Social Influences on the Visitor Museum Experience

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Only recently have researchers begun to systematically study the impact of group influences on museum experience. Prior to 1975, there was little overt interest among researchers in attempting to measure the social processes involved in museum settings. However, by 1980 a number of reports included data on group influence (e.g., Benton, 1979; Borun, 1977; Cone & Kendall, 1978; Diamond, 1980; Lakota, 1975; Linn & Thier, 1975).

More recently, Falk and Dierking (1992) and Dierking and Falk (in press) have summarized the literature on group influence and attempted to give proper emphasis to the social aspect of visitation. Falk and Dierking (1992) devoted a chapter of their book (*The Museum Experience*) to the social context of the museum experience. In another publication, Dierking and Falk (in press) reviewed studies dealing specifically with family behavior and learning in museums. These attempts to summarize the literature are important because they emphasize the importance of these processes on visitor behavior.

The purpose of this current short article is to outline some of the variables (both group-related and exhibit-related) that seem to play a role in social learning in museums. There will be no effort to repeat the efforts of Dierking and Falk; readers are encouraged to seek out these references.

Group Variables

Group variables include those that originate from the quality or number of people within the group or from the combination of variables. Note that the categories below are not always mutually exclusive.

1. *Gender of child.* A child's gender may play a role when exhibits provide an opportunity for gender-typical behaviors (e.g., Kremer & Mullins, 1992). For example, Kremer and Mullins found that boys were more likely than girls to mimick shooting actions and sounds at a water jet exhibit. Linn and Thier (1975), on the other hand, reported that girls often chose hands-on science activities requiring neatness.

2. *Gender of adult.* Female adults were observed to take a caretaking parent role while male adults were more likely to act as leaders (Diamond, 1980; 1986; McManus, 1987). When females were with other adults, they were more likely to act in an exploratory manner. However, when female adults were with children they were the least likely family member to select an exhibit (Diamond, 1986).

3. *Composition of group* (combination of age and gender). Fathers were observed ignoring their daughters (Cone & Kendall, 1978). Bitgood et al. (1993) found that the viewing time of adults was correlated with who they were with — other adults or children. This relationship was further complicated by the fact that some exhibits are preferred by adults and others by children. A child's presense would increase the viewing time of adults at the child-preferred exhibit. In another study, Wagner and Massey (1991) found that children were more likely to role play at an exhibit when with other children than when they were with adults.

4. *Size of group.* Individuals may behave differently in small groups than in large groups. For example, there may be a tendency to spend less time at exhibits (Bitgood, et al., 1993).

5. *Ages of individuals.* Two types of age differences are likely to be important: (a) child versus parent; and (b) developmental and physical stages of development. Clearly, adult-child differences have been repeatedly noted. Adults read more labels than children (Diamond, 1986); children interact with animals and games more than adults (Rosenfeld & Turkel, (1982); children are more likely to manipulate exhibits than adults (Diamond, 1986; Koran, Koran, & Longino, 1986);

6. *Agenda.* Both individual and group agendas are likely to have an impact on visitors. If the agenda of a parent is to teach a child about science concepts and the child's agenda is simply to have fun and purchase something from the gift shop, a conflict is likely to occur.

7. *Style of parenting.* Benton (1979) reported that the leadership style of the family was related to the amount of time on discipline versus the amount of exhibit-directed behavior.

8. *Strategies for learning.* Families tend to cooperate in their learning strategies (Bitgood, et al., 1993; Hilke, 1988). Groups composed of only adults, however, tend to adapt more personal strategies for acquiring information – i.e., reading to themselves (Bitgood, et al., 1993).

Exhibit Characteristics

Studies demonstrate that the design features of the exhibit play a critical role in understanding how visitor groups behave.

1. *Opportunities and type of participation.* Children are more likely to touch and manipulate (Diamond, 1986; Koran, et al, 1986).

2. *Content/subject matter.* Bitgood et al. (1993) found that visitor dyads behaved differently from one exhibit to the next. Adults viewed text-heavy exhibits longer than children; children spent longer than adults at an exhibit that allowed playing musical instruments.

3. *Relative amount of text and objects.* Bitgood et al. (1993) found that, as expected, text-ladened exhibits were more popular with adults than with children. Further, adults with other adults spent longer at such exhibits than adults with children.

4. *Configuration of elements.* The physical configuration of an exhibit can have an effect on group behavior in several ways. An exhibit designed such that only one person can see/ interact limits social contact. An exhibit designed such that individuals must be tall enough to see will filter out young children and wheelchair users or result in parents lifting children to get a better look.

Outcome Measures

In addition to the standard measures of visitor studies (stopping, viewing time, etc.), outcome measures in the area of social influence have attempted to document the social nature of the visit. Thus, there is an attempt to document verbal exchanges (e.g., asking for and giving information) and nonverbal influences (who leads the group, who pulls the group away from the exhibit). Perhaps these social measures should become routine data collection in all studies.

Conclusion

A better understanding of social processes in museums is necessary in order to better design informal educational experiences. Given the diversity of group patterns, the task of designing informal learning within a social context is a challenging one.

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