
A CONCEPT BY ANY OTHER NAME: INFORMATION PROCESSING AND BEHAVIOR IN MUSEUMS

by Steven Yalowitz

“What’s in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell as sweet.”

*William Shakespeare
Romeo and Juliet*

The words we use to describe something do not necessarily change what something is; a rose may be called by many names, yet still be the same rose. In the field of visitor studies, we borrow from the “outside” world concepts and theories that are applied to what we do. Partly, this happens because visitor studies is a field that has people from many different backgrounds coming together to achieve a common goal: understanding the relationship between the environment and the visitor. Few areas enjoy the diversity of input that we have—from educators, museum professionals, sociologists, psychologists, statisticians, etc. While this allows for the broad rather than narrow point of view, it does increase the chance that people may be talking about the same thing without realizing it because they are using different words.

In information processing, we often mention higher-order thinking, which is thinking at a deeper level, or involving more complex thought processes. In comparison, lower-order thinking or learning may be engaging in shallow or more simple thought processes. The comparison of higher-order to deep/complex and lower-order to shallow/simple makes sense to people familiar with those particular theories, but it would also make sense to use other terms to describe the same two things. Some dichotomies that may be substituted include central and peripheral processing of information, high-involved versus low-involved visitors, Chaiken’s (1980) systematic versus heuristic views, and Langer’s

(1989) mindfulness and mindlessness.

All of these apply to how people think or process information. While there may be subtle distinctions between these various labels, and the terms may have originated for different purposes, I believe they are talking about the same basic idea: that sometimes we really think about things, while at other times we invest little mentally.

Central and peripheral processing of information is discussed at length by Petty and Cacioppo (1981) in terms of attitude change. They discuss central processing of information as more intrinsic, cognitive processing of information, while peripheral processing of information is extrinsic, affective, and emotional. The first requires a good bit of mental activity, while the second involves little mental involvement on the part of the person. This concept is applied by Webb (1997) to museums, indicating the central route as a more cognitive means of visitor involvement, and the peripheral route as more affective in nature. So, the visitor processing information by the central route is thinking about things, trying to fit them into existing knowledge, while the visitor using the affective route is reacting more than thinking. Also, Webb mentions high and low involvement in visitors, which to some degree may be construed as the cognitive distinction of higher-order and lower-order thinking. However, it could be argued that someone reacting affectively may be just as involved as someone reacting cognitively, but is involved in a different way.

While these comparisons are not exactly the same thing, in my opinion they are talking about the same basic concepts. Langer’s (1989) mindlessness and mindfulness are easily ap-

plied and successfully compared to some of the aforementioned concepts. In regard to museum visitors, Moscardo (1991) describes mindlessness as “activity based on preexisting routines of behaviour” (p.153), and mindfulness as “active processing of information from the environment and the creation of new categories for information and new behaviours” (p. 158). Mindfulness as the active processing of information alludes to what we know as higher-order processing, while mindlessness is a state based on previous experience, with no deep, meaningful thinking going on. Not surprisingly, these concepts have been applied to the museum visitor, since we think of visitors as either interested or not, with interest frequently linked to attention or cognitive involvement in the material presented.

Chaiken (1980), like Petty and Cacioppo (1981), talks about persuasion and attitude change, but uses the terms systematic and heuristic instead of central and peripheral to describe the difference in views of persuasion. For Chaiken, the systematic view is when “recipients exert considerable cognitive effort in performing this task: They attempt to comprehend and evaluate the message’s arguments” (p. 752). Whereas, for the heuristic view of persuasion “recipients exert comparatively little effort in judging message validity” (p. 752). Here the authors do not specifically mention visitor studies, but they are talking about the same topic: attitude change. In principle, they are using same dichotomy, but with different labels. Both of these concepts can easily be applied to visitors, in talking about how they process material.

There are, of course, many other
(continued on next page)

concepts that deal with thinking or information processing in this manner, but these examples show the general idea of how people can talk about the same thing using different words. In part, that is the beauty of language, either written or spoken. However, in the interdisciplinary field of visitor studies this may lead to confusion as to what we are talking about. The purpose of this piece is to make a connection between these various concepts, when the connection may not be so obvious. Maybe we can look at these concepts as similar creatures, drawing on the advantages and content of one and incorporating them into the other.

It is often said that great minds think alike, but it may be just as valid that great minds think the same things but call them by different names.

References

Chaiken, S. (1980). Heuristic versus systematic information processing and the use of source versus message cues in persuasion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39(5), 752-766.

Langer, E. J. (1989). *Mindfulness*. Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley.

Law, R. A. (1916). *The tragedy of Romeo and Juliet: The Arden Shakespeare*. Boston, MA: D.C. Heath & Company.

Moscardo, G. (1991). Museums scripts. An example of the application of social cognition research in tourism. *Australian Psychologist*, 26(3), 158-165.

Petty, R. E. , & Cacioppo, J. T. (1981). *Attitudes and persuasion: Classic and contemporary approaches*. Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Company Publishers.

Webb, R. C. (1997). Comparing high-involved and low-involved visitors: A review of the consumer behavior literature. *Visitor Studies: Theory, Research and Practice*, 9, 276-287.

Steven Yalowitz is a doctoral candidate in Experimental Psychology at Colorado State University, working with Dr. Ross Loomis in the area of visitor studies.

VSA STUDENT NEWS

ONCE A STUDENT, ALWAYS A STUDENT

by Steven Yalowitz, Student Board Member

Well, the torch has officially been passed, and I gratefully thank James Jensen for all the work he did this past



year as the previous VSA student board member. Not only has he passed the torch, but he has also given me many useful ideas to follow up on as the new student board member. I'm also hoping that James's moving from student member to consultant will help make sure that the title of this column is more figurative than literal.

My first order of business is to get as much input about student issues as I possibly can, and not only from student members of VSA. I would love to get advice on issues specifically related to students, whether from current student members, potential student members, museum professionals, academics, or anyone. Of course, much of what I address is particularly important to student members, such as the travel aid fund that allowed me to attend this past August's VSA conference in Washington, D.C. The other two recipients were Kirsten Ellenbogen and Fred Stein. I also would love to hear specifically from past student members in terms of what they particularly liked as a student member of VSA, or in retrospect, what they wished had been made available to them. Being a student member, to me, is an incredible opportunity to learn the ins and outs of the visitor studies community from those most involved in it.

There are many things I would like to accomplish in the upcoming year:

- Most important, if you know of any students who are pursuing a career in visitor studies or a related field, encourage them to consider joining VSA. They can feel free to contact me if they want more details
- I am hoping to add a student link to the VSA web page dealing with student news and relevant information. For that, I would love any input on what should be included
- If there is enough interest, I'd like to set up a listserv for those interested in discussing issues relative to students in visitor studies. Listservs are e-mail groups where you can post a message to all the members of a group and have a continuing electronic discussion.
- It's kind of far off, but I'd also like to know what student members would like to do in Chicago this summer at the VSA conference. There will at least be a social event for student members, so we can get to know each other a little bit better in person (e-mail contact has its limits!)

I'm really looking forward to working with everyone in VSA, so here's to a good, productive year. Hopefully, I'll see you in Chicago!

Steven Yalowitz
VSA Student Board Member
Colorado State University
Department of Psychology
Clark Building B-219
Fort Collins, CO 80523
(970)491-1320
yalowitz@lamar.colostate.edu