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CRITICAL REFLECTIONS

As an evaluator, I observe and converse with visitors and exhibit developers. These experiences always make me think, often reflectively, about exhibit development and evaluation processes. Thinking about where we (evaluators and exhibit developers) have come from and where we are, I am motivated to consider alternative ways of working to shape the direction of our future.

A Historical Perspective—Thirty years ago, when evaluation was the “E” word, a handful of behavioral psychologists were examining visitors’ behaviors and experiences in exhibits. These psychologists—to whom we owe a great deal for promoting and supporting audience advocacy—were urging curators to approach museum exhibit development didactically. They also suggested that curators prepare exhibit objectives written in behavioral terms, stating what visitors will be able to do *after* seeing the exhibit that they could not do *before* seeing it—for example, name three organisms and a unique fact about each one. Such objectives, they said, would not only help to create cohesive, focused exhibits, but also allow researchers to measure their educational effectiveness (at least as far as the developer’s objectives were concerned).

The objectives were prepared like those in formal education. Curators and developers expected visitors to learn as students learn in school. Evaluators used the measuring devices typically used in the formal-education setting to determine the exhibit’s success. Museums were gravely disappointed in the exhibit’s ability to “teach” and the evaluation instrument’s ability to measure “learning” (Taylor, 1963; Screven, 1974; Shettel, 1976; Ames, 1992).

Museum staffs agreed that something good was happening to their visitors, but no one was really sure what it was. While evaluation results continued to remind museums of their shortcomings, they also indicated unanticipated visitor experiences, and they continue to do so. Some visitors might be having fun, others might be motivated to read a book on a particular subject, and yet others might be thinking about their own life experiences in a new context. Some museum practitioners realized that these visitor experiences were perhaps characteristics of an informal learning environment and began adding these dimensions to their descriptions of visitors' experiences.

Today, exhibit developers are embracing evaluation (under the umbrella of visitor studies), and visitor experiences are well documented. Recent user-friendly publications have demystified the evaluation process and have helped interested museum practitioners feel more comfortable evaluating exhibits themselves.

One would assume that the result would be museum professionals educated about how visitors behave in exhibits and how they process what they see, learn, and feel. But being conversant about evaluation methodologies and visitor experiences—even doing evaluation—does not mean applying that understanding.

Some exhibit-development teams that appear to know all about evaluation still believe that visitors go to exhibits to learn specific facts. Period. Why do exhibit developers often expect that visitors will only be able to recite certain facts after visiting an exhibit? Why are cognitive-learning objectives often the only learning objectives considered? A few museums have made a concerted effort to try alternative experience- and discovery-driven models, but the information-driven model is still dominant—as are its assumptions about visitors.

Why aren't exhibit-development teams acknowledging the range of visitors' learning experiences—*affective, cognitive, social, kinesthetic, and sensory*—when they prepare objectives? When a teenager wants to wear the armor he or she saw in an art museum or an adult wonders what it would be like to live in a historic house, it is worthwhile for an evaluator to understand the origin of those thoughts. While such remarks may not reveal anything earth-shattering, they are worth documenting. They are not quantifiable and do not indicate learning in the traditional sense. But as Raphling and Serrell (1993) argue, and I agree, "We must . . . resist the temptation to deal with . . . affective data as primarily anecdotal material and try to look more carefully at what else it can tell us."

Thanks to visitor researchers, we know much more about how visitors experience exhibits than we did thirty years ago. But that knowledge is often not creatively and constructively integrated

into exhibit-development procedures. Most exhibit developers' objectives focus on fact learning (to the exclusion of other learning experiences). Developers then use these limited objectives to guide development and design. Much of this planning is often complete when evaluators are invited to participate, and the evaluators are bound by a structure that is focused on learning facts.

Deciphering the Problem—As I try to understand the root of this problem, a few ideas emerge. I suspect that evaluation—even though it is touted as promoting visitors—is strongly driven by and embedded in the political and social forces of the institution. Museums that receive federal funds for public programming must evaluate their products to show that they were worth funding. But government at all levels only responds to quantifiable effects—the learning of facts in the most traditional sense. These outside forces drive the museum's agenda, which in turn drives the evaluation agenda from front-end to remedial procedures.

The continual focus on cognitive gains may be preventing museum practitioners from integrating visitors—who they are, not who we want them to be—into exhibition and evaluation plans. We must seriously examine the questions we ask ourselves about what the objectives are, the questions we ask visitors, and the standard practice of exhibit development. Has evaluation become a fashionable facade rather than a vehicle for embracing and understanding the visitor experience? Is evaluation conducted more to benefit the conscience of the museum than its visitors?

Likewise, evaluators must search for more and better models that will support and describe the range of visitors' experiences. They may not produce hard numbers that will convince government agencies that museums are worthy educational institutions. But they may produce real descriptions of the visitor experience that will, in the end, support the educational mission of museums in a broader, more realistic context. We must also continue to use evaluation and visitor studies to help developers create new exhibit-development models. Do front-end and formative evaluation procedures and questions pigeonhole visitors' experiences? Or do they allow visitors to articulate their experience in their own terms? How can evaluators and planners work together to support an honest exploration and utilization of visitors' experiences?

What Can We Do?—Questions are easier to generate than answers, but here are a few suggestions.

Conduct front-end evaluation before the exhibit-development process.

- Use front-end evaluation results to rewrite, if necessary, some of the exhibit objectives so they reflect the range of visitor experiences.

- Experiment with new exhibit-development models (which will likely lead to new evaluation models).
- Begin to feel comfortable with a new style of exhibit objectives that may not, in the end, be easily measured.
- Integrate the findings from a visitor-driven front-end evaluation into the conceptual and physical design of the exhibit.

Use formative and summative evaluation procedures to test the effectiveness of the new conceptual and interpretive approach.

- Use a visitor-driven approach (e.g., provide visitors with a tape recorder and ask them to record their thoughts as they look at a work of art or a case of artifacts). This can suggest how visitors think about a subject or an object from their own frame of reference. This information can be used by exhibit developers to improve the interpretive framework so that it will resonate with visitors.
- Use open-ended questions to allow visitors to talk freely about their experience from a variety of perspectives (e.g., socially and personally).
- Analyze the descriptive information (refrain from quantifying responses) and use the analysis as a record of how exhibits impact visitors, how visitors personalize their experiences, and the relationship between visitors and exhibits, as well as an assessment of the exhibit.
- Use these findings as the basis for preparing new models for writing exhibit objectives, developing exhibits, and evaluating visitors' experiences in exhibits.

When exhibits fail to convey specific information deemed important by the development team, there is plenty of blame for everyone—evaluators, exhibit developers, and visitors. Are developers and designers doing their best to support and then use what visitors do in exhibits—reminisce, associate personal experiences, socialize, describe what they see, search for personal relevance and self-validation (Silverman, 1990)? And do evaluators challenge faulty development practices and support their critiques with data? Are they communicating what to expect from a visitor's experience? Are they designing creative methodologies to help others better understand visitors?

A problem developers often have is wanting the exhibit to be all things to all people. They must ask themselves if this is appropriate. Visitors have varying levels of interest and knowledge, differ culturally, are young and not so young, visit alone and in groups and for an hour or five minutes. How does a single medium attract, appeal to, and impact them all? Obviously, some tough decisions may need to be made. Whether an exhibit provides one or multiple interpretive perspectives, it must communicate honestly with visitors and tell them from which perspective the story is being told. The ideas that form the essence of the exhibit must be repeated many times and in various ways with various techniques. Often words are the only mode of communication. In addition, reaching all visitors should not be the sole burden of exhibit developers, but

rather the collective responsibility of all staff members who are involved in public programming. If an exhibit is designed for novice visitors aged 16 years and older, other public programs related to the exhibit can serve other visitors. A film or lecture series could be targeted toward experts; a rental video could be directed toward seniors; and an "activity" hand-out could help parents explain some of the exhibit's difficult concepts to their children.

Evaluators may not be effectively communicating their understanding of visitors to those who create visitor experiences. Or perhaps exhibit planners hear just what they want to hear and stop listening when the hard-core realities about visitors are reported. Or maybe it is the delicate political position—museums' reliance on public funding sources that require them to be in the business of education (in the traditional sense)—that must be challenged. Few museums today are very comfortable claiming that their purpose is entertainment.

In a time when many museums are trying to focus on their public and be responsible educators, understanding visitors is more important than ever. So is listening to evaluators and others who study visitors. Evaluators and exhibit planners must work together and challenge the political forces and the standard practice of exhibit development and evaluation. If museums create exhibitions that allow visitors the opportunity to be themselves and we allow ourselves to hear and see how visitors respond to them, we will be in a much better position to enhance visitors' experiences and stay true to our mission.

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