

Assessing Historical Thinking at a State History Museum

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ABSTRACT

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The purpose of this study was to use *The Big Six: Historical Thinking Skills* framework (Seixas, 2013) to describe historical thinking by adult visitors at a local history museum. Data was collected through interviews with 26 visitors to the Washington State History Museum in Tacoma. Findings suggest that the majority of visitors engaged in historical thinking during their museum experience. Most common were instances where respondents considered historical consequences, made connections between past and present, and thought about issues of right and wrong in connection with history. In some cases, responses identified the varieties of historical thinking from the framework while in other cases they did not. This research is intended to inform discussion about how history is presented in museums and to explore some of the ways visitors reach understandings about historical content.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Chapter 1: Introduction | 4 |
| Chapter 2: Literature Review | 7 |
| Historical Thinking in the American Public | 7 |
| Historical Thinking in Formal Education | 9 |
| Historical Thinking Amongst Museum Professionals | 14 |
| Narrative, and how to navigate a history exhibit | 15 |
| The Place of Objects in a History Exhibit | 17 |
| Historical Thinking of Visitors in Museums | 19 |
| Chapter 3: Methodology | 25 |
| Research Context | 25 |
| Conceptual Framework | 26 |
| Data Collection | 28 |
| Analysis | 29 |
| Limitations | 29 |
| Chapter 4: Results and Discussion | 31 |
| Research Question: Do adult visitors think about the past over the course of their visit? If they do, what are the different ways in which they engage with the past? | 32 |
| Concept 1: Establishing historical significance | 33 |
| Concept 2: Using primary source evidence | 34 |
| Concept 3: Identifying continuity and change | 36 |
| Concept 4: Analyzing cause and consequence | 37 |
| Concept 5: Taking historical perspectives | 39 |
| Concept 6: Understanding the Ethical Dimension of Historical Interpretations | 40 |
| Chapter 5: Conclusions and Implications | 42 |
| Conclusions | 42 |
| Implications | 47 |
| Bibliography | 50 |
| Appendix | 53 |
| Interview Instrument | 53 |

Chapter 1: Introduction

Writing for *Curator* in 2010, Mary Alexander noted,

In reviewing what is known about learning history in history museums, I am struck by the lack of research into the subject, except for that done by a few individual museums. There has been no comparable review of research into learning in history museums since the landmark study in the early 1990s that produced *Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life* in 1998.¹

Alexander wrote her article in response to *Learning Science in Informal Environments: People, Places, and Pursuits*. This report was, and remains, an important synthesis of what is known about informal education in the sciences. A self-described “effort to develop a common framework for the broad and diverse fields of inquiry about informal environments for science learning,” it was written, in part, because, “prior efforts to synthesize these literature and discern what is known and what is not have been minimal.”² The result of this effort was a 336-page document, which explores the many different combinations of venue and audience, looks at some of the current issues which affect informal learning in the sciences, and makes recommendations for moving forward.

By contrast, research into how history is learned in informal settings is far less comprehensive. About three years after Alexander’s article was published, a group of Canadian researchers completed a ten-year long survey project describing how 3,419 Canadians understood the past.³ Taken together with *The Presence of the Past*, they provide useful insights into how many North Americans think about the past. They point out that people often perceive the past as their own life story and the story of their family. Even when they do think about

¹ Mary Alexander, “What Are the ‘Six Strands’ for History Museums?,” *Curator: The Museum Journal* 53, no. 2 (April 1, 2010): 239–46, doi:10.1111/j.2151-6952.2010.00023.x., 239.

² Philip Bell et al., “Learning Science in Informal Environments: People, Places, and Pursuits” (The National Academies Press, 2009), http://www.nap.edu/catalog.php?record_id=12190., 23.

³ Margaret Conrad, *Canadians and Their Pasts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013).

broader histories, it is often in the context of their self and their family. Critics of these studies argue that this research focuses on “the past”, as opposed to “history” and so does not really address persistent questions about how the public sees “history” as it is understood academically. Furthermore, they see this as a major limitation when trying to interpret these studies in ways that might be useful to museums, heritage sites, and other entities who present history to the public – particularly when those institutions are used to interpreting “history” in its academic sense.⁴

By contrast, research into learning history in formal educational settings is far more developed. Researchers have studied the difference between how history is understood by default—that is to say without sophisticated classroom instruction— and how professional historians approach their study of the past. This is done to lay the foundation for a pedagogy of history. It is also an attempt to step back from long-running debates over what parts of history ought to be taught and ask a more basic question about why history should be studied at all.⁵ The result of this research is a long list of the many ways in which students think about the subject at various stages of their cognitive development. A recent example, which avoids creating a graduated curriculum in favor of taking a more wide-ranging approach, was a framework published by Canadian researchers Peter Seixas and Tom Morton in the book *The Big Six: Historical Thinking Concepts*.⁶

The usefulness of formal educational literature on this topic wears thin when dealing with adult learning. Adults simply understand the passing of time and the changes this entails in a way that children rarely do; how these understandings affect the ways that adults approach history

⁴ Margaret Conrad, Jocelyn Létourneau, and David Northrup, “Canadians and Their Pasts: An Exploration in Historical Consciousness,” *The Public Historian* 31, no. 1 (2009): 15–34, doi:10.1525/tph.2009.31.1.15. p. 20-2.

⁵ Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts*. p. 5.

⁶ Peter Seixas, *The Big Six: Historical Thinking Concepts* (Toronto: Nelson Education, 2013).

museums is understudied. Evaluations of exhibits at history museum offer some examples of visitor thoughts and reactions. These are framed in the context of showing what elements of the exhibit were enjoyed and how and not how history is understood overall. This creates a gap in understanding between the debates in museological literature over the creation of these exhibits.

The purpose of this research is to investigate instances of Historical Thinking by adult visitors in a regional history museum. For the purposes of this research, “historical thinking” is defined as any instance of a visitor conceptualizing the past in any way, whether it is something as simple as mentioning a comparison between past and present, or by creating a complex narrative of an event. As there is no existing framework for understanding informal learning of history by adults, this study adopts *The Big Six* framework as a method for both creating a research instrument and analyzing that instrument. This aspect of the research, taking a formal educational framework and migrating it to an informal learning by adults, is a central component of its methodology. It allows this study to present adult learning not in terms of their understanding of exhibit content, but rather in terms of the ways they manipulate that content to come to conclusions or ask further questions. The study is guided by a single research question:

Do adult visitors think about the past over the course of their visit? If they do, what are the different ways in which they engage with the past?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The literature that supports this study may be broken into four distinct bodies: 1) a pair of surveys of historical consciousness conducted in the United States and Canada; 2) formal educational studies of historical thinking, of which an important subset looks at the social and the personal context that forms that base knowledge upon which history teachers teach; 3) museological literature, which is largely theoretical but steeped in ideas offered by curators, educators, and other museum professionals; and 4) a set of visitor studies, which are not designed explicitly to examine historical thinking but still offer insights through visitor testimonials. Taken together, they offer many suggestions about how a visitor to a museum (history or otherwise) thinks about the past.

Historical Thinking in the American Public

A large-scale effort to understand how Americans think of the past come from Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen's *The Presence of the Past: Popular Uses of History in American Life*.⁷ Their team completed over eight hundred phone interviews from respondents across the United States. Topics included "participation in activities that relate to the past", "trustworthiness of sources of information about the past", when and how Americans feel connected to the past, and which broad topical area of the past (family, racial-ethnic, community, and national) respondents felt [were] most important to them.⁸ The team then correlated their data with race, gender, and age. The image of American historical awareness that emerged was one where conventional histories used in schools and politics were practically absent. Most respondents did not think in terms of "triumphal national narrative" or "collective frameworks like ethnicity,

⁷ Roy Rosenzweig and David Thelen, *The Presence of the Past* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998). p. 31.

⁸ Ibid. p. 234-6

class, region, and gender.” Instead, they emphasized what was termed “the intimate past.”⁹ That is to say, their past and their family’s past, for which *personal* record keeping is the most important part of historical understanding. This discovery is perhaps less surprising considering Rosenzweig and Thelen’s choice to omit the term “history” from their interview. They found while piloting their survey in Phoenix Arizona that, “*history* conjured up something done by famous people that others studied in school; respondents said history was formal, analytical, official, or distant.”¹⁰ So Rosenzweig and Thelen opted to ask respondents about “the past”. This decision was subsequently criticized as ignoring the important difference between the two terms.¹¹ Later studies would make some attempt to separate larger histories of communities and nations from a respondent’s life-story.

The most recent study is the *Canadians and Their Pasts* project. Started in 2003 and published in 2013, the project surveyed a total of 3,419 Canadians on topics similar to the ones investigated by the *Presence of the Past* team. In particular, it looked at the ways in which Canadians engage with the past, how trustworthy they find different sources information to answer questions about “what really happened,” and what broad categories of the past they found most important. Combined with *The Presence of the Past* the Canadian study creates a widespread, if still very incomplete, image of historical consciousness. Perhaps most importantly for history museums is the relatively high amount of trust respondents placed in museums compared to other sources of historical information like non-fiction books and high-school teachers.¹² In the Canadian study, some respondents cited the role of experts and the possibility

⁹ Ibid. p 22

¹⁰ Ibid. p 6.

¹¹ Margaret Conrad, Jocelyn Létourneau, and David Northrup, “Canadians and Their Pasts: An Exploration in Historical Consciousness,” *The Public Historian* 31, no. 1 (2009): 15–34, doi:10.1525/tph.2009.31.1.15. p. 20.

¹² Margaret Conrad, *Canadians and Their Pasts* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2013). p. 50

of public embarrassment should a museum misrepresent the past as the reason for their trust. More respondents noted the presence of artifacts, which they saw as authentic, trustworthy evidence of the past that could be interpreted directly by the visitor.¹³ This is an important distinction. Some visitors might implicitly trust the authority of an institution and by extension the way that they interpret a bit of history. Others take this matter in their own hands, trusting that a museum has provided them with evidence of the past, and that they can make up their own minds. This distinction is not unsurprising given the way museums are often set up to facilitate free-choice learning.

Historical Thinking in Formal Education

The most thorough consideration of historical thinking comes from research in formal education. Still, and in spite of the fact that educational researchers have the advantage of the (comparatively) controlled environment of the classroom, it has been difficult to categorize all of the ways that one approaches the past into a single unified structure. As Peter Seixas put it, “history is perhaps no more than a set of closely related core issues that must be confronted in order to foster growth in historical knowledge.”¹⁴

Regardless, formal education studies show a diversity of opinions, thoughts, and abilities that further elucidates the diversity of historical thinking. In a 1996 study, Peter Seixas asked a diverse set of Canadian students to express which of a series of pre-determined historical events was most “significant.” They were then asked to create a visual representation of those events, ordering them “in a way which makes sense to you.”¹⁵ Seixas then grouped the responses, and

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Peter Seixas, “Conceptualizing the Growth of Historical Understanding,” in *The Handbook of Education and Human Development: New Models of Learning, Teaching and Schooling*, ed. David R. Olson and Nancy Torrance (Cambridge: Blackwell, 1996), 765–83. p 756

¹⁵ Peter Seixas, “Mapping the Terrain of Historical Significance,” *Social Education* 61, no. 1 (1997): 22–27. p 22.

the justifications given for them by students, into four different categories. Firstly, “significant” was interpreted in terms of what they were most personally interested in. One student picked the development of rock music because “without it I would not be what I want to be. It is the expression of your feeling into music.”¹⁶ A second group picked events that were significant not based upon their own thoughts and feelings, but those expressed as important by certain authorities. They choose events they remember being told about by teachers, textbooks, and other sources with a greater degree of historical knowledge than they had. Others were more sophisticated in their reasoning. They used the criteria of affecting a large number of people over a long period of time to question personal and authoritative biases.

Yet for Seixas, the most sophisticated understanding of significance came from students who link any given event, not matter how small or large, to a historical epoch. This was particularly interesting to Seixas because, “with this strategy, any historical phenomenon, even that which might be dismissed as simply of ‘personal interest,’ has the potential to achieve significance by being linked to a larger fabric of significant world history.”¹⁷ This can only be done with an understanding of a larger “fabric.” For example, one student illustrated a timeline in the form of a tower starting with a “prehistoric base” and ending with “technological boom”. The ability to tie otherwise insignificant pieces of the past to a larger whole opens up a much larger set of topics to a person’s interest than just what is personally interesting or perceived to be highly impactful. Seixas, in a later publication, points out that this ability is an important development for students as it open up a great deal of evidence to interpretation. Evidence which might otherwise be deemed too unimportant for consideration.¹⁸

¹⁶ Ibid. p. 24.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 26-7

¹⁸ “Historical Significance,” *The Historical Thinking Project*, accessed January 24, 2016, <http://historicalthinking.ca/historical-significance>.

Sam Wineburg's in-home interviews of Seattle-area high school students and their parents look at the factors outside the school which influence how students look at the past.¹⁹ Wineburg's write-up of his long-term study, *Mapping the Terrain of Historical Significance* considers, in particular, biases rooted in emotional connection to the past and outside influences. His example focuses on an interview about the Vietnam War conducted in the homes of his subjects.

Wineburg's essay focuses further on student named John. When his parents were shown a Pulitzer-prize-winning photo of a child running naked after a napalm attack they reacted with clear intensity of emotion; sobbing, voices shaking in indignation. John responded to this by stating that he had a more "objective view because I didn't live through it" and that the lack of an emotional connection aided with this objectivity.²⁰ This rough objective-subjective epistemology was shared by many of Wineburg's subjects, including John's parents. It is a simple attempt to think critically based around avoiding the detrimental effects of emotional investment.

This viewpoint is problematic for a couple of reasons. Emotional connection, in moderation, is an important aspect of historical thinking. Peter Seixas demonstrates this for several of his subjects, where personal interest is part of several degrees of sophistication in the analysis of historical significance. A certain emotional connection has also been noted, by Wineburg, as important for historians whose "personal connection [...] generates interest and passion"²¹, which turns into a more complete understanding of their subjects thanks to sheer time dedicated to studying them. Furthermore, a lack of emotional connection does not guarantee a lack of bias. "One of these instances came when John responded to the picture of the GI

¹⁹ Sam Wineburg, "Making Historical Sense" (New York & London: New York University Press, 2000), 306–26. p. 314-5.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid. p. 316

leaving a battle scene with two young boys tucked under each arm.” John’s response was, “kind of ironic that we think of Vietnam, you always hear someone say, ‘Oh baby killers.’ So here’s this guy running out, and he’s got these two kids, it’s like he’s saving them from the disaster that’s going on behind him.”²²

Wineburg’s team discovered that this idea of the Vietnam soldier as a “baby killer” was one John derived not from his parents, or an accurate understanding of America’s response to Vietnam veterans. Rather, it came from watching *Forrest Gump*, which created the context by which John’s understood 1960s America.²³ Wineburg uses this insight to point out that, “American children are by no means ‘blank slates’ when it comes to ideas and beliefs about the past. By adolescence, young people have been exposed to a wide variety of sources for learning about the past.”²⁴ Context is a crucial aspect of historic thinking. Wineburg points out that the source and validity of the context can be forgotten, but the ideas it leaves about the nature of the past can remain valid and usable by the thinker.²⁵

If Seixas’s study is important because it shows how historical thinking can be influenced by personal interests, and Wineburg’s because it shows how outside influences effect historical thinking, Linda Levstik’s *Articulating the Silences: Teachers’ and Adolescents’ Conception of Historical Significance*²⁶, shows the effect of widely held national histories. Levstik conducted a series of semi-structured interviews of students and teachers about how they thought of the whole sweep of the history of the United States. In her words,

The emphasis by students, teachers and teacher candidates on the expansion of rights and opportunities and the steady improvement of social relations indicates concern with

²² Ibid. 317

²³ Ibid. p 319

²⁴ Ibid. p. 310

²⁵ Ibid. p. 320

²⁶ Linda S. Levstik, “Articulating the Silences: Teachers’ and Adolescents’ Conception of Historical Significance,” in *Knowing, Teaching, & Learning History: National in International Perspectives* (New York & London: New York University Press, 2000), 284–305.

establishing the United States as a country in which historic hardships and injustices are corrected and overcome.²⁷

Narrative frameworks like these are an important aspect of historical thinking because they help link seemingly disparate moments in the past together and help make sense out of the whole. Levstik is concerned with the dominance of this one narrative. It would be better for schools to, “include different systems of ethnoracial classification used in the nation, including consideration of the various constituencies empowered or disempowered by these classifications.”²⁸ Use of a single simple narrative severely deemphasizes events that do not conform to its guidelines, even when these events would seem to be significant in any other context. The Vietnam War, for example,

Teachers and teacher candidates also had difficulty reconciling what they know of Vietnam with their ideas about why Americans enter wars. While they were not as convinced as the students that Americans went to war solely for altruistic purposes, they did think that Americans were supposed to get something out of the war—access to some other economic advantage, for instance.²⁹

Unable to reconcile the history of the Vietnam War with how they otherwise understood American history, some teacher opted to omit the topic entirely. Others simply dismissed it as an anomaly. For them, the Vietnam War did not represent an important shift in American political consciousness; rather it was simply “a problem at the time”.³⁰

It is difficult to say whether or not Levstik’s assertions apply to museum visitors. Rosenzweig and Thelen state that the national histories that are taught in school are not widely utilized by a more general sample of the American people.³¹ However, an exception might be made for museum visitors. Firstly because many come into the museum with a preexisting

²⁷ Ibid. p. 290.

²⁸ Ibid. p. 290.

²⁹ Ibid. p. 293

³⁰ Ibid. p. 294

³¹ Rosenzweig and Thelen, *The Presence of the Past*. p. 21-2

familiarity with history, and the national narratives that Levstik suggests are pervasive are taught in public school. In those instances, it might not be the national narrative Levstik suggests, but some other one. In either case, the same issues apply. That visitor, despite being given some historical context for what they learn about, also might ignore or dismiss things that do not fit into that narrative.

Historical Thinking Amongst Museum Professionals

Museum professionals have given much thought to many of the aspects of how history is presented in their institutions. The result is a body of literature that has a wide range of opinions about many different issues relating to historical thinking in museums. This literature review will focus on two debates: 1) issues of narrative, which relates to questions about the overall message derived by learners of history; and 2) the role of historical objects, which relates to issues surrounding the use of historical evidence. These topics are very different in focus, but in both cases they take the perspective of the producers of history exhibits. Unlike the other three bodies of literature, they only very rarely seek to understand the perspective of the learner. While studies of visitor thoughts and learning in single, specific exhibits do exist, there is no framework that looks at the discipline as a whole. This has been noted as a shortcoming of history museums when compared to their STEM counterparts.³² This, in turn, leads to questions about what history museums are supposed to teach. A common refrain is that history museums provide lessons from the past on what should or should not be repeated for the future. Yet there is an issue here, as writer for the *Journal of Museum Education* Roger I. Simon states,

If we accept this problematic proposition, we end up much like those Emmanuel Levinas characterize as “worrying about history in a way a shipping company worries about weather

³² Alexander, “What Are the ‘Six Strands’ for History Museums?”

forecasts.” On these terms, as Levinas put it, “thought no longer dares take flight unless it can fly straight to the haven of victory.”³³

Questions and considerations like these dot much of the museological literature around historical thinking.

Narrative, and how to navigate a history exhibit

Writing for *The Exhibitionist* in 2012, Regan Forrest noted how, “Narrative” has become one of the holy grails of exhibition making, with a whole book being dedicated to the subject.”³⁴ In this context, “narrative” refers to something more than its usage for history where it refers to the way a historian ties events together through causality. For exhibit designers “narrative is a way of considering the exhibition as a gestalt; does everything hang together?”³⁵ Yet the more historically grounded issues of what caused an event and what parts are or are not included in an overarching historical story still apply to museums.

The concerns raised by Linda Levstik in her study of public school teachers and their students are echoed in museological literature that considers exhibits organized in a chronological fashion. They exclude perspectives that might provide a contrary, or at least different, interpretation of a historical development. This was a concern with the Experience Music Project’s (EMP) long running (2000-2011) *Northwest Passage* exhibit. Writing for *Museums and Social Issues*, Nicole Robert critiqued,

The narrow chronology focuses on development of a singular musical expression- “the scene” – that incorporates cultural notions of success, from “its beginnings as a small” scene to its perceived pinnacle as “the center of the rock universe.” Building the narrative on commercially accomplished musicians recreates the marginalization that occurs within economic power systems, privileging the stories of white men over other Northwest

³³ Roger Simon, “Museums, Civic Life, and the Educative Force of Remembrance,” *Journal of Museum Education* 31, no. 2 (June 1, 2006): 113–21, doi:10.1179/jme.2006.31.2.113. p. 116

³⁴ Regan Forrest, “Exhibition Narrative: The Spatial Parameters,” *The Exhibitionist* 33, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 28–32. p. 28

³⁵ *Ibid.* p. 31

musicians.³⁶

A closer museological echo of Levstik's study comes from Brenda M. Trofanenko's look at the Smithsonian's primary military history exhibit *The Price of Freedom*. She is interested in history museums as a place, "where one learns the stories of a nation's progress, triumph, and exceptionalism."³⁷ For her, exhibits like *The Price of Freedom* establish a collective identity of "American" based on the waging of war. There is little room to consider dissenting opinions about the ethics of such an arrangement, and so they largely go unconsidered in the exhibit. Where Levstik and Trofanenko split is in their assumptions about learners. Levstik shows that nationalistic narratives of progress are part of how students and teachers consider history, even if these concepts are greatly simplified. Trofanenko notices a lack of research into the same topic for museum visitors and so points out how it is difficult to make the same claim.³⁸ She is not alone. When considering the 1990s political debate over whether or not to include more chronological exhibits at the National Museum of American History, Steve Lubar notes how, "It would be nice if 'accessibility' could solve the question of timelines and narratives; if we could turn not to politics but to visitor studies to find the right way to structure exhibition."³⁹

Both linear-chronological and social-open ended approaches have advantages and disadvantages. There have been successful exhibitions that emphasize either. Using both of them is difficult. If a visitor expects a narrative, the lack of one can create a feeling that an exhibit is disjointed or even pointless.⁴⁰ Today, exhibit designers treat chronological order as a means of guiding a visitor, orienting them and giving a path to follow. This ties an entire exhibit, with the

³⁶ Nicole Robert, "Getting Intersectional in Museums," *Museums & Social Issues* 9, no. 1 (March 13, 2014): 24–33, doi:10.1179/1559689314Z.00000000017. p 27.

³⁷ Trofanenko, "The Educational Promise of Public History Museum Exhibits." p. 270.

³⁸ Ibid. p. 279

³⁹ Lubar, "Timelines in Exhibitions." p. 182

⁴⁰ Forrest, "Exhibition Narrative: The Spatial Parameters."

subject that it interprets, together. In theory, this should allow visitors to experience walking through time. They will see how one event leads to another – at least implying an element of causation - perhaps taking detours to consider the objects and people caught up in the story.

Pulling this off can be tricky. For exhibit designers, there are the spatial constraints of the sometimes-unusual buildings that museums are often located inside. This leads to navigational issues, especially when an exhibit does not loop back to its beginning and a visitor find their self in an unfamiliar area of the museum. As Forrest noted, “in my own research, I have seen visitors exit a gallery, find themselves in an unfamiliar location, and decide to backtrack through the length of the gallery to get back to a navigational reference point they recognize.”⁴¹

The Place of Objects in a History Exhibit

If the conversation over narrative is useful because it provides a lens to look at historical thinking in an exhibit overall, the debate over the role of objects in history museum is useful because it shows what museum professionals do and do not expect from the small-scale encounters with history. This is the generally accepted value of historical artifacts: they provide a sense of authenticity to whatever aspect of the past the object is being used to explain.⁴² This view would seem to be supported in studies on the topic. Interviewees included in *Canadians and Their Pasts* cite historical artifacts as one of the main reasons why museum are trustworthy sources of information. A 2008 study by Reach Advisors linked the increasing ubiquity of the internet to a desire amongst 20 year-olds to interact with real-physical objects.⁴³

⁴¹ Ibid. p. 29

⁴² Robert Bain and Kirsten M. Ellenbogen, “Placing Objects Within Disiplinary Perspective: Examples from History and Science,” in *Perspective on Object-Centered Learning in Museums* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 153–69. p. 154

⁴³ Rainey Tisdale, “Do History Museums Still Need Objects?,” *History News*, Summer 2011. p. 19-20.

At the same time, a writer for *The Exhibitionist* points out how, “over the last decade, museums have become less and less centered on the object.” Instead, the focus is on messages and themes.⁴⁴ This is usually explained by assertions that history museum collections are frequently decontextualized and so lose their apparent connection to the past, that they are too similar across institutions and do not offer visitors anything new, and that collection policies have left history museums ill equipped to show the full length and breadth of their community’s history. In other words,

Most of America’s history museums are still struggling to adapt nineteenth-century collections to a twenty-first-century world. We have an embarrassment of riches when it comes to Chippendale chairs and embroidery samples, but embarrassingly few mezuzahs or intact pieces of colonoware.⁴⁵

There are some noteworthy exceptions. Even writers who criticize older ways objects were used note that there are clear exceptions. A particularly impressive and/or historically significant object can be the set piece for an exhibit. Objects are also more effective when they are kept in their historical place of creation and/or use.⁴⁶ In all, the debate over the uses of objects is ultimately a matter of what is appropriate given what circumstances, as is the case with narrative and chronological design.

Most clearly, objects are useful because they are evidence of the past. This draws comparisons to how scholars and students of history use them in the way that they use other types of historical evidence. There is a concern with simply considering a piece of evidence’s “surface features”. That because another culture created a piece of evidence, a “reader” should not assume that their first reading, seeped in different assumptions about how their world works,

⁴⁴ Laura Burd Schiavo, “Object Lessons: Making Meaning from Things in History Museums,” *The Exhibitionist* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2013): 48–52. p. 48.

⁴⁵ Tisdale, “Do History Museums Still Need Objects?” p. 21.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.* p. 22.

provides a direct window on the past. In formal education, this is worked around by corroborating sources and accruing knowledge of how the time and place from which a piece of evidence comes differs from the present. While it might be possible to replicate this process for museum visitors, many museological thinkers believe that this is not the best way to treat objects.

Historical Thinking of Visitors in Museums

Publications like *Visitor Studies* and the *Journal of Museum Education* as well as websites like Informal Science.org regularly document visitor behaviors in museums and other informal learning institutions. It is surprising to consider how few of the published evaluations explicitly feature history. An April 2016 search for evaluation reports of exhibits on informalscience.org yielded 484 results. Of these, 166 were tagged as featuring Life Science, 144 for General STEM, 106 for Ecology, Forestry, and Agriculture. Forty-seven were tagged for History/Policy/Law. Nonetheless, existing studies do show a wide breadth of historical thinking on the part of visitors; even if documenting historical thinking is not their primary goal.

Seven exhibit evaluations inform this section of the literature review. Four of them were prepared by Randi Korn & Associates for publication on Informal Science.org; including a formative evaluation of a then not yet opened to the public section of Ellis Island⁴⁷, a study of a prototype of an exhibit at the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County⁴⁸, a set of interviews designed to judge visitor responses to an existing exhibit at the Minnesota History

⁴⁷ Randi Korn & Associates, Inc., “Front-End Evaluation: Interpretative Planning of Ellis Island’s Hospital and Medical Facilities” (Alexandria, VA: Save Ellis Island, October 2007).

⁴⁸ Randi Korn & Associates, Inc., “Formative Evaluation: Testing of the Model Table and Mexican Era Section for the Becoming Los Angeles Exhibition” (Alexandria, VA: The Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, March 2012).

Center⁴⁹, and a visitor timing and tracking study at the Oakland Museum of California⁵⁰. The Smithsonian's Office of Policy and Analysis conducted two summative studies for the National Museum of American History featuring tracking, surveys, and interviews of their *American Stories*⁵¹ and *America on the Move*⁵² exhibits. Finally, an independent group conducted a study of visitor knowledge and opinions in preparation for changes to the Buffalo Bill Museum⁵³.

Evaluations are valuable because they are tailored to the concerns of the museum environment. They deal with a style of learning about the past that is not discussed in broad surveys about historical consciousness or classroom studies. Experiences like interacting with an artifact, being immersed in a historical place, and experiencing history through sensations like touch and smell are all found in museums. Evaluations are concerned first with questions about if and how visitors interact with various elements of an exhibit. This can include anything from the utilization of a touch screen to an understanding of certain exhibit themes. They are particularly valuable for looking at historical thinking because they document the intersection of a visitor's previously held knowledge and understandings with material provided by the museum. It is from this body of literature that we are shown examples of what historical thinking looks like to a museum visitor, even though that is never the reason for conducting the evaluation in the first place. A few common themes emerge from these studies.

⁴⁹ Randi Korn & Associates, Inc., "Summative Evaluation: Minnesota's Greatest Generation Exhibition" (Alexandria, VA: for the Minnesota Historical Society, June 2010).

⁵⁰ Randi Korn & Associates, Inc., "Summative Evaluation: Gallery of California History" (Alexandria, VA: Oakland Museum of California, April 2011).

⁵¹ Smithsonian Office of Policy and Analysis, "A Study of Visitors to American Stories at the National Museum of American History" (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution, July 2012).

⁵² Smithsonian Office of Policy and Analysis, "Multiple Perspectives on America on the Move at the National Museum of American History" (Washington DC: Smithsonian Institution, August 2005).

⁵³ Jacob A. Benfield et al., "An 'Honest Visionary' and 'Dishonest Scallywag': Blending Fact, Opinion, and Interest into a Front-End Evaluation," *Visitor Studies* 11, no. 1 (April 2008): 55–72.

First, visitors to history exhibits note that the experience gave them a feeling for what it was like to be in the past. Sometimes this is through complex, interactive design elements. For example, *Minnesota's Greatest Generation* featured an exhibit piece designed to look like the inside of an American airplane used to transport paratroopers during World War II. One visitor responded by stating, "it makes you appreciate what these people went through-the real people. I mean this is-you know you're safe and you're fine in there, but if you put your imagination to use and you think about what these people would've been feeling at the time, it makes you appreciate all the more what they did."⁵⁴ These interactive experiences are not the only way visitors get a feeling for what the past was like for the people living through this. *Minnesota's Greatest Generation* also benefited from an extensive use of oral histories and first-hand accounts. Over one-half of the respondents to that survey noted how it presented a, "unique and real experience"⁵⁵.

Second, visitors are able to express historical continuities by drawing comparisons between the identities of the people mentioned in exhibits and their own identity. For example, some visitors to Ellis Island expressed that their favorite aspect of the visit was "walking in the footsteps of their ancestors."⁵⁶ The majority of respondents in the *Minnesota's Greatest Generation* considered how they were part of a generation. Evaluators noted how the ways in which visitors thought about this fact varied greatly from person to person, nonetheless an identity was considered.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Randi Korn & Associates, Inc., "Summative Evaluation: Minnesota's Greatest Generation Exhibition." p. 7.

⁵⁵ Ibid. p. 8.

⁵⁶ Randi Korn & Associates, Inc., "Front-End Evaluation: Interpretative Planning of Ellis Island's Hospital and Medical Facilities." p. 6.

⁵⁷ Randi Korn & Associates, Inc., "Summative Evaluation: Minnesota's Greatest Generation Exhibition." p. 12.

Third, visitors use pre-existing knowledge of history to enrich their experience in the museum. Unsurprisingly, many visitors to history museums have a strong interest in history that extends outside of their visit. One visitor to *Minnesota's Greatest Generation* noted having read Tom Brokaw's book, *The Greatest Generation*.^{58,59} Another example of the effects of a personal interest in history comes from the Buffalo Bill Museum. A formative study published in 2008 sought to understand what visitors understood about the museum's namesake. It was discovered that

Locals generally had a negative view of William Cody and gave more negative responses about his character such as 'he was a dishonest scallywag. . .and a murderer.' Visitor comments (e.g., '[he was] overly generous . . . honest . . .a visionary') were generally more flattering.⁶⁰

In all, the visitor testimonials shown in these studies tend to be short simple statements. They might indicate a complex set of ideas held by a visitor, but the way they are articulated in relation to museum content is often in a manner which lacks the depth that historical thinking in more formal educational settings can attain. While not surprising, this is an important aspect of historical thinking in museum. Museums rarely have the time to create complex structures of events for visitors to connect new information to. When visitors are asked to think of some overarching idea, potentially allowing them to synthesize what they have learned, the responses are typically vague. A visitor to the Smithsonian's *American Stories* exhibit describes, "Big story of America? We're always changing. Evolution. We're just a growing nation. We're progressing. Innovator too. Rapidly, technology-wise . . .We've come a long way, a long, long

⁵⁸ Ibid. p. 4.

⁵⁹ Tom Brokaw, *The Greatest Generation* (New York: Random House, 1998).

⁶⁰ Benfield et al., "An 'Honest Visionary' and 'Dishonest Scallywag': Blending Fact, Opinion, and Interest into a Front-End Evaluation." p 62

way.”⁶¹ Part of the reason for this simple synopsis of the exhibit’s message is its design. The stated goal of *American Stories* is to act as, “an introductory experience to American history and as a dedicated space to feature new acquisitions that illustrate the breadth of the American experience.”⁶²

Supplementing these evaluations are Gaea Leinhardt, Kevin Crowley, and Karen Knutson’s *Learning Conversations in Museums*⁶³. It is a series of studies that considers visitors’ experience through their conversations. It highlights how members of a group are able to facilitate learning for one-another. While visitors are able to learn without saying a word, Leinhardt et al’s studies on conversations are able to offer a rare insight into learning in the moment that it occurs. This learning focus is one of the main ways they differ from visitors studies conducted for an evaluation. Of particular interest for historical thinking is a study conducted at the living history museum Conner Prairie in Fishers, Indiana. Researchers recorded five families (a total of 23 individuals) in their interactions with the museum’s first-person interpreters. They coded visitor conversations on the basis on the degree to which they elaborated a point in an attempt to see what situations allowed for the most in depth learning. That this takes place in a living history museum is particularly interesting because of the then - held idea that, “more than other kinds of museum, living history offered free choice learning and the opportunity for visitors to ask questions and become active investigators of history.”⁶⁴ Ellen Rosenthal and Jane Blankman-Hetrick found that there were major barriers to this type of

⁶¹ Smithsonian Office of Policy and Analysis, “A Study of Visitors to American Stories at the National Museum of American History.” p 15.

⁶² Ibid. p 22

⁶³ Gaea Leinhardt, Kevin Crowley, and Karen Knutson, *Learning Conversations in Museums* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002).

⁶⁴ Ellen Rosenthal and Jane Blackman-Hetrick, “Conversations Across Time: Family Learning in a Living History Museum,” in *Learning Conversations in Museums* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002), 305–29. p. 325.

discovery and that good interpretation on the part of interpreters was needed to introduce adults to the context of 19th century Indiana and to generally engage children. These most in-depth conversations occurred when both groups (adults and children) were engaged simultaneously.

Overall, the topic of historical thinking is written about in many different contexts but rarely coalesces around the museum visitor. Much is known about how North American adults conceptualize the past, but it is not clear if these are applicable to the types of people who visit museums, nor do the studies underlying this knowledge reveal much about the value added to historical knowledge by exposure to specific museum exhibits. Much has been investigated about how students learn about history. But adults conceive of time differently from students having simply lived through more of it. Exhibit visitor studies and evaluation capture visitor reactions to history exhibits. Yet they are focused on understanding specific interactions with specific exhibits and so are not easily generalized to history museums as a whole. Finally, museological literature provides highly sophisticated discussion about the role of history exhibits and everything that goes into creating them, but it often suffers from a self-admitted lack of knowledge about visitor interactions.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The purpose of this research was to investigate instances of Historical Thinking by adult visitors in a regional history museum. For the purposes of this research, “historical thinking” is defined as any instance of a visitor conceptualizing the past in any way, whether it is something as simple as mentioning a comparison between past and present, or by creating a complex narrative of an event. The study was guided by a single research question:

Do adult visitors think about the past over the course of their visit? If they do, what are the different ways in which they engage with the past?

This study is descriptive and qualitative in nature. This chapter describes the study’s methodology, specifically related to the research context, conceptual framework, data collection procedures, data analysis procedures, and methodological limitations.

Research Context

The Washington State History museum was chosen for its variety of exhibits and its wide coverage of Washington history. A history museum that covers a single time period, as is the case for many living history museums, would not easily address issues of causality, continuity and change. By contrast, the Washington State History museum’s main exhibit, the *Great Hall of Washington History*, is organized into several discrete periods including pre-historic Washington, Washington as a frontier territory, Hanford and nuclear development, and many others. The museum also featured a pair of community galleries on its fifth floor, and a temporary exhibit, *Arctic Ambitions*. All of these exhibits could potentially be drawn upon for examples of historical thinking in the interviews.

Conceptual Framework

There are several ways of conceptualizing historical thinking developed for use in formal education. This study is grounded in Peter Seixas and Tom Morton's *The Big Six: Historical Thinking Concepts*. The authors created a framework that describes historical thinking in terms of six main concepts, which they explain are “a basis for measuring their [, a student's,] progress toward competency in historical thinking.”⁶⁵

1) Establish Historical Significance: There are two broad ways of establishing historical significance. The first is to demonstrate that something “resulted in great change over long periods of time for large numbers of people.” The other, is to take what otherwise might be seen as an insignificant event and “link it to larger trends and stories that reveal something important for us today”.⁶⁶

2) Use Primary Source Evidence: Primary source evidence is the record of the past, from the past. They are the materials from which much about history is written. Learning to read them carefully and critically is, for many history educators, an integral part of teaching about the past. Understanding primary source evidence is not simply a matter of reading for information. That is only the first step. The second is to ask questions that are not explicitly answered by surface-level details such as “who created this?” and “what impact did it have on the people who read this?” In addition to this being an exercise in critical thinking, it helps the reader understand that many of the assumptions that they might have about the piece of evidence are informed by a world-view that did not exist at the time the evidence was created and that this difference can lead to misunderstandings. This is a very important idea for concept five.

⁶⁵ Peter Seixas, *The Big Six : Historical Thinking Concepts* (Toronto: Nelson Education, 2013). p.

⁶⁶ “Historical Significance,” *The Historical Thinking Project*, accessed January 24, 2016, <http://historicalthinking.ca/historical-significance>.

3) Identify Continuity and Change: Recognizing continuities and changes requires a historical thinker to understand the past as more than just a series of discreet events. Sometimes, it's possible to use trends to notice great changes occurring in the lives of people even if there are few significant events to mark those changes. For example, "the decade of the 1910s in Canada, ...saw profound change in many aspects of life, but not much change in its forms of government. If students say, 'nothing happened in 1911' they are thinking of the past as a list of events."⁶⁷ Being able to identify continuity and change means showing the course of history in terms of trends and not singular events alone.

4) Analyze Cause and Consequence: Understanding why a discrete moment in the past transpired is one of the chief functions of historical writing. Analysis of causation can take many forms. It can involve looking at factors close to a chosen event or those further away in both time and space. Yet for this framework there are a few rules. Firstly, human agency is at the center of studying causality in history. This agency may be intentional or it may not be, but in either case the actions and reactions of people are the chief concern. Secondly, historical events must be understood as never having been inevitable. In other words, "events occurred as they did *because* of the unique set of causal factors at play at the time. But change just one condition or action, and it could alter the way the event played out."⁶⁸

5) Take Historical Perspectives: "Taking historical perspective means understanding the social, cultural, intellectual, and emotional settings that shaped people's lives and actions in the past."⁶⁹ Inevitably these settings are different from the present and the way they are

⁶⁷ "Continuity and Change," *The Historical Thinking Project*, accessed January 24, 2016, <http://historicalthinking.ca/continuity-and-change>.

⁶⁸ Seixas, *The Big Six*. p. 114.

⁶⁹ "Historical Perspectives," *The Historical Thinking Project*, accessed January 24, 2016, <http://historicalthinking.ca/historical-perspectives>.

understood and so taking a historical perspective requires a reassessment of any assumptions one might have about how the people of the past understood their world. That way, an individual from the present does not project his/her understandings upon the past. This is most important when considering the emotions of peoples from the past. “Though it is sometimes called ‘historical empathy,’ historical perspective is very different from the common-sense notion of identification with another person.”⁷⁰

6) Understand Ethical Dimensions of History: This concept stands as a corollary to concept five. Where taking historical perspective often requires the ability to judge the past on its own terms, understanding ethical dimensions requires that this rule be broken when a historical wrong was committed that is simply inexcusable. Even if that wrong was widely viewed as normal or acceptable in its own time.

Data Collection

A total of 26 exit interviews were conducted at the Washington State History Museum (WSHM) in February and March of 2016 (see Appendix A for the interview guide). Data were collected on weekends, in order to maximize visitorship. Participants were selected at random as they exited either the third or fifth floor exhibition space. They had to be at least 18 years old. Visitors were informed of the purpose of the study, and told that participation was entirely voluntary. The beginning of the interview required that a visitor describe his/her experience in the exhibit space and if they could not recall or did not read, look at, talk about, or think about anything in the exhibit space, the interview was stopped. The vast majority of interviews were

⁷⁰ Ibid.

completed in eight to fifteen minutes. The researcher took written notes, paraphrasing visitors' responses to the interview questions.

Analysis

Data acquired from the interview were entered into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. Qualitative data were analyzed in order to understand the proportion of visitor demographics as expressed by questions from the very start of the survey. Statements were compared to determine which thoughts were the most and least popular. The semi-structured interview is organized broadly around *The Big Six* concepts as expressed on historicalthinking.ca, with two or three possible historical thoughts per concept. They are an attempt to capture the basic ideas behind each concept in a way that would be easy for visitors to respond to. They do not test for any of the more specific verities of historical thinking that are described in Seixas and Morton's book. Instead, qualitative responses were organized using emergent coding. An attempt was made to code using some of the more specific types of historical thinking. Where this was insufficient to capture the diversity of responses, emergent coding was used instead to categorize that data.

Limitations

This method has two primary limitations. Firstly, visitor testimonials were self-reported and then paraphrased. Even though this was done moments after they exited Washington State History Museum's main two exhibition spaces, there is no guarantee that their testimonials are an accurate reflection of their thoughts in the same way that visitor studies that record visitor conversations accurately depict those conversations.⁷¹ Secondly, the instrument is not an exhaustive checklist of the many different known types of historical thinking. An effort was

⁷¹ Gaea Leinhardt, Kevin Crowley, and Karen Knutson, *Learning Conversations in Museums* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 2002).

made to keep the interview statements as broad as possible, but this limits its ability to check for some of the more nuanced aspects of historical thinking and to insure closer comparison to *The Big Six* framework.

Chapter 4: Results and Discussion

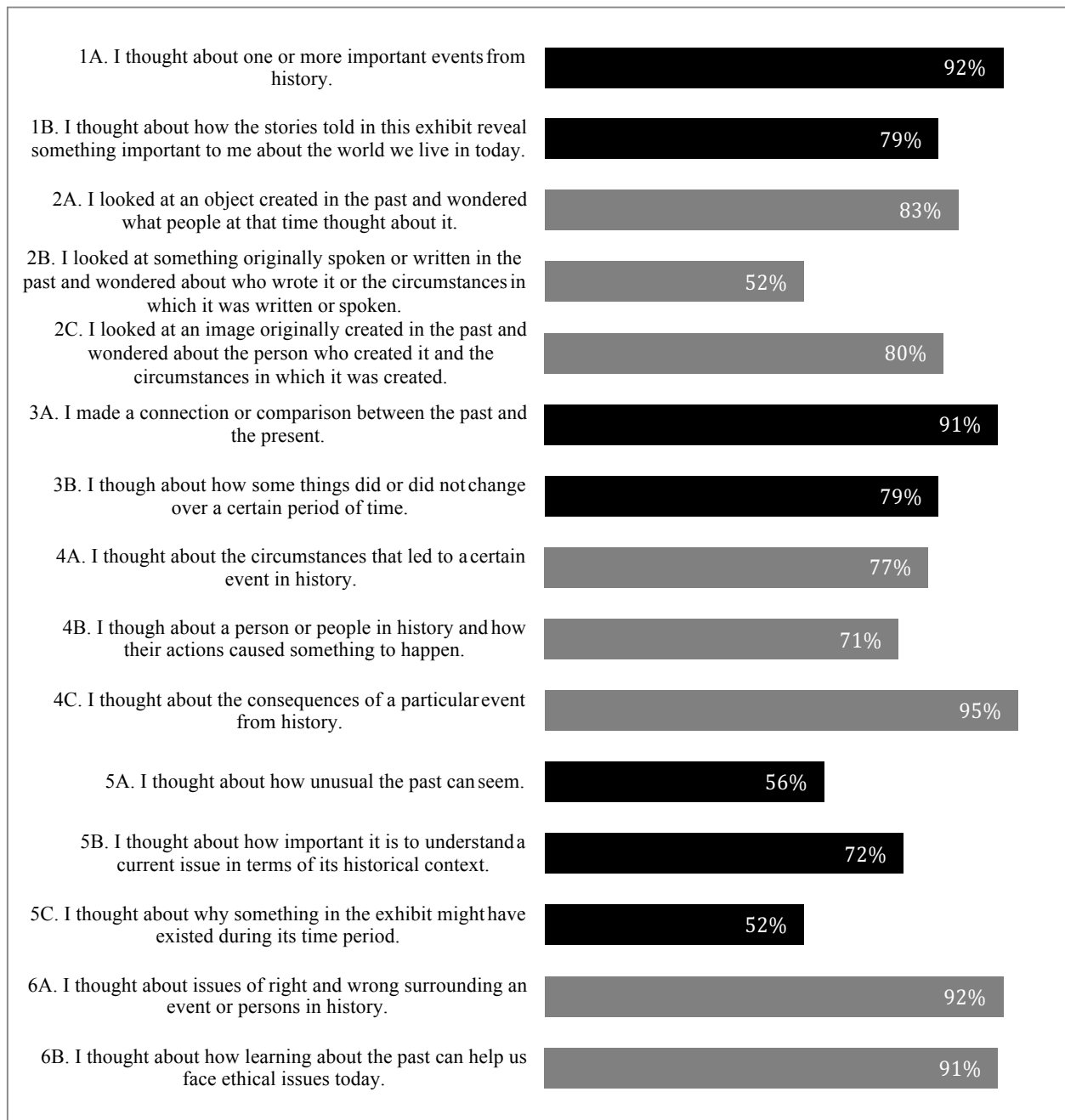
Interviewees were read fifteen statements representing thoughts about history they might have had over the course of their exhibition experience: each of the 15 statements correspond with one of Seixas and Morton's six historical thinking concepts:

1. Establishing historical significance
 - a) I thought about one or more important events from history.
 - b) I thought about how the stories told in this exhibit reveal something important to me about the world we live in today.
2. Using primary source evidence
 - a) I looked at an object created in the past and wondered what people at that time thought about it.
 - b) I looked at something originally spoken or written in the past and wondered about who wrote it or the circumstances in which it was written or spoken.
 - c) I looked at an image an image originally created in the past and wondered about the person who created it and the circumstances in which it was created?
3. Identifying continuity and change
 - a) I made a connection or comparison between the past and the present.
 - b) I thought about how some things did or did not change over a certain period of time.
4. Analyzing cause and consequence
 - a) I thought about the circumstances that led to a certain event in history.
 - b) I thought about a person or people in history and how their actions caused something to happen.
 - c) I thought about the consequences of a particular event from history.
5. Taking historical perspectives
 - a) I thought about how unusual the past can seem.
 - b) I thought about how important it is to understand a current issue in terms of its historical context.
 - c) I thought about why something might have existed during its time period.
6. Understanding the ethical dimension of historical interpretations
 - a) I thought about issues of right and wrong surrounding an event or persons in history.
 - b) I thought about how learning about the past can help us face ethical issues today.

For each statement, visitors were asked to first indicate whether they had or had not thought in that way over the course of their visit by stating "yes" or "no". If they agreed, they were asked to elaborate.

Research Question: Do adult visitors think about the past over the course of their visit? If they do, what are the different ways in which they engage with the past?

Figure 1 shows the frequency with which visitors thought about the past. On average, visitors said they thought about 10 of the 15 different types of historical thinking measured in the study. The minimum number was 0 and the maximum number was 15. (N=26)



Overwhelmingly, respondents engaged in historical thinking. A more detailed understanding of this engagement required a statement-by-statement breakdown and so data was analyzed in this way in Microsoft Excel. Initial coding was based around the different varieties of historical thinking described in detail by *The Big Six* framework. It was discovered that these did not always match up to the responses given by visitors. As a result, emergent coding, where patterns are identified within the data, was utilized to better categorize visitor responses where *The Big Six* framework could not capture the diversity of historical thoughts.

Concept 1: Establishing historical significance

a) I thought about one or more important events from history.

Ninety-two percent of visitors (n=24) said they thought about one or more important events in history during their experience in the museum. Fifteen of these respondents not only cited a historical event but also linked it to another event or concept. These “events” ranged from short, finite historical moments, like “Dropping of the Atomic Bomb,” to processes that took place over a much longer term such as “expansion of English imperial process.” In contrast, six visitors simply listed a few events but did not elaborate further on their understanding of why these events are important.

b) I thought about how the stories told in this exhibit reveal something important to me about the world we live in today.

Seventy-nine percent (n=24) of visitors indicated that they thought about how the stories told in this exhibit reveal something important to them about the world today. Elaboration of these thoughts took a variety of forms. Ten respondents cited a modern socio-political issue with a historical context as their example of something important about the world we live in today:

How we used to manage resources then. How it's nice how we are getting back to that. But is it a little too late?

Five respondents made a simple comparison between past and present but did not seek to qualify their “something” further beyond stating that it is similar or different. For example, the researcher paraphrased one visitor’s comment as follows: *A little bit. Interested in things about scurvy, what they did back then verses now. Just different things they did back then.*

Six visitors thought about a personal connection to the stories told in the exhibits: *I'm comparing my neighbors' stories to what I'm learning. I have a neighbor who is from the Puyallup tribe.*

Six respondents took a view of history as repeating itself. They did not explicitly state anything of concern to the present but instead thought about how themes from stories told in the exhibit were likely to come up again in the future: *As a matter of how people were in the past. We still remain in the future. Ambition to conquer, invent, and explore have never changed.*

Concept 2: Using primary source evidence

a) I looked at an object created in the past and wondered what people at that time thought about it.

Eighty-three percent of visitors (n=25) said they looked at an object created in the past and wondered about what people at that time thought about it. Overwhelmingly respondents cited tools and other utilitarian objects. This is not surprising, as much of the Washington State History Museum focuses on work and labor and many exhibit elements in the *Great Hall of Washington History* dealt with industrial Washington. Even when this was not the case, for example the museum’s section on pre-historic Washingtonians, many of the objects selected were part of the work of those pre-industrial people as well. For example, atlatls and baskets.

Eleven respondents considered what it might have been like for an individual to create or

use the tool: *Very impressed by the technical advancement of the clothing in relation to the condition it had to protect against. (Did you wonder what people at that time thought about it?) I suspect they were very grateful for it. I wondered how long it must have taken to [invent], over how many generations, something like that.* Four thought about the implication of some new object beyond its immediate utilization by its user or creation by its creator: *The machine that could decapitate and gut a fish. Kinda [...] displaced a lot of skilled Chinese workers.*

b) I looked at something originally spoken or written in the past and wondered about who wrote it or the circumstances in which it was written or spoken.

Fifty-two percent of respondents (n=25) said they looked at something originally spoken or written in the past, and wondered about who wrote it or the circumstances in which it was written or spoken. All but two of the eleven respondents who answered “yes” noted the quality of the text or the object it was written on/with. They did not cite specifically what was written. For example, the researcher paraphrased one visitor as saying, *Lewis and Clarke's journal entry. They had some broken English. Who could've thought they were an important member of an expedition?*

c) I looked at an image originally created in the past and wondered about the person who created it and the circumstances in which it was created.

Eighty-percent of respondents (n=25) said they looked at an image originally created in the past and wondered about the person who created it and the circumstances in which it was created. Fifteen respondents thought about either the thoughts or emotions of the person who created the image, or the thoughts and emotions of the image’s subject(s). This suggests a preference for images with human subjects. Paraphrased comments included the following:

I think about the Indian chiefs. (Where?) A lot of Indian culture. [I looked at] photos of Indians as they got older. All that wisdom and sorrow. You just feel connected.

The illustration of the indigenous peoples. I wondered what was in their minds as they sketched them. Were they identical to [the sketcher] or different species? [The] concept of the "noble savage" wasn't widespread yet so, "plain savage?"

Concept 3: Identifying continuity and change

a) I made a connection or comparison between past and present.

Ninety-one percent of respondents (n=22) said they made a connection or comparison between the past and the present during their history museum experience. There was an even split between examples of continuity and examples of change, with seven respondents for each. Ten participants cited a point of comparison having to do with their selves or relatives, indicating a personal understanding of continuity and change: *Grandfather worked in a coalmine [in England]. Life was so harsh back then, easy now because of [our better control over] disease.*

Another ten participants showed no explicit connection to their own individual lives in their connections/comparisons between past and present:

The Chinese question. It happened 100 years ago, so pretty recent. (What did you think this had to do with something in the present?) Well we can still be pretty judgmental of others. General stereotyping.

b) I thought about how some things did or did not change over a certain period of time.

Seventy-nine percent of respondents (n=19) said they thought about how some things did or did not change over a certain period of time. The original intention behind this statement was to see if visitors thought about change over a period of time that was entirely in the past. However, ten of the respondents made an explicit comparison with the present. Eight cited a continuity while six cited a change. Six thought about broad human conditions, while another six thought about the lives of historical individuals:

Everybody's still greedy. What would stop someone from kicking people to make a buck?

There is quote by a women. Native women. They just brought in the skins, and she was describing how she had given birth to her 3rd child. "That's nothing, I have to take care of the men! I can relate to that. 'What's for dinner?!'"

Concept 4: Analyzing cause and consequence

a) I thought about the circumstances that led to a certain event in history.

Seventy-seven percent of respondents (n=22) said they thought about the circumstances that led to a certain event in history. Thoughts about the causes of historical events tended to be simple. Twelve respondents cited a single cause. For example, *Nuclear plant around the Coulee Dam. (What were circumstances that led to that event, which you thought about while in the exhibit?) Sorta the expansion and taking of resources by folks, who have the power; the white people.*

Five respondents listed more than one cause. All of these took the form of a simple narrative, with one event from the past leading to the next.

I think the women during the war. Having to build [listed a number of things]. They didn't get acknowledgement. [Visitor noted a couple of small exceptions] (What did you think this lead to?) Women's revolution and rights. [Showed that] women could do a man's job.

Participants did not think about causes and consequences in a way that suggests they understood a historical moment as several simultaneous factors that converged to create a specific situation. For ten respondents, the historical circumstances involved an explicit reference to human causes while seven listed a circumstance and gave no clear indication if they felt that people were involved.

b) I thought about a person or people in history and how their actions caused something to happen.

Seventy-one percent of participants (n=21) said they thought about a person or people in history and how their actions caused something to happen. In thinking about the effect humans

had on history, respondents choose everyone from individuals, especially Captain Cook and Lewis and Clarke, to a massive undefined “we.” Captain Cook and Lewis and Clarke were the only individual historical figures that were cited respondents: *Lewis and Clarke talked with Indians. Caused work and trade. For James Cook, thought about the bad rap he gets for the slaughter of Indians and Hawaiians.* When considering the effects of historical people, seven visitors thought about how they affected other people. Eight cited a change in the circumstances of the places these people interacted with. Ten cited a single consequence while five cited two or more.

c) I thought about the consequences of a particular event from history.

Ninety-five percent of participants (n=21) said they thought about the consequences of a particular event from history. This statement received the highest percentage of “yes” responses. Part of this may be because it is simply a broadening of the previous statement, which focused on the consequences of people only. Several responses from the statement above were reused. Seventeen respondents thought about historical consequences in human terms. That is to say, what historical events did to people:

World War II, the Great War, wars in Vietnam, wars in general. (What consequences, if any, did you think about?) Suffering from the people war who lived in those countries.

Eight did not mention people instead concentrating on circumstances, like one respondent who thought about “*The white man coming ashore, causing diseases.*”

As was the case with the other two statements from this concept, more visitors mentioned a single consequence of their event, with eleven doing this and eight mentioning one or more.

Concept 5: Taking historical perspectives

a) I thought about how unusual the past can seem.

Fifty-six percent of participants (n=25) said they thought about how unusual the past can seem. The majority, eight respondents, thought about how strange it might have been to live in a different time. They cited the different lifestyles of the peoples of the past:

Driving cross-country [in] wagons. So tiny and they bring all of their stuff and sometimes threw it out as they went. I try to imagine myself, I can't imagine the food, like bacon and beans for so many meals, and the hardships. How easily we travel today.

The six other respondents thought about the state of the world, or at least Washington state, at a particular time in the past: *The lack of moral and ethical decision making that led to the making of the state of Washington.*

b) I thought about how important it is to understand a current issue in terms of its historical context.

Seventy-two percent of participants (n=25) said they thought about how important it is to understand a current issue in terms of its historical context. For ten respondents, history provided examples of situations that are transpiring in the present or are likely to transpire in the future. For example; *The Muslims verses the Japanese. At one time the Japanese were targeted unfairly. Now the Muslims are lumped together, unfairly.* That there is something to be learned for the past was a thought shared by fourteen respondents. Although how that information might be utilized was only vaguely hinted at except for the two respondents who claimed to deal directly with the effects of history. In one such case, the researcher paraphrased the participant as follows:

I spend a lot of time thinking about that during the day. I'm an attorney for a tribe. So I think about how treaties effect what things happen now. Generally about how these tribes are losing history and culture as much as they're losing their land.

c) I thought about why something might have existed during its time period.

Fifty-two percent of participants (n=25) said they thought about why something might have existed during its time period. For all but one of the twelve “yes” responses, the “something” chosen was an object. Half of the “yes” responses simply stated that the object was needed to complete some task at the time. For example: *Seeing fishing equipment. Obviously they need to fish with the type of technology that existed hundreds or thousands of years ago. How [was it that] they walked to that design?* A singular exception to this was a respondent who thought about a historic coal mine strike.

One in particular was, with regards to economic history with coal mine strikes in Roslyn. I try to see both sides of the coalmine strikes in Roslyn. I try to see both sides of the issues. (Visitor summarized some of the content of that section) It's interesting to put yourself into the context of the issue. Both sides trying to feed their families.

Concept 6: Understanding the Ethical Dimension of Historical Interpretations

a) I thought about issues of right and wrong surrounding an event or persons in history.

Ninety-two percent of participants (n=25) said they thought about the issues of right and wrong surrounding an event or persons in history. In most instances, the ethical issue was implicit within a stated event so that the two were the same. For example, Japanese internment was an example of the ethical issue of Japanese internment. It was rare that a respondent would think about event as an example of a wider ethical issue.

There were six instances where respondents questioned whether or not there really was an ethical issue surrounding an event or person. For example,

At the end, when it discussed the ambivalence regarding Captain Cook's legacy, when he was once regarded as one of [the] world's greatest explorers. When as now he's seen as a harbinger of exploitation. How to judge in the context of our own time?

Respondents were more likely to identify a person or people who were wronged than they were to identify who, if anyone, might be held accountable for the issue. For five respondents, there was an issue, but it was not clear who perpetrated it beyond a vague “they.” *And the way Indians were treated. Taken advantage of because they were so naive.* There were six instances where it was not clear what injustice a stated group of people may have suffered. For example, the researcher paraphrased one participant as saying, *Chinese. (Why does this deal with an issue of right/wrong?) We're all created equal. We're all the same. We're all human.*

b) I thought about how learning about the past can help us face ethical issues today.

Ninety-one percent of participants (n=22) said they thought about how learning about the past can help us face ethical issues today. For example, one participant was paraphrased as saying, *Daily in my mind. Three major things. 1. Value of economics and the importance of saving. 2. Influence of other cultures. Blending, not segregating. 3. Mental, physical, and moral streak of men compared then to now. [Felt that men today are lacking in that capacity.]* This response is atypically specific. It is also the only example of where the visitor felt that the past provided a better moral framework that the present should emulate. For all other “yes” respondents, the ethical issue was always a wrong inflicted upon a certain group of people. Six respondents cited an ethical issue from the past that was either similar to a modern issue or a direct antecedent: *The oppression. How the poor have been treated recently.*

Half of respondents also provided an example of a historical and ethical context but went one step further. For them, knowing about the past provided example(s) of things that were done wrong and should not be done again: *There again with the Chinese. We can't do that to people. We have to stop thinking everyone is different. Our individuality is different.* Yet exactly how this insight might be put into action was never considered.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Implications

The purpose of this study was to describe historical thinking by adult visitors at a local history museum. Peter Seixas and Tom Morton's *The Big Six: Historical Thinking Skills Framework* provided the conceptual framework from which an interview instrument was created and partially analyzed. Data was collected through interviews with 26 visitors to the Washington State History Museum in Tacoma. Interviewees were read a series of fifteen statements representing thoughts they might have had while experiencing the exhibits. For each statement, they could either reply "yes" it was a thought they had or "no" it was not. "Yes" responses were further elaborated from the respondent's memory.

Conclusions

Overwhelmingly, respondents displayed a wide amount and degree of historical thinking throughout the course of their visit. Interviewees were read fifteen statements representing thoughts about history they might have had over the course of the visit and then asked to elaborate if they agreed that "yes, this is a thought I had over the course of my visit today." An approximate average of 10.3 "yes" responses per visitors were recorded. When asked to elaborate upon a "yes" response, most visitors gave short answers that lacked the in-depth analysis encouraged for historical thinking in formal education. These responses suggest a pattern of quick interactions with the different individual elements of history, such as events, people, objects, etc., over the course of their visit. There was great breadth, but not as much depth, which is consistent with visitor testimonials collected for evaluations in history exhibits elsewhere.⁷²

⁷² Randi Korn & Associates, Inc., "Summative Evaluation: Minnesota's Greatest Generation Exhibition"; Randi Korn & Associates, Inc., "Formative Evaluation: Testing of the Model Table and Mexican Era Section for the

Across all fifteen statements, there was a high rate of response with at least half of respondents replying that a given statement was something they thought about. Certain responses received more “yes” responses than other with the highest rate at 95% for statement 4C (I thought about the consequences of a particular event from history) and the lowest rate at 52% for statements 2B (I looked at something originally spoken or written in the past and wondered about who wrote it or the circumstances in which it was written or spoken) and 5C (I thought about why something in the exhibit might have existed during its time period).

Peter Seixas and Tom Morton’s *The Big Six: Historical Thinking Concepts* framework describes the different examples of historical thinking by adult visitors with different degrees of success. Broadly, all six concepts used in this study provided insights into visitor thoughts, but these thoughts expressed in concepts two and five do not match their description from the *The Big Six* framework, while thoughts from concepts one, three, and four did. Concept six was moderately well described.

Concept 1, Establishing Historical Significance, matched closely with *The Big Six*. The majority of respondents did think about their chosen event(s) in relation to another event or historical concept. This was the case when respondents linked their chosen event(s) to things like “Hawaiian history”, “transitions in economies”, and the dividing line between pre and post-Atomic society. This shows a basic understand of historical significance following Peter Seixas’s criteria that an important event caused, “great change over long periods of time for large numbers of people.”⁷³ About a third of respondents simply listed an event. A smaller set of four

Becoming Los Angeles Exhibition”; Randi Korn & Associates, Inc., “Front-End Evaluation: Interpretative Planning of Ellis Island’s Hospital and Medical Facilities.”

⁷³ “Historical Significance,” *The Historical Thinking Project*, accessed January 24, 2016, <http://historicalthinking.ca/historical-significance>.

respondents interpreted “importance” in terms of their own experiences much like the subjects of Seixas’s study⁷⁴ interpreted “significance” as a matter of what was personally significant for them. For example, one respondent noted that they, “went to the place where Cook was killed in Hawaii [...] so I was interested in that.”

For Concept 2, Using Primary Source Evidence, there was a major gap between *The Big Six* model and the thoughts expressed by visitors. Dealing with historical evidence in formal education requires that the “reader” look beyond surface level details to consider what a source meant to the people from the time it was created. There is an attempt by many visitors to come to this understanding, but very few demonstrated that they possessed the knowledge to fully decode the evidence in front of them. Unlike the other concepts where there are many different types of historical thinking that exist even without the training and guidance of a teacher, concept two does not so without that knowledge there was little for visitors to do but move onto another area of an exhibit. That this behavior is to be expected is reinforced by Robert Bain and Kirsten Ellenbogen. They note that trying to get visitors to “read” an object with the same depth that a historian would is inadvisable. As they put it, “Such pedagogical alchemy is not what we are suggesting here, if for no other reason than the tremendous complexity involved in such transformations.”⁷⁵

For Concept 3, Identifying Continuity and Change, within *The Big Six* framework, this concept is all about identifying trends. Continuity and change are best understood as existing side by side. Apart from understanding this, there are few hard rules to understanding continuity and change the way there are for looking at evidence or taking historical perspectives, which

⁷⁴ Peter Seixas, “Mapping the Terrain of Historical Significance,” *Social Education* 61, no. 1 (1997): 22–27.

⁷⁵ Robert Bain and Kirsten M. Ellenbogen, “Placing Objects Within Disciplinary Perspective: Examples from History and Science,” in *Perspective on Object-Centered Learning in Museums* (Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2002), 153–69. P. 158

makes it easy to apply to a museum experience. Most respondents did think about continuity and change, even if there was less of a tendency to evaluate what it means. There were exceptions, as was this case with three visitors whose experiences made them consider how easier, nicer, and more comfortable life in the present is. Respondents were also more likely to evaluate continuities, where some observation of human nature could be made. For example; *How the human, human quality of greed and ambition doesn't change over time and how it'll drive whatever happens to the arctic.*

With Concept 4, Analyzing Cause and Consequences, analysis of causes and consequences can be reduced to a to a few dimensions. How far forward or back in time one looks from an event one, and how many causes or consequences one considers. This is a very open framework that can lead to some very complex ways to answer the question of why an event transpired. However, there are a couple of rules. Firstly, history focuses on human agency. Whether it is intentional or not, the actions of people are central to the study of history. Secondly, it is important to not think of events as inevitable. The interview does not test for thoughts about historical inevitability and no clear expressions of this thought were made. Human agency, on the other hand, is shown throughout the statements for concept four. In terms of complexity, more respondents represented cited single causes or consequences for an event and those who did not often utilized a short set of words like “work and trade” or “death and destruction”. Thoughts that did involve multiple causes or consequences took the form of short narratives, with one event leading to another. For example one respondent noted how: *My parents didn't want to be thought of as Indians. [There was] a law in the 30s where Indians couldn't get liquor, but they were light enough. But then my generation are "we're back and proud to be native."*

For Concept 5, Taking Historical Perspective, one of the main ideas behind confronting students with historical perspectives is to challenge preconceptions they have about the human condition. Doing this requires an acknowledgement of the ways that the past is different from the present beyond the obvious, surface-level differences. Students then have to try to put themselves in the place of a person from the past, but must also acknowledge the difficulty between fully understanding their thoughts and emotions. This is noted as “a huge challenge for students.”⁷⁶ This might explain why the statements from concept five had some of the lowest frequency of “yes” responses of the interview. Some respondents understood that differences between past and present but largely did not explain why they existed beyond the fact that a certain object was available for use. For example, *Seeing fishing equipment. Obviously they need to fish with the type of technology that existed hundreds or thousands of years ago. How [was it that] they walked to that design?* As in this case, respondents did acknowledge a lack of knowledge about the past. Much of the work around historical perspectives deals with addressing incorrect assumptions. As this survey did not ask for elaboration on “no” answers, it is impossible to know what assumptions about the past the many “no” respondents may have held. For this study, responses were not well described in terms of concept five.

Finally, for Concept 6, Understanding Ethical Dimensions of History, in the literature, ethical issues center around grievous wrongs inflicted upon certain groups in the past, which continue to have a profound effect on those groups. The Washington State History Museum addresses many historical wrongs inflicted upon native Washingtonians in addition to ethical issues surrounding the forced internment of Japanese-Americans during World War Two. The high percentage of “yes” responses within concept six show that ethical issues were a concept on

⁷⁶ “Historical Perspectives,” *The Historical Thinking Project*, accessed January 24, 2016, <http://historicalthinking.ca/historical-perspectives>.

the mind of many visitors to WSHM. Furthermore, the high percentage of “yes” responses to statement 6B (I thought about how learning about the past can help us face ethical issues today) shows that respondents understood that the issues they learned about had some modern relevance.

However, there is one important aspects missing from most responses. Many of the wrongs were widely tolerated at the point in the past where they were inflicted. Only a few respondents to statement 6A (I thought about issues of right and wrong surrounding an event or persons in history) grappled with this aspect. As one respondent put it

At the end, when it discussed the ambivalence regarding Captain Cook's legacy, when he was once regarded as one of [the] world's greatest explorers. When as now he's seen as a harbinger of exploitation. How to judge in the context of our own time? (17)

While there was an understanding that historical wrongs affect people in the present, there was almost no acknowledgement of *why* those wrongs existed in the first place. The closest respondents came was one visitor’s response to statement 4C (I thought about the consequences of a particular event from history):

Maybe the resentment to the Japanese prior to internment. (Was this a cause of something?) Seemed. Maybe resentment of Japanese success. Maybe that's why. We wouldn't see it as the problem we do today.

Implications

In some cases, the type of historical thinking expressed by visitors was very similar to the types expressed by students in Seixas’ research. In other cases, the gulf between the ways historical thinking is approached in schools and the thoughts museum visitors displayed is too great to be of use. This gulf does not necessarily mean that *The Big Six* framework is an inappropriate way for looking at historical thinking in museums. Furthermore, given the lack of formal instruction for visitors as they explore WSHM’s gallery space, the lack of more

sophisticated examples of historical thinking is to be expected. Educational researchers who seek to describe historical thinking often differentiate between its more sophisticated examples and the ones that people use by default. This second type is described in varying degrees of detail by researchers, including the creators and major influencers of *The Big Six* framework. This, when compared to the results from this study, makes *The Big Six* framework more useful in describing historical thinking concepts in some areas than in others.

The results from this study are in no way representative of history museums as a whole. Many of the questions sparked by interacting with the exhibits at Washington State History Museum might have been answered by another museum and could have led to more sophisticated historical thinking along those lines. If Washington State History Museum had allowed visitors to handle artifacts, or at least accurate recreations of them, then that would have helped to expand upon the thoughts eleven respondents had with regard to the creation and use of objects they had encountered in the exhibit. Conversely, had the museum not featured historical wrongs inflicted upon native Washingtonians, the visitors' experience might have been more akin to those experienced in the National Museum of American's history *Price of Freedom* exhibit. There, according to Brenda M. Trofanenko, the ethics of waging war go largely unexamined.⁷⁷

It is necessary to look across specific historical subjects in order to address some of the persistent debates about the design of history exhibits. Questions about the use and exclusion of historical agents, ethics, the use of evidence, and the value of history museums are important to the field as a whole. This study demonstrates that visitors do think in terms of many of these

⁷⁷ Brenda M. Trofanenko, "The Educational Promise of Public History Museum Exhibits," *Theory and Research in Social Education* 38, no. 2 (2010): 270–288. p. 270

debates. Sometimes these thoughts can be framed in ways that correspond closely to similar work in formal education and in other cases museums may need to find another framework. Yet overall, the fact that visitors expressed so much opens the door to getting their perspective and understanding the unique contemplative space of history museums as a whole.

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Appendix

Interview Instrument

Historical Thinking at the Washington State History Museum

Interview Guide

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Thesis Advisor: Dr. Jessica Luke, Museology Graduate Program, University of Washington

Phone: 206.685.3496 // Email: jjluke@uw.edu

Consent Script

I am asking you to participate in a research study that is part of my Master's Thesis work at the University of Washington. The purpose of this research study is to investigate instances of Historical Thinking by adult visitors at this museum.

Your participation is voluntary and you may discontinue participation at any time. This interview will be transcribed on paper. However, your responses will be confidential. Your name will not be identified and while I may quote you, that quote will not be attributed to you. If you have any questions now or in the future, you may contact me or my advisor using the contact information on the card I shared with you.

Do you have any questions? Do you agree to participate in this interview?

Date: Instrument #: Started with concept number... Time Bracket (:00)

Group Composition. Alone Adult group Adult(s) with children Age Bracket:

Interview Questions

I'm interested in what was going through your mind while you were in this exhibit. Can you mentally rewind through your experience, and tell me some of the things you thought about (if they're in a group, thought about or talked about). There are no wrong answers; this includes "I don't know", which is perfectly valid data for me.

Now let's get more specific. What kinds of things did you think about or talk about that were specifically about history?

I'm going to read you a series of statements. Each statement represents something you might or might not have thought about while you were in the exhibit. For each statement, I want you to tell me yes, this is something I thought about or no, this is not something I thought about. Are you ready?

[If visitors respond "yes", follow up with] – can you give me some context for this thought? What specifically were you looking at/thinking about?

Historical Thinking Concepts

1) Establish historical significance

- a) I thought about one or more important events from history. NO YES__

- b) I thought about how the stories told in this exhibit reveal something important to me about the world we live in today NO YES__

2) Use primary source evidence

- a) I looked at an object created in the past and wondered what people at that time thought about it. NO YES__

- b) I looked at something originally written from history and wondered about who wrote it or the circumstances in which it was written NO YES__

- c) I looked at an image originally created in the past and wondered about the person who created it and the circumstances in which it was created NO YES__

3) Identify continuity and change

- a) I made a connection or comparison between the past and the present. NO YES__

- b) I thought about how some things did or did not change over a certain period of time. NO YES__

4) Analyze cause and consequence

- a) I thought about the circumstances that led to a certain event in history. NO YES__

- b) I thought about a person or people in history and how their actions caused something to happen NO YES__

c) I thought about the consequences of a particular event from history. NO YES__

5) Take historical perspectives

a) I thought about how unusual the past can seem. NO YES__

b) I thought about how important it is to understand a current issue from the point of its historical context. NO YES__

c) I thought about why something in the exhibit might have existed during its time period. NO YES__

6) Understand the ethical dimension of historical interpretations

a) I thought about issues of right and wrong surrounding an event or persons in history. NO YES__

b) I thought about how learning about the past can help us face ethical issues today.
NO YES__

Do you have any additional comments or questions?

Thank you for your time.