

Chapter 2: Do We Really, Really Need To Do Visitor Studies?

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The notion that exhibits should "communicate," or "tell a story," or "have a message," or "instruct," or "have educational value," is generally well accepted in principle. Few today would deny that exhibits have an educational role to play in (at least) those museums devoted to the natural and physical sciences and their associated technologies. In fact, over 90% of all museum directors agreed in a survey conducted in 1974 that a critical role of museums is "informing and instructing the public." (Museum USA, National Endowment for the Arts, 1974, p. 25.)

However, the implications flowing from such an instructional/ educational commitment have not been realized, nor, in fact, have they been seriously considered by the majority of the museum profession. Exhibits are conceived, planned, designed, executed, and "evaluated" without the assistance of those who have expertise in training, educational or social psychology, or evaluation!

The above two paragraphs were written in 1976 and I believe that they were an accurate reflection of the status of visitor studies at that time. To what extent are these paragraphs still an accurate statement of the status of evaluation in 1988? To find out, I would like to conduct a survey of this audience. We have in this room a group of people who are quite knowledgeable about the world of evaluation in museums and related settings in the U.S. and Canada. My question to the group is this: "What percentage, in your judgement, of exhibits currently being produced have any input from serious evaluation of the type we are discussing at this conference?"

(The audience was asked to indicate their response to the following categories: Between 50% and 100%; between 25% and 50%; between 10% and 25%; between 5% and 10%; between 1% and 5%; and less than 1%. The largest response was in the "under 1%" category; the next in the "between 1% and 5%" category. There were no responses above the 25% range.)

Based on this group's informed opinion, we could say that after at least 25 years of rather well documented evidence that evaluation can make a substantive contribution to the effectiveness of exhibits and other educational programming in museums and other public access learning environments, we are having an impact on fewer than 1% of all of the materials being prepared!

Why? Why is it not the case that it is common and accepted practice to utilize some form of evaluation in the preparation of all educational programs and exhibits?

I will mention six factors that I consider among the more important reasons for our low level of impact.

1. The current method of developing exhibits "works."

What do I mean "works"? I mean that the criteria by which exhibits are currently judged are well known, and fall nicely within the skills and knowledge of those who are responsible for their development, usually curators, museum managers/directors, and designers. I believe these criteria fall into the following categories:

- Accuracy and completeness of the subject matter of the exhibit. This has to do with the research that went into the development of the content of the exhibit, reflected in the selection of objects and the preparation of labels and signage.
- Quality of the subjects on display. This has to do with the rarity, state of preservation, representativeness, etc., of the objects.
- The "fit and finish" of the exhibit. The workmanship and the quality of the materials used in the construction of the exhibit is captured here.
- The use of "high-tech" devices. This would include the use of computers, videodisc devices, audience participation games, and other innovations that may be "in" at a particular time. This criterion would apply to some exhibits more than others, usually those in science, technology, and natural history.
- Visitor acceptance. This is almost always confined to the number of people who visited the exhibit. It may, on occasion, also include some measure of satisfaction on the part of the public with the exhibit.
- Peer acceptance. Other curators and museum personnel view the exhibit favorably. This often seems to count more than visitor acceptance.

I believe that an exhibit that met all of the above criteria would be considered a roaring success by the vast majority of museum professionals. And there are two reasons why they would have no reason to change their minds.

First, there is no external pressure to change the way exhibits are currently developed. Nothing “bad” happens if you do not do evaluation. Our efforts to convince those who now control this process to use evaluation are based on the weight of evidence from our own studies and the commitment that museums say they have been very successful to date. And secondly, the museum visitors, the end “users” of the exhibit development process, have no constituency to represent them. They are not in the loop, and one can ignore them with impunity. In fact, the museum visitor is that increasingly rare phenomenon among U.S. consumers – a customer who blames himself or herself for the failure or weakness of the product being used. How often have I seen visitors struggling to understand a label on an exhibit give up in frustration at their own lack of knowledge. They always knew that they were dumb about science, and the museum has convinced them again that this is indeed true! This is a scenario hardly consistent with “educating the public.”

If the visitor is going to be empowered, who do you think is going to do it? If we look at the history of other similar situations in which the public has been disenfranchised (product labeling, car safety, truth in advertising, and many more), we see that the Federal Government has played a key role in restoring the balance. I think it is not unreasonable to believe that over time those agencies that fund museums and other similar institutions will require that they be given evidence that the exhibit or program being supported did, in fact, meet its intended objectives. Not by a head count, not by “satisfaction” data, and not by one or more of the criteria listed above, but by actual data obtained in a manner consistent with sound evaluation practices. It would be nice to believe that museums would not wait until such pressure is exerted from those who have power to do so, but it may be naive as well.

2. The natural conservatism of institutions

This is both an extension of the first point and an historical “excuse” for museums not doing more than they could. After all, history is rife with examples of institutional inertia. One could cite examples in education, medicine, and even in manufacturing, where innovation might be expected to be the rule rather than the exception.

A related point has to do with the way in which innovations are sometimes co-opted by those who say they are accepting them but are really not. I have heard many museums claim that they are not only in favor of doing visitor evaluations but that they, themselves, do them on a regular basis. However, when one looks more closely at what they actually do, one sees only the trappings of evaluations, usually in the guise of a visitor survey or of a poll of visitors as to what they did and how they liked what they did.

I'm afraid that there is no really painless way to embrace the concept of evaluation, e.g., without disrupting to some considerable extent the normal way of doing exhibits and programs. Once you let the visitor inside the tent, there are going to be some fundamental changes made in the exhibit development process and the roles and functions of the museum staff. Pretending that this is not so only encourages the status quo or the cosmetic "it won't hurt" kind of evaluation.

3. Evaluation can be seen as a threat to the existing power structure of an institution

It is not just fear of change, but fear of loss of status that helps keep us out of the exhibit development process. After all, one's credentials become less relevant when you place the criteria for an effective exhibit or program in the hands of the visitor. It is no longer your resumé that shows that you are a good exhibit developer, but the answers to questions given by the casual visitor or data from a tracking study.

What is interesting about this point is that there are areas in which such external criteria are used on a regular basis to validate and improve the product, e.g., industrial and military training programs. What these activities have in common is a direct feedback loop between the effectiveness of the product and the developers of the product. Soldiers or workers who cannot do their job are a direct reflection of the quality of the training programs that were supposed to teach them. Pretesting (formative evaluation) of such materials is carried out routinely and changes are made in areas that are weak or misleading. This not considered a failure on the part of those who prepared the programs, but simply a recognition that the communication of knowledge and skills is an extraordinarily difficult process, and must not be seen as a threat, but as a normal and vital part of the development process! This is the way evaluation should be viewed in the development of all public educational materials.

4. Evaluation costs money and takes time

Let's be honest. Even under the best of circumstances, doing any kind of evaluation is going to require the expenditure of effort on someone's part. Even if the data collection and analysis is carried out at no cost (perhaps by a university that is interested in studying visitor behavior), the changes that would be required in the exhibit itself as a result of such studies would require time and money. It is often said that it is less costly to find out what is wrong with an exhibit before it is finished rather than after, which is true. But it is not less expensive to find out what is wrong with an exhibit before it is finished than it is not to find out at all! Only when you factor in the commitment to convey a message to the visitor can you justify doing any kind of evaluation. (Otherwise, the criteria that I noted earlier work just fine.) To my way of thinking, an exhibit that costs a million dollars to prepare, regardless of how much of a "blockbuster" it is, is a million dollars wasted if it does not convey its intended message to its intended audience.

Those who say "I would love to do evaluations of all my exhibits but I can't afford it," are, in effect, saying that they can't afford to validate, or be accountable for, their work in terms of the visitor. Given the lack of pressure to do so, and the lack of aversive consequences from not doing so, I have to admit that the argument carries a lot of weight. If I, as a museum director, had to choose between doing three exhibits that met current standards for "good" exhibits but had no evaluation, and doing two exhibits that included evaluation, I might be very tempted to go with quantity. My trustees would be happier, my funding sources would be happier, and my staff would be happier. And I would be criticized by no one (or at least no one who counts). We have a long road ahead of us!

5. Lack of trained people in the system

In a study carried out by Mary Ellen Munley and me several years ago, we found that very few of the museum study programs in the U.S. or Canada teach evaluation, either at the "how to do it" level, or even at the "why to do it" level. It is safe to say that the vast majority of students coming out of these programs will be completely ignorant of the field and will not even realize that evaluation of any kind is possible in the museum setting. The only source of training at the present time comes from the workshops that are given by a small cadre of those who have experience in the use of evaluation in museums. While there seems to be an increase in the number of such workshops over the past several years, it would be naive to think that they are reaching more than a

fraction of the target audience. (The Kellogg project, to my knowledge, did not deal with the subject of evaluation.) I believe it will continue to be difficult to increase our impact on the museum world without a growing body of support from within that world. Efforts to introduce at least the notion of evaluation and visitor studies into the curricula of museum study programs should be encouraged and supported at every opportunity.

6. Weakness in current approaches to evaluation

So far I have noted only those factors external to the methods and practices of evaluation per se as being the source of our difficulties in gaining acceptance from the museum world. But it would be short-sighted indeed to neglect to mention some of the problems we have within our own ranks. I will not go into detail here – this would be a subject worthy of a conference of its own. But I will note some of the more salient areas of concern.

First, we have often been accused of not understanding the real value of the museum visit; of trivializing the museum experience. Are we guilty of measuring what is measurable rather than what is important? Probably. I could argue that if our clients cannot articulate what it is they want us to measure, we can hardly be blamed for not measuring it. But my heart would not be in it. The fact is that we need to put a lot more effort into trying to capture the full range of things that can be called the “museum experience.”

But we must demand fairness on the part of the exhibit developers as well. If they expect the visitor to learn more than substantive or factual content, why do they load up their labels with so much substantive and factual material? Personally, I would like to see museums broaden their horizons to include more in the realm of ideas and concepts and principles. Understanding science is not just knowing Ohm's law or the hemispheres of the brain, but, more importantly, knowing how knowledge is acquired, how hypotheses are formed and tested, how science impacts on our everyday lives, that science is not final truth (a notion that museums convey in so many ways), but the quest for truth, and a host of other powerful and meaningful IDEAS. The same notion applies to the arts and humanities, where opportunities for introducing new and interesting ideas and concepts abound. I would hope that if museums accepted the challenge to try to design exhibits that dealt with these kinds of issues, that we as evaluators would be ready to meet the challenge with appropriate kinds of measures!

Finally, we are developing a rather broad array of methods and techniques that are beginning to confuse even those working in the field. What is the difference between evaluation and research? When do you do one or the other, why, and who should or can do each of them? How many different kinds of evaluation are there? Is qualitative evaluation “better” or “worse” than quantitative, naturalistic “better” or “worse” than goal-referenced? How do marketing studies and visitor surveys differ? Can they be done together? What is front-end analysis, how do you do it and what do you do with the results? Are focus groups a valid way of gaining insights into the thinking and attitudes of the museum group? Even the very boundaries of our discipline are difficult to map. (Are we a discipline?)

I am not suggesting that we try to be rigid about our use of terms, or that we limit our repertory of evaluation tools. Our field is young and is growing in new and interesting ways. However, we should try to be aware of the confusion that we may be sowing in our audience when we toss too many terms around without defining them, and without acknowledging, on occasion, that there are areas in which there are differences of opinion as to the best way of approaching a particular problem.

I hope that my comments today do not leave you with the impression that I am pessimistic about the future of evaluation and research in the realm of public access learning. I would prefer to think of my remarks as being realistic. Actually, the past 25 or 30 years have brought us quite a long way. There are more of us, we do more, we write more, we have meetings like this one, we have the International Laboratory for Visitor Studies, we have *Visitor Behavior*, we have books on visitor evaluation like the excellent one just out by Ross Loomis, and we even have a few museums that actually do evaluation studies on a regular basis. The American Association of Museums has a Research and Evaluation Committee that is enjoying renewed growth and vigor (it is sponsoring six papers or panel sessions this year at the annual meeting!). Even on the international scene there is considerable activity. Of course, Canada and England have in many ways been at the forefront of our “movement” for many years. (Just note how many here at this meeting are from Canada.) And so there is much to be pleased or even enthusiastic about.

Do we really, really need to do visitor studies? Of course we do, but I am really, really looking forward to the time when such a question would be unthinkable to even pose – twenty years ago, I would have said in ten years at most. I was wrong. I'm not guessing any more.