Comparative Evaluation of Contemporary History Exhibits

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Introduction

The following text is part of the presentation that Hermann Schäfer, Director General of the Haus der Geschichte der Bundesrepublik Deutschland, and I gave at the Visitor Studies Conference in St. Louis. The presentation comprised two videos, one showing the history of the construction of this new museum to be opened in 1993, and the second offering a computer simulation of a visit to the future exhibition halls. In addition, a number of slides illustrating some selected results of our approach were also presented. However, these will only be referred to here rather briefly.

The Idea of ACE

Looking at the different ways in which other people do and have done things is one of the oldest planning practices around—and this is not exclusive to museums and exhibitions. In our daily lives we all relate our decisions and plans to things as we know them in the real world, and this causes the asymmetry of what is called the "normative power of facts."

Naturally, this method of collecting information and ideas among museum people does not—in most cases, I hope—mean that they are directly copying other people's ideas! With the method I propose, I do not want to encourage plagiarism as a popular and legitimate practice. On the contrary, the philosophy behind my research design aims at making controlled innovations for exhibits. As the search for new and appropriate exhibition concepts has necessarily to start from a particular frame of reference, it needs at the same time a critical look at reality in order to raise questions concerning the desirability, feasibility and possible consequences of such alternative solutions.

In this paper, I will present the idea of making comparisons and appraisals of other exhibitions which have similarities to the exhibit which is being planned, as a systematic approach of evaluation which is supplemental to current procedures. We have called this type of impact analysis "ACE"—Analogous Comparative Evaluation.

Before I outline some features, problems and methodological questions of ACE, let me briefly describe the uses and kinds of situations where I see this type of evaluation, vis-a-vis other approaches.

Evaluation Approaches— Benefits and Shortcomings

Pre-exhibit evaluation or post-occupancy assessment of exhibits, in general, is still in its infancy in Germany. One of the reasons may be that summative evaluation somehow forces the evaluator into the role of a "revisor," who supplies scientifically-based knowledge about the audience and the educational quality of exhibitions. The evaluation report is given not only to curators, but often also to administrative and financial agencies, as well as to journalists and ultimately to the general public. As the team responsible for the exhibit is not always pleased with these types of "verdicts," their enthusiasm for external social scientists is somewhat limited. On the other hand, remedial evaluation done by team members themselves or commissioned by them to check aspects of the exhibit which could not be tested adequately in a formative manner reveals other problems: the exhaustion of funds and personnel after the exhibit has opened, the end of contracts, and a diminishing interest in continuing with detail improvements. In the worst-case scenario, architects can veto changes to what they consider essentials of the exhibition, which in their eyes is seen as a work of art. In practice the above-listed factors tend to restrict the chances of subsequent remedies.

Thus I agree completely with Screven, Shettel, Miles and others when they say that an ounce of early hints and insights is better than a pound of later understanding. This type of preventive planning offers social scientists a much more satisfying role within the planning process, namely that of acting as advocates for future visitors. The advantage here is that they are able to suggest that specific visitor needs be addressed and included in the definition of goals, as well as in the concept and the didactic equipment of exhibits—and occasionally even succeed with these proposals.

Front-end and formative evaluation, for these purposes, have undeniable merits. I need not talk about these here. However, this does not mean that we cannot examine other sources and approaches. For example, it is sometimes difficult to determine the optimal moment for implementation of formative evaluation in the planning process. When formative evaluation occurs early on and there is plenty of time to test a series of modifications of a basic blueprint, curators and designers often do not want to admit that the first version is their favorite one. However, later on in the process, when time is running out, the same designers and curators after intense discussion have come to certain decisions and do not like these plans to be questioned. Any further testing of possible variations and problems is irksome and annoying to them.

To modernize departments in museums containing already complete exhibitions, it is useful to carefully draw up an inventory of the existing situation—what I have called "status quo evaluation." This critical stock-taking can include elements of summative as well as front-end evaluation. The advantages and efficiencies of these procedures can be easily explained to the different groups of people involved. Before the respective departments are closed prior to the changes, a visitor-oriented analysis can be used to formulate suggestions for goals, measures and priorities, and can at the same time form an excellent comparative basis for later findings of summative evaluation. The weak and strong components of an existing exhibit can be discovered, and the latter can be saved so that you do not overshoot the mark when planning the renewal.

The Research Design of ACE

What do you do when there is no comparative basis, such as an existing exhibition? Moreover, what can you do when you have to step into virgin territory, as is the case with a new museum of contemporary history like our example in Bonn?

In cases where these more or less perfect blueprints are not available, you have to look for less than perfect ones, or you have to make them up on your own. The planning and building of a new museum—and not only a large one—is a long process, sometimes dragging out for a whole decade. Over this period of time, ideas consolidate into concrete forms, and the staff begins to form into a real "orchestra." While the museum building is being planned and constructed, the team may be eager to prove and test its abilities of presentation and exhibition. This should not only be done through mock-up versions, like "Potemkin-villages." Instead, there are probably already existing collections which can be presented to the public in an experimental manner. Also, for events like anniversaries and commemorations, other institutions usually organize their own exhibitions. These are confronted with similar problems, the solutions to which must be found. Somehow these solutions, developed by different teams with varying goals, preconditions and intentions, are all set up in order to present similar messages to the public. Given this situation of exhibits distinctly manifesting different creativities, it is possible through comparative evaluation to learn how certain effects on the visitors have been achieved.

Naturally, the respective focal points, aims and configurations of the particular exhibition in question define the conditions and limitations for transmission or the possibility of generalizing the discovered results concerning visitor behavior and perception. A comparative analysis of empirical findings has to take this frame of reference into consideration. For example, a specific installation cannot be held accountable for certain deficiencies if it was never designed to accomplish this particular effect. On the other hand, it is possible in general to understand why visitors in comparable situations react in one way or another, either according to or in opposition to given expectations. In order to find a solution, the respective intentions and goals should be known in as much detail and as operationally as possible. This requirement will become more intelligible through concrete examples.

Visualizing Post-War German History

In the case of contemporary history in Germany, the situation in 1989, with the 40th anniversary of the Federal Republic, was very convenient for this purpose. We had the freedom of choice to select six exhibitions, among them two prepared by the staff of the *Haus der Geschichte*, where we could evaluate certain well-defined questions in a comparative way. In all cases we tried to use the same standardized methods, namely:

(a) in-depth interviews with curators, designers, and educators of the exhibit teams in order to find out exactly what their goals, attitudes, intentions and conclusions were;
(b) inspection, documentation and self-examination of the exhibit by the evaluation team;
(c) (hidden) observation of visitor behavior;
(d) partly-standardized visitor surveys on selected aspects;
(e) critical appraisal with groups of invited experts.

The conception and underlying goals of exhibiting contemporary history raise many questions. A common objection is that history in general cannot be exhibited. For me this reflects a rather ideological point of view, as well as an outdated idea. A more serious point is the question of objectivity concerning the selection of themes and the assessment of the respective importance of particular events and people. Closely connected to this is the question of continuity over time with respect to the validity of historic statements—I remind you of the dramatic and unforseeable German unification and the breakdown of the communist world, which forced many museums, not only in Germany, to change their presentations.

Also, information about target groups should determine goals and means of didactic mediation. For whom are you planning? Who are the most interested people with respect to contemporary history, and what are their motivations and predispositions? How can other groups be addressed? What is the preferred hit list of topics within different segments of the population? Remember that we have 15 million new citizens in the eastern states with an extremely different background in political socialization and mentality, in addition to growing numbers of immigrants of different ethnic origins. In which fields is there a pent-up demand for information?

Better grounded in the elements of the dissemination of political knowledge and interest, as well as in common misconceptions about terms and interrelations gained through front-end evaluation, you can then turn to the questions of effective exhibiting techniques. There is no reason that the accumulation of detailed information (for example, for labels) through methods of front-end evaluation should not be continued during the planning process as long as these data can be implemented. Nevertheless, for crucial points of design and the mediation of messages, the experiences deduced by analogous comparative evaluation studies can provide highly beneficial. You may tackle (as we did) questions like the following:

1. Which types of advance organizers have been used in history exhibitions, and with what effects? What patterns of behavior and understanding have been caused by different entrance situations? Some preliminary results show that "time-tunnels" are a popular but not always successful way to introduce visitors to historical exhibitions. An outstanding environment has been a narrow and dark passage leading into a glaring white room symbolizing the new starting conditions in Germany after World War II. Another example was a red welcome carpet for VIPs, which made many visitors feel uncomfortable and caused them to begin looking for an escape. A sliding door, indicated to be under repair (the message behind referred to the Berlin-blockade of 1949) rattled many visitors, which made us aware of the fact that doors of any type are normally perceived as physical limits, and not logical as internal symbols of an exhibit unit.
2. How can subgroups or departments of an exhibition be marked to indicate an obvious structural pattern? How can interrelations between events and processes in different fields be brought across to the visitor?
3. How do visitors react to reconstructive, decorative or symbolic settings (environments, period rooms and other displays)? What are the conditions of common understanding?
4. What are the most successful tools for reducing the deterring abundance of texts? How much interpretation are visitors ready to accept, and under what conditions?
5. How can the human being (popular people as well as everyday characters) be included in scenic environments?
6. How are important but inconspicuous-looking objects (documents, contracts, etc.) best presented so that their real importance is evident?
7. Which are the best ways to integrate media (films, newspapers, famous speeches) as "secondary witnesses" in an exhibition?
8. How are interactive media best included with the dramaturgy of the exhibit as a whole in order to transfer messages under given conditions?

The answers to these questions will be given after completion of our investigation. Although we are involved in the final stage of our field work, a detailed report will be published at the end of the year.

Conclusion

Through the research techniques of ACE we have found instructive empirical answers (or at least suggestions) for solutions to questions which we have raised. Concerning the benefits of this research design, as illustrated in the above case of contemporary history, it seems reasonable that ACE can serve as a useful tool and as a complement to well-known evaluation approaches in other challenging museum planning situations.