

Chapter 5

BRIDGING THE APPLICABILITY GAP BETWEEN RESEARCH AND PLANNING

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"Why are results of research not used more often?"
"How does one get them to implement the results?"
"How can I use the results?"

Although the volume of audience research and visitor evaluations has increased significantly over the past few years, rarely do the results of these studies significantly affect planning and decision-making. At last year's Visitor Studies Conference, Ross Loomis (1988) drew formal attention to this problem which he called "the applicability gap"—"the failure to get into practice ideas that are generated from research and development" (p. 22). The purpose of this paper is to discuss some causes of the applicability gap and some bridges for overcoming it.

This paper is presented in three parts. The first part offers a further definition of the applicability gap. The second part examines causes and bridges of the gap according to the planning phases of a research or evaluation project. The third part examines the applicability gap from the point of view of audience research and visitor studies in the museum field.

More About the Gap

What is this phenomenon—this applicability gap? Where and when does it take place? Whose fault is it? The applicability gap is not a phenomenon exclusive to any one type of institution. It can be found in museums and cultural institutions of all sizes and types. It is not solely the fault of the researcher nor is it solely the fault of the commissioner and anticipated user of the research results. Both parties are responsible for the research's ultimate useability. And while it is tempting to view the applicability gap as a phenomenon which occurs only at the end of a project, it can insinuate itself much earlier. In any research project there are times when things happen, or do not happen, which impact on the

useability of the research beginning with early planning and conceptualization through to project reporting.

Project Planning to Bridge the Gap

Ross Loomis (1988), in his remarks about the applicability gap, proposed "...thinking of evaluation as an aid to management and not just an enterprise in its own right" (p. 22). In projects that can and do make a difference, the individuals involved understand research and evaluation as tools to assist decision-making. Whether in the process of exhibit design or during the development of a marketing plan, it is always helpful to have reliable information upon which to make decisions, and this is what audience research as an aid to management—or planning of any kind—is all about.

Sometimes even the stated goals of a project affect the applicability of the project's results. If one project has as its goal "to elicit audience feedback" or "to study visitor reaction," its results are probably not going to be treated as a useful resource. These goals are indicative of research studies not fully perceived as aids to decision-making. Another research project, on the other hand, might have the goal "to develop policy, procedures, and guidelines" or "to refine proposed target audiences and design concepts." Here, we're off and running with a project which is, from the beginning, perceived as a decision-making tool. This is not to suggest that general studies of audience reaction or feedback are not useful, but experience suggests that projects with goals that explicitly address the application of research results are the ones more often used and implemented. The second two goals, actually extracted from two projects which successfully made use of research results, are cases in point. These projects, one for the Royal Ontario Museum (ROM), and one for the Canadian Museum of Civilization (CMC), in many respects serve as models of the processes which plan for and encourage the use of research results (Rubenstein, 1988a; 1988b; and Cave, 1989).

In projects where audience research tends to have the most impact, the research is conceptualized as one component of a good planning process. In the ROM project, for example, the audience research was one part of a large project designed to come to grips with the challenge of providing effective French language interpretation in exhibits. In the CMC project, audience research was just one small part of an overall environmental assessment for the development of a strategic plan and a new design concept for the Children's Museum. These two projects had a chance to make a difference from the very beginning because the research was conceived within frameworks that permitted, or encouraged, implementation of results. Ultimately, the research was used because this was the intent of the research from the beginning.

It is one of the credos of audience research that the earlier it takes place in the planning process the more it can offer. Take, for example, the often-cited case for exhibit evaluation (e.g., Miles, 1988). It is frequently argued that research conducted once an exhibit is complete is research undertaken too late. Rarely will managers find sufficient justification or resources to modify a completed exhibit on the basis of a summative research project. Front-end or formative testing of the exhibit during the planning and development stages, however, can more easily lead to useful modifications. Although this is a good example—and one which also applies to the development of programs other than exhibits—given the current scope of visitor research, the example is now limited. Research offers the most assistance to planning and decision-making when it is conceived as an early aid to the formulation of policy, guidelines, and procedures as well as to the later fine tuning of the policy products.

On the other hand, research can also come too early. Every research project should have a start-up, orientation, or pre-planning stage for review of any previous relevant research, analogous models, and background documentation. Prior to conducting audience research, the ROM, for example, synthesized previous relevant work and conducted an international review of multi-language exhibit interpretation. If research is going to make a difference, it has to begin on a firm footing which allows those involved to build on previous work.

Is the institutional climate or environment open to change? Is there potential for change to policy and procedures or just a particular product? Sometimes those involved in the research may not realize the type of data which can emerge from the project or their implications for change at all levels. Sometimes, expectations for change may be unrealistic. The institution may not yet be ready or, alternatively, it may be too late.

Often those interested in research do not seek assistance early enough to:

- (a) analyze the environmental or institutional context,
- (b) suggest how the research can fit into the overall planning framework,
- (c) predict, based on previous experience, what changes or results the research can potentially suggest, and
- (d) conclude whether the timing is appropriate for yielding the sought-after results.

Later, it should come as no surprise that the results have limited utility and impact.

More than anything else, including budget, the overall project schedule can influence the results and usefulness of the research. Adequate time for all phases of a research project, from initial planning through to reporting, must be available. This advice may seem somewhat obvious, but in practice poor scheduling is too often the problem at the root of research projects that have little impact on planners and managers.

Two factors may underlie this problem. First, those commissioning research often wish to begin data collection as quickly as possible. The pressure is on the researcher to 'fast-track' the project's planning phase and move right into instrument design and data collection. Why? In part, this happens because people get excited about the data collection and the research results, but it also happens because there is a concern about the project's overall schedule. The person responsible for initiating the research project has probably spent months—sometimes years—in getting institutional, departmental, and budgetary approval for the research and, now, timing is getting tight. The exhibit to be evaluated is going to close in a month or the busy attendance season is almost over. (Does this sound familiar?) But, sometimes, scheduling problems are not the result of bureaucratic delays or red-tape but of insufficient appreciation of the importance of the planning required to design the project properly.

The result of these scenarios is that the direction of the project may be indistinct or incomplete, and ultimately this leads to research of limited usefulness.

Research based on hazy, unfocused, or very general project goals results, at best, in weak recommendations. In her article, "Getting Started in Audience Research," Hood (1986) rightly points out that an important first step is defining what it is one wants to know and why. The more explicit the purpose of research, the more the design of the research can answer the questions.

The ROM and CMC projects required an identification and clarification of key issues and problems. Both projects also required very specific answers to very specific questions.

If the ultimate project results are to be translated into useful recommendations for review and change, the researcher needs to know how things are done now. With the ROM project, for example, review of specific documents pertaining to the French language project, alone, would have been insufficient. Knowledge of ROM exhibit design processes and procedures were just as critical. Unfortunately, tight schedules tend to reduce the researcher's general orientation time and time for review of background documents. Later, this leads to recommendations of limited utility.

Early input should be solicited from any key players expected to implement research results and recommendations. Often researchers will work closely with one particular person on a day-to-day basis even though the project results are to be used by many. Those who were excluded during the course of the project are unlikely to fully appreciate its results.

It should go without saying that project methods must be credible and properly conducted. But taking the step from the design of the project methodology to the specifics of experimental design demands special consideration if the applicability gap is to be bridged. In particular, instruments for data collection must be compatible with both the project's

purpose and the ultimate usefulness of the data. Following approval of the instruments, it is worth reviewing them one more time by asking, "Are these questions going to provide the answers which will assist in planning and decision-making?" Once the results of the pilot-testing are in, ask the question again.

One factor which tends to impress any potential user of research data, particularly management, concerns the researcher's attention to detail and ability to plan and manage all aspects of the work smoothly—even in the face of logistical complications. Conversely, if even one thing goes wrong, any would-be unbelievers of the project's results will be ready to pounce.

Throughout the project it is vital for close communications between the researcher and the ultimate user of the research to continue. Regular reports of progress, including any preliminary project results, are useful.

Project reports with results and recommendations which are ultimately used tend to have particular characteristics. The most important of these characteristics is credibility. The researcher, no matter how experienced or credible, should not necessarily take for granted that everyone expected to implement the results will believe them. There will always be individuals on the other end who will not want to believe the results. It is best to tackle this potential problem head-on and explicitly address why the results are believable through a discussion of project validity and reliability.

Sensitivity is also a feature of the best reports. "Evaluation: Its Nature, Limitations and Dangers," by Brian Lewis and Mick Alt, should be considered required reading for every researcher (Miles, et al., 1988, Chapter 15). As Lewis and Alt state, "It is one thing to evaluate the things that we ourselves do....But it is quite another thing to evaluate the things that other people do" (p. 129). Lewis and Alt discuss the activity of evaluation as risk, conflict, and fear, for those whose products or programs are coming under close scrutiny, and give good advice when they suggest that an evaluator needs to be sensitive to these concerns. Along the same lines, Loomis (1987) provides useful advice in his discussion of the different viewpoints of managers and evaluators and the implications of this for their relationship. For example, "managers are likely to view surprises or unexpected results as threatening, while evaluators find unexpected results interesting and important to report" (p. 12).

Reports which most often find their results reaching implementation are non-threatening, citing positive findings as well as negative ones. They applaud previous work which provided a basis for the research even when recommending this work for review, modification, or radical reworking. They congratulate the individuals who provided the groundwork for the study and who commissioned the research in the first place.

For reasons of sensitivity more than anything else, it is useful to submit a draft report for consideration and review prior to the preparation of the final version. Sometimes even a few words here and there, can inadvertently offend and it is best to correct these in the final report.

Reports should be easy to read, well-organized, and easy to use. They should clarify and summarize findings relevant to decision-making. They should also be written in the language of the users. For example, reports for exhibit designers should use design terminology.

Report recommendations should be as specific and as practical as possible. This is where the early orientation and review of background documentation pays off because it allows the researcher to achieve a high level of specificity. The more time allowed for in-depth preparation at the outset of the project, the more specific, relevant, and practical the ultimate recommendations arising from the research will be.

The most useful reports provide recommendations according to areas of future use and implementation. This is especially true of projects in which there are many levels of use, for example, by managers, exhibit planners, and programming coordinators. Recommendations should be categorized for these different individuals and according to procedural steps, such as policy implications, approaches to interpretation, development of promotions, and review of exhibit floorplan.

Especially if the research has led to a broad range of recommendations, it is important to suggest priorities and possibly a plan or schedule for implementation.

Since decisions are not made solely on the basis of research results it makes sense to allude to other influences in the report's recommendations. These include allocation of resources and the mandate or mission of the institution. It is particularly important to refer to the institutional mandate because of a common misconception about the model upon which museum audience research is based. The misconception is that audience research implies a rigid marketing research model in which decision-making is based solely on consumer demand. It is this misconception in fact, which is frequently responsible for the applicability gap. If museological research and evaluation adhere to any model it is a two-fold one that seeks to achieve a balance between museum mandates on the one hand and audience needs and interests on the other—including both internal audiences (staff) as well as external ones (visitors). It is critical to show how the research results and recommendations are sensitive to this model in the project report.

The specific wording of a report's recommendations can also lead to another major misconception at the root of the applicability gap. This misconception is that audience research is meant to be a substitute for good planning, problem-solving, creativity, and personnel. Exhibit designers, for example, often feel that research recommendations fail to recognize the power of design in making something work in one

environment that does not work in another. The resulting misunderstanding is that the research intends to be a substitute for a good designer. Useful, specific recommendations are not necessarily cut and dried ones. Design variables and options, for example, should be explicit so that the research is viewed and used as a design tool—not as a design replacement. The same holds true for other variables manipulated by other professionals such as managers, planners, curators, coordinators, and marketers.

Research projects are formalized as written reports but these should not be considered substitutes for personal contact, such as presentations and debriefing sessions. It is important for researchers to meet with as many of the ultimate users of the results as possible to ensure that those results are properly understood and to answer any questions. The presentation is also an opportunity to further interest and to build enthusiasm for the implementation of results. Ideally, the researcher should continue to be available throughout the process of implementation.

Loomis (1988) has made the point that: "A major advance in overcoming the applicability gap will have been realized when the results of past research and any ongoing evaluation can be immediately incorporated into the development of a project as it proceeds" (p. 22). In both the ROM and CMC projects this is exactly what happened and is still happening. This is because, in these projects as in others, planning from the beginning of the project and each step of the way had the specific aim of producing research results which would be used.

Does this mean that bridging the applicability gap is already within our grasp? Yes and no. Rarely is it a matter of research being used or not being used at all; it is the extent to which the results and recommendations are used and how easy it is to implement them that we can influence through planning and follow-up. This is a professional challenge for both researcher and potential user of the research.

General Considerations

Although this paper has concentrated on bridging the applicability gap within the parameters of a particular project, this final section turns to the general use of audience research and visitor studies in museums. Why are the results of such research—the body of knowledge which Melton (1935) called "museum technology"—not more broadly used and applied? Why is audience research not undertaken in more situations where it would be useful?

First, it is an issue dependent upon information dissemination. It requires further explicit argumentation of the rationale, model, and theoretical framework upon which this work is based. It depends on further dissemination of results of research through publications and

conferences, and the development of new and innovative technological databases for accessing research results and information.

Second, we need to consider our internal mechanisms and institutional procedures for this work. This begins with internal institutional reviews with respect to audience research, followed by mechanisms for enhanced future use and implementation. For example, currently the Ontario Science Centre is compiling a summary of all previous audience research conducted at the institution from 1969 to 1989 (Rubenstein, 1989). The purposes of the review are to make research results more readily accessible to staff and to allow the institution to take stock of what it does know, what it does not know, and where to go with respect to future areas of research. This includes the development of policy, guidelines, procedures, and standards for this research. As the use of audience research is growing in institutions, the development of mechanisms for its effective use is becoming more critical.

Third, as in other fields of work, the further use of research includes considerations of training. Currently, our training concepts and curricula tend to be weak in two ways. One is that the "museum research/visitor studies" curriculum is still weighted towards fine tuning products, although the work has evolved to encompass larger concerns such as audience and institutional development. Ross Loomis (1987) argues that many people are simply not aware of the potentials of visitor evaluation research. Unless our teaching curricula are modified, even our new students will be inadequately prepared for the possibilities Loomis suggests.

Current training also fails to recognize that the abilities to design and translate research into concrete planning recommendations, as well as the ability to apply these recommendations to planning are skills, and that these skills can and should be taught. Numerous research studies yield useful results but are never couched in terms that invite application. Conversely, there are many professionals who know a great deal about the results of research but do not know how to implement them. These are the consequences of a field in which we teach things such as designing questionnaires or mock-ups as skills, but do not give the application of research similar consideration.

In the beginning, and still in institutions where this work is embryonic, the big battle is just to be able to do research and evaluation. What this has meant is that the doing of it, once the battle is won, often becomes an end in itself, or what Loomis (1987) called "an enterprise in its own right." As I have tried to argue, one way to prevent this from happening is to plan for research and evaluation to be used. Another way is through "meta-evaluation"—an evaluation of the effectiveness of the evaluation process itself (Miles, et al., 1988). Such constructive, although potentially painful, exercises will advance the state of the art.

Conclusions

Although this paper has discussed procedures for bridging the applicability gap, more importantly, its intention is to generate continuing dialogue of this major professional and "meta-evaluation" topic. As Loomis (1988) notes in the proceedings of last year's conference, "One major potential of having an annual visitor studies conference that includes both those involved in doing research/evaluation and participants concerned with application is constructive dialogue on how to bring about change and implementation" (p. 22). The growing consciousness of such professional topics is indicative that the field of visitor studies is reaching a new plateau. Arguments over the need to do evaluation are more and more supplanted by arguments of the need to do evaluation properly. Discussions of training, methodology, dissemination, ethics, and the like are becoming increasingly important in our field (see Bitgood, 1989, in this volume). Finally, as a meta-evaluation topic, what is a true measure of an evaluation project's success if not the extent to which the results have been used? This question brings us back to the beginning of this paper and the argument upon which this field of work is founded. What could possibly be a stronger argument for the further use of research and evaluation than a greater number of projects which have actually made a positive impact on both planning and decision-making?

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