

# Museum and Visitor Studies Today

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On the general principle, dear to museologists, that we cannot live in the present or look to the future without a consciousness of our past, this paper shall look, first, to the beginnings of visitor studies and briefly survey where we have been in the recent past. Next, I shall examine some "unhelpful" notions we may be taking forward into the future and then look at some current foci of visitor study interest.

My observations are inevitably colored by my experience in Britain as a museum and heritage consultant and educator of future museum staff. However, contact with colleagues on the American continent leads me to believe that our experiences are broadly similar.

## The Beginnings of Visitor Studies

Henry Hugh Higgins was one of the founders of the British Museums Association and in 1890 was its first president. He was the honorary curator of the invertebrate collection at the Liverpool Museum. In 1884 he reported one of the first recorded visitor surveys in the *Transactions of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Liverpool* (Hancock, 1975; Higgins, 1884).

In the one hundred and twelve year-old report of the work Higgins did in the Liverpool Museum he said, "I have long been convinced that a series of observations on the constituents of this irregular procession of visitors, combined with overtures suitable for inducing them to make remarks on the objects exhibited - in a word, the application of the inductive method to the examination of human elements in transit through a museum - might lead to much valuable information."

This statement chimes with the truth of what we are still trying to do. Do we not watch people and ask them questions? Are we not still troubled with sampling the irregular flow of a mixed audience? Are we not still trying to infer general laws from particular instances?

This remarkable man also describes what must be the first preliminary assessment (front-end analysis) survey undertaken. He considered the survey to be successful because he used the information to produce *Museum Talk*, a guide to the displayed invertebrate collections which became very popular. *Museum Talk* went to over five editions and sold 30,000 copies at a penny a time.

Here we have a modern concern to get the visitor's view. We should also note the populist title of the publication and note the commercial marketing note to the measure of success Higgins adopted.

Higgins, as a result of his contemplation of the audience divided it into, 78% observers (people who were on a general visit and "just looking"); 20% loungers, and one to two percent serious students of the science of invertebrate biology. I find that the time which has passed since then has not altered audience circumstances greatly. Overall, our basic working concerns do not appear to have changed radically in the intervening one hundred and twelve years! However, I think that our approaches to exploration of the museum environment have become more sophisticated and wide ranging since those early times.

### **Where We Have Been In The Recent Past**

Henry Higgins was the curator of a collection. It is very probable that in the first half of this century quite a large number of curators became involved with visitor studies. One of the characteristics of the recent past in our field of work is that much of the lead in designing and conducting visitor study work has been taken by people working outside of museums, often in universities. Nowadays, visitor studies experts are frequently from backgrounds not traditionally seen in museums. They come from a wide range of social sciences including psychology, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, education, market research, communication and cultural studies. This eclectic mix of disciplines has both given our work a multi-disciplinary character, as when various approaches to investigation are mingled in one study, and also led to "schools of approach" as we have worked through the utility of differing disciplines in shedding light on our concerns.

I am going to take our recent past as beginning with the 1968 publication of the work of Harris Shettel and his colleagues on the United States Office of Education exhibition called "The Vision of Man." The purpose of this project was "to outline a systematic development of research strategies and testable hypotheses which could lead to improved evaluation and design of scientific and technological exhibitions designed to reach educational objectives." The work described in this publication (Shettel, Butcher, Cotton, Northrup, & Slough, 1968) is a milestone in our field because it creatively pushed forward the frontiers of investigative methodologies in exhibition work and helped to open out the field of visitor studies to a wider audience.

In the thirty or so years since this publication I can discern three main strands of visitor study work, not all of which occurred simultaneously.

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## Demographic Studies

Firstly, that concerned with Demographic Studies: this descriptive field will always be with us. I think it is fair to say that the majority of visitor studies taken in museums large and small, wherever they may be, are concerned with demographics— with describing who comes to a particular institution and why. In recent times, following professional concerns to broaden and create an inclusive museum audience, this work has been extended to surveys of the general population, and particular minority and community groups in order to describe and distinguish between those who include museum visits in their lives and those who do not (see for example, Merriman, 1989).

## Behavioral And Knowledge Gain Studies

I see the second strand of visitor study work from the recent past as including behavioral studies and knowledge gain studies, both being concerned with the visitor's behavioral response to exhibit displays.

As the underlying theory in behavioral studies was behaviorist psychology with its emphasis on stimulus and response, the focus of such investigations was always on the performance of the exhibit. This focus was accompanied by a steady search for ways of increasing the effectiveness of exhibits, the implication being that visitor learning could be controlled by aspects of exhibit design. From such studies, we have the notion of what I call the "active exhibit" with mysterious, in communication terms, "attracting" and "holding" powers over the helpless and passive visitor. Notions which, incidentally, predate my chosen period since they go back to the work of Melton in the thirties (Melton, 1935).

From the knowledge gain element of this strand we have the curriculum development approach to learning in the museum with its emphasis on educational technology and pre- and post-testing of the visitors' knowledge. Here we have the notion of exhibitions as "learning systems" to which the passive visitor is exposed with his or her "learning gains" seen as a product of the experience of the exposure. The key to these studies is the requirement that the change in visitor behavior should be consistent with the previously stated aims and objectives of the exhibit.

## Visitor Focused Studies

The third strand of work I discern is that of visitor focused studies. The work I described as behavioral and knowledge gain studies conceptualized exhibits as distance physical entities, as objects. The communication model which would encompass them was that of the active transmitter of an encapsulated message and the passive receiver of same. Such "objectification" of exhibits (McManus, 1986, 1987) took no account of the

visitors' motivations, interests, past experience, autonomy as a learner, the brevity of visits or the social context of visits nor did it take much account of the people who prepared exhibits in the first place. A model of a communication situation in which those who prepared an exhibition and the visitor who saw it worked together to construct meaning had to be built (McManus 1991a) before these two parties could be accounted for. This model was slowly constructed as my third strand, that of visitor focused studies.

In the last half of the period I describe as the recent past, the last fifteen years or so, from the early 80's onwards, having worked through the behavioral psychology approach to visitor studies for the insights available (Miles, 1993, p28) the shift in emphasis has been from examining what exhibits do to visitors to seeking to understand the visitors' perceptions of an exhibit or an exhibition or a museum visit. I think that the early signs of this approach were shown in the naturalistic work of Wolf and Tymitz (1979) in the Smithsonian and by the work of Diamond (1986) in describing family behavior in a science center. In the 1980s, work in Britain at the Natural History Museum began to take an increasingly visitor-oriented approach with investigations into the visitors' notions of the ideal exhibit (Alt & Shaw, 1984), into the way visitors mentally mapped their way through exhibit communications (Griggs, 1983), and into the influence of the social context of visits (McManus, 1987a & b, 1988).

Alongside this change in emphasis from exhibit-focused to visitor-and communication-focused work, there was a naturally arising increase in the tools used for investigation. Many more open-ended, qualitative studies using much smaller groups of visitors than formerly were undertaken. Focus groups became popular. Methods of work were borrowed from the market research and anthropological communities.

By the mid 1980s some bigger museums had established marketing departments staffed by marketing professionals. They sometimes appeared to work independently of traditional visitor study workers because they tended to contract traditional market research companies who had previously not worked in the museum field. The money for visitor studies now had to be shared between marketing and communication concerns, though nowadays things have settled down somewhat and visitor study work in such situations has become more integrated. At the start of this period we began to hear, and still do, comparative talk of the merits of qualitative and quantitative methods of investigation and, underlying that, the generality of any work done in museums. But that is another story.

Throughout the eighties, the new emphasis on the path of communications with the museum visitor, and a new interest in describing conditions which might support learning in motivated visitors, led to a rapid increase in formative evaluations designed to shape exhibit communications as exhibits were developed.

Later, visitor-oriented work led to consultations with visitors about proposed exhibits and exhibitions in the very early days of their conceptualization. Nowadays, much of my work is in this field. In Britain this form of study is often called Preliminary Assessment since the aim is to determine the lie of the land in communication terms. I prefer the term "Preliminary Assessment" to that of "front-end analysis" because the activity it describes is exploratory and qualitative in character rather than analytical. Also, the term "front-end" implies a particular "rear end" and a production line approach to the development of museum communications which does not fit our present point of view. It is annoying to use differing names for similar activities but because words have meaning, they can affect the attitudes we bring to our work and, in this case, the term used should reflect the intents behind the activity.

### **Unhelpful Baggage From The Past**

I can see two pieces of what may be "unhelpful," and much discussed, conceptual baggage we are carrying forward from the very active eighties and early nineties.

### **Qualitative And Quantitative Distinctions**

The first is to do with the continuum lying between qualitative and quantitative work. Data collection methods should be appropriate to the individual task in hand and the type of information required. Each method has its strengths and weaknesses so I often use several methods of investigation at the same time. However, in the minds of parts of the museum community some methods of data collection appear to have become associated more closely with one particular type of situation rather than another and I believe there are no real grounds for any rigid distinctions.

How do fashions in data collection methods (for example, the early nineties prevalence of focus group studies) arrive and change? Conducting focus groups is very enjoyable, but sometimes a survey with lots of open-minded questions would be more useful in a particular situation and, perhaps, cheaper. But if everybody else seems to be doing focus groups there can be a prejudice against a survey.

Maybe this situation has arisen because quite a few of us (me included, McManus, 1991b) have written "how to do it" papers for beginners in the field which specify particular tools for particular situations. Maybe these papers have given the impression of evaluation and assessment as a technological system with clearly defined applications. On the other hand, maybe the moving on from behavioral and knowledge gain studies has left an unjustified taint of measurement on the large sample, questionnaire surveys capable of statistical analysis commonly used in such studies. The requirement to understand statistical measurement, and its limitations, in

order to decide when it is appropriate to apply it, or not to apply it, may be lacking. Also, maybe some practitioners specialize in a particular form of data collection at the expense of others.

Our work is essentially pragmatic, practical and usually concerned with finding indications of a general drift or trend, unless we are embarking on the study of a particular research topic, in which case more rigor is required. Most evaluation work is a part of the larger piece of work called exhibition development. Our everyday work isn't overly "scientific," nor should we pretend that it is. Mostly we are trying to build a body of observations from which we might be able to theorize and which may be of use in designing evaluation studies in the future. Consequently, evaluative work draws on a wide range of methods for collecting data, most of which have arisen from different disciplines. This is where the joy and creativity in designing studies in our field of work lies. A strict "horses for courses" attitude to methodology denies us the full use of our eclectic tools of investigation.

Just what counts as a qualitative study and what as a quantitative one? I am with Miles (1993) in insisting that the terms quantitative and qualitative should be anchored to methods of analysis rather than methods of data collection as appears to be the current conception. I agree that it is not clear how much random sampling and statistical analysis is necessary for a study to be called quantitative, though sample size has a lot to do with it. I would like to reserve the ability to collect data in more or less formal ways, according to the situation to hand, and to have the freedom to subject that data to qualitative or quantitative forms of analyses, or both if possible, no matter what the origins of the data might be.

## Cognitive And Affective Objectives

The second piece of "unhelpful" baggage is concerned with cognitive and affective objectives and the use of the words "cognitive" and "affective" as mutually exclusive terms. The practice harks back to the adoption of Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives, which were concerned with the so called cognitive, affective and psychomotor domains, in the strand of work I have called behavioral and knowledge gain studies.

In our field there will always be an interest in wondering what people learn from our exhibitions. We have long ago worked through the stage when we tried to find meaning in evaluating cognitive objectives seen as the learning of particular facts laid down as particular cognitive objectives in a particular exhibition. Many of us have never attempted such studies but we are still likely to be berated for them in the literature every now and again. Most of the cognitive objective studies that were done in museums showed that people learned very little, probably because they were learning lots of other things or trying to form a holistic view of the trend of a

communication in a short period of time rather than collect a series of reductionist facts.

For at least the past decade we have worked with a more sophisticated view of "learning." Visitor-focused studies have left us more prepared to understand peoples' interpretations of the world around them — their knowledge — as bedded in personal and social contexts of motivations, values, attitudes, feelings and interests. Imagine my dismay, therefore, when I see the shadow of Bloom's objectives in present day proposals to evaluate "affective learning," whatever that may be, or read that "the learning that occurs in museums is often more affective than cognitive, so a proposed exhibition should have lots of affective objectives."

Bloom's forty-year-old taxonomy of educational objectives imposed a theoretical division of cognition, affect and psychomotor domains which is entirely artificial. Besides, its use is exceedingly unhelpful in our multi-disciplinary field where not a great many people have specialized in contemplating human thinking and knowing, let alone the complex process of learning.

Bloom's taxonomy arose from the editing of papers of university examiners who were concerned to find objectives which could be used in the preparation of test questions and the assessment of teaching programs (McManus, 1993). Its source, and the motivation for constructing it, is not derived from psychology, philosophy, epistemology or any other area where one might go to try to understand the nature of thought, memory and learning. The taxonomy became popular in the first place because it appeared to offer a formula which made it easy to design curricula, to construct test items for examinations, and to prepare distance learning and training programs. The objectives are essentially educational technology tools adopted in a period of psychometrics and behavioral psychology. At the time, the taxonomy was criticized because, on an epistemological level, it failed to recognize the inter-relatedness of intellectual abilities and, on an educational level, it ignored the intrinsic features which characterize education — rationality, autonomy, understanding and critical awareness.

One can't help wondering whether, because people have read that we can't assess "cognitive learning" in the free choice museum environment, they think they might have a go at the "affective learning" situation to see if they have better luck! Both approaches are, I think, wrong headed. This is because an individual's use of, and indeed retention of, any particular concept in his or her thinking is affected as much by the way that individual values and feels about that particular concept as it is by his or her understanding of it. Cognition and affect are inextricably linked and firmly integrated as we discover when we honestly try to examine our own attitudes and beliefs or change the attitude and beliefs of another person.

If we are going to examine learning in museums we can perfectly well devise studies which take into account of knowing, memory, understanding

and feeling at the same time but it is a much more sophisticated endeavor than most people would be prepared to take on.

Whatever we do we shall have to cope with the concept of affect because it is there in our thoughts and literature. I would like to persuade people in our field to think twice when they mention the word "affect." The term has come to be applied in an unclarified way so that it can mean, firstly, opinion levels to do with likes and dislikes, and secondly, feeling or emotional states of amusement, pleasure, awe, pride, or anger and so on and, thirdly, responses indicating interest, attentiveness, attitude integration and the building of value systems on the other. In other words, our description of affect is too broad for easily shared understandings.

### **Current Activity Areas In Our Field**

I shall now discuss some current areas of active interest in our field in an attempt to come closer to my title of "Museum and Visitor Studies Today."

### **Standards And Training**

We still hear comments about poorly published studies. I think that much of this feeling is unjustified and that it arises because people confuse evaluation, which is concerned with a particular situation, and research, which aims to provide information which can be generalized across situations. Most people who work in museum and visitor studies are engaged in assessment or evaluation activities which cannot produce findings which can be generalized beyond the situation they have examined.

In the past, criticisms have been justified when authors reporting assessments and evaluations have neglected to report all their data or have been too keen to infer big claims based on little information. I think we were justified in publishing such individual assessment studies to a wider audience because we were really engaged in sharing methods of working and conceptualizing an evaluation or assessment problem — generally keeping in touch and encouraging each other. However, enough is enough, and maybe the time has come to be a little more discerning! Most of our work is pragmatic and practical, but during the course of it true social science research questions do sometimes arise. I would like to suggest to those who find difficulty in finding funding or time for pursuing a research question the possibility that such questions can be slowly explored by insinuating research questions into more everyday projects. As an aside, I would mention that pure research takes time and I wonder whether we shall ever produce enough work to consistently fill our own professional journals.

Still on the question of standards of work in our field, I note an explosion of courses in museum and heritage studies in Britain. Each course is likely to have a requirement that a student conduct an investigation and write a report on it. Many of these projects are in the field of visitor



studies, so we are likely to have more and more students talking to visitors in museums and sites for short periods and not all of them will be motivated to do good work. They are working, after all, primarily for examinations in their institutions and secondarily for the museum or its visitors. However, I think that student placement can be very successful situation for all concerned when the museum requests and supervises a particular piece of work and retains control of a project of works in partnership with the student.

As far as professional development goes, visitor studies can be a lonely field of work bringing uncertainties for some people. We have a big peer group when we meet at international conferences, but when we scatter we really scatter! Some of us in Britain have joined the recently formed, United Kingdom Evaluation Society which includes evaluators and researchers from local and central government, charities, health authorities, education and the European Community. Connecting with the wider world of evaluation has been illuminating, as we have learned that most people learn to be evaluators in an ad hoc way which depends on the tasks which arise — just as we have. That is, most professional learning is experiential with working decisions being derived from recurrent practice and the implicit rules which govern them. Evaluators in other fields seem to be more concerned with negotiating the politics and processes of evaluation situations than we have ever needed to be — for which much thanks.

## **Learning**

I have already mentioned learning as a continuing area of interest. I think that this area will become a research activity, rather than an evaluation or assessment interest, because of the difficulty in dealing with the concept of learning in pragmatic, everyday studies. I also think that studies of memories will be included in this area of work as learning and memory as topics are integral to understanding the impact of museum visits.

## **Audit And Feasibility Studies**

The third area of increased activity I note is to do with Audit and Feasibility Studies. In Britain, the national museums must offer up audit data about their activities to the government department which funds them. This means that many more museum professionals than in the past are having to deal with surveys and other forms of assessment. Also, when large scale changes are planned the need for feasibility studies, with their attendant surveys and forms of assessment, has become more obvious.

Such activities mean that more visitor study work than before is now undertaken. Most importantly, museum professionals and curators are coming to learn more about visitor studies. This area of activity is bound

to gain momentum and I think that our work will gain in sophistication from it.

## **Broadening Of The Audience**

The fourth and last area of increased interest I note has to do with calls to broaden the audience. Audit activities frequently give rise to calls that the audience to a particular institution should be broadened or that audiences to all museums are too elitist and so on. Nowadays, we are frequently faced with requests to find out why the people "out there" don't come.

I am interested in this topic because I think that museums should be accessible to all sorts of people. I think we need to spend quite a lot of time conceptualizing this audience issue so that we can give more than instrumental assistance to our museum colleagues. Our contributions should help to clarify the notions of audience and elitism because, after all, we are the people who have lots of contact with the visiting public.

I can see the issue clearly when a particular museum is apparently not serving its local community well. Census data can help me to find out who the local community is and I can start investigating and the museum can start working. Difficulties start when audiences are defined along socio-economic grounds. Socio-economic divisions are very broad and do not deal well with communication issues, nor do they separate out minority interest groups with clarity. In Britain, the data on which they are based on may exclude up to forty percent of the population as women working at home and students and the retired are often not included (Timming, 1995).

If a culture is an aggregate of interests, large and small, a multi-cultural society must engage in as many interests as possible. Do you see a multi-cultural society as one based on different nationalities or one based on differing areas of interest in the arts, in sport, in music and so on? Can all interests be encompassed in one institution or is the attempt to do so a form of editing? Should the intent be to provide a plurality of museums? Could we use the notion of audience to include the people who visit one or two museums or heritage sites in a lifetime? In which case we could say we have a very inclusive audience. Another level of complication arises when famous museums have very large proportions, sometimes fifty percent or more, of foreign tourists. So, there are lots of questions we, as visitor studies professionals, could examine in order to clarify the notion of audience.

## **Conclusion**

In discussing current issues I have come full circle to the matters of survey, communication, audience and curatorial interest in visitor studies which were the matters which concerned Henry Hugh Higgins one hundred and twelve years ago.

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