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Pat Villeneuve and Alicia Viera

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Multiculturalism and the Supported Interpretation (SI) Model: Embracing Cultural Diversity through Inclusive Art Exhibitions

Pat Villeneuve
Florida State University
Alicia Viera
Texas A&M University-San Antonio

Over twenty years have passed since the American Alliance of Museums (formerly the American Association of Museums) issued its landmark policy publication, *From Excellence to Equity: Education and the Public Dimension of Museums* (Hirzy, 1992). Two of the three key ideas expressed in the report were:

1. The commitment to education as central to museum's public service must be clearly expressed in every museum's mission and pivotal to every museum's activities.
2. Museums must become more inclusive places that welcome diverse audiences, but first they should reflect our society's pluralism in every aspect of their operations and programs. (p. 3)

In a similar vein, Weil (1999), then the leading U.S. museum theorist, charged that museums must shift from being about something (the object) to being for someone (the visitor).

During this time frame, writings on the constructivist museum (Hein, 1994, 1998; Hooper-Greenhill, 1994) dominated art museum education literature, informed by constructivist epistemologies that hold that individuals construct their own knowledge based on experience and previous knowledge (Schunk, 2007). Hein (1994) described how a constructivist orientation in a museum would differ from traditional practice:

The systematic [traditional] museum...is one based on the belief that: 1) the content of the museum should be exhibited so that it reflects the 'true' structure of the subject-matter, and 2) the content should be presented to the visitor in the manner that makes it easiest to comprehend.... In contrast, proponents of the constructivist museum would argue that: 1) the viewer constructs personal knowledge from the exhibit, and 2) the process of gaining knowledge is itself a constructive act. (p. 76)

Hein (1998) further stipulated that a constructivist exhibition:

- will have many entry points, no specific path and no beginning and end;
- will provide a wide range of active learning modes;
- will present a range of points of view;
- will enable visitors to connect with objects (and ideas) through a range of activities and experiences that utilize their life experiences;
- will provide experiences and materials that allow students in school programs to experiment, conjecture, and draw conclusions. (p. 35)

Recently, Villeneuve (2012) raised concerns over the limitations of constructivist museum practices. She contends that general public education in the United States has not provided the foundation of art and other knowledge necessary to support personally satisfying constructivist interpretations in art museum galleries. Disappointing museum experiences can alienate visitors and risk conveying or reinforcing the [presumed] message that museums are not for all people, as so poignantly reflected by Coles (1975). How, then, can museum administrators and educators circumvent exclusionary museum practices and encourage museum visitation among the general public and particularly for disenfranchised or disregarded [potential] audiences?

In response to these concerns and in an attempt to advance the educational function of a museum, Villeneuve (2012) developed SI, a model for inclusive, visitor-centered exhibitions. This chapter will introduce SI and describe two SI exhibitions that addressed Mexican American identity. It will then detail how SI facilitated the process of meaning-making for visitors from different cultures and backgrounds, presenting examples from a visitor study conducted at one of the exhibitions.

SI

The development of SI was an iterative process based on professional experience in education and museums as well as on related literature. In addition to constructivist ideas, SI was informed by the works of Knowles (1955, 1984, 1988) and Van Mensch (1990). Knowles specialized in adult education and envisioned the ideal learning environment as one enriched with resources that independent learners could choose from to support their learning. He referred to this process as guided interaction, with the educator serving as a facilitator. Van Mensch reconceptualized the roles of museums from the traditional five (collect, exhibit, preserve, educate, and study) to three: preserve (which presumes collecting), study, and communicate. In this view, educational components and exhibitions must work together to communicate with the public.

Defining characteristics of SI include:

- Re-envisioning the exhibition as an interface, or point of interaction between the museum and its visitors.
- Embedding the interface with resources—mostly non-didactic and non-authoritarian—that free-choice visitors can choose from to support their own interpretations.
- Using a team curatorial approach, including educators, curators, and community members
- Making visitors important to the exhibition, sharing their voices within the interface (Love, Villeneuve, Cruz, Hueting & Keim, 2013)

These characteristics change the conditions of museum exhibition practice while addressing critical multiculturalism (May & Sleeter, 2010). SI rejects a single, authoritarian view while compelling a focus on museum visitors and incorporating their voices within the

exhibition, whether as informed and respected members of the curatorial team or as valued participants in the interface. For complete guidelines for SI, see Villeneuve (2013).

MIXING IT UP WITH SI

The first SI exhibition was a small-scale demonstration project at Arizona State University featuring Mexican American art that consisted for the most part of modern works on paper (Villeneuve, 2012, 2013; Villeneuve & Erickson, 2011, 2012). Although it was hung in a university boardroom rather than a more conventional art space, the project came with the opportunity to control and experiment with the curatorial process. The works at our disposal, owned by the Hispanic Research Center, led to the idea of an exhibition exploring artists' representations of their hybrid identities drawing from Mexican, U.S., and Mexican American cultures. The artworks were replete with symbols—Mayan temples, the Mexican golden eagle, the U.S. flag—but the curatorial team present that day realized that people who did not recognize the iconography would be challenged to make sense of the images. To support their meaning-making without adding the burden of reading extensive label copy, we determined to add visual assists within the exhibition installation, hanging labeled referent images of the symbols artists used between artworks. To underscore the diversity of influences on the artists' lives, we entitled the exhibition *Mixing It Up: Building a Mexican American Identity*. This concise entry label written by a member of the curatorial team revealed the intent of the exhibition and cued visitors:

This exhibition explores how seven Mexican American artists have expressed ideas about who they are using symbols and images from both the Mexican and U.S. cultures that impact their lives. Use the smaller images as clues to see what is important to these artists. What are they telling us about themselves?

With the support of the referent images, visitors could then engage in a seek-and-find process to piece together their interpretations of potentially challenging works of art, such as a depiction of the Statue of Liberty built on a Mayan foundation.

At the exit, a “Making It Personal” visitor-participation wall invited people to reflect on their own identities and draw symbols representing themselves. The curatorial team included this activity to underscore that identity extends to all people—not just the Mexican American artists included in the exhibition—and to be more inclusive. An informal evaluation of the free-choice worksheets suggested that visitors understood the notion of identity and could select symbols to represent themselves.

The concept for the demonstration project was expanded into a full-scale exhibition in 2011-2012 at the Tempe Center for the Arts near Phoenix, Arizona. *Mixing It Up: Building an Identity* was more complex, offering opportunities to learn about art styles and themes within the exhibition interface. These were introduced at the gallery entrance with one-sentence definitions:

- **Styles**
Traditional—Artists use old-world knowledge and techniques like anatomy, perspective, and shading to make their artworks look real.

Folk–Artists inspired by affordable art of the people often use lots of details, bright colors, and simplified, even cartoon-like, shapes.

Graphic–Artists use affordable processes for wide distribution of dramatic, attention-grabbing designs.

- Themes

National Identity–Artists explore connections with their U.S. and/or Mexican heritages.

Labor–Artists comment on issues about workers.

Family and Community–Artists celebrate connections with others.

Each term was matched with a dedicated icon evoking the colorful images of the ubiquitous Mexican lotto game, La Lotería (Mexican Lotería). To support visitor learning, these exhibition-specific symbols were also placed in the interface next to particularly strong examples of each style or theme. Some artworks received multiple icons to illustrate that works of art can reflect more than one theme or style.

The exhibition interface included opportunities for visitor participation and interaction, which fostered our goal of attending to diverse audiences. An assortment of *lotería* icons appeared in magnet form next to selected artworks. Visitors were invited to “tag” the artworks with their assessments of style or form by placing appropriate magnets on nearby metal strips. In this way, visitors could learn from each other, viewing earlier appraisals of style or theme or leaving opinions for subsequent visitors.

In an alcove off the gallery, an artist’s rendition of his grandmother’s kitchen was recreated. The tabletop was turned into a large-scale *lotería* game board with the exhibition’s style and theme icons. Reproductions of works from *Mixing It Up* were the game cards to be played on the symbols for style or theme, encouraging discussion from players seated around the table. A reading/gathering area in the middle of the gallery welcomed visitors to sit and talk or peruse reference books available there, and an extra-large visitor comment book was placed at the exit. Style and theme prompts, accompanied by their respective *lotería* icons, invited visitors to reflect on the exhibition and share connections with their own lives.

MIXING IT UP: BUILDING AN IDENTITY: A CASE STUDY OF SI

Viera used the larger exhibition as a case study to evaluate the SI model, with three main purposes in mind:

- To provide museum professionals with an understanding of how the SI model was implemented at this exhibition
- To identify whether or not the SI model facilitated visitors’ meaning-making through social interaction in order to understand and explain how the process occurred as part of their museum experience, and
- To inform future implementations of the SI model at other museums and galleries.

The overarching research question for this study was: Does Villeneuve’s SI model facilitate the process of meaning-making for visitors through social interaction at the *Mixing It Up: Building an Identity* art exhibition, and how? Supporting questions included:

- a) What are the different interactive components of the *Mixing It Up* exhibition, and how do they support social interaction in the galleries?
- b) How do social interactions at *Mixing It Up* support meaning-making?

Data Collection and Analysis

To conduct the study, Viera utilized qualitative methods of data collection such as observations, interviews (in English and Spanish), and document analysis and used a maximum-variation sampling strategy to understand how diverse visitors interpreted and connected with the art in the exhibition interface. Participants were adult visitors between the ages of 18 and 65 whose native languages were either English or Spanish.

Observations and Interviews

Viera conducted observations and described the physical environment and visitors' engagement, emphasizing the interactions occurring in relation to the four interactive components of the exhibition. Viera interviewed some visitors who she had previously observed. In those cases, details gathered during the observations informed some of the questions asked during their interviews. Interviews were conversational and occurred in either English or Spanish depending on the visitor's preference. All interviews occurred inside the gallery after visitors had already spent some time at the exhibition, or, in most cases, when they seemed ready to leave the setting. All visitors agreed to engage in recorded interviews.

Viera conducted a total of thirty conversational interviews, which included visitors who came to the art gallery alone as well as in groups. In some instances, not all members of the group participated in the interview; in other instances, all group members participated. Eight interviews included participants of Hispanic heritage. The total number of Hispanic participants was 13 (ten visitors were of Mexican descent and three of Salvadoran heritage). There were a total of three interviews conducted in Spanish, and they were all with groups entirely composed of visitors of Mexican heritage.

Most interviewed participants were from the United States—mostly Anglo American, except for three African American visitors and one of Native American heritage. Other Anglo participants from outside of the United States included three British visitors and two English-speaking Canadians. Interviews were casual, and they mostly revolved around what visitors liked the most about the exhibition, to stimulate a conversation that was meaningful for them and that validated their choices and opinions. Viera found this approach to be the most appropriate to pique participants' further thinking about art, including their individual and collective interpretations, the meanings derived from their encounters with artworks and the interactive components, and connections with prior knowledge, as triggered by their museum experience. By conducting the interviews inside the gallery, Viera was able to talk with visitors in front of the artworks, which stimulated further reflection about their choices.

Even though each interview was unique in both length and content, some of the questions were common to most of them, and they were initially informed by an art-based inquiry model

(Villeneuve & Love, 2007), which was modified as needed. Some questions regarding visitors' motivations to visit the exhibition and their involvement with the interactive components were also included in some cases. The latter were usually included when talking with visitors who had been observed earlier.

Document Analysis

The main document analyzed during this evaluation was the visitor comment book. The theme and style prompts developed by the curatorial team to stimulate visitor reflection and sharing included:

- How has your heritage contributed to your identity? [accompanied by the *Identidad Nacional* and National Identity icons]
- How is work part of who you are? [accompanied by the *Trabajo* and Labor icons]
- What family values or traditions are important to you? [accompanied by the *Familia/Comunidad* and Family/Community icons]
- Which style would you use to express your identity and why? [accompanied by the Traditional, Graphic, and Folk icons]

These questions were added to ten different pages of the comment book, which was 30 pages in length. The prompts were always in pairs on a page, but different combinations were created. Each of the questions appeared five times throughout the book. Visitors could choose to answer one or more of the questions but were still able to contribute in any other way they wanted since there was ample white space, even on those pages that had questions. Visitors also had the option of getting their pictures taken to add next to their comments. For the purpose of this evaluation, Viera analyzed only the comments that seemed to relate to the questions posted.

General Findings

Viera's study unveiled a variety of visitors' stories and narratives that reflected their prior knowledge and diverse lived experiences. Findings from the study concluded that the SI model facilitated the process of meaning-making for visitors from different cultures and backgrounds. The exhibition stimulated reflection and interpretations of art and culture overcoming cultural barriers.

The SI model provided visitors with opportunities for active learning and for constructing personal knowledge built on their prior experiences. The interface offered a flexible environment in which they were free to interact with the different exhibition components, shaping individualized learning experiences rather than being given an authoritarian interpretation of the exhibition.

The major features that directly influenced visitors' makings of meanings at the *Mixing it Up* exhibition included:

- the use of a curatorial team approach
- the use of themes and styles

- the reconceptualization of the exhibition as an interface, and
- the four interactive components included in the interface.

Using a Curatorial Team Approach

In Villeneuve's SI model, the curatorial team benefits from the addition of education and installation staff as well as knowledgeable community members. The ethnic diversity of the *Mixing It Up* team was crucial in keeping a multicultural perspective throughout the development of the exhibition. Since the exhibition addressed Mexican American identity, two of the curatorial team members were of Mexican heritage, which provided insider knowledge of the culture while representing that particular audience group. The varied selection of works chosen by the curatorial team—including a few artworks made by U.S. artists to stimulate comparisons—accomplished the goal of making it relevant to a variety of audience groups, regardless of their backgrounds.

Although most visitors during the observations were Anglo American, data suggest that many of them were able to find their own connections with the exhibition content and relate to it in personal ways, regardless of the fact that most of the art was created by Mexican, Mexican American and Chicana/o artists. Indeed, most visitors to the exhibition used the word *diversity* when complimenting it during the interviews or when providing feedback in the visitors' comment book. A variety of them further praised the selection and placement of artworks, which motivated them to learn and reflect on culture and on current political and social issues affecting different cultural groups at the local and national level.

For example, as a response to a common question about what they liked the most about the exhibition, four visitors, all in their 30s but from different ethnic backgrounds, shared their opinions during the interviews.ⁱⁱ

- “[I like] a lot of things... Right now the political climate in Arizona is pretty tough for Mexicans, and to have them attain a show like this, you know... I think it's very good. My guess is that it's not as well-received... You know, I think folks that appreciate art are pretty liberal, diversive [sic]... They are not going to be this concerned about these issues. That's my personal opinion... but I can see, especially people that come in casually. They probably appreciate the art but there is a... there is lots of politics going around here right now that I frankly don't... agree with, you know... I think this is a good show. I think it's important to embrace all of the cultures...” (Anglo American male, January 12, 2012)
- “Pretty interesting. A lot of statements are being made in here that... are in right now, you know, it's not from just many years ago, or something from the 40s and 50s, it's stuff that's going on right now, which I like. It's very now.” (Hispanic male of Mexican heritage, January 13, 2012)
- “I like that it's controversial, and I like that it's not something that... you know... okay, a picture that shows something that makes you feel happy all the time because you have to recognize the truth.” (African American female, January 10, 2012)
- “I like that it's cultural. I like that there is political pieces, but say a little bit more than just a regular art piece that just has nice colors... I think I can identify with the

artwork, and it's nice to see something like that... I'm not Mexican but I'm Salvadoran, but it's very similar cultural values, and the things that I do in the community it's really nice to see that artists are having strong messages so that other people can kind of learn about... or think about certain issues that are going on, especially with the labor, and it's nice to see that in the artwork..." (Hispanic female of Salvadoran heritage, January 10, 2012)

As the above examples illustrate, the diversity of the curatorial team enabled appropriate object selection and placement, which enhanced the opportunity for visitor meaning making.

Using Themes and Styles

As illustrated by the words of the visitor at the end of the previous section, the use of themes and styles at the *Mixing It Up: Building an Identity* exhibition also supported meaning-making while helping visitors explore cultural aspects of their personal identities. The data collected for this case study reveal that many visitors addressed and referred to the themes selected, even when they didn't name them exactly as the curatorial team did. Although visitors used their own words, findings show that the selected themes (family and community, labor, and national identity) helped them find deeper connections with art at the personal level. Moreover, the chosen styles (graphic, folk, and traditional) made them reflect on their preferences and facilitated further explorations of their own cultural identities and issues of relevance to their communities.

The following entries from the visitor comment book illustrate how themes and styles influenced the museum experience at *Mixing It Up*. In response to the question "How has your heritage contributed to your identity?" a young visitor wrote next to his picture: "Although I grew up as a 'white' boy in America, I have lived many places that have diverse cultures and the problem I have encountered is a loss of identity because I do not have any strong ties to my own heritage" (Anglo American male). This comment shows how this visitor reflected on his own identity and recognized the influence of his past experiences.

On the other hand, in response to the question "Which style would you use to express your identity and why?" one visitor expressed: "I would use folk art because of its use of bright colors & expressive format. The simplified shapes can often tell a dramatic, expressive story" (Young female). A different visitor responded to the same question with the following: "Probably I would use traditional style to express my identity. That will help me to think about who I am and where I come from. Traditional way always helps me to feel my origin" (Young female). These answers to the prompt related to style demonstrate that some visitors reflected on the characteristics of a specific style in abstract terms while others analyzed their preferences and what they say about themselves, connecting to their identity as the question intended.

Moreover, the data collected during the interviews with visitors in front of some of the exhibition artworks support the impact of the chosen themes and styles and the fact that they stimulated deeper conversations and facilitated visitors' connections with prior knowledge. For example, *Sun Mad*, a serigraph on paper by Californian artist Ester Hernandez (Hernandez, 2012), was one of the pieces that visitors referred to more frequently during the conversational

interviews. According to Hernandez (2012), “*Sun Mad* speaks of the impact of the overuse of pesticides and the effect they have on the farmworkers, consumers, and the environment.” The print resembles the front of a Sun Maid brand box of raisins. The print also states, “Sun Mad Raisins” instead of “Sun Maid Raisins” and shows as a tag line the phrase “Unnaturally grown with insecticides, miticides, herbicides, fungicides.” It features a skeleton instead of the woman that characterizes the brand.

In reference to the theme of labor, an Anglo American woman in her 40s was attracted to *Sun Mad* because it made her remember a historical period that was part of her own life:

Mostly for me is the mad raisins history because of César Chávez [...] from years ago, when I was in eighth grade I think I remember doing that so... It reminded me of that time, of not buying grapes ever... it was out of the main campaign to not buy grapes out of California because of the conditions of the migrant workers who were picking the fruit... so there was a whole campaign...(Anglo American woman, January 7, 2012)

On the other hand, a Hispanic woman of Salvadoran heritage in her 20s, who was visiting with her little niece, was also attracted to *Sun Mad* even though she belongs to another generation and has a different cultural background:

I walked over there [toward the *Sun Mad* poster] and then I was trying to explain it to my niece. It was difficult to explain like how, you know, the pesticides and things like that... what I think they are saying you know, it will kill you [...] It's also, I think it's also like a cultural symbol, too, the raisins is something that... is what, you know, we eat and we don't really think about it... and I guess again it's the political stuff like things that we don't stop to think about [and] the artist is trying to bring attention to... [...] It says Sun “Mad” rather than “Maid”... but again just thinking about labor and kind of how workers' rights and maybe like the things that have happened in the past... exportation or even things that have affected workers producing anything for America...(Hispanic woman of Salvadoran heritage, January 12, 2012)

These comments underscore how different types of visitors made connections between artworks and the social connotations derived from them, more specifically regarding the selected theme of labor. Some visitors recalled events from their own lives as they linked to artworks, while others reflected on the social implications and the significance of some of the works selected.

Reconceptualizing the Exhibition as an Educational Interface

Embedding different types of educational activities throughout the interface enabled visitors to choose to engage with the exhibition content based on their interests and learning preferences. This inclusive approach tacitly acknowledged diverse ways of knowing as it facilitated visitors' individual constructions of knowledge.

The strategic placement of artworks throughout the exhibition was also crucial in helping visitors make personal connections among artworks and themes. For example, two Anglo

American women in their 50s commented on the *Sun Mad* serigraph mentioned in the previous section: “We remember when we weren’t supposed to buy grapes because of the movement, making everybody aware of the labor and the way the grapes were grown [...] Their living conditions were terrible, and they were not given education... he is the one who really helped them with the United Farm Workers...” (Anglo American woman, January 11, 2012). One of the women in this duo shared this reflection while pointing at the print to the right of *Sun Mad*, which portrayed civil rights activist César Chávez and the flag of the United Farm Workers.

The interactive components of the interface

The four interactive components of the *Mixing It Up: Building an Identity* exhibition—the tagging activity, the *lotería* game, the reading/gathering area, and the visitor comment book—all supported visitors’ meaning-making, as highlighted in the examples that follow.

Viera interviewed a Hispanic woman of Mexican heritage in her 50s, who was visiting with her husband and son. During her interview in Spanish, this visitor talked about the work of Mexican political cartoonist José Guadalupe Posada and could not remember the names of some of the periodicals Posada had worked for at the time. After the interview ended, the family still spent some time in the reading/gathering area, browsing books related to the exhibition, and this interviewee spent most of her time looking at a book about Posada’s work, probably in search of answers.

Another visitor of Mexican heritage in his 40s, who had also participated in an interview, used one of the books from the reading/gathering area to show Viera the work of Mesa artist Zarco Guerrero, who he thought should have been included in the exhibition. After that, he called over his wife to show her a representation of the legend of *La Llorona* (The Weeping Woman) by San Antonio artist Xavier Garza, also in the same book. After spending some time by the *lotería* game in the alcove that featured a rendition of a Mexican kitchen from the 1950s, they left entertaining the possibility of remodeling their home kitchen using motifs from the game.

On a similar note, an Anglo American woman in her 40s, who had also been attracted to the *Sun Mad* poster during her visit with her husband, looked closely at the *lotería* icons underneath. As she started moving away from the poster and toward the tagging activity located nearby, she shared how she had framed some *lotería* cards to use them as decoration for their home “‘cause they are fun!”

Through the visitor comment book, Viera also collected an array of multicultural examples from *Mixing It Up* visitors. One of the comments, signed by a visitor from California, read: “Fantastic exhibit! [sic] Very identifiable as a Mexican American I love the relation between our heritage, culture and us as Americans” (Visitor from California). On a different page of the book, a young visitor wrote in answer to the question about family values and traditions, next to her picture: “I have a large extended family. Christmas is the time when we all get together. That is the best tradition at all [sic]” (Young female)! There were a number of visitor comments related to food, even when they were not directly answering the question about traditions or any of the other ones proposed by the curatorial team. Mentions of chocolate cake, tacos, turkey, and

nopal (cactus), in either written form or as illustrations, shared the pages of the comment book with drawings of Mexican *calacas* (skulls) and other things that came to the minds of visitors after visiting *Mixing It Up*.

As demonstrated above, the diverse array of visitors attending *Mixing It Up* found connections to their identities and prior experiences in different ways with the help of the interactive components available as part of the exhibition interface. This shows how the interactive components supported their constructions of individualized meanings as part of the museum experience.

CONCLUSIONS

This chapter highlighted Villeneuve's (2012, 2013) SI model as an example of an inclusive approach to exhibitions. A curatorial team with diverse backgrounds and expertise was fundamental to developing the *Mixing It Up* exhibition. Equally important was the SI model's holistic view of the exhibition interface. The model requires the curatorial team to anticipate and attend to visitors' needs to know, which is fundamental for addressing multicultural issues or themes in museum exhibitions. Taking a visitor-centered approach, SI places educational concerns at the center of practice while moving beyond constructivist museum practices to support visitors' meaning-making and to afford them more meaningful museum experiences in a multicultural world.

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ⁱ See <http://www.tempe.gov/Modules/ShowDocument.aspx?documentid=2513>

ⁱⁱ Although interviews and comment book entries analyzed were in both English and Spanish, only English examples appear here.