

Chapter 6: Museum Recollections

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Abstract

Museum learning involves a wide range of recollections about a diverse set of experiences encountered over the course of a museum visit. Three key features are: 1) visitors "learn" about many different aspects of a visit (not just exhibits); 2) experiences are stored in memory and are recallable; and 3) learned experiences persist for long periods of time (i.e., months, years and decades). A series of pilot ethnographic style interviews were conducted. Each of eleven subjects was conversationally "walked" through his recollections. Several consistent themes ran through all the recollections: 1) Every individual interviewed can place the museum visit within a context—social, geographical and temporal; 2) Every individual interviewed has a surprisingly good recollection of how long they spent in the museum, and often what their mental state was at the time—such as being bored or harried; 3) Most individuals can recall at least a few exhibits they saw, and some specific details about them, though none of these people could recall a full visit's worth of things they saw; 4) All individuals refer to some aspect of the museum's architecture or "feel". These interviews also suggested that often museum memories are "bound together" in individualized ways that make total sense to the individual who is relaying the information, but not necessarily to an "objective" outsider.

Introduction

Museum learning continues to be a hot topic. Rhetoric aside, an increasing number of researchers, in an increasing number of journals, are publishing the results of excellent studies on museum visitor behavior and learning. Yet, millions of visitors, hundreds of studies, and countless anecdotes later, little consensus exists on what museum visitors learn, or even by some accounts, whether they learn anything at all.

A major problem is one of definition. What is meant by learning in a museum context? Despite a great deal of research and theorizing about learning in general, let alone within a museum context, no consensus currently exists on the subject. As Bransford (1979) states: "The term 'learning' is ambiguous, and an experimenter's choice of critical tasks is

an index of his or her current use of the term." For the purpose of the study reported here, I began with the assumption that museum learning involves a wide range of recollections about a diverse set of experiences encountered over the course of a museum visit. Things that are learned are stored in memory (Koran, Longino, Dierking, & Shafer, 1983) and are able to be recalled long after a visit (Falk, unpublished). The three key aspects are:

- Visitors "learn" about many different aspects of a visit (not just exhibits).
- Experiences are stored in memory and are recallable.
- Learned experiences persist for long periods of time (i.e., months, years and decades).

Study and Methodology

As a first step towards arriving at an understanding of learning in museums, I conducted a series of "pilot" ethnographic style interviews. Eleven individuals were interviewed over a two year period. The sample was not systematically derived. I interviewed friends, relatives, people sitting next to me on airplanes; children, young adults, middle aged adults and the elderly. The methodology, however, was consistent.

In all cases, interviews were begun by conversationally asking the subject if they had been to a museum before (or if I knew that they had, I asked "do you remember when you went to X museum?") Next, the subject was "walked" through their visit. Typical questioning went as follows:

- Who did you go to the museum with?
- What time of year was it?
- Do you remember walking in the front door?
- What was the first thing you saw once inside the museum?
- What was the next thing you saw?
- What was the next thing you saw?
- What was the next thing you saw?

The interview proceeded until the subject informed me that they had exhausted all recollections of the visit. Transcripts from the interviews were prepared and a preliminary analysis of content conducted.

The reader is cautioned that due to sample size and bias in the selection of respondents, this study cannot be considered scientific in its methodology. The results, however, are suggestive and the approach is worthy of further study.

Results and Discussion

Even with just these few interviews, patterns emerged. Several consistent themes ran through all the recollections.

- Every individual interviewed could place the museum visit within a context — social, geographical and temporal.
- Every individual interviewed had a surprisingly good recollection of how long they spent in the museum, and often what their mental state was at the time — such as being bored or hassled.
- Most individuals could recall at least a few exhibits they saw, and some specific details about them, though no individual could recall a full visit's worth of things seen.
- All individuals referred to some aspect of the museum's architecture or "feel".

Context

Nobody interviewed had any difficulty in recalling who they went to the museum with. Of course, in several cases I had no way of verifying a subject's recollection, and in one case I knew a subject's recollection was partially faulty. Nonetheless, all subjects interviewed, without hesitation, recalled the social context of their visit, even when the visit had occurred as long ago as a half a century. Additionally, all subjects could place the visit within a geographical and temporal context — e.g., the visit occurred when the woman's daughter was a baby, or the 54 year old man visited the Smithsonian when he was eight or ten years old as part of a visit to Washington. Museum memories seemed to be embedded within some kind of personal context — social, temporal and geographical.

Time

As I have suggested earlier (Falk, 1982), time appears to be a very important currency for visitors. The people interviewed seemed to be able to recall how long they were in a museum. Even the young children (6 and 7 years old) were able to do this. Not only did many of those interviewed recall time in minutes and hours, most also vividly recalled their perception of time, i.e., their mood. For some of the people, "the time flew by," they did not have enough time to see all they

wanted. In other cases subjects recalled being bored, or wanting to leave sooner than allowed.

Exhibits

Subjects' recollections of the exhibits they saw were variable. Although the data set is very limited in this regard, preliminary results suggest that in general, adult visitors had greater difficulty accurately recalling details of the exhibits they saw than did children. Children could describe, in modest detail, many of the exhibits they saw, and in reasonably explicit detail, one or two of the exhibits they saw.

At the risk of over generalizing from limited data, it appears that people were best able to remember things that they already knew something about. For example, one subject (a 54 year old salesman) recalled a variety of facts and feelings about the "Spirit of St. Louis" which he saw at the Smithsonian when visiting as a young boy. During the interview he stated: "The thing I remember best was seeing the Spirit of St. Louis. It was suspended from the ceiling. I had heard about it in school, and I marveled at the history." He had heard about the plane (probably quite a bit), but he had never seen it. The combination of the two, previous knowledge and the real object, produced an indelible memory. In a similar way, other subjects seemed to recall most vividly exhibits that built upon prior knowledge, rather than totally novel objects and ideas. The experience of seeing tangible examples of previous verbal, or perhaps pictorial, learning may have played a role in producing long-term memory.

No doubt all of the subjects interviewed saw, and perhaps briefly remembered, much more than they could talk about in these interviews. I would even suggest that under the appropriate cuing, it is highly likely that more memories might have been recalled. Nonetheless, the bulk of what was recalled were things that subjects already had had some exposure to, be it in school or elsewhere.

Architecture

All subjects mentioned, unprompted, something about the architecture. Most described the feel and gestalt of the museum. Physical size, particularly for the children, seemed to be salient, as did the complexity of layout. The children in the sample often described physical aspects of the museum in a very self-centered way. For example, one child recalled the large rocks in the courtyard outside of the museum, because they were "good for climbing". The adults were

cognizant of the functional architecture — upstairs, downstairs, exhibits to the right versus exhibits to the left. Whereas novelty did not seem to be a factor promoting recollection of exhibits, it did appear to be an important factor in the case of physical settings. Many subjects described aspects of the setting that struck them as “unique”, “surprising” or “different”.

Miscellaneous

In addition to the above, several of the visitors interviewed vividly recalled details about bathrooms, eating and gift purchasing. For a few of the people interviewed, eating or gift purchasing occupied a major proportion of their recollections, while one child talked at length about the bathrooms.

Some Concluding Thoughts

In addition to the generalizations about context, time, exhibits and architecture, there was one additional insight these ethnographies suggested about the nature of museum memories. From these interviews, it was possible to glimpse the way memories were “bound together” by people. During the course of the interviews, memories were often related in ways that made total sense to the individual who was recalling the information, but not necessarily to an “objective” outsider. For example, one subject seemingly had a place in her mind called “museum” (or perhaps “natural history museum”) in which were stored all of her natural history museum recollections. When asked to recall what she saw during her visit to the British Museum (Natural History) she described the large elephant in the rotunda. The British Museum (Natural History) does not have a large elephant in its rotunda. However, the Smithsonian Museum of Natural History (which this subject had visited the year prior) does. Seemingly, this lady “housed” several museum experiences in a single location in her brain. Interestingly, the social event of the two summers when the visits were made, were kept separate in her memory. Her recollections of social context were much richer and, by my measure, more accurate than her recollections of exhibits seen. Similar examples were found in other subjects' recollections too. To the extent that all people “construct” reality in ways comparable to these people, i.e., the combining of events into mental categories, it suggests that accurately measuring museum learning may prove difficult under some circumstances.

A very revealing example of this “constructing of reality” was represented by the interviews of five people who had visited the BM(NH) together. The interviews occurred one year after the visit. None of the subjects knew they were to be interviewed, nor did they know that others in their group were interviewed. The differences between each of these BM(NH) visitors' mental “boxes”, and how tied to past personal experiences they were, were revealing.

These five individuals experienced roughly the same event, at the same point in time, and yet constructed very different recollections of that event. The recollections seemed to depend upon what aspects of the experience were deemed important at the time, what specific parts of the event were actually perceived, the amount of prior experience the person had with similar kinds of events and things in the past, and finally, the cues that were used to elicit the recollections later on. No two recollections were exactly alike, and in some cases they directly contradicted each other. Some individuals (mostly adults) emphasized social aspects, others (mostly the children) emphasized exhibit content. All five placed the event within an appropriate social, temporal and geographic context for them. Each individual participating in this event had a recollection of some sort, some more detailed than others, but all representing their unique museum experience.

In conclusion, these eleven interviews represent only a beginning to answering the question of museum learning. I believe they are a good beginning. What they lack in rigor is compensated for in depth and detail. Dr. Lynn Dierking, Dr. S. M. Nair and I have begun a long term study of visitor museum recollections at the National Museum of Natural History in New Delhi. I have also talked with individuals at the Field Museum and the Brookfield Zoo about conducting similar studies in Chicago. I am hopeful this methodology and approach will continue to yield interesting insights as to the what, how and why of museum learning.

References

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