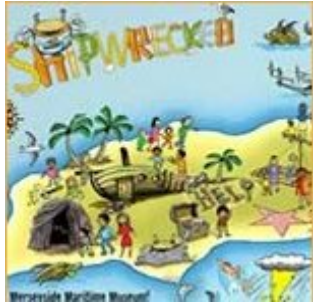


The Shipwrecked Club!

A guide to running a children's panel

National Museums Liverpool





Shipwrecked- can you escape the island was on show at Merseyside Maritime Museum from Jul 2006- May 2007. The exhibition was targeted at a family audience and gave young visitors and their families the chance to find out for themselves the survival skills, boat building techniques and navigation skills that would be needed to escape the island

It was the first major exhibition at the museum that had such a strong interactive and family focused approach that it was decided early on to involve children in the development of the exhibition, and to this end *The Shipwrecked Club* was established by National Museums Liverpool's research office.

This was also the first time that the research office had run anything like a children's panel, and despite an extensive desk based research project, it seemed that there was very little experience and feedback from other museums and visitor attractions 'out there' about similar projects. The research office therefore decided to run the panel as a pilot test- both for the exhibition and for the development of future panels.

Panel members were (very scientifically..) recruited from friends and family of NML staff and in all five evaluation sessions were held which were attended by between 7 and 11 children of the target age. There was a core of 7 panel members who attended every session- others attended as and when holidays/sickness allowed.

Right from the start the panel members were made to feel that they were very important- and had a special job to do in helping museum staff. At every session they were given a sticker 'I'm in the Shipwrecked Cub' to wear during their visit so that everyone would know how important they were!

The panel helped develop the exhibition in several ways such as deciding on a name for the crab character that would guide visitors round the exhibition, testing out text the effectiveness of text panels in communicating their intended message, and taking part in demonstrator lead sessions to assess how interesting they would be for people visiting the exhibition.

This document does not contain the results of any of the panel sessions, instead it is meant to act as a quick 'how to' guide for anyone who wants to do something similar. Reports are available from the National Museums Liverpool research office- on 0151 478 4627, or vivien.bell@liverpoolmuseums.org.uk.

Running a session

Each session of the Shipwrecked Club was run along similar lines- this way the children knew what to expect and we were able to keep the sessions interesting by combining the evaluation exercises with fun learning activities and allow time for refreshments etc.

Each staff member had a briefing sheet detailing what their responsibilities and key activities were on the day, as well as the timetable for the session. Generally the timetables were flexible so that allowances could be made for activities overrunning or if necessary be expanded so that the appropriate feedback could be achieved.

Generally the sessions ran along the following lines:

Meet and greet and begin settling in activity (colouring) while everyone arrives

Demonstrator lead learning activity- gallery trail or storytelling

Refreshment break

Panel split into two groups- for evaluation activity, swapping over after half an hour.

Groups join back together to summarise events and activities and general Q&A.

Goody bags given out and end of session

Hints and Tips

- Have a member of staff at the entrance to meet the panel members and take them to the relevant room
- Have a settling in activity that the children can do while everyone arrives- colouring is good as they can do this while you are explaining to them what they will be doing
- Keep your timetable structured but flexible- always allow more time than you think you will need!
- Have clear objectives for each session.

Testing text panels

One of the key objectives for *The Shipwrecked Club* was to help get the tone of the exhibition narrative right for the target audience. It was important to the exhibition project team that the panels gave enough information without being text heavy, whilst using language that was appropriate for young visitors.

To test the success of the text panels in communicating their messages effectively, simple A3 mock ups were made which the children could then read and identify any words they didn't understand.

For this exercise there was a lot of responsibility on the researcher to put the child at ease and help them to understand that it was not them (or more specifically their reading ability) that was being tested, but the text itself. This was managed successfully by allowing the children to distance themselves from their own feelings and asking them to identify words and phrases that they thought other people like them might have problems understanding.

Hints and tips

- Print out basic mock up panels with very little illustration or styling so that the children focus on the words
- Reassure children that it's the words being tested, not them.
- Laminate the mock up sheets and give the children a whiteboard pen which they can then use to underline difficult words/ phrases etc. Make a note of these words, then wipe the mock up clean and start again with the next child.
- Allow the children to work in pairs if appropriate, it's unlikely they'd stand in an exhibition trying to read things on their own anyway.
- Get them to summarise what they have read by asking questions like 'What do you think that tells you about' or 'can you tell me something important that you have just read?'
- Don't spend too much time on text panels in each session- make it just one of a number of activities and rotate the order of activities.

Incentives

It was agreed that the panel members should be made to feel special and that their input to the exhibition through their attendance at the Club sessions was really valued. In particular we wanted to achieve this feeling so that the panel members would stay loyal and attend every session.

To this end, each participant received a goody bag at the end of each session. The goody bags were usually made up of things from the museum shop- postcards, pens, toys etc and where possible they were themed around the exhibition or the museum collections. Each goody bag was worth a maximum of £2.50

In addition to incentives for the children, the parents also needed to be encouraged to carry on bringing their children, so incentives were needed here too, as well as reimbursement of travel costs.

Parents were given a voucher to the value of £5 (per couple) to redeem in the café during the session, and a further voucher for £10 to allow the family to get lunch in the café after the session. In addition to this they were offered £5 cash each session to cover travel expenses, although after the first session many of them opted not to take the cash payment.

Hints and tips

- If budget is an issue, keep costs down by using old stock etc in the goody bags. Postcards and posters were always well received even if they didn't relate to current displays.
- Minimise the cost of refreshments etc for parents by making tea/ coffee/ biscuits available in the room. (this wasn't possible for Shipwrecked Club for health and safety reasons)
- Where possible make use of car parking facilities etc for parents to avoid reimbursing costs.

Parental involvement

For The Shipwrecked Club we mostly wanted to focus on the thoughts and feelings of the children, but did not want to exclude their parents/ guardians from the evaluation process. During the first session of the club we found that the parents wanted to stay close to the children to find out more about what they would be doing and also to give the children a little more confidence in strange surroundings.

Parents were included in some of the evaluation activities alongside the children, and on occasions were given their own activities to do. The exhibition was aimed at a family audience so some input from adults was desirable!

Hints and tips

- Make sure you understand and comply with your organisations policy on child safety and decide whether you need the parents/ guardians to stay with the children.
- If parents are not staying for the evaluation session make sure you have their mobile number in case of emergency
- Maintain the appropriate ratio of adults : children
- Make sure that staff involved in the project are CRB checked to the appropriate level, and that any staff not CRB checked are not left alone with any children.
- If you are taking photos of the children get parental consent first explaining how the photographs will be used.

(For The Shipwrecked Club we asked that parents stayed within the museum building and gave us a mobile number so that we could contact them. We also had a space set out for them within the room we used and made newspapers/ magazines available. We generally found that they were quite happy to sit in the room having a quiet half an hour to themselves with the Sunday papers!)

Press coverage

As The Shipwrecked Club was run as an experiment, panel members were recruited from staff friends and family. We found enough panel members easily this way although it did mean that the members were mostly of a similar background and already used to visiting museums and galleries etc.

Local media will more than likely be very interested in stories around children's panels so this could be a handy way of generating panel members- particularly if you are interested in feedback from people who would not normally visit your attraction.

We found that the children's panel was also a good way of generating interest in the exhibition before it opened and had some coverage in the local papers.

For more information on *The Shipwrecked Club* childrens panel or any other evaluation projects at National Museums Liverpool, please contact

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