

Report from the CECA Conference 2006

The 2006 CECA conference took place in Rome, Italy, and was hosted by the *University Roma Tre*. The theme of the conference was 'Thinking, evaluating, Re-thinking'.

Over 60 speakers presented at the conference, including keynote, theme and research papers, a poster session and a market of ideas. There was a special focus on the host country, Italy, and Brazil, the USA and French-Canada also got a lot of coverage.

While nonetheless interesting, not all presentations adhered strictly to the conference theme. Five relevant presentations that stood out were the following:

- Hagit Allon (Israel)
This presentation introduced an exhibition on books at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem, which had the aim of bridging the generation gap between grandparents and their grandchildren. The idea of carrying out a 'joint survey' was introduced, i.e. grandparents and grandchildren were questioned together, with some questions aimed only at the adults, some only at the children, and some at both parties. The aim was to identify who had initiated the visit, what each of the two parties were interested in, and what the connection points were. The main outcomes showed that the grandparents took a proactive role in explaining the exhibits, including incorporating stories of their own experiences, while there was a role reversal with the children being proactive with regards to the computer interactives.
- Anne-Marie Emond (French-Canada)
This presentation introduced a study with student teachers in the Anselm Keifer Exhibition *Heaven and Earth* in Montreal, to explore how they responded to and talked about contemporary art. The methodology used was the 'thinking aloud and friendly stranger approach'. Single female adults were asked to visit the exhibition for one hour and to talk out loud about what they were seeing, thinking and feeling without having to justify their reactions to the researcher. The researcher's role was limited to listener, though sometimes interventions were necessary to encourage the participants to continue. The visits were recorded and later analysed. Main outcomes included that the student teachers showed a lack of confidence in their visual responses, and that they had difficulty in creating a web of associations between works, i.e. when asked they couldn't remember the comments about previous works of art – every work of art was a new challenge for them.
- Wan Chen (Taiwan)
This presentation introduced a study from the Institute of Museum Studies in Taipei, Taiwan, which had evaluated the use of mobile phone audio tours that had been implemented across 9 Taiwanese

museums. The methods used were tracking visitors (observation and listening to conversations), a questionnaire, and focus groups. The main outcomes showed that there were concerns with the fees, operation, content and promotion of the mobile phone tours. Visitors were often oblivious to the existence of the mobile phone tours, or did not have ear phones for their phones or did not have a phone at all. Many visitors were suspicious of the fees involved (13 minutes cost around 1 Euro), while others found the tours too complicated to use. Some visitors were suspicious of the quality of content and preferred a tour from a real guide.

- Minda Borun (USA)
This presentation introduced a study carried out by the Franklin Institute Science Museum in Philadelphia, USA, looking at the relationship between children's learning style and preferences for on-line educational activities. It also introduced using the web as a research tool. The study was based on the model of Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory. A typology of online education activities was devised, and sample activities for each of the identified categories developed. Data was collected via an online survey, back up by lab testing. On the website, visitors were asked to complete an interactive version of Kolb's learning style inventory, and to pick their three favourite online learning activities. The website was linked to twelve other informal education websites. In the lab testing, visitors were additionally asked to play and rank 5 games, and to answer questions about learning and their actual preferences. The main outcomes included that not only were the preferred activities related to learning styles, but there was also a correlation between preferred activities and age. The most widely preferred activities were the so called 'puzzle-mystery' activities, which engaged all ages and learning styles. These activities were goal based, had the content embedded in the activity, were interactive, challenging, and provided feedback and a satisfying outcome. The conclusion was that it is important to create activities that engage all learners rather than customised activities for each learning style.
- Paulette McManus (UK)
This presentation was part of the market place of ideas. It referred to a study carried out at the V&A with regards to labels in one of the galleries, *Curators And Visitors :The Impact Of The V&A Text Guidelines In 2004*. The presentation introduced the theory that the psychology of the writer is as important as that of the reader, i.e. that the perception of authorship influences visitors' attitudes. Visitors were asked what they thought about the text writers of labels in the chosen gallery. Responses ranged from the positive, such as "precise", "expert", "knowledgeable" to the negative, such as "unenthusiastic", "showing off", "just trying to get their point across".

The general impression we got from the conference was that the UK seems to be among the pioneers in the visitor studies sector, especially compared to Latin-America and Southern and Eastern Europe. Many presentations gave

the idea that learning is only concerned with knowledge and facts, and museum education with schools and teachers and curriculum-based programmes of activity. The idea that learning has a much wider range – e.g. as presented in the Generic Learning Outcomes (GLO) model – and that museum education reaches beyond schools and teachers, was underrepresented. Another issue that was addressed suggested that many museum educators are not trained evaluators, which can result in poor quality evaluation or in evaluation not being carried out at all. Indeed, a survey with museums from across Brazil showed lack of qualified personnel and lack of knowledge of adequate methods and methodology as the main reasons for not carrying out evaluation. As such we feel that the VSG has much to offer to the wider visitor studies network.

Overall, we found the conference very beneficial in meeting people from so many different countries, exchanging ideas, and building a wider network of likeminded colleagues.

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