

### Achieving Better Discipline in the Exhibit Development Process

Once the concept of evaluation is clear and approved, the most common disincentive to performing evaluation is a lack of discipline in the exhibit development process. This lack makes evaluation difficult, expensive, and unproductive. Without a tightly controlled process, exhibit development always seems rushed, with no opportunity to pause for evaluation, and no opportunity to make use of what is learned from evaluation.

Exhibit development always seems to take longer and cost more than originally budgeted. When cost overruns occur, the temptation is to jettison evaluation in favor of getting more exhibit units completed. Michael Spock has described (see his article in this issue) meeting this challenge by holding a percentage of an exhibit budget in reserve for remedial evaluation after opening day.

The struggle to include evaluation among the daily tools of exhibit development has high stakes for the future of museums as well as the employment of museum evaluators. As described here, the issues and tactics should be treated not only as intellectual matters, but as political and financial ones as well.

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**Note:** The following article is based on a presentation to the American Association of Museums Annual Meeting in Philadelphia, PA, 1995.

### Evaluation Climates and Conversations

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Not surprisingly, both fundamental and situational concerns surround the practice of museum exhibit and program evaluation. I would like to explore each of these levels of concern by first offering some observations on the situational politics of our recent exhibit evaluation work at the Field Museum, and then conclude by suggesting how semantics plays a more fundamental role in the way we relate to the evaluation process.

I left the Field Museum, a large collections and research-based natural history museum, in 1994 after eight and a half years of intense renewal work in which we renovated 140,000 square feet of exhibit space to the tune of more than \$25 million. And significant attention was given to the Museum's education programs as well.

A great deal, although not all, of this renewal was informed by evaluations of various sorts. How did we do these evaluations? How did they shape our work, our exhibits, our programs? What sort of climate for evaluation existed when we began? How did that change and why? What is happening now that things have slowed down and some of us have left the Field?

There had already been some exhibit and a lot of program evaluation when I arrived at the Field Museum of Natural History in 1986. The most recent big permanent exhibit, *Maritime Peoples of the Arctic and Northwest Coast*, had been extensively evaluated and Harris Shettel did a major summative evaluation of *Man and His Environment* back in 1975. The Education Department was systematically defining goals and objectives and evaluating most of their programs as I walked in the door.

So I was not coming into an evaluation desert. There may have been significant pockets of indifference to program and exhibit evaluation, but little detectable hostility. However, in a curatorially driven museum, I think it is fair to say that there was a much stronger commitment to the standards of content accuracy and object conservation than to the rigor of presentational efficacy in public programming.

The first politically relevant thing to understand is that I had a clear mandate from the board and senior management to take control of the direction and execution of public programming and make it work. Whether the implications of this mandate were fully understood, the board and senior

management seemed to be saying: "Someone has to see to it that our exhibits and programs do a better job of attracting and serving, entertaining and educating a broad cross section of the public, and you're it!"

I was eager to accept that mandate and run with it. The formula we developed for more effective public programming was sophisticated, wide ranging and powerful. Exhibits and programs were to be multidisciplinary rather than departmentally focussed, multilayered and multichanneled, audience as well as content and collections driven. Developers (a relatively new role with balanced commitments to content, audience, communication and management) would run the show rather than the team-approach triad of curators, educators and designers.

Evaluation grew to become a cornerstone of this program partly because some funders require it, partly because it seemed to make sense to us, partly because no one outside our area seemed to be paying attention or care, and partly because I said so.

With our first two relatively small informal exhibits and a resource center that got off the boards early, evaluation was fairly unstructured and intuitive. *Inside Ancient Egypt* bridged the gap to our first really systematic and fully realized evaluation: *Traveling the Pacific*, our second large thematic exhibit.

Eventually, we had a full-blown evaluation program for each new exhibit including front-end, formative and remedial or summative evaluations. We spent real time and money on this work, hired outside evaluators and also participated in the evaluation work ourselves, paid attention to what we were hearing, and changed our exhibits and programs accordingly.

We held out money in the budget for revisions after the exhibit opening. We invested a lot in trying to tap into what our visitors were going to bring to their encounters with our exhibits. Members of the team — developers, content people, editors, designers, educators, technicians — all spent time out on the floor talking to visitors, trying out prototypes, seeing whether copy made sense and graphics were legible, and assessing the impact of finished exhibits, materials and programs. From beginning to end we tried to figure out what presentational strategies to apply, adapt, abandon or revise, and to be honest with ourselves about where we were succeeding and where we were not.

I think we began to see evaluation more as a tool for our work rather than a judgement of our work.

As time went on I came to feel that front-end evaluation gave us our most powerful insights. Having the voices of our clients in our ears, reminding us who was on the other end of our conversations, asking their own questions, expressing their own convictions, confusions and enthusiasms, telling us what they did and did not want to know, kept us focussed and helped us become much clearer about which leads to pursue.

Because it helps settle arguments and keep things moving, I don't think there was much net cost or time lost in the evaluations of these very large, multimillion dollar projects,

although there certainly was a cost associated with a commitment to revisions after the exhibit's opening. Incidentally, in spite of our considerable efforts, not all of these set-aside funds were successfully protected over the years so that full-scale revisions could be completed for all exhibits, although important adjustments were made to most.

Today, two years after my leaving, evaluation money is being budgeted for new projects. I have not heard any reports of this aspect of project work being challenged, although it may be more a reflection of the requirements of funders and the outlook of the surviving exhibit developers than a deeply rooted institutional commitment.

So, perhaps because of a peculiar combination of the exceptionally broad mandate carried into the program renewal and my personal interest in and comfort with it, evaluation was not much of a political issue at the Field. Plenty of other political issues surrounded this renewal effort, but that is another story.

From this experience and the war stories from other museums, it seems reasonable to infer that evaluation will take root in an institution only where there is someone at a senior level to give encouragement and protection while it becomes imbedded within the organization's culture. Evaluation seems unlikely to be successfully planted in a climate of indifference or hostility if it only has a champion at some less politically advantageous position within the museum.

Even with the disclaimer that my Field Museum experience may not shed much light on the generic politics of museum evaluation, I have done some thinking about how we might better understand the nature of evaluation and begin to build a more welcoming environment for it within all museums. Let me conclude by sharing some of these thoughts with you.

The world of semantics finds it useful to distinguish between the symbol and the thing symbolized. Although it may sound obvious, semanticists make the point that the word for something ("cow") is not the same as the thing it symbolizes (a real cow you can reach out and touch). A word may carry so many associations and meanings that they get in the way of our dealing productively with the actual thing the word stands for. In this way the choice of a heavily freighted word to label an activity we engage in may make it impossible for us to get through the associational brambles and fully commit to the task the word stands for.

"Evaluation" is not an unfreighted word nor a neutral practice. It carries all the associative burdens of your being judged, and worse, found wanting. Through it the fruits of our hard work can be criticized, unwelcome conclusions drawn, deeply held beliefs challenged, reputations jeopardized. Evaluations can be expensive, time consuming, a distraction from the main task of getting real work done. They frequently do not seem terribly helpful, tell us what we already know (or fear!) and are only on the agenda because funders require it.

The word "evaluation" carries so much baggage that it is at best tolerated rather than really welcomed to most exhibit

and program development work. Yet clarifying goals and gauging progress towards those goals can be a critically important activity. And defining goals and measuring progress is what evaluation is really all about. So I would like to take a look at evaluation from a semantic perspective to see if we can find a way to have access to this powerful tool while avoiding some of the anxiety and resistance the word conjures up.

In short, "evaluation" may be the least helpful word for what we do. I prefer to think of it somewhat metaphorically instead as opening up a "conversation" with the visitor.

Each visitor constructs their perception and understanding of the things and ideas we present out of their own unique ways of knowing and dealing with the world, as well as from the material we offer. In this way the visitor's contributions are just as critical to the exhibition experience as the choices we make of objects, label copy or lighting.

Much of what we do in museums, at least in exhibits, is impersonal and arms-length. We talk about communicating ideas and facts through our exhibits. We want to provoke thought, stir feelings, open insights. Yet we cannot be there all the time to communicate personally with our visitors. The exchange is more a one-sided presentation than a two-way communication. There is no continuous feedback to tell us how we are doing. It's as if we were creating our exhibits — having our conversations — blindfolded, our ears stopped with cotton. Our conversational partner could just as well have walked out of the room as be there in rapt attendance, getting the point of everything we are trying to say.

Therefore, in the impersonal exhibit medium where the visitor is a major contributor to or collaborator in the exhibition experience, something has to be done to create real two-way communication, if you will, between the visitor and exhibit team.

I am interested in engaging with the visitor, finding out what she is bringing to our exchange so that I can anticipate some of her prejudices and questions (we call this front-end evaluation), how the dialogue is evolving so I can adjust how I put things as we go along (we call this formative evaluation), and how it all comes out in the end so that I can change my message for the next conversation I have about this topic with another visitor (we call this remedial evaluation) or with her on another subject (we call this summative evaluation).

This model seems more natural, useful and less judgmental. It is semantically more neutral. It downplays the sense that you could get into trouble through evaluation, that bad things could happen. In this model, bad things could happen in the conversation only if you are not paying attention, and only if you do not adjust your content and delivery to accommodate what you hear and see going on.

When put this way, it is hard to imagine developing new exhibits and programs without insisting on having a real conversation with our visitors.

In museums that already welcome the contributions of visitors to the exhibition process, this semantic slight of hand may seem unnecessary. However, if the visitor is not as-

sumed by natural law to always be a part of these conversations, and the consequences of a "bad evaluation" send everyone into rationalizations of why it's not worth doing, then a gentle metaphorical translation may be just what the doctor ordered.

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