Redefining the Museum Experience: The Interactive Experience Model

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Understanding visitor behavior within a museum is a very difficult task. Understanding why these same visitors go to the museum in the first place and what lasting impressions, if any, they take away with them is an even more daunting task. When you add to this a desire to understand not just one museum, but all types of museums, and not just one type of visitor, but all types of visitors, the task appears overwhelming. An approach to tackling this problem, which allows us to view the museum experience from a visitor's perspective, conceptualizes the museum visit as an interactive experience, resulting in a range of possible outcomes such as increased knowledge, as well as changed attitudes or enhanced social skills.

At the heart of the model we call the Interactive Experience Model is a visitor-centered perspective and the notion that all experience, and subsequent learning, is contextual. We suggest that the very nature of the Interactive Experience is dictated by three contexts interacting with each other:

1. The **Personal Context** that the visitor brings to the visit — that is, their psychological make-up, including prior knowledge, experience, attitudes, motivation and interests;
2. The **Physical Context** they encounter, which includes the objects and artifacts, as well as the architecture, "feel" and ambiance of the building; and
3. The **Social Context** of the experience, including those with whom the visitor attends, as well as those encountered during the experience, such as museum staff and other visitors.

The Interactive Experience Model encompasses the actions that the visitor is engaged in during the visit, whether that be looking at an exhibit on Renoir, talking with a friend while walking down a hall between exhibits, or eating lunch at the snack bar, and enables one to consider outcomes that may result from these experiences. Each context within the

Interactive Experience Model is constructed by the visitor and collectively makes up the total visitor experience. This constructed reality is unique to the individual; no two people ever see the world in quite the same way. What is remembered of this constructed reality is one indication of what the person learns from the experience.

Museum staff design exhibitions, develop label copy and carefully arrange objects in the hopes that visitors will attend to them, but that does not mean that it always happens. When it does occur, the visitor's constructed reality includes those exhibitions, labels and objects. When the visitor does not attend to a particular exhibition, label or object, they, of course, do not become a part of the visitor's constructed reality, and it follows will not be a part of their learning.

Understanding the process of constructed contexts permits the researcher to appreciate that the choices visitors make between watching a film or listening to a lecture-demonstration, going to the museum alone or bringing the family, visiting the zoo with a picnic lunch or attending the opening at an art museum, seeing the dinosaurs first or second, walking around the museum a little longer or stopping for lunch, represent the contextual factors that influence a myriad of possible outcomes, including learning factual material, feeling different about a piece of art, or appreciating one's son in a new way.

The model can be visualized as a set of three interacting spheres, with each sphere representing one of the three contexts (See Figure 1). At the heart of the model is a shaded area created by the interaction of the three contexts: the interactive experience. The interactive museum experience occurs within the physical context that we call "museum," and includes not just objects and artifacts, but physical structures as well. Within this museum is the visitor, who perceives the world through his or her own personal context. Sharing this experience are other people constituting the social context for the visitor. At any given moment, any one of the three contexts could assume major importance in influencing the visitor. The visitor's experience can be thought of as a continually shifting interchange between personal, physical and social contexts.

The Interactive Experience Model predicts that a visitor's experience can best be understood by analyzing, over time, the series of critical intersections of the three contexts. For example, when a family visits a museum, it has been well documented that social interaction, overall, tends to dominate the visit (Lakota, 1975; Rosenfeld, 1980; Diamond, 1979; Dierking, 1987; Falk, 1991; Falk, Koran, Dierking & Dreblow, 1985; Hilke & Balling, 1985; Snow-Dockser, 1987). At any given moment though, a family member could be attending to an object (physical context), watching the sun stream through a window (physical context), thinking about things that need to be done tomorrow (personal context) or joking with a family member about something that happened that morning (social

context). It is the ebb and flow of these influences, and their interactions, that ultimately create each visitor's unique museum experience.

It is common for museum professionals involved in exhibit development to consider a variety of issues such as lighting, color, object and text placement, but not to consider the myriad of other influences that affect the way a visitor interacts with an exhibition. Taking into account that the museum experience includes much more than just looking at and interacting with exhibits is critical to better understanding the visitor's total museum experience.

Exhibit developers are not the only museum professionals who have failed to consider the total experience of the museum visitor. Museum educators put a great deal of thought and effort into planning what docents will say and how they will engage children with the objects and concepts to be presented on docent-led school field trips. As one analyzes the child's visit over time, however, one not only observes attention to the docent and involvement in the planned activity, but also interaction with peers, focused looking at exhibits not directed by the docent, and a great deal of attention paid to the overall physical setting. All of these factors need to be considered as one analyzes the visitor experience of an individual child or group of children. The complex relationships, only alluded to in this example, are the ones that we feel the Interactive Experience Model may help to clarify.

We have found this model a useful one in thinking about issues related to museum learning. The Interactive Experience Model has the potential for providing a framework for understanding the totality of the museum experience – a socially, cognitively, kinesthetically and aesthetically rich experience.

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Figure 1