavor.

I hoped to find one or more reliable definitions by analyzing, using the combination of the terms "meaning-making-and-museums", the 65 entries indexed in the PsycINFO database (APA PsycNet), as the American Psychological Association has a reputation for including only research of great rigor.

The following text first presents the database and its contents, then the analysis performed on it, along with its results. It concludes with some perspectives inspired by the disappointing nature of these results.

2. The database and its content

PsycINFO (APA PsycNet) lists 48 texts published between 2022 and 2025. These texts include primarily journal articles (38), but also book chapters (7), critical reviews (2), and a journal editorial. Four of the articles had to be rejected after review because they dealt with learning rather than meaning-making. Thus, the analysis ultimately focused on only 44 texts.

The database also lists dissertations. In fact, it provides a list of 17, the earliest dating from 1991 and the latest from 2022. Only the last 16 were selected for analysis, as the very first one lacked an abstract, and the university to which I am affiliated was unable to provide me with the full text of the dissertation.

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3. Analysis, key elements (points)

3.1. Text analysis

For each text, the following were noted: its title; the journal or book in which it was published and the field to which it belongs: psychology, communication, health, for example; its author(s); the type of museum in which the research was conducted (science, art, ethnology-archaeology-history); the category of visitors involved (children, schoolchildren, adults, groups); the type of investigation carried out (experimentation, description-analysis of a situation, theoretical study); the means used to collect information (field notes, observation or video, questionnaire, interview); the time when the information was collected (during the visit versus after it had ended); the situation in which the visitors found themselves (visit to an exhibition versus participating to an educational or cultural program offered somewhere in the museum galleries); the definition of meaning-making; and, where relevant, the results of the research conducted.[†]

The aim of such a thorough analysis of the texts was to contextualize each definition by means of the points with which it was associated and, where applicable, to identify constants such as: definition A appears consistently when the researcher works in a science museum with schoolchildren and obtains information from them through a questionnaire; conversely, definition B is associated with research conducted using videos in art museums and with families participating in a cultural program...

3.2. Analysis of the theses

Since the full text of the theses was not available in the database, nor, it seems, from any university other than the one where they were deposited, the analysis had to be based on the abstracts provided by the database. And, as the length and precision of these abstracts varied considerably, only the definition of meaning-making was extracted.

4. Results

4.1. Fields of study of the analyzed texts

The 44 texts studied cover a wide variety of fields: especially psychology, education, communication, and health, but also digital technologies, sociology, art or art history, museology, and leisure. This abundance and diversity of fields, as one might expect, makes it unlikely that data or definitions could be cited in texts other than the one in which they are presented.

Regarding the 16 theses, their subject matter appears to exhibit a similar dispersion.

4.2. Evolution of the number of texts and theses

The first texts date only from 2002, but they subsequently experienced significant growth. Indeed, there were 15 from 2002 to 2010, then 21 from 2011 to 2020, and 12 from 2021 to 2025, a period of only 5 years. This significant increase over a period of just 20 years should have generated numerous cross-references. However, this is not the case, probably due to the wide variety of fields covered by the texts, as highlighted above.

The first theses were published in 1991 and 1998 respectively, thus preceding the publication of the first texts by about ten years. However, the growth in theses then roughly mirrors that of the texts, with 4 from 2001 to 2010, 10 from 2001 to 2020, and 1 from 2021 to 2025.

4.3. Number of definitions found

Of the 44 texts studied, only 16 offer one or more definitions. The implications of this result are significant. Indeed, it means that 28 texts, or 63% of them, contain no definition of meaning-making. It is therefore probably not an exaggeration to say that, for the authors of these texts, meaning-making is merely a buzzword without a precise meaning. Could it be that, for an English speaker, meaning-making belongs to everyday language and that it would therefore be pointless to define it? Yet, this is a concept that, in psychology at least, has been systematically studied, even in the early 2000s (for example, see Brockmeier, 2009; Krauss, 2005; Kunner & Bosma, 2000). Why then were some of these studies not referenced?

Another question, this one particularly troubling for the scientists who evaluated these texts without definitions: How is it that they approved their publication?

Of the 16 theses studied, only 6 offer a definition of meaning-making. It would be tempting to say that the theses present the same problems as the texts, but that would be an outrageous accusation. Indeed, an abstract can, without being flawed, omit the precise presentation of the definitions offered in the thesis.

[†] All texts have been fully read and analyzed by the author.

4.3.1. Remarks. From the analysis of the second and third texts and the first thesis, it became clear that the definitions of meaning-making could be only implicit and that some authors also offered implicit definitions of the term meaning, i.e., of the outcome of meaning-making when it is successful. These two elements have been added to the analytical framework. However, the space available here does not allow for a presentation of the resulting information.

Of the 16 texts offering a definition, only 9 presented an explicit definition of meaning-making; the other 7 were limited to an implicit definition.

4.4. The definitions themselves

The definitions sought were in fact presented as descriptions of processes or identifications of their components. Of the 9 texts selected, 5 describe either an individual process or a group process, and 4 identify components that occur either during an individual process or during a group process.

4.4.1. Meaning-making carried out individually. This category of definitions offers the following 5 conceptions:

- Meaning-making as a process is equivalent to the process of learning (Dierking, 2002);
- Meaning-making is the process of making sense of and interpreting our experience, prior knowledge, learning, culture, beliefs, values, the world around us (Frykman, 2009). This is in fact a definition borrowed from Hooper-Greenhill (1999);
- Meaning-making is the process of situating encounters with the world in the appropriate context in order to know what they are about (Frykman, 2009). This definition is borrowed from Bruner (1996);
- Meaning-making is a process through which visitors make connection between their life and the objects they encounter in the museum (Bhavnagri & Kamash, 2019);
- Meaning-making is the process of integrating new knowledge and coordinating it with existing values, beliefs and knowledge (Soni et al. 2021). This conception is borrowed from Vygotsky (1978).

4.4.2. Meaning-making carried out in a group. This category offers only the following conception:

- Meaning is emerging in the mix of artifacts, information from the museum, information brought in by the visitors themselves and the social process of the visit (Eklund, 2020).

Comments:

Each of the conceptions, except the first, offers an approach to meaning-making that can support an investigation conducted in a museum setting. But even more interesting is the fact that the positions of Hooper-Greenhill, Bruner, and Vygotsky present a complementarity that can be interpreted as follows:

- Meaning-making is a process that consists of giving meaning to one's experiences (Hooper-Greenhill)
- This meaning is obtained by situating one's experiences in an appropriate context (Bruner);
- The context would be constituted by the person's values, beliefs, and knowledge (Vygotsky).

And this complementarity can be extended by adding the conception of Bhavnagri and Kamash. Indeed, this conception specifies that the preceding process can occur when a visitor comes into contact with a museum object.

Finally, Eklund's conception adds to the previous ones an element that characterizes group visits, namely the interaction between visitors.

In general, we can therefore assume that, while presenting different aspects of the meaning-making process, the last five identified conceptions offer such complementarity that the whole can be considered, at least temporarily, as a complex and entirely acceptable description of the process.

Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the meaning-making process conceived as equivalent to the learning process. This equivalence does not hold; it is void! Indeed Hein (1998) and Hooper-Greenhill (1999), who researched abundantly the learning process taking place in the museum describe it as a meaning-making process!

4.5. The components of meaning-making

Here again, different texts examine the two situations of individual and group visits.

4.5.1. The Components of individual meaning-making. The collected data offer the following three conceptions:

- Meaning-making is a mental activity (Stainton, 2002);
- Meaning-making includes: internalization, externalization, tool mediators, goals, actions and operations (Bahia & Nogueira, 2019);
- Meaning-making encompasses higher-order cognitive processes such as interpretation, reflection, and understanding (Estrada, Youn, Cardillo, & Chatterjee, 2025).

4.5.2. The components of groups meaning-making. Only one author who addresses the subject (Rowe, 2002) conceives of it as follows: meaning-making encompasses construction and interpretation which depend on the context in which the group is visiting. The museum's role is then twofold: to transmit information and to encourage the divergent production of visitors, the latter depending on what each individual brings to the museum (ideas, concepts).

Comments:

The first and third conceptions of individual meaning-making complement each other as follows: meaning-making is a mental (cognitive) activity encompassing interpretation, reflection, and understanding. The context of the visit, which facilitates this activity, is further developed by the author who focuses on group visits (Rowe, 2002).

However, Bahia and Noguerita's conception appears problematic because it includes a large number of elements of diverse natures (operation and purpose, for example) without any articulation that would allow them to be situated in relation to one another. For the reader, this results in a mere jumble of terms.

5. Synthesis and perspectives

It is unfortunate that the texts of the dissertations listed in the APA database could not be consulted, as they would likely have offered definitions that would have either broadened or modified the meaning of those provided by the articles and book chapters. However, the content of the dissertations alone could not have changed the unfortunate situation created by the high percentage of texts that simply did not offer a definition. How could it be explained? How is it that more than 60% of the texts analyzed escaped defining explicitly the subject that they were researching?

Although, an analysis of the 65 entries of the APA database succeeded in identifying a few different but complementary conceptions of the meaning-making process and their cognitive components. And fortunately, the few process descriptions exhibited remarkable coherence and could thus offer valuable support for future research.

As far as they are concerned, the process components could be used as the starting point for the development of a series of questions that could lead future research intending to a better understanding of the meaning-making process. These questions read as follows: 1) Do the components mentioned, i.e., interpretation, reflexion and understanding, represent all those involved in a meaning-making process? 2) What is the dynamic of these three preceding ones? Are they complementary, and if this is the case, how do they relate to each other? 3) Given the complexity of each of these components, what series of mental operations contribute to each of them? 4) How are these operations organized or sequenced? 5) All what precedes is cognitive in nature, does it mean that the affective functioning is excluded? 6) If this is not the case, how does it intervene? Does it combine with the mental operations proper to each component of the meaning-making process? If not, how both functioning contribute to the meaning-making process?

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