DO MUSEUMS WANT EVALUATION?

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How serious are museums about testing visitor behavior? After spending thirty years urging such testing and observing activity in the field, I must conclude that the answer is very little indeed. The reason? In my opinion, lack of confidence, fear, and in some cases sheer ignorance on the part of the museum authorities.

Museum directors, who increasingly dominate the museum "profession," are not averse to surveys of their visitors so long as those surveys are limited to determining the education, residence, age, sex, frequency of visit, and other characteristics of their visitors. It is useful for a museum director to have a "profile" of the average museum visitor. But when the proposal is made to test the effectiveness of an exhibit, to determine whether the intention of the director, curator, or exhibit designer has been realized, then the depth -- or lack of depth -- of commitment to visitor testing becomes apparent. Few museum officials are willing to risk an analysis that might prove them wrong.

The fact that most psychological testing in museums has been carried out by psychologists not on museum staffs illustrates the point. They have had to operate cautiously within museums, like porcupines make love. As I expressed in my paper on professionalism in museums at the annual meeting of the American Association of Museums at Detroit in June, 1985, "If the museum's commitment to self-examination were intense, there would be museum psychologists on the staffs of large museums." I pointed out that the numbers of individuals hired in "education departments" of museums had shot through the roof yet few of these "educators" were trained psychologists or educational technologists. ["Professionalizing the Muses," Museum News, 64(2): 18-25,70-71]

The lack of commitment to psychological testing in the museum is mirrored in the policies of the American Association of Museums itself. In the 1920s and 1930s the AAM was the leader in psychological testing in museums. The pioneering work of psychologists Arthur Melton and E. S. Robinson was carried on under AAM auspices. This is no longer the case.

The AAM's report on the future of museums, Museums for a New Century: A Report of the Commission on Museums for a New Century [Washington, D. C.: AAM, 1984]: 66, noted that "there has been little research on object-centered learning or the nature of the museum experience." The report recommended that a "high priority" be given to research into the ways people learn in museums, but weakly concluded that "universities linked with consortiums of museums in particular fields might provide a mechanism for implementing these studies." Were museums serious about psychological testing they would not ignore the possibility of hiring trained psychologists for their own staffs rather than limiting their interest in studies of museum behavior to occasional requests to university psychologists to participate in a museum testing project.

The failure of American museums to welcome psychologists within museum walls may be related not only to fear and ignorance but also to professional jealousies among the various "professions" uneasily claiming jurisdiction within the museum world. "Educators" operating in the American museum environment have failed to welcome the work of psychologists or "educational technologists." The situation is better in Great Britain where there are more museum "professionals" concerned with evaluation and analysis of exhibits than in the United States. This is not to say that psychological studies are welcomed with open arms in Great Britain, but merely to say that the position of such studies, while sometimes challenged, is more readily accepted than in the United States. The Musuems Association of Great Britain's recent Manual of Curatorship: A Guide to Museum Practice [J. Thompson, Ed, London, 1984] demonstrates an openness to the use of psychological studies in a museum context. The work of American psychologists such as C. G. Screven, Harris Shettel, as well as Arthur Melton and E. S. Robinson, is more widely recognized in Great Britain than in the United States.

I am sure there will be some who disagree with my analysis; I would love to be proved wrong. □

INTERACTIVE EXHIBITS

A. W. Melton (1972). Visitor Behavior in Museums: Some Early Research in Environmental Design. Human Factors, 14(5): 393-403.

Melton compared automatic versus manual operation of exhibits that illustrated principles of electricity. He found that visitors spend longer examining objects (average = 23.8 sec) when they were able to manually operate the device than when it is operated automatically (average = 13.8 sec). In addition, visitors spent more time reading labels under the manual operation condition than under the automatic operation condition. Melton argued that "...the cranks were not just gadgets to turn; they heightened interest to such an extent that more label reading was done." This study is consistent with the observations of many professionals that interacting with the exhibit can increase time at the exhibit and interest in finding out more about the exhibit subject. □