A Broader View of Front-End Evaluation

by Eric D. Gyllenhaal

Background

A few years ago I was lead developer for a Field Museum of Natural History project called the Exploration Zone. The Exploration Zone's goals were to inform the public about the scientific research that takes place behind the scenes at the Field Museum and to help visitors find personal value in our scientists' work. We were only in the pre-planning stage of the exhibition, but we had some money to spend, a wonderful team of exhibit developers to work with, and a year to think things out before we were scheduled to begin designing the exhibition.

When the Exploration Zone team started its work, we didn't know much about front-end evaluation–we just knew that it seemed like a really good idea. The members of the Exploration Zone team had been hanging around behind the scenes in museums for a long time. We knew an awful lot about natural history museums, and we had a hard time imagining what it would feel like to be someone who didn't have our backgrounds. We hoped that front-end evaluation could help us experience secondhand some of the ways that visitors thought and felt about behind-the-scenes research in museums.

As it turned out, we stumbled onto a good thing. We hired Selinda Research Associates, and they did a wonderful front-end study for us. They kept us informed of what they were learning as their study developed, and they produced a very useful final report (Perry & Forland, 1995; Gyllenhaal, Perry, & Forland, 1996). We learned just how huge the gap between us and the visitors re-

ally was, and we got some good ideas about how to begin to close it.

Meta-Analysis as Front End Evaluation

But we found ourselves asking, is that all there is to front end evaluation? We had answered lots of questions–including some that we had never thought to ask–but lots of questions remained. Did we have to confine ourselves to the results of a single front-end study? Was there any way we could learn more? At the same time Selinda Research Associates was talking with visitors on the floor, we exhibit developers started to explore some other ways of learning about potential visitors.

Meta-Analysis of the Public Understanding

In an ideal world–like perhaps, the future–we could have gone to the visitor studies literature and read about earlier front-end studies on visitor understandings of behind the scenes. Unfortunately, the world was not yet ideal, so we had to settle for reading the published research from other fields of study. These included surveys on the public's understanding of and attitudes towards science and the environment, and research by formal educators on how kids and others think about science and scientists. Did any of this research tell us directly how we should develop our exhibit? Of course not! But it contributed to our growing understanding of how regular folks–not scientists, not museum folks–think about how science gets done and what science contributes to their lives. This kind of meta-analysis proved to be an effective,

cost-efficient way of gaining a larger perspective on what Selinda Research Associates was learning from talking with Field Museum visitors.

Meta-Analysis of Summative Evaluations

Following a long-standing tradition in exhibit development, members of the Exploration Zone team traveled to other museums with exhibitions about their own behind-the-scenes research. We took photos, formed our own opinions, and talked with other museum folks about what they thought of these exhibitions. Then we took this process a step further. We obtained summative evaluations for several of these exhibitions, and these studies helped us revisit the exhibitions through visitors' eyes. Once again, we discovered that visitors thought about museums and science–and about exhibitions on these topics–in some very different ways than we did.

Inspired by what we had learned from other institutions' summative evaluations, we conducted some small-scale summative evaluations on our own. We evaluated a number of small, temporary exhibits about behind-the-scenes science in our own museum (Gyllenhaal, in review). We learned more about the ways in which visitors perceive and understand these exhibitions, and our understanding of our audience continued to grow. We also got some ideas about what probably wouldn't work for the Exploration Zone and some leads about promising directions for future planning.

Think about it: summative evaluations as part of a front-end study. I have to admit, I like the continuity of

it. I like the idea of stringing together one evaluation process after another–your summative is my front end, and then my summative contributes to someone else's front-end study. As a profession, we might as well admit that we've all been doing exhibitions on similar themes for basically similar audiences. There's a past that we can learn from, and we're part of a collaborative, historical process that's never really going to end.

Also, remember that our meta-analyses were being done in conjunction with Selinda Research Associates' on-the-floor study. Each approach to front-end evaluation complemented and informed the other, and in the end we had more confidence in our understandings of visitors because they were based on several sources of data. We didn't replace traditional front-end evaluation; we just extended and built upon the tradition.

As a profession, we've already learned enough about visitors that the scope of front-end evaluation has to change. Meta-analyses are the best way to make what we've learned available to the folks who need to know it most: the folks on the front lines of the exhibit process.

Who Should Do Front-End Meta-Analysis?

As exhibit developers, we learned a huge amount from doing the front-end meta-analyses ourselves. It would be wonderful if every exhibit developer could experience a similar process on every exhibit. However, we had a luxury of time and money that few developers have at present. In my ideal world, all exhibitions would include enough time and funding to include meta-analysis as part of the exhibit planning process, and grant agencies would look favorably on re-

quests to include meta-analyses as a major part of the evaluation budget. Then the entire exhibit team, including the evaluators, could work together on meta-analyses that have particular meaning for that particular project.

But what about the less-than-ideal world that most of us will continue to live in? To make this world a better place, those of us who find the time and money for meta-analyses will have to publish what we've learned. Then even underfunded, fast-track exhibition projects can benefit.

Of course, that means I'm guilty–

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I haven't published everything I learned from the Exploration Zone meta-analyses. The Exploration Zone ran out of money before there was time to publish, and I had to move on to the next funded project. It's hard to be a responsible professional when you're living a soft-money life. So, how could I become a more responsible person? Perhaps grant agencies could be more explicit in their support of these kinds of publications by encouraging grantees to build writing time into the tail ends of their project schedules. Alternatively, grant agencies could provide mini-grants to help support professionals who want to expand on their earlier project-based

work and publish meta-analyses for the museum field as a whole.

References Cited

Gyllenhaal, E. D. (in review). Communicating behind-the-scenes research to museum visitors: evaluation of temporary exhibitions at The Field Museum. Submitted to Current Trends in Audience Research and Evaluation, Volume 11-12. American Association of Museums, Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation.

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Perry, D. L. & Forland, E. (1995). The Exploration Zone at the Field Museum; Front End Evaluation. Unpublished monograph. Chicago: The Field Museum.

Author Note: The Exploration Zone exhibition never got beyond the planning stages. However, the results of the front end evaluation continue to be used by exhibit developers at the Field Museum and elsewhere.

Eric Gyllenhaal has degrees in Interpretive Work in Natural Resources and in Geology, plus a Ph.D. in Paleontology and Stratigraphy. He has worked as a naturalist and Curator of Natural Science at the Children's Museum of Indianapolis, and most recently as an exhibit developer at the Field Museum. Eric now works as an evaluator with Selinda Research Associates. However, on the inside, he still feels like an exhibit developer.