

**THE ESSENTIAL ARCHITECTURE OF THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE
IN HISTORY MUSEUMS
A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY**

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**THIS THESIS IS PRESENTED FOR THE DEGREE OF
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I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged in the text.

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Richard Keith McLauchlan

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ABSTRACT

This study undertakes an in-depth investigation of the learning experience of selected visitors to three Australian museums. The research questions guiding the study were:

Central Research Question: What is the essence of the learning experience in history museums?

Sub-questions:

1. What is the essential structure of the museum learning experience?
2. What are the constituent elements of that essential structure?
3. How is meaning created by the visitor during the museum learning experience?
4. What are the key implications for the management and marketing of museums arising from an understanding of the above?

Having established from the literature the importance of learning to the museum experience and emotion to such learning, the methodology assumes an emergent construction progressing through three separate but interrelated qualitative phases. The first two assume a broadly ethnographic approach while the third, in an attempt to achieve a deeper understanding, adopts a hermeneutic phenomenological approach referring in particular to the work of Husserl, Heidegger and Van Manen.

The research incorporates a range of investigative methods including preparation of Personal Meaning Maps (Falk, 2002); audio recording of participant visit conversations; and in-depth interviews during a 'return to the experience' by individual participants and the researcher immediately subsequent to the visit.

The first two stages identifies learning to have occurred by way of a number of principal concepts around which the data is grouped as well as a series of

themes by which meaning is evidenced. Emotion is seen to be an influencing factor with respect to both concepts and meaning.

The third stage identified the essence of the learning experience as a relationship between the visitor's emergent interpretation of exhibits and their feelings of interest. From this the essential structure is identified as the interrelationship between such emergent interpretation in narrative form, interest and the self. The emergent narrative is thereafter deconstructed to its elemental processes of remembering, thinking and imagining, linked together by way of constructivist narratology. The identified themes, providing meaning to the experience, are then incorporated into the model. The learning experience is then seen as the on-going dialectic between the constructivist processes of the emergent narrative and the de-constructive processes of meaning-making.

The conceptual model provides new insight into the museum learning experience by providing the interrelationship between the fundamental elements that constitute the essence of the phenomenon and upon which it might be argued other theories of museum learning are built.