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# THE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FRENCH-CANADIAN RESEARCH ON MUSEUM VISITORS

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Three main tendencies characterize the way research is done in Québec. First, researchers use material published in many parts of the world because they read French, English and often Spanish and Italian. This scope of language reading has two consequences: a certain originality of the research, and a number of collaborations developed with other Canadians and with foreigners. The high rate of collaboration has led to the creation of a learned society called "Museums and Education" that holds yearly conferences and has published its conference proceedings for the last six years. It also has facilitated the creation of real networks of researchers, including numerous foreign colleagues.

Second, research tends to be done by groups rather than by individuals, and according to integrated programs rather than isolated projects. Thus the same theme can be researched for several consecutive years and studied from a variety of related angles.

Third, universities and museums have developed very strong links, as far as the Montréal-Québec-Ottawa region is concerned. Museums ask graduate students to carry out small research projects that have real relevance and, stimulated by the results of this type of experience, some professionals who already had a taste for research have joined the university teams of research. There are three such teams in Quebec working on the museum education of children, adolescents and adults, respectively.

## An Example

As everybody knows, museum adult education is a very fuzzy, underdeveloped field. One is not really

sure what it means, to what extent it should include cultural activities, and to what extent it should include exhibitions when they are not didactic ones. About ten years ago, three professors from two universities (Montreal and Concordia) decided to study the psychological functioning of the adult who is observing objects in an exhibition room. Their aim was to use the visitor's functioning as a starting point to elaborate a structured understanding of adult education in a museum context. They wanted to follow, minute by minute, what the visitor is thinking, feeling, imagining,

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when pleasure or stress appear and what triggers these; when learning happens, what are the processes that lead to it, and the various forms it takes; and what the visitor does with his or her new knowledge and in what way it contributes to his or her satisfaction. In other words, they wanted to study the very contact of the visitor with the museum object. This has been possible by adapting and integrating two elements: (1) a research approach, and (2) "thinking aloud," borrowed from the American cognitive scientists who work on problem solving, and an instrument, borrowed from the French, consisting of a grid of analysis of the discourses produced by the visitors who are thinking aloud. The combination of the two means

was used to study a database created with the verbal discourses (verbalizations) produced by adults in three types of museums: fine arts, history and ethnology, and natural history. The results obtained from the information stored in the database are extensive.

As work progressed, a fourth researcher from France (Ecole du Louvre) joined the team. These senior researchers supervise the work of about fifteen graduate students, most doing their master's or doctorate on the database described earlier. About four years ago, the group felt that du Louvre had enough information on what a visitor does easily and what he does with difficulty to start developing and experimenting with educational programs to improve the capabilities of the visitor in dealing with the exhibited object. Finally, two years ago, after analyzing the results obtained with the first programs, the group could identify what could be gained by increasing the skills of the visitor and what should be done by the exhibition itself. So it turned to exhibition analysis.

About five years ago the museums started to ask for particular studies to be done by the graduate students. This summer there will be six of them, three from Paris and three from Montreal, who will use what the group already knows about exhibition analysis to answer questions that a Canadian and a Dutch museum have formed about their own exhibitions. This collaboration is possible because of the international network built into the research program.

*(continued on page 8)*

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## IT'S DONE, IT'S BOUND, AND IT IS GREAT!

Have you recently completed a master's or doctoral study of interest to readers of this publication? If so, please send the title, your name, university, and a 50 to 75 word description to the editor by September. A listing will be published in the fall issue of *Visitor Studies Today!*

## VSA STUDENT NEWS

*by James Jensen, Student Board Member*

My first column came from somewhere about an hour from the Atlantic Ocean; this one is coming about an hour from the Pacific. I appear to be the first student rep in recent memory who has had to produce two of these columns. I'm not sure if that's a good thing or a bad thing. I suppose the appropriate thing to do would be to wax eloquent about my year in the position, but...well, never mind.

Thank you to all who expressed interest in taking my place as student representative on the VSA Board. By the time you read this, the selection process will hopefully be clarified and resolved. I hope those who have managed to put up with the selection process for the travel assistance funds for the conference have hung on as well. I also hope I manage to get to D.C. from the west coast and meet some of you at the conference.

The editor has asked me to remind all student members that she plans to compile a listing of recent thesis work (after January 1997) related to exhibits and audience research. If that includes you, please contact Kris Morrissey for more information. As it includes me, I will soon have to sit down and get the revisions to my thesis complete—ugh.

I'm actually no longer a student and am working for an exhibit design firm in Seattle. Since they bill for my time by the hour, I suppose I should get back to work.

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