

VSA Conference August 2005 / Philadelphia

Introduction

Each year the Visitor Studies Association holds a conference to support research in the field of visitor studies and to disseminate information about the visiting public.

Nicky shares with VSG members' useful practical methods that she found out about/learnt more about at the conference while Theano reports on new research in the fields of visitor studies (to include her own presentations).

1. Development of the Museum Affect Scale and Visit Inspiration Checklist (Dr. Jane Marie Clipman, Asst. Professor of Applied Psychology, Penn State Berks, PA USA)

Objectives:

How can we measure visitors' emotional reactions to exhibits and the impact of these emotions on visitor behaviour? The presentation described the development of two instruments that audience researchers can use to achieve these aims: The Museum Affect Checklist and the Visit Inspiration Checklist.

Issue:

A variety of well-known psychometrically valid scales already exist in the field of psychology for measuring affect e.g. the PANAS (Positive and Negative Affect Scale): a list of 10 positive and 10 negative emotions that respondents endorse on a scale of 1 (none) to 5 (very much). Unfortunately, measures such as these are often not practical or appropriate for use in museum settings because they are complicated or time consuming to complete and contain terms that are not relevant to exhibits.

In September 2004 Dr Clipman helped the Reading Public Museum determine whether their exhibit of Chihuly Glass made people feel 'happy' or 'calm' and whether these emotions were linked to outcomes such as gift shop sales, membership, and repeat visitation.

She used the PANAS+ (PANAS plus 6 emotions they were specifically interested in) and a checklist of outcome behaviours she created (see 'Visitor Experience Survey, chihuly.doc'). Visitors balked at the PANAS and Dr Clipman feels that what audience researchers need is a psychometrically valid Museum PANAS. She is now creating a Museum Affect Checklist that is modelled after the PANAS, but contains emotions typically experienced in exhibits and is responded to by merely checking emotions experienced rather than rating their intensity on a scale of one to five. Terms have been gathered from literature reviews and by asking people to recall emotions they experienced in museums.

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2. Knowledge hierarchies (Deborah Perry, Director, Selinda Research Associates,

Inc. IL USA)

A knowledge hierarchy is an assessment technique for describing the range of ways visitors think about and understand a topic within the context of an exhibit or exhibition. It is based on the assumption that embedded within every exhibit is an internal knowledge structure that is at the intersection of the exhibit developer's and visitors' organisation and understanding of the content.

The knowledge hierarchy which Deborah developed for an exhibition called 'Underground Adventure' looks like this:

- 0 - don't know much, I don't care
- 1 - don't know much, but now I'm curious
- 2 - lots of stuff live underground
- 3 - all the stuff is related (the basic message of the exhibit)
- 4 - I am part of that relationship
- 5 - I appreciate how important all these interrelationships are to the health of the planet (what the museum ideally wanted people to come away with).

Deborah's measure of success is that 90% of visitors go up one level from where they are at when they come into the exhibition. The levels are formulated through front-end evaluation. She would always use this method in context with other methods.

Download studies using this method at www.selindaresearch.com

Perry, D.L (1993). Measuring learning with the knowledge hierarchy. Visitor Studies: Theory, research and practice papers from the 1993 Visitor Studies Conference, 6, 73-77.

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3. Coding Data: How to make the most of Visitor Comments (Elisa Israel & Jennifer Heim - St Louis Science Center)

This workshop covered:

- What is coding?
- Why would I want to code data?
- How to code qualitative data
- What can I do with coded data?

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Recent visitor research studies

1. Visitors' Memories of World Expositions: A Comparative Analysis of Themes of Memory from Contemporary and Chronologically Distant Expos (Dr David Anderson, University of British Columbia, Canada)

This study looked at the nature and character of visitors' long-term memories of 3 World Expos: 1) Expo '86 in Vancouver, Canada; 2) Expo '88 in Brisbane, Australia; and 3) Expo '70 in Osaka, Japan. The methodological approach used was that of phenomenology and the data collection method was in-depth interviews. The study showed that, although 'memories of exhibits were thin', people had vivid memories of the social dimensions of their experiences at all three Expos. Moreover, visitors' memories closely related to their socio-cultural identities at the time of the visit.

You can read more about this study at: Anderson, D. (2003). Visitors' long-term memories of World Expositions. *Curator*, 46(4), 400-420.

2. Studying Visitors' Active Prolonged Engagement at Science Museum Exhibits: Methods and Final Results from the Going Ape Project (Dr Joshua Gutwill, Exploratorium, San Francisco)

The aim of the Active Prolonged Engagement (APE) project was 'to develop and study exhibits that empower visitors to explore phenomena according to their own driving questions, interests and enjoyment'. The objectives of the study were to:

'determine the extent to which visitors showing signs of APE interaction at exhibits'
'shed some light on the design characteristics of exhibits that promote APE interactions'.

Visitors was videotaped, interviewed and tracked as they used the exhibits. Main findings include:

'visitors at APE exhibits posed a larger proportion of What If? And Why? questions than visitors at the Planned Discovery exhibits (PD)';
'visitors at APE exhibits were more likely to answer their own questions by using the exhibit or discussing it without any reference to the label';
visitors 'spent three times as long at the APE exhibits';
'most visitors left the APE exhibits for reasons that were extrinsic to the exhibits, while most visitors left the PD exhibit for reasons that were intrinsic to the exhibit'.

APE exhibit are described as 'constructivist' exhibit type, according to Hein's description of constructivist museum exhibits. The Exploratorium researchers offer ideas on how to build and study APE exhibits.

Copies of the phase 1 and 2 of the APE study can be found on-line at:

<http://www.exploratorium.edu/partner/evaluation.html> - under 'summative evaluation'. A project-specific web site is under construction and book presenting the study and design guidelines will appear soon. Watch this space for more info!!

3. Parent Partners in School Science - Year 3 Evaluation Report (Jessica J. Luke, Institute for Learning Innovation; Kerry Bronnenkant & Jill Stein)

Parent Partners in School Science (PPSS) is a 4-year project funded by the National Science foundation (NSF). The project aim was:

to foster home-school connections in support of K-4 students' science learning, working with teachers and parents from 3 urban elementary schools in Philadelphia.

The Institute for Learning Innovation was asked to design and carry out the evaluation of PPSS. Jessica, Kerry and Jill reported on the evaluation design and main finding from the third year of the project.

4. Human Origins Exhibitions and the Making of Ancestral Meaning (Dr Monique R. Scott, Yale University)

This research project set out to address the following question:

How do museum visitors relate to natural history museums and to the narratives of human evolution that they contain?

The focus of the study was how Kenyan, British and American museum visitors 'make meaning' from human evolution exhibitions. A series of studies with visitors were carried out at the Natural History Museum (London), the Horniman Museum (London), the National Museums of Kenya (Nairobi) and the American Museum of Natural History (New York City). Visitors used personal and cultural influences as well as material and ideas from popular anthropological media circulating outside the museum to interpret exhibitions.

5. Automated visitor tracking and data analysis for research and evaluation in museums (Dr Theano Moussouri, UCL Institute of Archaeology; and Dr George Roussos, Birkbeck College, London)

This paper reported on early experiences with a prototype Museum Experience Recorder (MER) system that tracks visitor activity during a museum visit and reconstructs the experience in the form of digital trails. The collected data can be subsequently processed and aggregated to provide insight into visitor behavior and use of space. Although the same data can be recorded by individuals, automating this process offers the opportunity for higher accuracy in data collection, and also the collection of far greater data sets than it would be possible (or economical) when carried out in the traditional way. Furthermore, the use of a wearable device removes the need for direct involvement of a researcher and thus reduces the effect of observation on the visitor experience. Finally, the collected data can be processed into aggregated views of visitor activities and identify trends and common behaviors. The MER system was discussed in the context of simulated visits to the British Museum and examples of the types of information that can be collected were shown.