

"Memories as Indicators of the Impact of Museum Visits"

Paulette M. McManus(1993)
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Summarized by
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Traditionally, when testing visitor knowledge of exhibits, visitors have been interviewed immediately after their visit. This approach has several problems, including: different visitors pay attention to different parts of the exhibit, exhibit knowledge is dependent on previous knowledge of the subject, and learning may be still taking place after leaving the museum and is not accounted for by immediate testing. More recently, researchers are asking visitors to describe the context of the museum learning environment as a whole to gain a more sensitive description of an environment where learning might occur.

This study reports on the memories of visitors to *Gallery 33, A Meeting Ground of Cultures in the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery*, United Kingdom, and is one of seven complementary projects to evaluate *Gallery 33*. The exhibition is about human society and includes material on beliefs, values, customs, and art from around the world. The visitors for the memory study had visited *Gallery 33* up to ten months before being asked for their memories.

A Note on Memories

Three divisions of memory were used for the purposes of this paper: *declarative or semantic memory* which is concept or knowledge based and can be linked together so that new information can be formed; *procedural memory*, used when one repeats complex learned physical movements; and *episodic memory* which includes context and time dependent memories of personal experiences.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to assess recall of a prior visit to the gallery in hopes of eliciting accounts of the overall experience of the prior visit. It was speculated that episodic memories would be recalled relating to the physical setting and internal psychological state of the visitor, as well as social influences affecting the overall context.

Procedure

A letter, with a stamped addressed envelope for reply, was sent to 136 people who had given their addresses when they wrote comments on the comment sheets provided in *Gallery 33*. The letter explained that an investigation into the long-term impact of the gallery was being undertaken and

asked the visitors to help by writing about their memories of their visit to the gallery. Twenty-eight replies were received.

Respondents

Of the respondents, 18 were female and 10 were male. The ages ranged from under 8 through 50, predominately ranging from 8-15 years. The range of duration of the memories was from 2-10 months, averaging seven months. Fifty percent of the memories were eight or more months old.

Results

From the 28 visitor accounts, 138 separate, individual memories were separated out and placed into five categories:

1. Objects or things - 51% (n=70)
2. Episodic events - 23% (n=31)
3. Feelings at the time of visit - 15% (n=21)
4. 'Summary memories' on recall - 10% (n=14)
5. Content (science) of exhibit - 0

Memories Related to Objects or Things. Over half of the memories related to objects and things were associated with the interactive videos (24%) and masks that could be tried on (20%). Also scoring high was a large diorama-style model of a missionary's hut which was located in the center of the gallery. These three exhibits were also ranked high as favorite exhibits and were stopped at most frequently in a tracking study.

Memories Related to Episodes and Experiences. Of the total number of memories, 23% were related to episodes, events, and experiences related to their gallery visit. These were personal memories such as doing something (writing comments in a big book), experiencing enjoyment ("enjoyed playing with the masks because they looked so real"), and getting there ("I visited *Gallery 33* by accident as I had really taken my children to the museum to see the dinosaurs").

Memories of Feelings Experienced and Judgements Made at the Time of the Visit. This category related to feelings about the gallery as a whole including those memories experienced while at the exhibit or when remembering the exhibit at the time of questioning. Examples of this category include feelings about the gallery environment and design, memories of the assessment of the visit apparently made at the time of visiting, and memories of enjoyment in the visit.

'Summary Memories' About Gallery 33 Based on Past Memories. This was concerned about "fresh" memories created while thinking about the old memories. Most of these included thoughts of revisiting the exhibit and a later intellectual judgement about the exhibition communication.

Conclusion

McManus argued that the results showed that the gallery produced a memorable communication creating a lasting impact on its visitors. The uncued, mail-back memory comment sheet invited a wider range of memories than a structured face-to-face interview.