

Educational Background and Perception of Exhibits

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Introduction

This article summarizes a portion of a dissertation research project (Thompson, 1992). In particular it deals with the relationship between people's educational background and their perceptions of exhibits. For this project, exhibit objects (mounted animals) from the An-niston Museum of Natural History were photographed under varying conditions and participants were asked to rate these photographs on a series of statements (e.g., "It makes the animal(s) come to life;" "It's exciting").

Two exhibit factors were studied: (1) the contextuality of background environments against which exhibit objects are presented, and (2) the degree to which exhibit space surrounds the viewer (Bitgood, 1990). An example of a contextual presentation of a mounted animal would be one which provides a naturalistic habitat as a backdrop, while a noncontextual presentation would be one which utilizes a plain background such as a white wall or a blank screen. Bitgood (1990) has argued that objects which are presented in a contextual manner can generate more visitor interest than objects which are presented in a noncontextual manner.

Space surround refers to the degree to which the visitor enters the exhibit setting rather than merely viewing objects from the outside as is customary in the traditional style of museum exhibition. An example of an exhibit which provides a higher degree of surround is a walk-through exhibit that simulates a cave in which the visitor is surrounded by the sights and sounds found in an underground limestone cave. Bitgood (1990) has also suggested that exhibits with a higher level of space surround can produce higher levels of interest than those in which visitors are merely outside observers.

Method

A sample of 105 individuals who represented a range of demographic factors including age, gender, and socioeconomic status were shown photographs illustrating a variety of contextual and noncontextual exhibits, and surround and nonsurround exhibits. For the contextual condition, photographs were taken of the animals with various naturalistic habitat backgrounds. For the noncontextual condition, a blank white screen was placed in back of the animal mounts. The space surround condition was created by photographing two individuals inside the exhibit habitats appearing to touch

the mounted animals while the nonsurround condition showed the same individuals viewing the animal mounts from behind a barrier. Each participant was asked to rate the applicability of a series of descriptive phrases to the exhibits ("It's fun," "It's exciting," "It looks real," etc) on a five-point scale. Photographs were presented to them in pairs (Contextual vs. Noncontextual and Surround vs. Nonsurround). A total of eight pairs of photographs were used, four with Contextual-Noncontextual and four with Surround-Nonsurround examples. However, each subject was shown only four of them. Each participant's ratings were averaged across each type of photograph (Context, Noncontext, Surround, and Nonsurround), and these averages were then evaluated by analysis of variance.

Results

Figure 1 shows the relationship between adult respondents' education and their ratings of photographs. Results are shown for three of the 13 descriptor statements ("it's fun," "It would get me involved," and "It's memorable"). Only for these three descriptors were there statistically significant differences in responses for both contextuality and surround factors. However, the pattern of the results was similar for the other descriptors, although differences were of smaller magnitude.

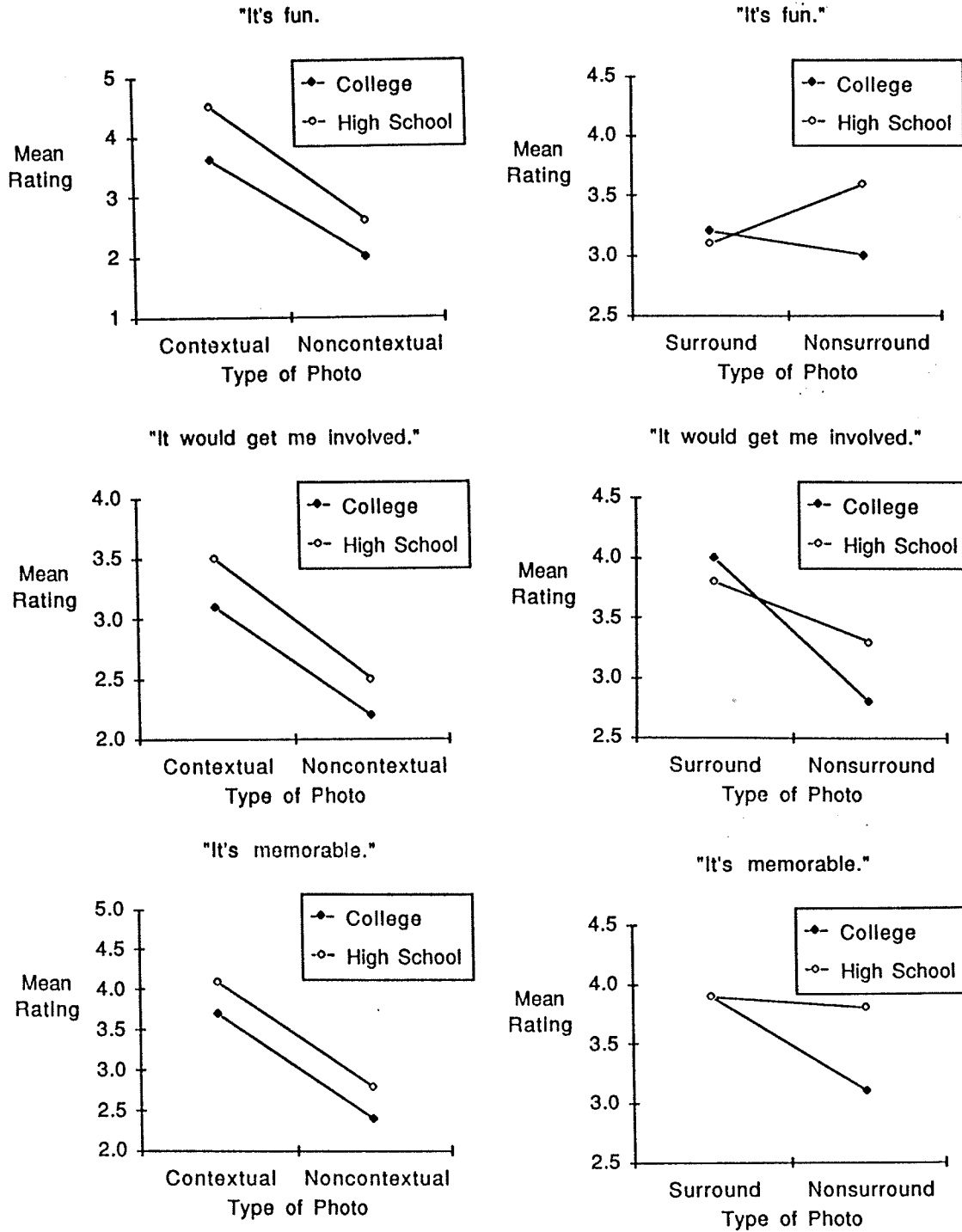
Role of Contextuality

As shown in Figure 1 (left side) contextual photos were always rated higher than noncontextual photos. In addition, for each exhibit descriptor, adults with a high school education or less rated both types of photographs significantly higher than did those with more than a high school degree. There were no interactions between education and type of photo for contextuality.

Role of Space Surround

Significant interactions between type of photograph and educational level were found here, as well (see the right side of Figure 1). All adult participants, despite their educational level, rated the surround photos at about the same level. The nonsurround photos, however, were rated significantly higher by high school-educated respondents than by college-educated respondents. Except for "It's fun," the differences between ratings of surround and nonsurround photos were larger for college-educated respondents than for those with a high school education.

Figure 1
Ratings of Pairs of Photographs in Terms of
Type of Comparison and Educational Level



Discussion

The major finding was that adult participants with high school and college education levels responded to the photographs in different ways. For contextual comparisons, high school-educated respondents rated all photos higher than college-educated respondents. However, for surround comparisons, there was an interaction between educational level and type of photograph. College-educated adults tended to have a larger rating difference between surround and nonsurround photos than did high school-educated adults.

It may be that the lower overall contextual photo ratings for those with more than a high school degree are due to the wider variety of cultural experiences they have had during their lives, making them less easily impressed. This explanation makes some sense when reviewing the similar differences which appeared when respondents were offered an opportunity to walk among and touch stuffed animals. However, caution must be taken in interpreting this data. There are at least two possible explanations for these findings. The first is that those with less than a high school degree simply found all types of exhibits to be more appealing, and would respond more favorably to them in an actual museum.

The second explanation is that under the conditions of the interview, those with less education responded more favorably to questions than did their counterparts—either because they were more inclined to try to please the interviewer, or because they were more willing or able to "imagine themselves" to be in a museum. In these alternative explanations lie the dilemma of all research which predicts behavior based solely on reaction to anything other than a real-world setting. However, while there remain issues which require further study, the initial evidence is that in some way a person's level of education can have an effect on his/her responding, in ways which may be quite relevant to museum exhibit design.

The interaction between education and space surround photographs was surprising. College-educated respondents discriminated more between the surround and nonsurround photos than did high school-educated respondents. It may be that better discrimination skills are developed in the educational process.

Another possible explanation for the interaction between education and space surround photos is that high school-educated subjects may perceive the surround photos as a "violation" of the traditional museum norms of "do not touch." Several respondents made comments suggesting concern about the individuals in

the photos touching the animal mounts. High school-educated respondents may be similar to the "traditionalists" described by Griggs (1990). In a study at the British Museum of Natural History, Griggs found that about 20% of the visitors studied preferred the old-style exhibits while another 34% preferred the new-style galleries. He termed the latter group "modernists." Traditionalists tended to prefer the old-style museum exhibits while the "modernists" preferred the new-style participatory types.

References

- Bitgood, S. (1990). *The Role of Simulated Immersion in Exhibition*. Technical Report #90-20. Jacksonville, AL: Center for Social Design.
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