Empowering Young Visitors

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The project described here was designed to investigate the applicability of a School-Museum Learning Framework piloted in an earlier study. The Framework had its theoretical base in research into school visits to museums, family group behaviors in museums, and social constructivist approaches to teaching and learning.

The Framework rests on three Guiding Principles:

• Integration of school and museum learning
• Facilitation of natural learning behaviors appropriate to the setting
• Provision of a learner-centred climate

Implementation of the Framework involves students bringing their own chosen questions or 'areas of inquiry' to the museum and students having considerable control over their learning within parameters provided by the teacher.

Seven grade 5 or 6 teachers from four wide-ranging Sydney schools agreed to trial the Framework, with minimal assistance from the researcher. The excursions took place at the Australian Museum in Sydney during 1995. The project began with a one day Professional Development seminar for the teachers including introduction to the teaching/learning approach, experience with a sample mini-unit in the Museum, and ideas on development of their own learning units. The teachers organised their own visits to the Museum at varying stages in their 5-6 week units.

The applicability of the Framework was evaluated through interpretive analysis of observations, interviews with students and teachers, videotape and audiotape recorded during the visit, and students' written work.

The results of the project indicated that the School-Museum Learning Framework can, with adaptations to suit each situation, provide a successful model for learning-oriented school-museum experiences. The overwhelming response from teachers and students was strong support for the Framework's guiding principles. Significantly, the teachers' showed willingness and confidence to select and emphasise different elements of the Learning Framework to suit their class and context.

While these trials showed that the guiding principles are robust under a wide variety of circumstances, they also revealed the need for a framework for school-museum learning to be flexible and broad-based. They showed that provi-sion of a learning climate including a clear shared understanding of the purpose can be provided through:

• integration of school and museum learning;
• use of a learner-centred approach allowing students choice over their specific learning,
• movement and pacing which reflects 'natural' learning behaviours of family groups; and
• both cognitive preparation as well as familiarisation with the setting and how best to learn from it.

The teacher trials also revealed the impact of prior experiences of students and teachers with the learning approach, and with the museum; the need to monitor the number and nature of the students' questions or "areas of inquiry"; and the value of working in small, independent groups.

This project indicated that with minimal professional development, teachers can adopt the School-Museum Learning Framework to suit their own class situations. By supporting and assisting teachers to facilitate provision of the four main components - purpose, choice, sharing and control - museum professionals could ensure that young visitors will be empowered learners who will leave their museum visits feeling positive about themselves, their learning, and the museum.

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In Search of Resolution: The Australian War Memorial, "The Enemy", and Front-End Evaluation

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The Australian War Memorial has many audiences: Australians who fought or lost loved ones in war, people who have grown up in a multicultural society, and inbound tourists from countries that Australia once opposed. They all visit for different reasons and with different needs and expectations.

How can the Memorial represent "the enemy" in its galleries in a way that will meet their different needs?

This was one of the issues being tackled in some recent front-end evaluations undertaken at the Memorial. The evaluation projects were for two new galleries being developed as part of a major overhaul of the Memorial. The two galleries have a strong focus on the Pacific region during World War II, when Australia was primarily fighting against a Japanese enemy.

We decided that there was one main variable that would affect how people would relate or react to the content of the two galleries. This was to do with how closely their lives had been touched by war. People who had been closely touched by war would use the gallery to remember or reaffirm what they already knew; people without experience of war would use the galleries to "find out" about what had happened and the people involved.

Focus groups, visitor surveys and tracking studies were undertaken to find out about our audiences and how they would respond to the proposed galleries. During the focus groups we raised various issues and discussed whether and how they could be treated in the gallery, including ways of representing "the enemy".

The participants felt very strongly about this issue. They were unanimous in wanting us to show the ugly reality of war and that many Australians had suffered and were killed by Japanese forces during WWII. However, our audiences also held many conflicting opinions about "the enemy".

People whose lives had not been touched by war wanted to be able to find out about the enemy at the Memorial and to understand their motivations, culture and behaviour. They wanted to see a balanced representation of war that showed both sides of the story. And they wanted to focus on the humanity of the people involved: "the enemy" were people too.

On the other hand, most people who had been closely touched by the war said that they did not want to find out about the enemy, especially at the Memorial. While they understood that it was part of Japanese culture to treat prisoners badly, they were very concerned that the Memorial would excuse this treatment if it tried to explain it. These audiences had difficulty comprehending a "humanised" enemy and said that it was inappropriate for the Memorial to include personal information about enemy soldiers.

The Memorial has tried to find an outcome that will meet the needs of both audiences, despite their differences. Some of these resolutions are:

- including displays that show the ugly reality of war
- including Australian stories that feature or revolve around Japanese people; through these, showing a variety of sides to the enemy to let visitors build up their own picture and reach their own conclusions
- allowing a degree of choice into how much visitors wish to "find out"
- including stories that will disclose the motivations, behaviour and culture of Japanese people without having to "explain" them
- drawing attention to the humanity of the enemy by referring to enemy soldiers by name and using artefacts, objects and photos that communicate our shared humanity.

As a result of front-end evaluation, the Memorial can develop these two new exhibitions in a way that will engage, and not alienate, our different audiences.

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From Exhibit Evaluation to Insights into Visitor Behavior

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In 1996, staff and volunteers at Questacon, Australia's national interactive science and technology centre, used observations of and interviews with visitors to evaluate a group of sixteen prototype hands-on exhibits. The evaluation method and instruments used (Rennie and McClafferty, 1996) proved extremely useful in pointing to improvements for the exhibits concerned. This article describes early stages in the further exploration of the data collected.

The place of prototype exhibit evaluation in an interactive exhibition development project has been described elsewhere (Groves, 1996), as have the development and use of the evaluation handbook and the results obtained using it (Groves, McClafferty and Rennie, 1997). Briefly, the evaluation handbook provides observation and interview schedules and summary record sheets (with instructions for their use) for three evaluation stages, yielding information on whether and why an exhibit attracts visitors, whether it is used in the way intended, what visitors understand the exhibit to be about, what they enjoy and what frustrates them during its use. The same data are now being revisited with a focus on the visitors rather than the exhibits.

The project yielded observations on how each of 493 people (51% males, 49% females) interacted with an individual exhibit, as well as summaries of interview responses from a further 296 people who used the exhibits. At this stage, the re-analysis is incomplete and thus conclusions are tentative.

As a start, the impact of visitor group size on whether or not people managed to use an exhibit successfully (as judged by observation only) is being explored. Of the 493 visitors observed in the first round of the evaluations, almost exactly half (51%) used the exhibit on their own; the rest were in groups of two to five people. Among 'single' visitors who paid some attention to the exhibit being observed, 38% were judged to use it successfully. Among people in groups, the figure was a rather similar 42 %. A slightly different picture emerges, however, if the visitors who used exhibits while