

How Graduate Students Learn to Study Visitors: One Approach

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All of us are interested in professional development. If we weren't, we wouldn't participate in activities such as the Visitor Studies Conference. The purpose of this paper will be to detail the professional development of museum studies graduate students at J.F.K. University in Orinda, CA. I will also describe lessons which I learned from students and from the experience of teaching a seminar in museum evaluation.

The evaluation seminar is a required course, part of the Museum Studies Master's Degree Program. The class met six times over a period of about eleven weeks and the required work was supposed to include about forty hours of outside classroom work.

The opportunity, as I saw it, was to expose students to the wonderful world of evaluation—to show them what evaluation could do for them, how they should use evaluation in their museums and how to conduct an evaluation. One challenge was the time limitation. Visitor Studies Conference participants know how much information they pick up over a period of three days. In terms of actual contact time with my students, I didn't have much more than that.

The other challenge was the experience level of the students. Out of thirteen students in the seminar, one had never worked in a museum. The others had museum experience ranging from less than a year to twenty years—an indication that they were either really entrenched in what they thought they knew or they didn't know anything about evaluation. Their experiences within museums also varied a great deal. Some were security guards and others were administrative assistants, educators, and one was a business manager.

I decided from the outset that students weren't going to become evaluators during their short time in the seminar. Instead, I decided that the goals for the course would be to:

- Make them aware of the benefits of evaluating programs and exhibits (Evaluation is still the first item cut from my program and exhibit development projects, mostly because clients don't understand what it is and what it can do for them.);

- Give them enough information about the evaluation process so that they could work with an evaluator who was hired by their museum;
- Give them enough information/experience to be able to read an evaluation report critically.

Based on these three criteria, I developed seven objectives for the seminar. Upon completion of the Evaluation Seminar, students were expected to be able to:

- Describe the development of evaluation in museum settings (a historical perspective);
- Define and describe front-end evaluation, formative evaluation, and summative evaluation;
- Given an evaluation problem, select an appropriate evaluation design and develop an evaluation plan that includes evaluation questions, data-collection procedures and costs;
- Develop data-collection instruments for an interview, a questionnaire, and/or an observation which will provide valid and reliable evaluation data;
- Use a data-collection instrument to collect data, then summarize the data;
- Produce an evaluation report and communicate the findings including the evaluation context, purpose(s), procedures, conclusions and recommendations;
- Critique existing evaluation reports according to the overall methodology used, the evaluation questions addressed, statistical procedures used, and reporting format and conclusions.

Based on these objectives, I divided the seminar into three components. The first component comprised four lectures over the six meeting times. The second component was a project at The Oakland Museum, intended to give students hands-on experience (because they were mostly first-year graduate students, they were anxious to do something real, rather than sit and listen to information). The third component was to have students track down an evaluation report, read it and critique it.

I conducted a pre-assessment of the students on the first night of class to find out a little bit about them and what they knew about evaluation. When asked what they knew about evaluation, one of the 13 said s/he knew nothing at all about the topic; three said they knew something, but not enough to actually conduct an evaluation; none said they knew enough to conduct an evaluation; and nine said they weren't sure exactly what they knew.

When asked to define evaluation and to define or describe front-end, formative, and summative evaluation, all of them could define evaluation

well enough. None of them could define front-end evaluation; three of them were able to give an adequate description of formative evaluation, and five were able to describe summative evaluation—although three of the five indicated that they didn't really know what summative evaluation meant, they just guessed.

When asked what they expected to get out of the seminar, eight of them wanted how-to skills, and one wanted to learn to be objective in her assessment of exhibits and programs. One of them wanted two units towards his master's degree, and two didn't know what they hoped to get from the seminar—they were just there. When I asked about their interest in evaluation, three of them indicated that they were somewhat interested, seven indicated that they were very interested, and three said they had never thought about evaluation.

The syllabus for the class lists the lecture topics, the books used for the seminar and the titles included in the course reader. Students were required to purchase a series of nine small booklets from Sage Publications that cover a variety of topics including focusing, designing, and reporting program evaluations. Students were also asked to purchase *The Evaluator's Handbook* and other publications. I discovered that these publications are written for people who have education or psychology backgrounds. Because the seminar students had backgrounds in art, history, and anthropology the books weren't appreciated as much as I had hoped.

The course reader was about 80 pages in length. Copyright owners were wonderfully generous and gave permission for the duplication of their materials. Included in the course reader were papers from the *Proceedings of the Visitor Studies Conferences* and the *ILVS Review*; the first chapter from Ross Loomis' (1987) book *Museum Visitor Evaluation: New Tool for Management*; and the professional standards paper developed by the AAM committee on visitor research and evaluation.

The lecture topics are also given in the syllabus. The first lecture was an overview of evaluation in museum settings, and of the project. I found that it was good for the students to see that evaluation in museum settings is a relatively new field and that some of the issues that were of concern in the 1920s are still issues that we're facing today.

The second lecture was about evaluation design and focusing an evaluation project. We discussed ethical issues, and the use of a variety of instruments and observation techniques. During the third lecture we went through instrument development since that coincided with the course project. We also talked about project logistics. In the fourth class, we talked about data analysis and interpretation and reporting findings. During the last meeting, students presented their findings to The Oakland Museum.

The project undertaken by students was a front-end evaluation of a planned exhibit at The Oakland Museum called *To See the Sea, The Underwater Vision of Al Giddings*. The exhibit is a creative combination of

underwater exploration technology, underwater photography and hands-on physical science.

I met with Linnea Wicklund, the project manager, and Sandy Bredt, the natural history interpretive specialist, at the Oakland Museum a number of times during the six months prior to the beginning of my seminar. Our goal was to focus the evaluation since I knew students would have a limited amount of time

Initially we had planned to conduct a formative evaluation. The museum would develop exhibits or videos and the students would survey visitors to find out what worked and what didn't. Two weeks before the seminar started, however, The Oakland Museum extended the opening date of the exhibit around which this project had been planned, by one year. They decided that, since they had more time, they wanted to do a front-end evaluation, even though the exhibit was essentially designed. We decided that students would conduct a front-end evaluation of the exhibit's concepts: ocean exploration and exploitation, ocean research and Al Giddings. The Oakland Museum was interested in visitors, non-visitors, and local (San Francisco Bay area) school-age students, their target audience. I divided the class into three working teams and each team picked one of those audiences.

One team surveyed 156 visitors to the Oakland Museum. The non-visitor team interviewed 166 non-visitors on the streets of downtown Oakland and a flea market. The third team contacted 12 teachers who had scheduled visits to the museum. Seven teachers agreed to distribute questionnaires to their students. A total of 207 students from grades 5 through 8, and their teachers, responded to these questionnaires.

Each seminar student was asked to assess each member of his or her own team, on a variety of criteria, including: Would you work with this person again and why or why not? Did the other team members keep deadlines and do what they agreed to do?, etc. This assessment helped to uncover a problem with one of the teams that probably wouldn't have been identified simply from reports and group discussions.

Students were also asked to keep a time log so that, for comparison, The Oakland Museum could be given an estimate of the time and cost of conducting this project with non-volunteer evaluators. The total time involved was approximately 430 hours. Multiplying that by \$30 an hour for a staff-conducted evaluation, the evaluation would have cost about \$12,900. At \$60 an hour for a consultant-conducted evaluation, the evaluation would have cost \$25,800.

The students' final assignment was a critique of an evaluation report. They were given about 50 titles of evaluations conducted in museum settings (both art and science, since their backgrounds were mixed). Each of them was asked to choose one and get a copy of it (I wanted them to actually go to a library and track down a report to see how easy or difficult it is to get this information), and then write a two-page critique of the report.

The primary lesson of the seminar was that everyone worked hard. I'll probably not use books in the future. I'll continue with the readings and the project. For the critique, I'll probably choose several papers for students to read, then discuss them in class.

Based on the post-assessment, the number of students interested in evaluation increased—more students were interested at the end of the seminar than at the beginning. Almost all of them could define front-end, formative and summative evaluation. I found they gained a real sense of the time and cost commitment needed to conduct an evaluation. I think the project was very valuable to the students. It was a lot of work, and I probably would select a smaller project in the future. Although each student was supposed to put in a total of forty hours outside class time, most of the students actually put in almost forty hours each just on the project.

They all said they enjoyed the course and learned a lot. They felt the evaluation seminar was definitely a valuable part of their museum studies education—except for the person who had twenty years of museum experience; s/he believed that evaluation shouldn't be a separate seminar, but incorporated into other courses.

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References

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