

Visitor Studies Group Conference
Including Kids in Evaluation
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Imaginative ways of running focus groups for children

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Powerpoint presentation outlining the basic principles of running focus groups available from Alison James

Evaluation tools which can be incorporated into focus groups

1. Personal meaning mapping

A visitor-centred approach used to establish the knowledge, attitudes and feelings children have about a topic e.g. before and/or after participation in an activity. Children are given a sheet of paper with a word or image in the centre and asked to note down or draw anything they can think of to do with this. The evaluator then clarifies these words/phrases/drawings and makes additional notes on the sheet using a different coloured pen. If there is a follow-up stage the children add to or change the same chart in a third colour of pen and the evaluator clarifies in a fourth colour. The two stage process can measure change thus demonstrating new learning. The analysis technique turns qualitative details into quantitative data using four measures.

2. Gallery visit, eg. finding out which panels, labels, pictures children like best with post-it feedback (smiley faces☺ and frowning faces☹) – ‘unpick’ placement of post-its.

3. Observation, eg. use of pilot resources/interactive exhibits

4. Feedback on stimulus (eg. text, image, website)

5. Brainstorming (‘ideas sharing’) using flipchart

6. Prioritising lists of ideas and issues

7. Statements for discussion

8. Graffiti walls (participants are invited to write comments or draw on a big piece of blank paper on the wall or write or draw on post-it notes to stick on the wall) - prompt questions are needed (e.g. asking people to comment on something in particular that relates to what you want to evaluate)

9. Drawings or other artistic responses (e.g. modelling) - ask children to explain their work when they have finished.

10. Sticky dots for rating on a horizontal line with smiley face☺ at one end and frowning face☹ at the other e.g. how inspired I was by the workshop (excellent for measuring generic learning outcomes). Facilitators need to verbally ‘unpick’ the feedback.

11. Smiley face / weather / traffic light symbols - all can be used when asking a group a question to get their response (participants can choose what to hold up or draw).

12. Playback theatre: a technique where children act out responses to questions (e.g. 'what was the worst thing about the workshop or project?') and other group members can step in to act out alternative outcomes... thereby suggesting solutions

13. Questionnaires - can gather qualitative data if the questions are open-ended but quantitative data if the questions are closed (e.g. did you like the activity?). Examples of open-ended questions in questionnaires include: I didn't know that.....It made me think that.....I found out that.....I was surprised that.....

Case study 1: Use of visuals (websites)

Museum of London

Alison and I carried out in-depth audience consultation for the Museum of London and London's Transport museum in order to inform their new website 'Exploring 20th Century London'. This will make accessible learning resources using records from their 20th century collections.

The chosen method of consultation was focus groups with additional tools incorporated. One of the main target audiences consulted were families (adults and children, aged 7-14 years). The areas explored in the focus groups were responses to ideas for this new website. The family consultation lasted two hours (parents and children were divided into separate groups and each group participated in two sessions of 45 minutes with a refreshment break).

The project team wanted to find out what their target audiences wanted from the website in terms of the 'look and feel'. A list of websites for participants to comment on was supplied by the project team and participants were asked to think about colour, text/image balance, general accessibility, font type, navigation and how attractive/welcoming the site was to them. Website pages were transferred to PowerPoint.

Some examples of feedback;

<http://www.objectlessons.org>

Children were enthusiastic about the Object Lessons website main page. Many felt that there was not too much information (a good thing), they liked the direct (*iconic*) use of objects: a pram says childhood, a gas mask says conflicts and that you could click on objects and open window ('*use of macros*'). They thought it was varied and contrasting.

www.leodis.net/default.asp

The children felt there was too much information on the first page. Some wanted a slide show at the beginning, showing a comparison between then and now and sound to go with the pictures.

Case study 2: Personal Meaning Mapping

Museum of London

With the same group I explored the content for the new website. The museum had provided a list of topics which they wanted feedback on but before introducing these I wanted to find out what knowledge base the children were starting from and what ideas they had.

There were 16 children in the group representing 8 families so I asked them to work in their sibling pairs. I gave each pair a sheet with the words 20th century London in a circle in the centre and asked them to write down or draw anything they could think of to do with London in the 20th century (and what they might expect to find on a website with this title).

I was surprised at their confusion about the term 20th century and their uncertainty about what historical events took place in this period (Guy Fawkes...the Fire of London) - the process was

therefore very revealing about misconceptions (these may not have become apparent if we had only consulted on the topics the museum had identified).

For analysis the main topic categories were identified using the meaning maps from all the audience groups consulted - transport, buildings, entertainment, fashion, etc. They were counted up and listed in order of the most frequently mentioned. Similar topics were listed by both children and adults. In some cases these echoed those proposed by the museum but in some cases they were completely different.

Case Study 3: Model making & mood-boards

Royal Cornwall Museum

In 2004 I carried out front-end focus groups with 8-11 year olds for a new children's discovery centre at the Royal Cornwall Museum in Truro. One of the main areas we wanted to consult children about were the suggested four themes for the new discovery centre;

- The Sea (pirates, smuggling, wrecks and wreckers, boats and fishing, lighthouses)
- Work (mining, engineering, inventing)
- Home
- Explorers

One of the project designers put together 4 large mood-boards which included pictures of objects from the collection relating to each theme, ideas for interactive activities, historical and modern illustrations and key words & phrases. Children were asked; which theme they liked best and why, which theme they liked least and why, what they would expect to see for each theme if they visited the new discovery centre (did you get the idea from the board, if not – from where) and what they would like to find out.

The museum were also keen to involve the children in design ideas for the new museum and children were asked to make models of the sort of furniture they would like to see in the new space. They were given a range of different materials to use and museum learning staff were on hand for children to explain their designs.

Case study 4: Using post-its and sticky dots

Bromley Museum

Nicky and I are currently engaged with a longer term evaluation project for the London Museums Hub called 'Say it Again, Say it Differently', working with five museums to improve their interpretation and consulting target audiences at three stages: baseline/front-end, formative and summative. We recently conducted the first focus group at Bromley Museum, collecting feedback about the existing Archaeology gallery and asking families to identify what they got from the gallery as it is now.

We were working with four family groups with children ranging in age from 6-11 years. We wanted to make the two hour session as active as possible so designed activities which involved everyone getting up and moving around. The first activity was to take two post-its (one pink saying 'best' with a smiley face and one green saying 'worst' with a sad face) and choose your favourite and least favourite text panel (there were about 20 in the gallery). When everyone had done so we sat back down and discussed their reasons why – this brought forth more detailed feedback than if we had just asked them what they liked and didn't like in general. It also made them look more carefully. A similar activity was conducted looking at the object captions in the cases and we went round each case in turn to discuss what they liked and didn't like. This meant they had to make the effort to read some of the captions which they otherwise might not have done.

The final activity related to learning outcomes that the museum had identified as priorities for the gallery they were developing. We wanted to gather baseline evidence with which to measure

change. Using a flipchart we asked them to put a sticky dot on a line to show, eg. how well the gallery gave you a sense of what it was like being an ordinary person living in the past (ranging from not at all to very well). Children enjoyed choosing where to put their dot and were asked to explain their reasons for doing so afterwards.

A Website activity

a) Activity (20 mins)

The Learning Team at Ramsbottom Local History Museum are developing a website in order to make accessible learning resources using 500 records from their 19th century collections. Their main target audience are KS2 aged children who are studying the Victorians at school. They want to make sure they get the 'look and feel' of the new museum website right for them and are planning to carry out some front-end evaluation with a group of 5 children from the local school. They have defined 'look and feel' as colour, text/image balance, general accessibility, font type, navigation and how attractive/welcoming the site was to them.

The Learning Team has put together a list of websites which they like;

www.tate.org.uk/servlet/SubjectSearch

www.staffspasttrack.org.uk

<http://www.objectlessons.org/>

www.unionhistory.info/timeline/timeline.php

One person to act as evaluator and show the rest of the group in turn each webpage (good idea to write up what you are asking the group on a flipchart – or piece of paper in this case) so they can easily refer to what they are being asked to comment on. One person to be responsible for time-keeping, note-taking and tape-recording the feedback from the group (individuals to respond as themselves). (10 mins).

b) Analysis (20 mins)

As a group review these notes and/or listen to the tape-recorder and make short notes from the feedback for each webpage. Identify any overall patterns; draw out the most important points made overall.

B Sticky dot activity

a) Activity (20 mins)

The Learning Team at Ramsbottom Local History Museum want to carry out some front-end evaluation with family who have joined up for their four week family learning course (every Saturday for a month). They want to create opportunities for ownership to take place, to become clear about the purpose of the project and to understand the needs and expectations of their target audience.

The learning objectives for the course are for families to;

- have a better understanding of how Victorian children used their spare time
- have developed their making skills e.g. drawing, cutting, sticking
- have more confidence in visiting the museum in the future
- have had the opportunity to be creative as a (family) group

They intend to carry out the same activity at the end of the four weeks to show (hopefully) that families have achieved these learning objectives.

One person to act as the evaluator: assign one copy of the bulls-eye target for each question you want to ask and write on the questions.

Each participant will need a sticky dot per question (it is easier to cut up sheets of sticky dots beforehand into the right numbers). To investigate differences in opinion between adults and children you could use different colours.

The evaluator needs to stick the bulls-eyes up on a wall and explain the process to the participants (participants to respond as themselves). Someone to be responsible for time-keeping and taking notes.

‘Unpick’ responses with the participants after they have voted for all questions.

b) Analysis (20 mins)

As a group convert the votes into numerical scores by assigning values to each ring. They can then be presented as bar charts to aid understanding.

As a group summarise your findings & how you might use these to shape your family learning course.

C Model-making activity

a) Activity (20 mins)

The V&A wants to find out what visitors' impressions are of the museum as a whole and what might make them feel (even) more positive.

Break into two or more groups and choose some coloured plasticine. Your task is to make a symbolic model of how you (as a group) see the V&A. Give your model a name. You have 5 minutes (someone to time-keep). *(At this point the evaluator would photograph each model.)*

After 5 minutes stop modelling and explain what your model shows to the other group(s) (allocate explanation time according to the number of groups – 5 minutes total for all groups). These explanations can be tape-recorded for analysis afterwards (with everyone's permission) – you may also wish to take notes.

Now in your small groups make one change to your model to show how you would like the V&A to be. You have 5 minutes. *(At this point the evaluator would photograph each model.)*

Explain this change to the other group(s) – tape record (5 minutes total for all groups).

b) Analysis (20 mins)

As a group try to transcribe the discussion by looking at the notes and listen to the tape. Identify significant words and phrases. Look for patterns between the different groups. Mark anything which surprised you or is in contrast to the rest of the data.

Note down the key points to feedback to the V&A team (you won't really have to do this!). Select a representative quote to illustrate each point.

D Personal Meaning Map activity

a) Activity (20 mins)

Without talking to one another take a PMM chart each and write down or draw anything you associate with the V&A – include facts, impressions, feelings, attitudes, etc. (in green)

When you have finished exchange PMM charts with a partner and using a different colour (black) check/clarify each word/phrase/image and make notes.

b) Analysis (20 mins)

Look at the charts you have and count up the number of separate words (or phrases, where a word does not make sense on its own) on each chart – this gives you a measure of extent (vocabulary).

Next identify the main concepts from all the PMM charts and make a separate list – then count how many concepts each chart has - this gives you a measure of breadth.

It is also possible to get a measure of depth by counting the number of words/phrases relating to each heading.

A fourth measure is for mastery. It is a more subjective measure – look at each PMM chart and give it a score of between 1 and 4, 1 being a 'novice' and 4 being an 'expert'. If a follow up stage were being undertaken (eg. at the end of a visit/project) the measures for each could be compared to demonstrate change/impact.

Resources:

Case study - Personal Meaning Mapping at the Pitt Rivers Museum in the members' section of the VSG website: www.visitors.org.uk

Falk, J., Moussouri, T., & Coulson, D. (1998). The effect of visitors' agendas on museum learning. *Curator*, 41(2), 107-120.

Kreuger, R. A. 1988. *Focus groups: A practical guide for applied research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publications. - *One of the few books that applies focus groups to evaluation research. This book gives considerable attention to analyzing and reporting focus group results. Detailed examples will be helpful to those who are just getting started in focus groups.*

<http://www.evaluationforall.org.uk/toolkit/quantative.html?tkrmid=33891aed2e9b1682af48a4c614dc6d90> - *An interactive guide to evaluation designed to help you improve and develop your practice (Scottish Arts Council)*

www.inspiringlearning.gov.uk - *Lots of information about how to measure learning outcomes, including downloadable material, etc.*

Measuring Success – A Guide to Evaluating School Grounds Projects

http://www.ltl.org.uk/about/newsarticle.asp?NW_ID=53 (for order form) - *Lots of excellent ideas for participatory techniques aimed at evaluating school grounds projects but easily adapted to other projects.*