



VISITOR STUDIES GROUP CONFERENCE 2015

5TH AND 6TH MARCH 2015, ST MARTIN-IN-THE-FIELDS, TRAFALGAR SQUARE, LONDON

The Visitor Studies Group (VSG) Conference 2015 was held in St Martin-in-the-Fields in Trafalgar Square on 5th and 6th March. The Conference theme “**Visitor Studies: Embracing Change?**” challenged delegates to consider what changes they were facing in their workplaces, how the discipline is evolving or needs to develop, whether they were addressing these changes and by what means, and what barriers constricted or hampered change.

As ever, the VSG Conference encourages networking and skills-sharing amongst delegates and this year was no exception with formal and informal networking playing a key role across the two days.

The Conference programme was packed with inspiring speakers and lively discussions. Approximately 80 delegates attending representing visitors studies across a wide range of cultural organisations including zoos, botanical gardens, museums, libraries, galleries, universities and visitor attractions as well as research agencies and consultants. This year, we were delighted to welcome delegates and speakers from across the UK and Europe clearly highlighting the aim of the VSG to share best practice nationally and internationally.

The committee’s overall take-out from the two days was that visitor studies is evolving, the conference showed that we can now ask and contribute to the big questions of cultural organisations, such as what they are, what they promise, how they can stay relevant and how to bring participation more to the centre of organisations. We want to thank all speakers and delegates for their invaluable contributions. It felt like the VSG is asserting a more confident, strategic role and we hope to build on this further together with all our members.

This paper is a brief synopsis of what we heard and discussed across those two days – the PowerPoint presentations prepared by our speakers can be accessed via our website.

Day 1

Day 1 of our Conference commenced with **keynote** speaker **Piotr Bienkowski** who is currently Project Director of the **Paul Hamlyn Foundation’s** Our Communities and Museums as Active Partners Programme. In this capacity and as a cultural consultant specialising in organisational change, community engagement and cultural planning Piotr was an inspiring start to our Conference.

Piotr’s presentation highlighted that the directors, senior staff and trustees – or equivalent governing body – all need to actively support change to embed and sustain community engagement

and participation and that such an approach can correlate with income generation. He counselled that organisational change and processes benefit from a rigorous approach to qualitative evaluation, action based on shared reflections and ongoing critical dialogue with all stakeholders. The voice of external stakeholders must also be heard to provide a fresh and independent perspective. Piotr talked about the role of a “Critical Friend” – an external facilitator – as a useful tool in organisational change. These Friends are positive and supportive but ask the difficult questions, they listen to what is being said as well as what is not being said and feedback by summarising/clarifying what they have heard and identified.

“Working with a critical friend is proving an effective way for Our Museum participants to gain an independent view of the programme and processes underway in their organisations and prompt honest reflection and appraisal.”

In a joint session, **Jane Rayner** of the **Science Museum** and **Areti Damala** from the **University of Strathclyde** looked at the **role and impact of digital technology on learning in exhibition spaces**. The speakers warned that technology only had a role to play if it enhanced the visitor experience and was constantly monitored to ensure it was in working order. The speakers acknowledged that we were working in a time of unprecedented rate of technological change. There are exciting new possibilities through technology, but it was noted, that the technology can easily take over and even impact negatively on the visitor experience, e.g. when it hampers the social experience of visitors interacting with each other. Jane from the Science Museum suggested that audiences don’t want more content as there is plenty in museums, so before investing in more content, new apps and mobile devices, to rather invest in search engine optimisation. She highlighted that if visitors are using key search engines then venues should make sure their content is featured highly when visitors are seeking information about content. Areti shared with us the first findings from the meSch project with which she is involved observing how visitors used an interactive device within exhibition spaces and the cognitive and affective impact it had on their experience.

“Digital technology is not a barrier to learning in an exhibition if used thoughtfully. A blended approach remains a good solution.”

Prior to lunch, our popular speed networking session provided delegates with the opportunity to meet each other, discuss how they were addressing change in their workplaces and share experiences. Year on year we have built on our delegates’ wish to network more widely and we ensure that our Programme features this opportunity.

Following lunch, the Programme featured the first parallel session of interactive workshops of the Conference. **Dr Annette Loeseke (Museum Consultant Berlin; Lecturer NYU Berlin and Reinwardt Academy Amsterdam)** facilitated an interactive workshop entitled **“Changing digitally shaped reception practices: what visitor studies could learn from the media sector”**. In this session delegates worked in groups to identify ways in which they could use the skills of the media sector to deliver content. This called upon delegates’ creativity and resulted in fascinating suggestions including the development of a blog called Nelson’s Column with Nelson informing readers each day of activities/events taking place in Trafalgar Square and giving them that bird’s eye view. Using journalistic formats can make us see our content in a very different way and communicate it to our audiences, both current and potential, in a way that may attract their interest and attention.

Andrew McIntyre from **Morris Hargreaves McIntyre** delivered the interactive workshop running in parallel with Annette's, entitled "**The spectrum of audience engagement**", explored using a strategic tool to navigate the changing museum world. Andrew's matrix contained five key stages– Deliver, Inform, Involve, Co-Create and Empower – with the advice that moving from left to right i.e. from Inform to Involve and onto Co-Create and Empower will continue to increase relevance and accessibility and significantly increase audiences and their engagement, yet organisations can also be on different stages with different parts of their programme. Through the case study of the Western Australian Museum he demonstrated how visitor studies/audience insight can ask and contribute to answering the big questions about museums.

Each year the recipient of the **VSG Alison James Bursary** is asked to speak at the Conference to encourage delegates to apply for funding and to show how they have utilised the monies awarded to them. This year's recipient **Gina Koutsika** from the **Imperial War Museum** used the Bursary to attend the 2014 Annual ICOM-CECS and the 13th ICOM-UMAC Conference in Alexandria. She provided very engaging and personal insights from both Conferences and highlighted how the Bursary can be used to widen experience and build relationships within the visitor studies community. Gina was very positive about her experience and actively encouraged others to apply for the Bursary in 2015. Check our website for information on this year's Bursary and how to apply.

Our last session of Day 1 was a joint presentation by three speakers addressing the topic "**A changing society: how are visitor studies representing culturally diverse audiences?**". Our speakers included: **Yvette Jeal (The John Rylands Library, University of Manchester)**, **Olutwatoyin Sogbesan (City University London)** and **Vera Allmanritter (Ludwigsburg University of Education, Germany)** Our speakers considered that the main barrier for diverse audiences is the perception that Museums are not for them. In order to change this perception, Museums need to create a sense of belonging. Visitor studies clearly has a role in consulting with these audiences to identify barriers and how they may be overcome to ensure our venues are welcoming as well as accessible and relevant for all. Olutwatoyin detailed why and how the BME community feels less represented both within and outside the museum walls, which can be caused by a lack of understanding of the different role object and artefacts can have for the community compared to the museum and how promotional materials lacks relevance for the BME group. She also commented on the under-representation of the BME community amongst the museum workforce. She considered that the way forward was education through involving children and creating an enabling environment. Vera's talk focused on visitors of cultural organisations in Germany within the population with a migrant background. Studies which focused on information about people from different origins, however, highlighted little difference between people with or without migration background!

Day 1 concluded with a poster session with delegates sharing and discussing case studies over a glass of wine and continuing the networking which had commenced earlier in the day.

Day 2

Following a welcome back from the VSG Co-Chairs, our second day commenced with a joint session from **Christopher Whitby (the Science Museum)** and **Dr Effrosyni Nomikou (King's College London)**. Their session used two Science Museum projects to reflect on **how visitor studies is adapting to the needs of the sector, the demands of its funders and the vision of leaders**. The session clearly highlighted the issues faced when managing the expectations of different stakeholders. Dr Nomikou

talked about visitor studies as a strategy for organisational resilience i.e. what makes some organisations not only able to survive but to thrive in the face of adversity i.e. cultural, economic changes.

Our second **keynote** speaker of the Conference, **Kerstin Mogull, Managing Director of Tate**, is herself no stranger to change having moved from senior roles in the BBC as well as Director of Strategy at Clear Channel International before joining Tate in 2014. Kerstin highlighted the changes that we – and Tate – are currently experiencing i.e. population changes, global/local change, competition for time, experience economy, digital growth, information overload and participation. Tate is geared to challenging and embracing change with plans for the new Tate Modern including an international focus as well as local engagement, live art, participation, social spaces and facilities/activities for members. Across Tate, the organisation's vision is "championing art and its value to society". One of Kerstin's quotes was one of the most tweeted across the two days:

"If we are audience inspired rather than audience led we retain the ability to surprise our visitors and be experimental."

Our Co-Chair, **Kayte McSweeney (Science Museum)**, facilitated a panel discussion featuring panellists from the funders' community: **Amelia Robinson** from the **Heritage Lottery Fund**, **Jane Steele** from the **Paul Hamlyn Foundation** and **Manisha Laloo** from the **Royal Academy of Engineering**. The aim of this session was to explore **what funders, sponsors and major donors are looking for when seeking evaluations and impact studies**. The session was very insightful – it provided both panellists and delegates with an understanding of why evaluations are sought by funders, what role they play and what content should be included. The differing quality of evaluations was discussed and the role and level of guidance provided by funders at the outset in terms of what outcomes and evaluation content they were seeking. Across all three funding organisations it was clear that the organisations used the evaluation process to monitor how funds were being used and to assess whether aims and objectives are being achieved. There was acknowledgement and concern from the delegates that evaluations were often undertaken by external organisations – and sometimes as an afterthought, i.e. not clearly timetabled into the overall project. Often organisations seem to listen more to voices from outside, but as Jane Steele affirmed:

"We can't outsource what to do with the outcomes."

The final parallel session of the Conference featured two interactive workshops. The first was led by **Brad Irwin (Natural History Museum)** and **Jen DeWitt (King's College London)** which clearly highlighted the strengths of learning practitioners and academics working together. The title of the session was **"Developing a learning research agenda: Bringing museum learning practitioners and academics together"**. This workshop explored the building of a collaborative learning research agenda following on from similar work undertaken in the United States. The workshop went on to debate how a learning research agenda could help the sector with benefits including enabling organisational change.

The second session was led by **Martin Bazley (Digital Heritage Consultant and Chair of the Digital Learning Network)**. Martin's session focussed on conducting audience research to better understand the needs **of online audiences** and how Google Analytics can help us build a picture of

who is visiting our website/online presence and what they are spending time looking at. The session queried “different users, different needs ... how do you get it right for everyone?”.

The session “**Methodological, ethical and practical challenges of using digital technologies: how is digital changing visitor studies practice?**” was led by **Theano Moussouri, Eleni Vomvyla and David France from University College London**. The speakers explored the changes the use of digital technology has brought in research methodology and provided examples of methods used to better understand how visitors engage with content and move around spaces. The session included three case studies: first person video observation at the British Museum, videoing the movement of visitors around London Zoo and looking at how digital technologies/exhibits shaped family interaction at the Natural History Museum and the V&A. The three speakers addressed the challenges and opportunities that digital technology can bring to audience research as well as the ethical implications when conducting research or using data from digital devices.

The final session of our VSG Conference 2015 was facilitated by the VSG Committee’s very own **Critical Friend Susie Fisher (The Susie Fisher Group)** and entitled “**Visitor Studies: What Next?**”. Demonstrating skills akin to those of David Dimbleby on Question Time, Susie facilitated questions from the floor to each of our panellists including **Elee Kirk (Research Associate, University of Leicester), Andrew McIntyre (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre), Theano Moussouri (UCL), David Francis (British Museum and UCL)** and **Christian Walzl (Director of KulturAgenda in Austria)**. Questions from the floor and from Susie included: “Is visitor studies in reality a luxury that today’s institutions can ill afford?”, “Will a lack of visitor studies expertise in organisations lead to a big increase in consultants?”, “If you could wave a magic wand who would you partner up with to give visitor studies a lift?” and “In what format will the output from visitor studies be served up in ten years time?”. The responses were lively and stimulated an energetic debate. The consensus was that visitor studies was not a luxury but a necessity with Elee comparing it to the kitchen within the home, but who could be the Brian Cox of visitor studies and raise our profile to the heights it needs and deserves? The communication of findings was an issue which was raised during other sessions and may be a theme that the VSG addresses in future events. How do we make our findings accessible, engaging and relevant to different stakeholder groups?

Our two day programme was action packed and thought provoking. It highlighted that we all know that change is happening and are doing our best to adapt and embrace it. We look forward to welcoming everyone to another VSG event soon.