Some Things to Think About

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Introduction

The Fourth Visitor Studies Conference (and the first one held under the auspices of the newly formed Visitor Studies Association) is an appropriate occasion to examine some of the issues that are relevant to the continued growth and development of the field of visitor studies. They are presented in the form of questions.

1. Has the status of exhibit evaluation in museums improved since the first Visitor Studies Conference in 1988?

Other ways of asking this question are: Is evaluation better accepted now by the museum community than it was then? Are more exhibits and programs being evaluated by qualified people? Are evaluators more likely to be a part of the exhibit development team? Are there more qualified people working in the field? Has the quantity and the quality of studies increased – are we asking (and answering) more important questions?

At the first Visitor Studies Conference in 1988 I asked the group who attended my paper, "Do We Really, Really Need to Do Visitor Studies?", to give their best judgment as to the percentage of exhibits produced in the U.S. that receive any kind of legitimate evaluation – front end, formative, remedial, summative, or whatever. The results? The vast majority of hands went up when I gave them a range of 1% to 5%. A few hands responded to the 5% to 10% range. Only three hands showed at the 10% to 25% range. And no one thought that over 25% of exhibits receive the "blessing" of evaluation.

I did not take the time to ask the audience of the 1991 Conference to do the same thing, but I would venture to guess that the answers would definitely be higher now. The question is, how much higher? And, an even more interesting question – "How high should we expect it to be?" It would certainly be safe to say that very few hands would be raised even today in the 50% and above range. Should we consider this overall situation a sign of progress or evidence of lack of (adequate) progress?

Let me cite two non-trivial cases that could be said to argue for the latter interpretation. I recently learned that a major science museum in a major city opened a very large new wing containing dozens of new exhibits, and only a couple of them were given any kind of prototype testing. Not only that, but this particular institution has on its full-time staff a very experienced evaluator! My second example is longer term in nature. A world class institution in the U.S. does not have now, nor has it ever had, a standing requirement for evaluating any of its exhibits or programs. Evaluation, when carried out, is done on an ad hoc basis, and the one person who planned and carried out most of these evaluations is now engaged in exhibit development work.

Which brings up another indicator of acceptance – how many museums have a qualified evaluator on their staff (regardless of whether or not they use them!)? I was told very recently by someone who made such an estimate that the number in the U. S. is about fifteen (Barbara Birney, personal communication, 1991). Ten years ago it was at best five, so we have a three-fold increase. But, there are over 5000 museums in the U. S., so I will let you decide which half of the half a glass of water you want to emphasize!

One very large museum *not* in the U.S. with a 10-year history of evaluation work recently eliminated its internal evaluation staff. It is their stated intention to continue to do evaluation using external consultants and vendors. It is true that more and more museums are following the practice of using external evaluators for specific projects and this certainly represents an improvement over doing no evaluation at all. But is is also true that in more than a few cases these evaluations are done primarily to meet the requirements of federal granting institutions. One could also consider this as a good sign in the sense that museums are being "encouraged" to recognize the role of evaluation, at least if they want to receive federal funding. But, as someone who has been involved in a number of these kinds of efforts, I can tell you that they can be problematic, ranging from the sponsor showing little interest in the evaluation work being done (including the results), to diverting some or even most of the funds set aside for evaluation to some other aspect of the project.

It is unfair, of course, to dwell only on the problems we face in gaining broader acceptance of the evaluation function in the informal learning environment. We do have many accomplishments that speak to the basic vitality of our efforts. These well-attended conferences are certainly one indication of that vitality. Others include:

- The recently initiated, peer-reviewed professional journal, *ILVS Review: A Journal of Visitor Behavior* (with over 200 subscribers);

- The *Visitor Behavior* newsletter published quarterly by the Center for Social Design (over 500 subscribers);

- The American Association of Museums (AAM) Visitor Research and Evaluation Committee which was recently accepted as a Standing Professional Committee (with 140 members);

- The Ross Loomis book, *Museum Visitor Evaluation: New Tool for Management* (which sold out two editions);

- The number of papers, panels, and poster sessions devoted to visitor studies presented at the annual American Association of Museums meetings (eight in Baltimore in 1992);

- The always well-attended evaluation workshops wherever – and whenever they are given.

And so, we can and should point with pride to our many achievements, but we should also be mindful of the fact that we have a very long way to go before we can say that we have made the impact that we are capable of making. (See Shettel, 1988, for a discussion of several of the factors that have inhibited the use of visitor evaluation in the museum setting.)

2. Is the traditional visitor evaluation model fatally flawed?

This may strike you as a strange question to bring up to this group, but the fact is that the question has been seriously raised both from a practical and a philosophical point of view on a number of occasions, including at recent professional meetings and in print.

For example, I quote from a paper given at the AAM Convention in 1990 by a well-known evaluator/educator (Munley, 1990): "Can we really measure something as varied as museum experience?" and "There are endless and unpredictable ways in which people acquire, retain, and use knowledge." The basic thrust of this paper was that evaluators are traditionally looking in the wrong place with the wrong tools for evidence of effectiveness, and that the entire evaluation enterprise is misguided and basically unhelpful.

Others have questioned the use of empirical data, such as that derived from tracking studies, interviews, and questionnaires, as adequately reflecting the reality of the visitor experience. Still others have attacked the experimental research paradigm itself as being outmoded and inappropriate as a model for visitor research studies (e.g., St. John, 1990). These statements should not be allowed to go unchallenged.

For starters, I would ask those who make such statements to demonstrate that their alternative approaches can provide verifiable, objective, practical, and useful information that can inform exhibit/program planners and developers and result in "products" that are more effective in communicating with their intended public.

3. Are we giving adequate attention to the exploration of innovative ways of understanding and documenting the visitor experience?

While we are not (in my opinion) in the throes of a paradigm shift, we are clearly in need of better ways of getting a handle on how visitors respond to, and in, the museum environment, and why. (Not to mention our need to know a lot more about the *non*-visitor!)

This need is especially evident in the affective domain, where traditional measurement techniques can be weak, if not misleading. We need to continue to explore ways of obtaining and using qualitative data so as to avoid the stigma of subjectivity (focus groups and depth interviews come to mind in this regard). In many ways I think we are ahead of the formal educational establishment in looking for creative ways of getting at the impact of the learning experience. But, we should not be satisfied with our present box of tools. We can do better and I am glad that there are those in our field of study who are exploring the frontiers of this important area. (Note, for example, papers on affective learning in this volume.)

4. Are we ready to meet the challenge of those who are putting the public educational role at the forefront of museum responsibilities?

Two major initiatives taken recently by the American Association of Museums place *service to the community* as the principle function of museums. The third Museum Assessment Program (MAP III), called the "Public Dimension Assessment," is designed to "review the public's perception of your museum, to identify ways to improve the quality of the public's experience, and to consider the publics involvement with the museum." Specifically addressed in the MAP III self-study questionnaire is the way exhibits and programs are planned and developed and the way they are evaluated to see if they are meeting their educational and institutional objectives. MAP III survey teams will consider the absence of an internal evaluation function as an area requiring further study and assistance. In short, museums are going to be expected to document their commitment to public (informal) education. Mission statements alone will not suffice!

Another initiative that deserves our attention is the report prepared by the American Association of Museums Task Force on Museum Education entitled "Excellence and Equity: Education and the Public Dimension." Here is a clarion call for museums to be accountable not only to their current visitors, but to the community at large. The notion of using the experience of visitors from all walks of life and all ethnic backgrounds to validate the quality of the museum experience is a central thesis of this document. Its recent endorsement by the AAM Board indicates the level of commitment it is receiving. (Copies are available from AAM headquarters in Washington, DC).

At a more global level, the concern about the dismal state of science literacy in particular, and education in general, in the U.S. is another reason for museums to examine and strengthen not only their *informal* public education role, but explore ways in which they can work even more closely and effectively with the *formal* educational system.

We have a great deal to offer in all of these areas, and we should let it be known that we stand ready and able to assist not only in assessing the effectiveness of the end products of these initiatives, but, even more importantly, in the planning, testing, and revision process that they should go through.

Recently, Steve Bitgood, Arlene Benefield and I visited the East Wing of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. (What do we do in our spare time? We visit a museum!) A pedestrian path to the entrance runs right in front of a very sharp vertical building edge. I happened to notice something unusual on this edge. A closer look revealed that, as a result of many hundreds of hands touching this apparently irresistible part of the building, a beautiful normal distribution curve had been produced! (See Figure 1).

In those weak moments when even I begin to think that visitor behavior is too idiosyncratic, complex, and multidimensional to ever be brought under scientific scrutiny, I see something like this to renew my faith in the essential (but probabilistic) lawfulness of what goes on in our museums.

Can we really measure something as varied as museum experience? The answer is, happily, YES! *Do we have a lot more to learn about how to do this?* The answer is, again, YES! Our very presence at this conference affirms our belief in both of these answers.

References

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Note

This paper is a slightly expanded and modified version of the presentation made at the 1991 Visitor Studies Conference in Ottawa.

Figure 1
Normal Distribution of Visitors' Hand Prints on East Wing of National Gallery, Washington D.C.
(Photo courtesy of Stephen Bitgood)