

10 things that I took away from the 2005 VSA Conference

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The Visitor Studies Association is an American-based international organisation that provides a forum for the exchange of information in the field of visitor studies. The association sponsors the annual Visitor Studies Conference where people from all over the world come together to share their knowledge and questions about the visitor experience. The 2005 VSA conference took place in Philadelphia from 2-6 August. There were pre-conference workshops and sessions focusing on a variety of themes. The workshops I attended were on Assessing visitors' understanding by Ross Loomis and on Coding data: how to make the most of visitor comments by Elisa Israel & Jennifer Heim. I chose the conference sessions that related to interpretation, learning outcomes & diverse audiences.

1. A model for summative evaluation

Beverly Serrell presented a model that looks at the learning outcomes of an exhibition during the summative stage. Before entering the exhibition, visitors are cued that they will be asked about their experience. Beverly Serrell argued that cueing increases their motivation and focuses on what visitors are capable to learn rather on what they learn . Only three questions are asked:

What is the main purpose of the exhibition?

What did you take away with you? This question is complemented with suggestions such as "I did not know...", "I never realized...", "It reminded me..."

Anything else?

Answers to the above questions give information on any changes and improvements that are required. For accurate results, a sample size of 60+ per target audience is recommended.

2. Museum fatigue

Amy Cota-McKinley argued that museum fatigue is a combination of many phenomena (mental & physical exhaustion, time impact, cognitive elements) and therefore should not be measured as one. She used S Bitgood's conceptual framework to explain the role of attention and visitor behaviour. The three interrelated principles of attention:

Attention is selective

Visitor motivation is needed to focus attention

Resources for attending to exhibits have limited capacity and are depleted by mental and physical effort.

3. Underrepresented ethnic groups

Cecilia Caribay insisted that there is an ethical responsibility not to ignore certain audiences. Museums assume that people of different communities have a shared perspective and that they could simply come to the museum, like any other visitor. What a specific ethnic culture is goes much deeper than the characteristics of the surface. The goals & impacts of an exhibition need to be examined through the lens in which the culture of the participants is an important factor. Translating a questionnaire into another language

is not successful.

The following are issues that need to be dealt with prior evaluating with an ethnic group:

- Communication style
- Building a relationship and mutual trust
- Any cultural values of the group related to honest and direct criticism
- Education & socioeconomic factors associated with the group
- Careful attention to what information is collected.
- Likert scales -some groups do not feel happy with more than three choices
- Power structure, like clipboard, dress...etc.
- Transparency - explaining why it is important to have certain information.

4. Disability issues

Christine Reich talked about disability as a social model - a human difference, not a defect. Evaluators face the following difficulties:

- There is a lack of research & evaluation studies that include people with disabilities.
- Many current methods for collecting data are inaccessible for certain audiences.

Evaluators need to:

- Involve people with disabilities as equal partners.
- Create relationships/partnerships with independent right groups and independent living organizations.
- Recognize that part of the disability culture is a history of exclusion.
- Avoid the trap to protect the institution from audiences that have build up anger.

According to her, possible solutions include the design of a universal model that could work with all people, visitor studies instruments that allow for flexibility or a combination of multiple instruments to ensure that all audiences are heard when looked at collectively. For example, an alternative to a paper survey is one that uses audio and text to ask questions simultaneously and therefore reaches a broader audience.

5. Enjoyed the survey?

In Assessing visitors' understanding: an integrated approach to Learning from Interpretation workshop, Ross Loomis suggested adding to questionnaires the question "how much have you enjoyed taking part in this survey?"

This could actually inform us of our evaluation methods. We sometimes compensate visitors for their time and we also get some feedback on the evaluation process. However, we do not really know what visitors feel about our interviews, surveys or focus groups.

6. Communities of practice

Dale Mc Creedy used an example of a science novice that was a group leader in a girls scout group. This inexperienced woman was transformed into a science expert, who later inspired girls to take up science. This transformation was a result of attending an after-school science program in an informal environment. According to the study, participation in free-choice science practice can lead to core membership in science communities.

Communities of Practice, including science communities, have the following characteristics:

- Share the same practices & skills
- Create a network of people
- Believe in a domain/mission

7. Volunteers

Minda Borum in the Franklin Institute of Science has a team of qualified & committed volunteers that collect & record data. Each comes for one day per week and as a result, there is always one every day. Most of the volunteers are senior citizens or doctoral students and have been in the Museum for 4-5 years.

8. Coding data

In the Coding data: how to make the most of visitor comments workshop, Elisa Israeli & Jennifer Heim advocated the importance of coding & analyzing visitors' feedback forms and comments book. The digestible presentation of visitors' comments could encourage management to create a system where recurring comments are taken into account in the strategic planning of the organization.

9. Issues affecting long-term memory

David Anderson studied long term memories of world-expositions. Visitors' vivid memories were related to:

- Social context (who one visited with, family, friends, alone)
- Socio-cultural ID (identity at the time of visiting, i.e. for young mothers it was important to talk to other young mothers, for teenagers it was important to flirt with the opposite sex ...etc.)
- Emotional & life status (what else is going on in life at that time)
- Agenda planning of the visit (what were the drivers for visiting)
- Episodic /experiential Affect
- Agenda fulfillment/frustration (i.e. if one visited in order to see the moon rock, did they actually managed to see it)
- Rehearsal (how often the event was remembered through sharing it with other or looking at photographs)

Museums cannot change the emotional state of visitors, but can create environments for social interaction and give visitors a forum to rehearse their experience. Exhibits that enable social interaction could be hands-on exhibits that require more than one participants or displays with text that evokes debate and discussion. The web or even selective merchandise provide opportunities for visitors to rehearse their experience.

10. The "essential museum"

Elaine Heumann Gurian presented her vision of "the essential museum", a museum that is free, easily accessible to dip-in on the way to the shops, or emerge in its collections for hours. She would like a museum that used as a visual resource, parallel to the local library.