

Do your visitors talk about your exhibits? What do they say?

Dr Sue Dale Tunncliffe

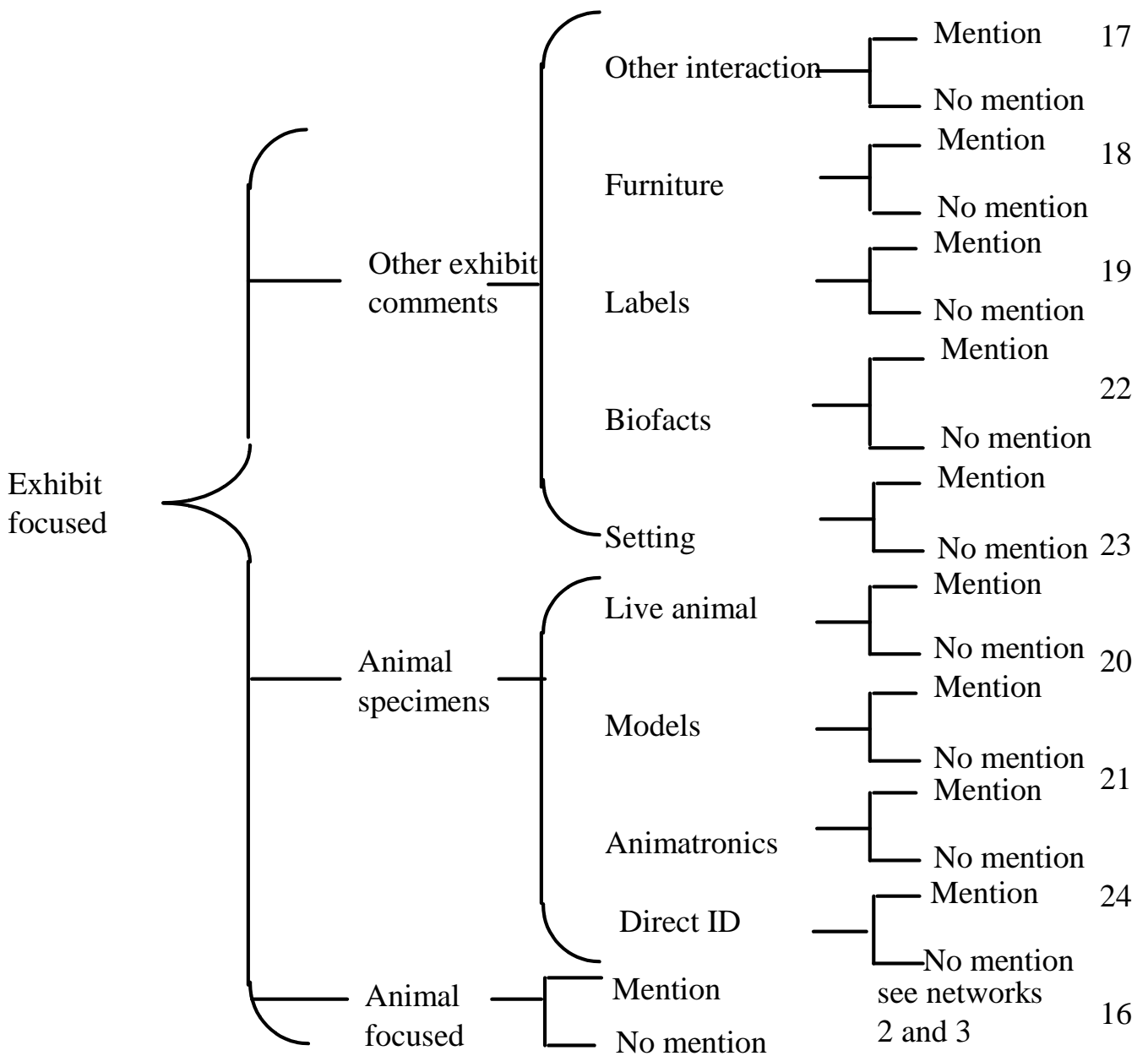
Institute of Education University of London

Email: s.tunncliffe@ioe.ac.uk

One indicator that the message of an exhibit is reaching visitors is the content of their conversations. Do they reflect what the exhibit 'says'. Do they use their knowledge and understanding with which they come to the exhibit to link with messages in the exhibit and construct further understanding?

Whilst exhibits may only provide a stimulus which triggers the groups into a particular content of dialogue which may be focused on the main points which is the theme of the exhibit this may not always be the case. In my experience of working with visitors at biological, cultural artifacts and transport exhibits these visitors- school or family groups, in the main failed to focus on aspects of exhibits and retell the 'story' planned in the exhibit or make links with facts and concepts learnt elsewhere to any great extent, least so at live animals and most at animatronics in a museum. Transport exhibits elected stories from the experience of visitors in some cases, recollections from childhood or the journey that day.

There are various research techniques available to enable you to collect and analyse the content of conversations and to use this as an indicator of engagement and it and the success of the exhibit in 'transmitting messages'. I use a systemic network in my research in zoos and museums. However, this is a time consuming method and for everyday purposes a quicker less time-rich method is needed which non-research trained people can use easily. I developed a TCOR, Tunncliffe Conversation Observation record, which has a sound theoretical basis within the systemic network I use in analysis of conversations (Fig 1). Essentially the network is a hierarchical network starting at a super ordinate category e.g. conversation at exhibits with finer and finer subordinate categories, e.g. type of exhibit which then may have several comments made about it such as name. Dimensions color etc., role, age.



Systemic networks is a technique, which turns qualitative data in to quantifiable data, but is user friendly and easier! These TCORS have been used by a variety of people - designers, educators, student teachers, in museums and zoos- who were amazed that the visitors did not talk about what they anticipated they would and furthermore, that topics of interest the producers- the staff- were not often those of interest to the visitors, the consumers.

A TCOR

TUNNICLIFFE CONVERSATION OBSERVATION RECORD

Date _____ Museum _____ Observer _____

Topic	Time begun: This is comment. Tick if comment heard ONCE or more	Comments Tick if comment is heard once. Do not tick again if comment is repeated. study of frequency of conversations with at least one										Row Total
		exhi-bit	exhi-bit	exhi-bit	exhi-bit	exhi-bit	exhi-bit	exhi-bit	exhi-bit	exhi-bit	exhi-bit	
Management/social comment 'Let's go', 'Mum'												
Exhibit access e.g Look! Where is it?												
A Knowledge source comment = 1+ 2+ 3+ below												
ref. to source e.g TV =1												
A statement of knowledge =												
A question = 3												
Explaining comments *add up * totals												
*Compare/explain in human terms												
*emotive comments (**+**)												
**like												
**dislike												
**Other interpretative e.g. "Oh"												
Comments about exhibit not focus object = 1+2+3												
labels ¹												
Other things- background, foliage, g ²												
Did visitors refer to other interaction e.g touch exhibit, smell it ? ³												
Comments directly refer to focus object a+ b+ c												
a. dimensions e.g size, colour, shape												
b. behaviour e.g position shown in, light/dark												
c Naming comments = 1+2+3+4 below												
1. an ID (every day name)												
2. technical name												
3. Compare with something												
4. misname												
Ref. to conservation topic?												
Ref. to nothing to do with exhibit?												
Other												

INSTRUCTIONS FOR USE: Add up each line across and put total in total column.

A tick in the line for the topic to which visitors referred is made and then these can be added up at the end. If you are only interested in a small section of the topics design a shorter table.

This procedure works very well for small numbers and can be used by volunteers and people untrained in research. Such an exercise provides an impression of the main topic of content of conversations. If you need more detailed observations, such as which behaviours of animatronics exhibit visitors attend to, draw up a short TCOR for the specific topics.

If you are interested in the behaviours of the visitors instead of or as well as their conversational topics draw up an observation sheet focused on recording the physical actions of the visitors. The topics in such a sheet would be - touch the model, touch the label, stand still and look, walk past and look, walk past ignore.

Knowing the topics about which visitor's talk is the first step in providing material through which visitors can acquire further information from their museum visits and designing exhibits that reach the visitor.

Further reading

Tunncliffe S. D. (1995) *Talking about animals: studies of young children visiting zoos, a museum and a farm*. Unpublished PhD thesis. King's College, London.

Tunncliffe S. D. (1996). *Conversations within primary school parties visiting animal specimens in a museum and zoo* *Journal of Biological Education* **30** (2) 130- 141

Tunncliffe S. D. (1996) *A comparison of conversations of primary school groups at animated, preserved and live animal specimens*. *Journal of Biological Education* **30** (3) pp 1 –12

Tunncliffe S. D. (1996) The relationship between pupil's ages and the content of conversations generated at three types of animal exhibits. *Research in Science Education*. 26(4), 461-480.

Tunncliffe, S. D. (1997) The effect of the presence of two adults- chaperones or teachers - on the content of the conversations of primary school groups during school visits to a Natural History Museum, *Journal of Elementary Science Education*. 9 (1) , 49-64

Tunncliffe S. D., (1997) Yet another missed opportunity? Primary school visits to natural history museums. *Journal of Education in Museums* no 18, pp 20-23

Tunncliffe S. D., Lucas, A. M. & Osborne, J. F. (1997) School visits to zoos and museums: a missed educational opportunity? *International Journal of Science Education* a. 19(9), 1039-1056.

Tunncliffe S. D. (1998) Boy Talk: Girl Talk - Is it the same at animal exhibits? *International Journal of Science Education* . 20 (7), 795-811.

Tunncliffe S. D. (2000) Conversations of family and primary school groups at robotic dinosaurs in a museum. What do they talk about? *International Journal of Science Education* 22(7) 739 – 754

Tunncliffe , S.D. (2001) Talking about plants - comments of primary school groups looking at plants as exhibits in a botanical garden. *Journal of Biological Education*, 36, 27-34