



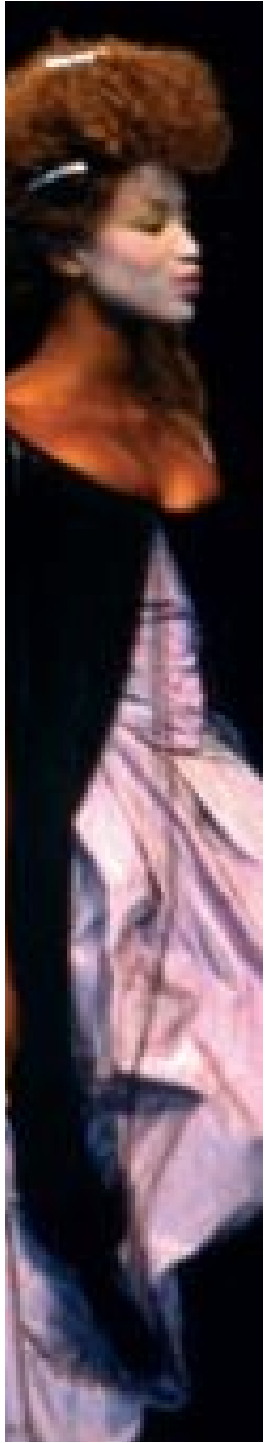
Meet the New Boss ... Same as the Old Boss

A contribution to the debate on New Methods
for 21st Century Visitor Studies

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AGM
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Case Study I • The V&A

How do HE Tutors and Students Use Museum Collections in Design?

- The set up
- Two extended focus groups, incorporating accompanied visits within Galleries.
Design Tutors and Design Students.
- Questions
- What kind of display is most engaging as a learning support for Design Coursework?
 - How do students look at objects?
 - What's the role of the Tutor?
- Answers
- Students might go and look at an exhibition but almost never plan to visit the galleries. Some regard the High Street as 'purer'.
Displays needed to be hands-on and to point up the concerns of the maker.
- Surprises
- The colleges are ambivalent about the Museum
Educated to undermine orthodoxy
Want what the Museum has.
They are too proud to be seen to be helped.



Case Study II • National Museums of Scotland

What Should be the Shape of the New Gallery for Art, Industry and Commerce?

- The set up
- Three focus groups.
 - Visitors, non-visitors, C2DE. Families and pre-retired.
- Questions
- How do people relate modern design to their own lives?
 - How do they naturally assess and interpret 20th Century designs?
- Answers
- Hands-on activity, creation, use, the experience of the moment will all be necessary to give a sense of life and importance to the subject.
- Surprises
- People thought design was marginal and then discovered to their surprise that they did care about objects. Decoration, loss of character, because they all decorate their home.
 - The C2D non-visitors had a lively interest in applied Art. Why? Not because they wanted to analyse the objects but because they earned their living making things.

Spot the Difference!

Which came first and when?

Well, the V&A project is this year and the National Museums of Scotland project was in March 1995.

Nearly 12 years apart.

No change! What a facer!

What is going on here?

We asked similar questions in similar ways and got similar answers.

Hands-on and the maker's point of view were important in both cases and lacking from the displays.

But we also smashed a few preconceptions while we were about it.

C2Ds in Edinburgh can appreciate applied art.

The Art Schools don't want to accept help.

So, all in all, focus groups were doing their job in 2007 just as they were in 1995.

They delivered for BME schoolchildren, talking about slavery and they delivered for Muslim men talking about Shariah Compliant mortgages.

So where is the scope for new methods?

I am speaking for qualitative research which is the area I know myself.



Well, there are levers we can play with

Who do you recruit?

8 year olds? Non-visitors? Artists? Valley dwellers? Jewish?

How many?

Rooms of 50? A group of eight? A pair of friends?

Where do they meet?

In gallery? At home? In a hotel? In a supermarket?

How long do they talk for?

20 minutes? 3 hours? Come back next week too?

How do they divide their time between talking and doing?

Talk in the abstract, visit and talk, engage in a group activity, e.g. sorting

All these are currently in use and give each project their particular flavour but, essentially, the method is unchanged. It is about talking and listening.



But what is at the heart of Qualitative Research?

- It absorbs what people say and do and applies that understanding to the project goals.
- It involves
 - Observing
 - Listening
 - Asking questions
- It can explore below the surface
 - e.g. If the VSG were a restaurant, what kind of restaurant would it be?
- It relies on interpersonal assessment, therefore, it has to be face-to-face. It involves dialogue.
- It makes use of the things people let slip.



So how does qualitative research lend itself to an evolution in methods?

Well, it couldn't be more primeval. It is about people sizing each other up.

Where could it evolve to?

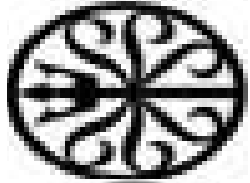
What have I been asked to do recently that was a bit out of the ordinary?

- I ran a specialist day workshop for the Rural Museum Network.
- I ran a focus group in conjunction with an expert witness (discussing nanotechnology with the long term sick).
- I trained up the client to do supplementary interviewing (at the V&A).
- I used my laptop to show the stimulus material, TV excerpts, PowerPoint of a visit. For Science Museum.
- I tested out experimental PDAs (what's to do with content, what's to do with equipment?) for Royal Institution.
- I plan to email a bubble cartoon around to the wider user group to supplement the focus group findings for the BA.
- I had to write the Audience Development Plan.
- I got the client to generate hypotheses to use as probes in the groups.

Reflecting on this, I see some trends

- Involving more of the stakeholders directly in the research encounter themselves.
- Exploring to see what new technology might add.
- Asking more pertinent questions, with a view to achieving more pertinent goals.

It is this last where I see a huge scope for evolution and change.



Two Beacons

There have been two clear drivers in the evolution towards setting more pertinent goals.

HLF Audience Development Plan

“The actions we take to involve people, to understand their needs and interests and to create an environment and experience that appeals to them are the main elements of audience development.”

Gallery planning must incorporate the visitor’s point of view.

MLA Inspiring Learning for All

“GLOs use what people say about their learning experiences in museums’ archives and libraries to provide evidence of impact.”

Galleries must be clear about what they want people to experience and learn and have designed methods for communicating it effectively.

These two demand questions which will help decide the strategy.



A more demanding kind of question emerges

It used to be essentially passive

“What do they like and what don’t they like?”

“Will they come?”

The new generation is more active

How can we ...

- build on parents’ enthusiasm for Science to build a successful Science Centre?
- display our collections in order to help Design Students?
- reconcile the opposing interests of Nurses and general public in the Florence Nightingale Museum?

As one of my favourite clients once said to me

“Questions with Poke.”

Questions with Poke

What will they be like?

- Answers may be unwelcome, difficult, inconvenient
 - e.g. Horace Walpole was gay and local audiences don't warm to him.
- They will involve subsequent action.
- They will be important to people.
 - e.g. What stance should the Jewish Museum in London take towards the Holocaust?
- They are likely to be political.
- They may be tacit lurking, not articulated, waiting to cause trouble.
 - e.g. what is the best role for a Museum at the National Archives?

These are my hope for the evolution of research.

So have I argued myself into a corner?

The argument so far ...

- Qualitative research draws its power from letting people express themselves freely, face-to-face. Therefore, its method cannot change at base.
- Research methods evolve by responding to the goals and questions asked.
- The question I want to ask now is how far questions with poke can drive the qualitative method.

And I thought we might put it to the test ...



The Experiment

- Let's identify a test question.
- Let's use it as a launch pad for inventing a new qualitative method.

No holds barred!

Innovation starts here!

Summing Up

- Can't change, won't change

Face-to-face dialogue with audiences

- Won't change, should change

One shot research, cram it all in, no chance to learn and build. A budget issue

- Can change, has changed

Funding requirement to build strategy round visitors

- Can change, should change

Better questions, more challenging goals



THE TRIGGER TO BETTER AND MORE CHALLENGING METHODS

