

## Indigenous Issues in Evaluation and Visitor Research

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Australia is a land of contradictions. There is evidence that the original inhabitants, the Aboriginal people, may have occupied this land for over 100,000 years, yet Australia is still seen as a "young" country, soon to celebrate 100 years of Federation. There is much debate in Australia at the moment about who we are as a nation and where we might be going in the next millennium, particularly given issues on people's minds such as Australia as a republic, the impending Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, Australia's place in the Asia-Pacific region, important judgements on native title and distressing race debates. A significant change in the political scene in Australia occurred earlier this year with a move from a long period of a Federal Labor government with an agenda of social reform and change to a new, conservative Liberal government with an agenda driven by economic reform.

In this climate the Australian Museum launched a major new permanent exhibition in March this year - *Indigenous Australians: Australia's First Peoples*. The Australian Museum is Australia's oldest natural history museum established in 1827, and holds significant and extensive collections in both natural history and Aboriginal and Pacific cultures.

The exhibition represented a series of conceptual shifts for the Museum:

- from historical representations of Indigenous peoples to a contemporary one;
- from museum "curator-led" stories and interpretations based on the collection to Indigenous peoples' own stories based on their experiences;
- from exhibitions emphasising the "traditional" ways to a thematic exhibition based on current issues and new ways of seeing Indigenous cultures; and
- from a Museum saying what it wants to say to an emphasis on front-end evaluation and listening to what the many audiences want and need.

Some important questions had to be answered early in the exhibition development process:

- How could the many and varied audiences for the exhibition be involved in its development?
- Whose "voice/s" should come through in the exhibition?
- What was it that visitors wanted to see in an exhibition about Australia's Indigenous cultures?
- How did Indigenous people themselves want to be represented, given that they are a key stakeholder in the exhibition?
- What should be the scope of the exhibition?

More "traditional" methods of evaluation were used in the front-end stage as well as many approaches that are specially suited to different audience groups. Focus groups and surveys are not necessarily the best way to reach many Indigenous people, particularly as Indigenous communities in Australia are widely distributed and made up of many people with many different points of view. "Traditional" methods need to be combined with more flexible ways of collecting information with an emphasis on extensive consultation with Indigenous communities. It was more important to have an involvement by Indigenous people in the development process from the very beginning. We were able to achieve this by using our Indigenous staff in an ongoing liaison role with communities.

The front-end evaluation for the exhibition was broad in scope and accounted for these different ways of collecting data. A number of separate projects were undertaken:

- interviews with Museum visitors, teachers and others testing out themes, concepts and knowledge
- Indigenous community day - where groups/individuals from Indigenous communities were invited in to the Museum to discuss themes and content of the exhibition
- postal survey of Indigenous communities and people testing out themes, concepts and knowledge
- a photograph-sorting project testing out preferred communication strategies with general Museum visitors
- focus groups to progressively test developments using mock-ups
- extensive prototype testing of the computerised object databases

The results of these evaluations led the team to forming goals in developing the content and communication strategies to:

- begin with the contemporary;
- explore Indigenous peoples' experiences;
- create a space where Indigenous people can express, explain, talk about their lives and experiences;
- have Indigenous people staffing the exhibition;
- provide objects to touch and use;
- ensure mediation of the more confronting content for general visitors; and
- leave a positive message for the future.

A comprehensive summative evaluation has been commenced including a tracking study, critical appraisal by both communications experts and Indigenous people and a series of interview studies with visitors. Responses to the exhibition so far have included numerous letters to the Museum, and interestingly, many considered and lengthy comments in the Public Comments Book about how the exhibition has made visitors feel. Many of these were framed in the broader context of the debates in Australia at the moment as mentioned earlier.

*Indigenous Australians: Australia's First Peoples* has been an important first step in re-presenting the Indigenous cultures of Australia in a contemporary way by one of Australia's major museums and should prove to be a fascinating summative evaluation study.

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## The Family Experience of Museums: A Pilot Study of Ten Family Group Visits to the Queensland Museum

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### Theoretical approach

Museums need to sharpen their perceptions of their audiences and it is widely recognised that audience research can provide the tools to change this. Understanding more of visitors' needs for, and experiences of, museums can however be jeopardised by a linear communication model whether this is explicit or implicit in museum planning. This model limits the thinking about visitors to their role as the destination for the museum's messages. To consider adequately the visitor experience of museums, the focus must include their personal and social agendas and their subjective experiences. The framework should not reduce the visitors' role to passive receivers nor privilege the museum professional as the creator and sender of interpretative messages, nor limit understanding by too narrow a conception of visitors' experiences.

### The study

This pilot study looked at one context for museum visiting - the family group - and aimed to construct an understanding of its members' subjective experiences of museum visiting. Three ways to frame audience activity were identified - the visitor experience model (Falk & Dierking, 1992), a hunter gatherer model (McManus, 1994) and a meaning - making model (Silverman, 1995). These frameworks were explored for their appropriateness to construct answers to three main research questions:

- 1) What are the motivations for family visits to museums?
- 2) What are the strategies adopted by the family on the visit?
- 3) What sense does the family group make of the visit afterwards?

To investigate these issues, ten families were observed throughout their visit to the Queensland Museum, a museum which records and preserves the social, technological and natural history of Queensland. The adults and children completed a questionnaire on demographics and psychographics at the end of the visit and an interview was conducted with the family group in their homes within a month of the visit. At the interview children were asked to draw their recollections of the visit. Data from these research instruments were analysed and compared to provide a layered construct of the family visit experience.

The families were found to be far from passive audiences and instead were physically dynamic and personally and socially active. The parents' museum visits were motivated by their children's learning but inextricably linked with doing something together as a family. 75% of the visit focused on the exhibits with the remainder on other things such as the social group and parenting. Visit strategies were strongly influenced by personal agendas influenced by prior knowledge, experience, interests and attitudes as well as the social nature of the experience. While the personal agendas of all family members were evident, those of the children had the most influence on the pace and structure of the visit. The sense made of the visit was linked to recollections of the museum content and to the personal and social contexts of the visit. The outing generated activity and some learning continued to take place as a result of the visit.

Elements of all three frameworks were found to be valuable in constructing the picture of the family experience. The 'forage, broadcast and comment activity of the hunter gatherer' (McManus 1994) was certainly evident, as was the interaction of the personal, social and physical contexts of the visit. Most importantly for the conceptualisation of the audience as active creators of meaning from the museum text, the study found families using personal and subjective strategies for making meaning including reminiscence, recognition, judgement, evaluation, storytelling and fantasy as well as relating knowledge.

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