

## BIBLIOGRAPHY – WORKSHOP #5 EDUCATION

### Workshop Readings in Binder

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### Utah Humanities has copies of these resources available upon request

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### Additional Readings of Interest

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- Samis, Peter and Mimi Michaelson. *Creating the Visitor-centered Museum*. Routledge, 2016.
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## Helpful Education Links

### Online

Free sounds for your hands-on tours or exhibits <http://www.freesound.org>

Journal of Museum Education <http://museumeducation.info>

Museum Ed – Connecting the Museum Educator Community <http://www.museum-ed.org/>

Smithsonian Institution - Education <http://www.smithsonianeducation.org/>

Smithsonian Institution - Museum on Main Street – Educator Resources  
<https://museumonmainstreet.org/content/educators>

Utah State Core Standards <https://www.uen.org/core/>

### **Online - Storytelling**

Columbia Center for Oral History <http://library.columbia.edu/indiv/ccoh.html>

Ira Glass videos on storytelling (4 parts)  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pFI9UuC\\_fc&list=PLE108783228F1E008](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5pFI9UuC_fc&list=PLE108783228F1E008)

The Moth: true stories told live without notes [www.themoth.org](http://www.themoth.org)

The Bee: true stories from the hive (Utah version of the Moth) <http://www.thebeeslc.org/>

National Storytelling Network [www.storynet.org/](http://www.storynet.org/)

Society for Storytelling [www.sfs.org.uk/](http://www.sfs.org.uk/)

Storycorps [www.storycorps.org](http://www.storycorps.org)

Utah Storycorps from Utah Public Radio <http://upr.org/programs/storycorps>

### **Blogs**

The Uncataloged Museum - Linda Norris Blog <http://uncatalogedmuseum.blogspot.com>

Museum 2.0 Blog – Seema Rao & Nina Simon Participatory Museum Blog <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/>

Nicole Duefel's Blog <http://nicoledeufel.com/2011/09/10/what-makes-a-good-guided-tour/>

# Fellowships *in* Museum Practice

## *Interpreting History Through Interactive Experiences*

D. Lynn McRaney

As an educator in a history museum, I am faced with the challenge of introducing visitors to the concept of history. To many, history is often viewed as a collection of stories about events and places involving people whose lives are distant and far removed from their own contemporary existence. History is viewed as something you read from books or exhibition labels, or are told through television movies or Sunday afternoon lectures rather than perceived as an active process of inquiry and discovery. Thomas Schlereth, in "Object Knowledge: Every Museum Visitor an Interpreter," describes how museums "let us in on how they exhibit or how they arrive at their interpretations." It seems that museums need to be more forthcoming and direct with our visitors by letting them in on our secrets of interpretation.

Two incidents relating to school group visits illustrates visitors' perception of history and the museum experience. I remember overhearing a teacher trying to lure her students up the main stairs to the exhibitions on the second floor. Her encouraging words rang throughout the galleries, filling her students with inspiration of their upcoming historical encounter. She proclaimed, "the sooner we get this over with, the sooner we can have some fun." The other incident relates to an article that appeared in a newspaper on field trip experiences and where teachers preferred to take their students. One teacher commented that the city's history museum didn't have a lot of things that "beep and buzz." One can only wonder if these school groups had been to one too many history exhibitions where they had moved through endless galleries of objects and lengthy labels, without the opportunity to question, analyze and interpret history for themselves.

The more formal approach to history exhibitions leads visitors to assume that the "facts speak for themselves" through displays and grouping of objects and through scholarly written labels and text panels. Visitors to these exhibitions are told the stories of history, rather than being active participants in the analysis and interpretation of the past. Through passive involvement, visitors willingly accept the facts presented to them, not realizing the true engaging qualities of the historical process. But historians know otherwise. Edward Hallett Carr reminds us that the

"facts speak only when the historian calls upon them." In agreement with Carr, Carl Becker asserts that it is an illusion to believe that the facts will "speak for themselves." How then can history museums transform the museum experience into one that encourages visitors to become active participants in exploring history? The answer lies in creating exhibitions that invite visitors to become involved in the interpretation of the past by allowing them to utilize analytical and interpretive skills just as a historian would.

**T**o understand how museums can, and are, translating the historical process into interactive experiences, we need to consider what is the process of "doing" history. Kieran Egan, in "Accumulating History," says "to be able to teach children the rules of the game historians play we need to know what they are and how they can be accumulated by an individual child." Many historians have written about the process of doing history, instructions to playing the "game." First, one must approach the task prepared for and receptive to new ways of thought. A. L. Rowse also emphasizes the need for historians to be alert and to "keep [their] eyes open." Another important skill is the ability to draw one's own conclusion after assessing the information collected. Historians need to be able to identify the diverse viewpoints presented in different perspectives and to understand their value in historical research. It becomes apparent that these skills are definitely within the grasp of any visitor.

**W**hat is it that historians do with these skills; what is the historical process? To begin the historical process, the historian must select a subject and search for sources. The historian then focuses on the facts - assembling, questioning and always returning back to them. Rowse, Lucey and other historians identify the critical analysis of all sources as a recurring task for historians. Historians have to be critical of the evidence and must always question their sources in order to determine its relevance and merit. The historian returns to the facts and sources because they may not be authentic, credible and may be filled with biases and exaggerations. Edward Hallett Carr adds interpretation and evaluation as two final steps in this process. As stated earlier, the historian must come to some conclusions and do something with the information collected, beyond recording it. Interpretation and evaluation of the facts and the sources allow for new insights and discoveries. The process becomes one of identifying, analyzing, interpreting and evaluating the sources, evidence and witnesses.

**I**n identifying the skills of the historian and defining the historical process, the question arises, "Is history a game that anyone can play?" The process that Carl Becker takes Mr. Everyman through in *Everyman His Own Historian: Essays on History and Politics* further illustrates this point through showing how the historical process translates into a person's daily experiences. Mr. Everyman, as we all do, begins his day remembering some things and not others. But Becker assures us that this is not a problem since Mr. Everyman, like any historian, initiates his own historical research. Mr. Everyman, who wants to pay his coal bill, turns to his first source, the entry that he ordered coal from a Mr. Smith, and discovers that a critical analysis of this source is necessary. Mr. Everyman then pieces together the bits of information collected from his calendar entry and a conversation with Mr. Smith, to create a picture in his mind of past events. From the picture, Mr. Everyman remembers that Mr. Smith turned the order over to Mr. Brown who delivered the coal.

Carl Becker says that "Mr. Everyman would be astonished to learn that he is a historian, yet it is obvious isn't it, that he has performed all the essential operations needed in historical research." Interactive experiences transform history exhibitions into environments that enable visitors to become part of the historical process. Key components to these activities are questions that encourage visitors to rely on objects for answers. Through object-based activities, visitors are able to identify the evidence; analyze the evidence; use the evidence; interpret the evidence to create a story; and evaluate the evidence in order to come to one's own conclusions. The examples that follow are interactive experiences used by history museums in Washington, DC, Baltimore, Maryland and Richmond, Virginia. These interactive experiences illustrate how museums are introducing visitors to the historical process.

### *Identifying*

Identifying the evidence is a key step in beginning the historical process. An exhibition label at the Valentine Riverside, in Richmond, VA, explained to visitors that a model was created from research in "archival records, prints, photographs, insurance policies and maps." Records, sources, evidence and witnesses are where historians find their facts, and where museum visitors can begin the historical process. The historian begins by searching for sources. And what form do these sources take? David Weitzman, in *My Backyard History Book*, tells us the possibilities are endless: "What kinds of things go into history? Anything and everything." Interactive experiences capture the breadth of historical evidence through the variety of objects visitors are able to touch, handle and explore. The National Museum of American History (NMAH) has a big wheel bike that lures visitors down a hall into the Hands On History Room, a space filled with inviting things from the past to capture any visitor's attention. Objects become "a hook" or "an invitation to learn."

To draw visitors into the historical process, museums want them to identify the evidence by taking a closer look. In *So What About History?*, Edmund S. Morgan explains that "historians take a closer look to see why things are the way they are." The "Telegraph Station" in the NMAH Hands On History Room encourages visitors to look at the evidence, in this case telegrams: "Why should Mrs. Dugan come home? Look inside this box to find out." At the National Postal Museum, an activity early in the exhibition directs visitors to find the evidence. A large leather pouch and the label "What's in the mail pouch-Take a look" directs visitors in identifying the evidence, newspapers and letters. Through the large windows, even the city itself became an artifact at the Valentine Riverside: "Look out the window to see the area as it is today." "Take a closer look" reduces the first phase of the historical process to its lowest terms. Through letters, telegrams, a big wheel bicycle and even a city itself, visitors are able to identify the evidence and take a closer look at history.

In both the more formal exhibitions and interactive experiences, museums are showing visitors the sources, evidence, records and witnesses to the past. But, as museum professionals, we know it is not enough to collect and preserve, nor is it enough for the visitor to look and observe. Interactive experiences invite visitors not only to see, look and observe, but also to touch, handle and most importantly to examine the evidence of history. The shelves, trunks, boxes and tables in these

interactive environments are all filled with objects inviting visitors to look, to handle and to question.

**C**ritical analysis of the source was earlier defined as a recurring task in the historical process. Interactive experiences use questions to encourage visitors to carefully examine the sources identified through analyzing its distinctive characteristics. At the National Building Museum exhibition "Washington: Symbol and City," visitors discover that the unique traits of a map, such as the direction of the streets, communicate a lot. Questions such as "At which two points do the most streets come together?" and "What do you notice about the wide, diagonal streets?" introduce visitors to the object (identify the evidence) and initiate a dialogue between visitors and the object as they begin to analyze the source. The visitor is encouraged to take a closer look to discover what the object has to say. As visitors enter the NMAH Hands On History Room, they are greeted by a shelf, filled with mystery objects, labeled "What is it?" Once again, questions, called clues, lead visitors in their exploration and analysis of artifacts. "This is not a giant pie plate" and "the attachments on the ends of this object are an important part of its function" are clues that connect visitors to the objects and lead them to discover that they are looking at a gold pan or that they are holding a coral and bells baby rattler from the 1700's.

**A**t the National Postal Museum, a stamp becomes more than something you place on an envelope. Here, the critical analysis of the source, in this case a stamp, provides visitors with different methods of analyzing the same object. "What Makes a Stamp a Stamp," "Collecting Stamps" and "Fakes and Forgeries" allow visitors to analyze their source in a variety of ways. "What Makes a Stamp a Stamp" introduces the different characteristics of a stamp. In "One Lick Should Make It Stick," a weight demonstrates how much pressure a stamp can withstand. The "Collecting Stamps" activity also uses questions to help visitors further analyze and dissect the evidence. After learning the definitions of terms such as postmark and gum, questions such as "Can you find the postmarks on these covers?" and "Which stamps have the best gum?" encourage visitors to look critically at the sources provided. In "Fakes and Forgeries," a magnifying glass allows the visitor to look below the surface of the evidence. Through these and other activities, interactive experiences encourage visitors to consider the many different characteristics of any one object. At the same time, visitors become more critical and selective of their sources.

**S**orting and grouping activities are other ways to assist visitors in identifying the evidence and analyzing its unique characteristics. A number of activities invite visitors to create a collection, an activity familiar to many visitors. At the NMAH Hands On History Room and the National Postal Museum, visitors must select a theme or title for their collection and then select the stamps that best represent that subject. Whether a visitor is looking at a map, inspecting a mystery object or sorting stamps into groups, museums are engaging them in the historical process. The one-on-one encounter between the visitor and the object has been established; an informal dialogue has been imitated through analysis of its unique appearance. Objects are more than something to look at; they become sources of information and tools for further exploration. The rules of the game have been established in this early stage of the historical process. The chosen game pieces or tokens become objects. And what is accomplished through this initial stage? Museum visitors discover

that they are no longer restricted only to looking.

### *Analyzing*

Visitors are introduced to the second phase of the historical process through interactive experiences that encourage the use of objects. Whereas in identifying the evidence, visitors are invited to "take a closer look," visitors are now encouraged to do something with this evidence. In these activities, the objects are used as tools for performing different tasks, or as tools for providing information about past events. This phase of the historical process provides visitors with opportunities to move beyond an object's unique characteristics to consider "what can this object do." Museum visitors are now being challenged to take the evidence they have identified and use it to experience history.

The "doing" of history takes on a literal translation of the term. In the NMAH Hands On History Room, the commands "try sending it" (Telegraph Station) and "work the machine" (More Work for Mother) both solicit from visitors some type of physical response that requires interaction with the object. The doing of history is as varied and diverse as there are objects. Visitors can try their hands at tapping messages on a telegraph to discover the clicks and clacks of the dots and dashes of the morse code, or treadle a sewing machine to carefully stitch a line. In "Design Your Own Row Houses" at the National Building Museum exhibition "Washington: Symbol and City," visitors have the opportunity to create a row house by rotating and selecting drawings of different windows, doors and pediments, as if making their choices from an architect's pattern book. Whether a visitor is tapping a message in morse code or creating their own row house, objects become more accessible to visitors on a personal level.

Other activities in the NMAH Hands On History Room such as "The Mighty Mule", "Try Making Rope", and "Dressing the Part: Anna and Henry Saunders, 1780-1800" lead visitors through step-by-step instructions to properly harness a mule for work; to create a piece of rope; or to wear stays in order "to shed your 20th century style to dress and move in the 18th century style." All of these activities connect visitors directly to objects that they must learn to manipulate, operate or wear. The historical process becomes a physical act as one performs tasks and activities that were (and are) a part of history. By wearing stays, a visitor discovers that an 18th century lady would have had to bend from her hips, not her waist, and would stand in a ballet-like third position in her heels. At "The Story of Cotton" station, the task of operating a cotton gin is not the only activity to experience. Next to the gin, a different experience provides visitors with alternative ways to understand the different stages to processing cotton. A sack filled with twenty pounds of cotton, only a fifth of what the average adult could pick in a day, takes visitors to the cotton fields. Through a photograph illustrating workers with their sacks, visitors are able to use the evidence to experience this rigorous task as they are prompted to "try the sack on" and "pull the sack across the floor." Visitors are reminded that they are using the evidence to understand only a part of the experience since the sack would become heavier from more cotton as the day wore on. Each object takes on a life of its own offering visitors new experiences and unique opportunities.

**I**nteractive experiences can also place objects and visitors into specific historical contexts that further illustrate how objects were used. In the activity "Sorting the Mail by Rail" (NMAH Hands On History Room), visitors are able to take a railroad clerk efficiency test to discover if they are "qualified for the job." Laminated letters, sorting mailboxes labeled with city names and a small hourglass enable visitors to discover how many letters can be sorted in a minute, and whether or not "you are hired" or will need to "try again." At the Baltimore Museum of Industry, students learn about the oyster cannery business through actually becoming workers in a simulated factory. The artifacts become tools to assist the students in fulfilling tasks for their new positions. As skilled laborers, some students work as canners making cardboard cans, while others work as printers printing labels for the cans personalized with their school's name. As unskilled laborers, the shuckers shuck, or open, actual shells and remove oysters in the form of small clay balls; the fillers pack the clay oysters into the cans, made by the canners on the floor above; and finally the labelers place a label on each can. Through becoming workers in the factory, students are better able to understand the process involved in canning oysters. Artifacts are an important part of the process in both the task being performed and the experience provided.

**T**hough three-dimensional objects are used by visitors to perform a variety of tasks, two-dimensional artifacts such as documents and letters can also be used by visitors as sources of information. The Telegraph Station in the NMAH Hands on History Room contains an assortment of telegrams that can be used by visitors to answer a variety of questions: "What kind of messages did people send? Which seemed the most important? Which are business transactions? Which are personal messages?" Both the hand-written and coded telegram provide visitors with information that no other object could provide or duplicate. "Why should Mrs. Dugan come home?" can only be answered by the telegram sent by John Dugan to Mike Sullivan on April 11, 1889; the message reveals that the cow would not let anyone else milk her. In the "Settling the Frontier" section at the National Postal Museum, the physical act of sitting in an actual stagecoach and being rocked back-and-forth is not the only way of using the evidence to understand the stagecoach. The experience of "what it was like to be there" is further captured in letters from this period that describe the different types of people who rode a stagecoach. The answer (found in a letter) to the question "what new event bonds Mary to her mother" reveals that important news, such as the birth of a baby, became a different type of "passenger" that traveled by stagecoach. Through using objects as tools for performing tasks and as sources of information, visitors are beginning to make connections between objects and specific past events.

### *Interpreting*

**M**useums frequently describe their exhibitions and programs as those that bring history to life. The "life" in history is derived from the people of history; the struggles and challenges they faced and the choices and decisions they made. Interactive experiences introduce visitors to the people of history through engaging them in the interpretation of the evidence. Through interactive experiences, visitors are asking and answering the question of who: who made, owned or used this object, and on what occasion? Up to this point, the object has served the



visitor in many ways, whether it has been a mystery object to identify or a tool used to make something. Now, in the interpretive phase, objects and the stories they embody become the means through which people of the present are introduced to people of the past. The story takes its form through organizing and ordering all the facts, information and data collected from questioning, identifying, analyzing and using artifacts.

**T**o get visitors to discover the stories of the past, museums are faced with the challenge of introducing a diverse group of visitors to the varied stories of history. Depending on the visitor, some of these stories are familiar, while others may be obscure in content and meaning. The process of communicating any story is one that involves the teller of the story (a museum exhibition for example) and a receiver (the museum visitor). The receiver of the story tends to be a passive participant in this type of process. Interactive experiences, though, transform the experience of learning the stories of history into an engaging activity. The artifacts used in these activities become the means for communicating the stories; objects become storytellers and the interpreters of past events. In the "Life in a Sod House" station in the NMAH Hands On History Room, a large photo blow-up and a case of sod bricks are just a few of the objects that introduce visitors to the unique story of the Crans and their sod house. Questions such as "How did the Crans build their sod house?" and "Why is there an open space above the window?" prompt visitors to turn to the evidence for explanations and for meaning. When organized, these pieces of information collected from objects communicate the story of the Crans and their life in the sod house. Grasshoppers, buffalo chips and statements by sod house pioneers become other forms of evidence that expand the story of living in a sod house to one that explains life on the plains.

**E**laine Wisley Reed, in *Helping Your Child Learn History*, discusses the dual nature of history both as a record and as a story. Two activities in the NMAH Hands On History Room illustrate the relationship between objects as records and objects as storytellers. A sickle and a slate in the "You Be The Historian" activity introduces visitors to the Springer family; who they were and how they lived. These objects not only provide answers to the clues, "this was used at harvest time" and "this was used in school work," but also work together to create a picture and to tell the story of the Springer family. "Betsy's Moving Trunk" creates a similar experience in its collection of objects. But these objects communicate a different story and introduce a new cast of characters: "Inside the trunk are reproductions of things Betsy might have owned. Let's look inside and see what they can tell us about her life." In this activity, a sampler and a pouch of polished stones are just a few of the objects used to tell us the story of a young girl who lived over two hundred years ago. The sampler was used to perfect her skill with a needle, while the stones were an early version of jacks. Even in the interpretive stage, analyzing the evidence is still encouraged and a recurring task for the historian and the museum visitor, as evident in the step-by-step instructions on how to play jacks without a little red ball.

**O**bjects are no longer secondary to lengthy labels, but rather become the words and the pages of the story. As evidence of a specific event, objects are able to take the visitor back in time to discover the people involved. To understand these experiences, James Deetz believes "we have to try to place ourselves within the minds of the people who lived then." As storytellers, objects

enable visitors to understand the experiences of other people through a sort of "walk in their shoes." In the NMAH Hands On History Room, an assortment of objects introduce visitors to Sarah Trask and Nathan Adler and become the guides to their stories. In "The Story of Making Shoes Without Machines," Sarah Trask and an assortment of artifacts become our guides, or docents, as we explore a specific moment in the past. A census, pattern pieces, leather, boar's bristles and Sarah's diary entries all become translators through which Sarah tells her story and through which the visitor discovers how a shoe was made. But this story is not just about Sarah. It is a story filled with many characters; each person has a different perspective to add to the story and a different task to perform in making the shoe. From Micajah Pratt, the shoe boss, to Isaiah Hacker, the clicker, each person and each object add to the richness of the story being developed. Visitors are faced with the same challenges as these people when asked to "try to figure out how you would cut as many umps and quarters as possible from this one piece of leather."

**I**n "Travel With the Peddler," visitors embark on a different story and journey with Nathan Adler, an immigrant peddler, and the collection of goods in his peddler sack. Visitors are encouraged to "imagine what it was like to walk through the countryside" as they become assistants to the peddler, looking inside the sack at each stop to discover items to sell to the different customers. Polly Arms needs to sew her husband's shirt and make herself an apron, while the Sullivan family have twins celebrating their seventh birthday. In the sack, one discovers sewing notions such as darning egg, thread and thimbles, along with a variety of toys, such as a tea set, doll, jumping jack and a rocking horse. All of these items were objects to entice the peddler's customer and the visitor's imagination. The journey into the past is one that visitors do not have to take alone, but are guided by the stories of the people who took the same journey many years ago. History is no longer distant and remote when the people of the past are sharing with visitors their choices and challenges, their innermost thoughts and feelings.

**E**laine Wrisley Reed further asserts that "your child is born into history. She has no memory of it, yet she finds herself in the middle of a story that began before she became one of the characters. She also wants to have a place in it." If we look at history as Elaine Wrisley Reed does, each person's life becomes a chapter in this on-going story. Although countless chapters have already occurred before our own lives began, each chapter, or each individual, provides a special link between the past and the present. To secure and understand our own place in history and in time, we turn to the stories of those who came before us for explanations and meaning. The time-line of dates used to illustrate the progression of history is now transformed into a story-line illustrating the diverse characters and tales of the past. Interactive experiences communicate these stories and take visitors on journeys into the past to meet the diverse cast of characters. Historical understanding then can be seen as "finding one's place" in the story of history. This understanding or knowledge of history draws upon the close affinity of the past to the present, and the present to the past.

### *Evaluating*

**H**ow then can the interactive experience become a link between the past and the present? The

fourth and final phase of the historical process provides such a link between the past and the present. At this point, both the historian and the museum visitor are ready and able to apply their skills in judgment to evaluate the evidence. The main objective of these interactive experiences is to draw one's own conclusions. "What do you think" provides a perfect entry for visitors into this stage as they are called upon to make connections and to express opinions. Whereas in the interpretive phase the perspective of the person of the past is of primary importance, now, in the evaluation stage, the focus shifts to the viewpoints and perspectives of the visitor. Connections can be made on a number of levels through the visitor's critical assessment of the experience and discoveries made.

**I**n this phase, interactive experiences invite visitors to make connections between the past and the present. After following the peddler on his route in the NMAH Hands On History Room, this journey into the past ends by bringing the visitor back to the present by asking: "Are there things in Nathan's pack you'd like to buy? What items can you find that are still used today? Can you find some things that are rarely used anymore?" After analyzing objects in the "You Be The Historian" section to discover who the Springers were, the final task left for the museum visitor, and for the true historian, is to "come to some conclusions." This final task encourages visitors to draw parallels between the evidence that tells the story of the Springer family and the evidence that would tell their own stories:

"Think of the evidence you are leaving behind every day. What would historians in the next century learn about you and your family if they found your house exactly the way you left it?" Though the visitor's story is quite different from that of the Springer family, a different collection of objects could tell and document that story. The continuous nature of history is apparent through the links between the past, the present and even the future.

**I**n making these connections, visitors are challenged and encouraged to think in new ways. Just as historians express their thoughts and draw conclusions after identifying, analyzing and interpreting the evidence, so can museum visitors. In the "Daily Life on a Rice Plantation" section of the NMAH Hands On History Room, visitors are asked to "Use your imagination. What purpose could you find for this unusually shaped gourd? What other uses can you think of?" Visitors now must interact with the object in new ways and on more personal levels. The focus now shifts back to the present and to the visitor's thoughts, feelings and reactions to the objects and to the museum experience. At the National Building Museum, the final section of "Washington: Symbol and City" acknowledges the value of judgment and evaluation as a final step in the historical process. In the final section,

"Pennsylvania Avenue Today: Balancing Symbol and City," visitors are challenged to consider: "How will you balance the symbolism of the avenue with the needs of the city's services?" Visitors must evaluate and rank their priorities from the selections provided: ceremonial route, a place to sit and talk, a place for government offices, a place to invest and make money and a place where people live. Whether it is a gourd or a city street, the connection to the past is made through the visitor's personal response to it.

**T**he evaluation phase of the historical process empowers visitors to draw upon the knowledge and information collected from identifying, analyzing, using and interpreting the evidence. Since the questions and activities in this stage rely on a more personal response, the fear of not

knowing the right answer is eliminated. Connections between the past and the present are as varied and diverse as there are museum visitors. Each visitor is capable of questioning and challenging the meaning and significance of the stories they have learned. An activity at the National Building Museum on the sculpture of the Capitol building allows visitors to make their own associations with this historic structure. After the visitor identifies the evidence through images of the sculpture, analyzes the evidence through discovering what these figures symbolize and interprets the evidence through selecting the name of the sculpture (Progress of Civilization,) the final activity is to evaluate the evidence in relationship to the visitor's own perspective: "Does this sculpture still represent the America you want portrayed to the world?" Through evaluating the evidence, visitors are able to rethink the past and take a fresh look at the present. What occurs in this phase is similar to the process of creative thinking Alan R. Gartenhaus describes in *Minds in Motion: Using Museums to Expand Creative Thinking*. Many of the characteristics Gartenhaus associates with creative thought are similar to the skills of a historian and to the skills interactive experiences are encouraging visitors to use: divergent thinking, open-mindedness to new ways of thinking and moving towards new understandings and change. Evaluation of the evidence encourages visitors to think in new ways and to move beyond accepting the stories of history as isolated events and bits of information. Instead, the life of history is achieved through people and through the connections made between the past and the present, and the present and the past.

**T**hrough identifying, analyzing, interpreting and evaluating the evidence, museum visitors participate in the historical process. Objects and interactive experiences offer countless possibilities and endless discoveries for each visitor. Just as no one object tells the whole story, no one activity can illustrate the entire process. Interactive experiences provide entry into the historical process at different points. While one visitor may begin by using the evidence, another may begin by discovering the story it has to tell. In either case, the process of doing history engages museum visitors on a variety of levels. In creating exhibitions, museums need to continue to ask themselves what type of experience do we want to provide visitors, like that group of reluctant students. How do we want them and other visitors to perceive history? Do we want to let them play our game? Through interactive experiences, visitors become active participants in the interpretation of the past. Museums need to continue to challenge themselves to create exhibitions that engage visitors in historical inquiry. Only then will history truly come to life and the past and the present will no longer seem so far removed from one another.

(D. Lynn McRaine is Associate Educator for School Programs at the Chicago Historical Society. This report is based on Ms. McRaine's four month Fellowship in Museum Practice at the National Museum of American History, under the sponsorship of Nancy McCoy, director of the NMAH Division of Education.)

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## **CALLOUTS**

"Is history a game that anyone can play?"

"Questions, called clues, lead visitors in their exploration and analysis of artifacts."

"Museum visitors are now being challenged to take the evidence...and use it to experience history."

or:

"Museum visitors are now being challenged to ... experience history."

"Objects...become the words and the pages of the story."

"The connection to the past is made through the visitor's personal response to it."

*[Return to start of Fellowships in Museum Practice](#)*

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## Families First! Rethinking Exhibits to Engage All Ages

By Anne Grimes Rand, Executive Vice President; Robert Kiihne, Director of Exhibits; and Sarah Watkins, Curator USS Constitution Museum

**T**he **Problem:** A nationwide survey of 5,500 museum-going families in 2007 indicated that history museums are the least popular with today's families. When families chose among eight different types of museums, only twenty-three percent chose to visit history museums.<sup>1</sup>

**The Opportunity:** The likelihood of visiting a history museum or historic site increases in families with grade-school-age children who are beginning to learn about history. There is a window of opportunity for museum professionals to entice families to visit, especially by developing special programs and exhibits that target this audience. If museum professionals share effective techniques for engaging an intergenerational audience, history museums can appeal to more families. This demonstrates their value to the local community as fun and exciting places for hands-on learning.

**Proposed Solutions:** At the USS Constitution Museum, we wondered if there were simple, low-cost techniques to encourage family learning and conversation in the galleries that might work in different history museums.

The Institute of Museum and Library Services provided the necessary resources to explore this question through a 2004 National Leadership Grant. With the assistance of a steering committee, a study of best practices, and a prototype gallery where staff interviewed over 2,000 families, we learned a great deal about how to encourage families to laugh and learn together in a history museum. This technical leaflet is a summary of findings from three years of studying intergenerational interaction within the USS Constitution Museum's prototype exhibit in Boston. A more detailed explanation of the project findings is available at [www.familylearningforum.org](http://www.familylearningforum.org). While the content we tested explored seafaring in the age of sail, the techniques identified in this article and on the website are adaptable to a wide range of history museums. The goal of this publication is to share replicable techniques and approaches that have proven to be successful at engaging family audiences in history.

### Family Learning in Museums

Families are the first learning community that a person experiences. When families visit a museum, there is an opportunity to engage the family in compelling experiences. John Falk and Lynn Dierking in *Learning from Museums* observe that “museum exhibitions and programs, when done well, support opportunities for families to participate in and become more effective communities of learners, allowing group members to share, watch one another, have a new and novel experience, reinforce something they already knew, or see something in a new way.... All of this contributes to a highly personal experience, which is all important if meaningful learning is to occur.” The experience of visiting an exhibition together, exploring the past, comparing it to the present, and solving problems together builds a shared memory that lasts long after the visit to the museum.<sup>2</sup>

Family learning in a museum may take many different forms. When visitors engage with one another, as well as the content of the museum exhibit, family learning is likely to occur. The Children's Museum of Indianapolis describes the characteristics of family learning in this way:

- Family learning is a playful, fun, and social experience.
- Family learning is influenced by the ages of the children and adults in the group.
- Families all learn in different ways.
- Families find value in their own personal observations and experiences; they learn by working, talking, and solving problems together.<sup>3</sup>

Increasing family visitation has benefits in both the short and long term. Falk and Dierking report that the adults who are most likely to bring their families to a museum are those who visited museums with their parents as a child. Engaging a family audience today will increase present visitation *and* build a pattern of family museum visitation into the future. Exhibits and programs that engage visitors of different ages and learning styles create greater opportunities for learning within a museum. Engaged visitors spend longer discussing the activity or exhibit, and their satisfaction increases. When visitors are engaged in a compelling experience, they are more likely to stay longer, make a donation, plan a return visit, or become a member.

### I. Putting Families First

When the USS Constitution Museum put families at the center of exhibit development, it led to a radical shift in our thinking and creative process. Families first meant social interaction was as important as conveying content. If visitors are bored, very little content will be delivered, much less remembered a week later. If visitors have a great experience they will remember content long after leaving.

Families first also meant that we could not assume we knew what was best. Instead we let families tell us what they are interested in, how they want to learn about the topic, and what makes the topic compelling, memorable, personally relevant, and enjoyable. We discovered that designing a thematically organized exhibit facilitates family learning more than a chronologically organized exhibit. Thematic organization allows families to bounce around naturally

Photos Greg Cooper courtesy USS Constitution Museum



The prototype gallery at the USS Constitution Museum offers hands-on opportunities for visitors of all ages to sample life at sea.

and bypass areas altogether. By encouraging positive group interactions and using humor within the exhibit, families were more receptive to learning.

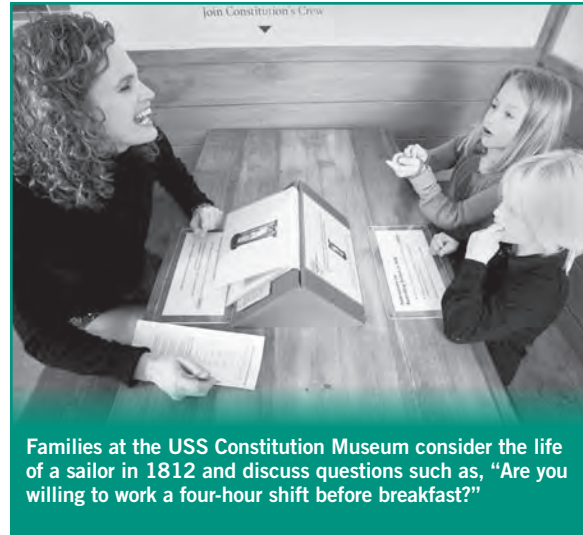
Allowing families a voice in the exhibit development process had an unexpected benefit for the exhibit's in-house steering committee. The USS Constitution Museum's planning team included members of the curatorial, exhibits, and education departments. We learned that letting the visitors decide eliminated a lot of interdepartmental debates. Testing ideas with the visitors was also very freeing. Instead of getting too invested in any one idea or arguing over whose idea is better, we let it go and directly asked the visitors what they thought.

## II. Crafting a Compelling Experience

### Use Interactive Elements to Convey Key Messages

Certain exhibit concepts or stories that are important to the museum may be difficult for visitors to grasp. There may be few if any artifacts or images to support these concepts. These concepts may be perfect candidates for interactives. Visitor tracking studies at the USS Constitution Museum demonstrated that families stop at interactives more than any other kind of exhibit.

In 2005, the museum tested an interactive that illustrated just such a topic with family visitors, recruiting a crew for the USS *Constitution* in 1812. There are almost no objects or images related to recruiting, but understanding why someone would join the crew was vitally important to the exhibit team. The recruiting station is a simple two-sided tabletop interactive with questions on one side and a related image on the other. Questions are slightly humorous and relate to a person's skills, health, and sailing



Families at the USS Constitution Museum consider the life of a sailor in 1812 and discuss questions such as, "Are you willing to work a four-hour shift before breakfast?"

experience, foreshadowing the exhibition to come. Questions include: Have you ever swung in a hammock? Are you willing to do it next to 200 of your closest friends who haven't taken a bath in a while? The exhibit team hoped to encourage conversation about what it meant to be a sailor in 1812.

The USS Constitution Museum designed interactive exhibit elements that met the PISEC criteria, [see sidebar] then subjected them to rigorous formative evaluation. This resulted in a series of interactive experiences that encourage family participation and conversation. Tracking studies show that families spend three times longer in this hands-on exhibition than in our larger, more traditional history display. Satisfaction is higher and visitors are absorbing exhibit themes while laughing and learning together.

### Multi-sided Exhibits Take Up More Space, But That's OK!

One PISEC characteristic that can be extremely effective comes at a cost. Multi-sided exhibits take up a larger footprint, easy for a cavernous science museum, but a challenge for history museums with limited gallery space. Creating an exhibit element that is multi-sided also reduces available wall space, but it's worth it!

The benefit is changing how visitors use your museum. Families gather around multi-sided exhibits, interacting as a group rather than as individual museum-goers. The resulting conversations can be the highest form of visitor engagement.

### Integrating Learning Styles

Museums are free choice learning institutions. Understanding the different ways people prefer to learn can help us broaden our exhibit's appeal, increase visitor engagement, and spur new methods of exhibit interaction. People do not learn by reading alone. Museums are an ideal environment to teach using a variety of learning styles. Addressing a

## PISEC

The Philadelphia/Camden Informal Science Education Collaborative (PISEC) identified seven characteristics to promote family learning.<sup>4</sup>

- Multi-sided—the family can cluster around the exhibit.
- Multi-user—interaction allows for several sets of hands and bodies.
- Accessible—the exhibit can be comfortably used by children and adults.
- Multi-outcome—observation and interaction are sufficiently complex to foster group discussion.
- Multi-modal—appeals to different learning styles and levels of knowledge.
- Readable—text is arranged in easily understood segments.
- Relevant—the exhibit provides cognitive links to visitors' existing knowledge and experience.

**Try this test:** Take the PISEC criteria into your galleries and see how many criteria your exhibit elements meet. Are there simple modifications you could make to meet more of the PISEC guidelines?



different learning style need not equal dollar signs. For example, charts or visual representations can sometimes present information in a way that appeals to visitors with strength in math or logic.

**Try This Test:** Print a list of learning styles, such as Howard Gardner’s multiple intelligences, and see how many of these techniques you employ in your exhibitions. This is a great exhibit-planning tool to see if you are creating experiences for different types of learners.<sup>5</sup>

### III. The Power of Prototypes

Prototypes can take many forms. The form depends on what the final exhibit will be and upon where you are in the process. Show a few versions of a label on a clipboard and you can quickly find out if families interpret the label as your exhibit development team intended. A paper and cardboard mock-up can test an idea with staff and a few family, friends, or visitors. Observing visitor flow near a neatly posted paper directional sign can show if your signage will do what you need it to, before investing in expensive, ineffective signage. Even a cheap plywood and laminate version of an interactive that can be tested on the floor is much less expensive than a finished version—especially if the final version is not successful.

Exhibit prototypes can test:

- Functionality—Will it work?
- Clarity—Do visitors understand how to interact with the exhibit?
- Comprehension—Do visitors understand the exhibit’s key idea or story?
- Interest—Do visitors want to engage with the exhibit? Do they unexpectedly show interest in certain elements?

#### Be Prepared to Revise Exhibits

Information gained from prototyping and visitor observations will most likely lead to exhibit design changes—changes that will improve the visitor experience and opportunities for learning. A favorite idea among the exhibition development team may not work and may need to be abandoned. You must know what you are prototyping for, and be open to unforeseen outcomes.

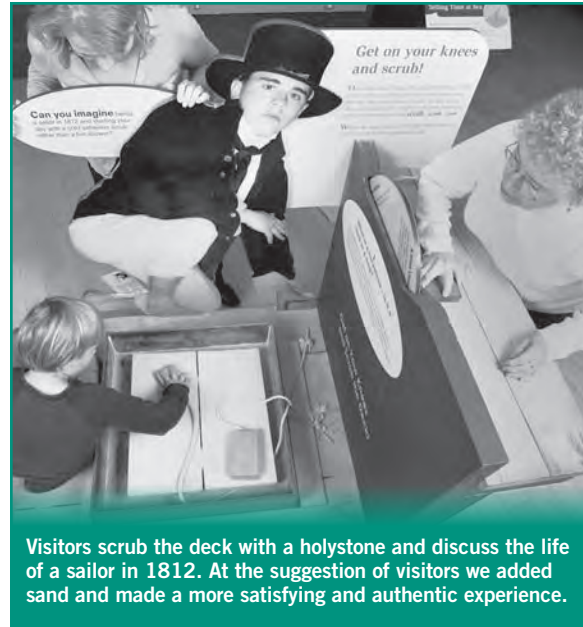
Prototyping (a form of formative evaluation) is an

#### FORMATIVE EVALUATION

Formative evaluation is conducted when you have something to show your audience.

You might try testing:

- A draft of text panels, instructions, or even object labels
- Graphics (charts or illustrations)
- Interactive prototypes (ideas in a 3-D form—cardboard & masking tape are okay)
- Rough cuts of media pieces



Visitors scrub the deck with a holystone and discuss the life of a sailor in 1812. At the suggestion of visitors we added sand and made a more satisfying and authentic experience.

iterative process. *Draft. Test. Modify. Repeat.* Many times during prototyping, the audience may suggest changes and additions exhibit developers had not considered that improve the product significantly. To get an overall feel for visitor satisfaction, it can be helpful to ask visitors to rate each interactive (like a movie with a five-star scale). The USS Constitution Museum kept modifying each exhibit element until the average visitor ranking reached four-and-a-half stars. The museum has come to see formative evaluation as making their family audience a partner in exhibit development.

### IV. Engaging Text: Short & Sweet

Developing content for a family audience at the USS Constitution Museum challenged us to convey history in a way that appeals to both adults and children. Some people felt this would mean “dumbing down” the story. Instead it led us to think thematically, choose information that best supports the themes, and layer content in creative ways.

We knew that our visitors did not want a book on the wall. So we gave ourselves the goal to limit our text panels to fifty words. Fifty words is brutally short, but it forced us to focus. For each panel, we asked ourselves, what is the main point we want to convey?

The short segments of text carry the themes in an engaging, conversational manner that reflects the perspective of the speaker (a crew member). These labels were unlike any we had ever written. Once we gained confidence in this new method, we discovered that label writing could actually be fun. Instead of dry, academic report writing, these labels turned into a creative writing exercise. We learned to have fun with word choice (i.e. “buddy” instead of “friend”). By simply changing the voice from third- to first-

person, the same content suddenly came alive. Some of our NEH-sponsored scholars were our toughest critics going into the process and our greatest supporters upon its completion.

### The Proof is in The Numbers

The museum tracked and timed family visitors through two exhibitions: our traditional *Old Ironsides in War and Peace* exhibition and our family-focused prototype exhibit *A Sailor's Life for Me?* We found that family visitors spent an average of seven minutes in *War and Peace*, a 3,000-square-foot exhibit with many long text panels totaling nearly 4,500 words, sensational objects, and a few interactives. *A Sailor's Life for Me?* is only 2,000 square feet and contains about 1,500 words of text, but families spent nearly twenty-two minutes in the smaller exhibition. Just as important, families also talked to each other significantly more than in the *War and Peace* exhibition.

### Using Questions and Quotes—A Research Study Which technique is more effective to promote conversation?

The museum wanted to identify questioning techniques that encourage family conversation, so we tested three types of labels. We asked if visitors preferred:

- An actual historic quotation from a sailor
- A historic question that put them back in time, “What would you do in this situation?”
- A contemporary question bridging past to present such as “Have you ever been in a similar situation?”

Three hundred families commented on label text accompanying the cut-out figures in a pilot study before the prototype exhibit opened. A first-person context label accompanied each of three cut-out figures throughout the study.

**Historic Quotation:** “The most disagreeable duty in the ship was that of holystoning the decks on cold, frosty mornings.” —Samuel Leech, 1810

Almost half of the family members interviewed preferred the historic quote labels and sixty-three percent of males prefer historical quotations.

Visitors stated they preferred historic quote labels because the content was accurate and authentic, provided a personal connection, and provided historical perspective.

**Historical Question:** “Can you imagine being a sailor starting off your day with a cold saltwater scrub rather than a hot shower?”

One-third of visitors and forty-seven percent of females prefer historical questions. Visitors expressed that these labels fulfilled their need for thought-provoking content and that the questions’ open-endedness was more engaging.

**Contemporary Question:** “What is the chore you dread the most? How often do you have to do it?”

Fewer than two in ten visitors preferred the con-

temporary question. Due to this low response, we eliminated the contemporary question from the rest of the study after the pilot phase.

**Summary:** *When shown three types of labels, visitors showed a strong preference for both historic quotations and historical questions.*

What happened when visitors encountered these labels within the exhibit? Which were more effective at encouraging conversation? Staff observed over 550 visitors and recorded their behavior in tracking and timing behavioral studies. Visitors engaged in conversation with the historical question labels three times more often than with the historic quote labels. This highlights the importance of using different research tools to understand visitor preferences and behavior. The findings are not contradictory, as a visitor may prefer to read an authentic quotation to learn about the past directly; however, if an exhibit developer’s aim is to encourage family conversations about the topic, the historical question is a more powerful technique.

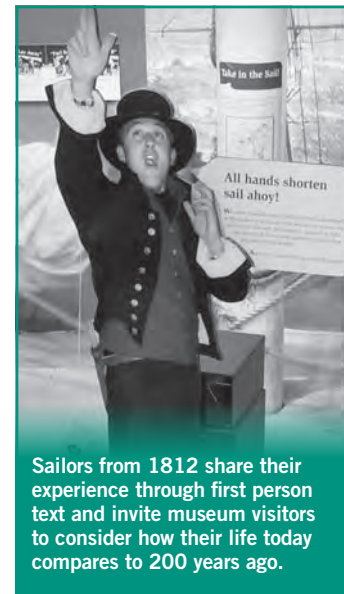
**Summary:** *Posing a question is three times more likely to encourage visitor conversation than simply presenting information or a historic quotation.*

### Peopling History

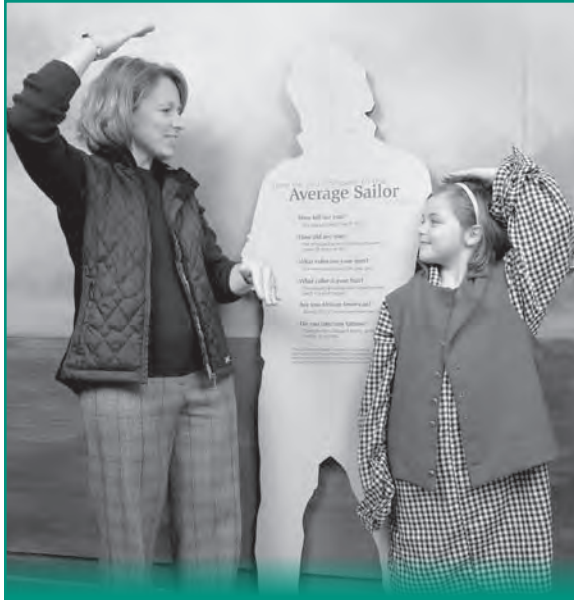
Our exhibition set out to reinterpret the USS *Constitution* by offering the human perspective. This interpretive strategy resonated with our family audience. By personalizing the story and telling it through people, our visitors connect on a personal level and can feel empathy for what the sailors went through and as a result are better able to imagine themselves in the sailors’ shoes. To help bring the crew to life, full-scale photo cutouts visually “people” the exhibit and the

text is written as if visitors are hearing sailors’ stories first-hand. Because we illustrate a diverse range of crewmembers and the families they left behind, minorities, women, and children who may not expect to see themselves in our exhibition can make emotional and intellectual connections.

The audience research we conducted focused on how to present personal narratives in engaging ways to foster personal connection between visitors and stories. We tested different types of interpretive labels



Sailors from 1812 share their experience through first person text and invite museum visitors to consider how their life today compares to 200 years ago.



How do you compare to an average sailor in 1812? Simple, direct questions compare today's visitors to sailors in 1812 and make statistical information relevant and fun.

accompanying a photo cutout and learned that sixty-four percent of visitors preferred labels written in the first-person as opposed to a third-person curatorial voice. Visitors reported that they preferred the conversational voice because it felt like the historical cutout was speaking directly to them.

When asked about the first-person approach, one visitor to our prototype exhibit commented:

*"When I come to a history museum I want my family to hear it from the people who lived it, not a secondhand dry account. History should be alive and this type of label gives you a chance to be a part of that."*

## V. Steal this Idea!

Here is a collection of simple, cheap, effective, and tested techniques that have worked in other exhibitions and may be applicable in your museum.

### Making Work Fun

Children visiting Conner Prairie living history museum will sweep the floor, make the bed, or wash dishes when asked to by costumed interpreters. At other museums, children churn (imaginary) butter in Indianapolis, build a (foam) stone wall at Sturbridge Village, carry buckets of (imaginary) water at the Wenham Museum, and scrub the deck at the USS Constitution Museum. These full-body kinesthetic experiences are both an outlet for energy and a moment to pause and reflect on the similarities or differences between the past and the present. These activities set the seed for a conversation at home, when water rushes effortlessly from the tap, or butter comes neatly wrapped in paper.

### Try a Board Game

Board games are a familiar form that can take advantage of successful pre-visit family interactions. They can also offer seating, a welcome rest within a museum visit. Through the roll of a dice, games can also highlight the role of chance in determining the final outcome. Games can be used as a summary element, to review content presented in the exhibition. Games have proven to be effective, engaging, and inexpensive. Families sit, smile, and converse, laughing and learning together.

### Involve the Senses

An exhibit is more likely to be effective if a variety of exhibit techniques address a range of senses. Smelling the pine tar in the ship's rigging or the salted cod carried in barrels creates a more vivid experience than simply reading about life at sea. When visitors climb in a hammock or get on their knees and scrub the deck, it is a full body experience. These are the activities eliciting the most comments in exit interviews at the USS Constitution Museum, and the elements most frequently recalled, even years after a visit. The Chicago History Museum created an exhibit for children called *Sensing Chicago*. Based on front-end and formative evaluation with children, the exhibit uses the senses as a window to history—smell the fire of 1871, hear the roar of the crowd at a baseball game, or climb into a giant foam roll and see what it feels like to be a famed Chicago hot dog with all the trimmings.

**Try This Test:** *Walk through your exhibitions and see how many senses you engage.*

### Discovery

A surprise element hidden within an exhibit becomes a family's discovery. Discoveries can trigger conversation and encourage visitors to slow down and take a closer look. Simply hiding a light-sensitive document or small item like a coin can enhance its importance; the discovery becomes a moment to share with another family member. In food barrels at the USS Constitution Museum, visitors discover a rat eating the sailors' food. In exit interviews, it is one of the elements most frequently mentioned by visitors. Offering a surprise is a reward that can encourage closer exploration of an exhibition.

### Flipbook / Questioning Interactive

The flipbook is a simple tabletop activity that consists of pages with questions or information viewable from one side of the table and a related image viewable from the other side of the table. At the USS Constitution Museum, we used this format to let visitors play the roles of recruit and recruiter, asking one another fun questions related to their suitability as a possible sailor in 1812: "Are you willing to eat bread as hard as a brick?" This questioning interactive engages

both young and old visitors. It invites the audience to rest for a moment and consider the content. It links your visitors' experience to the past, providing an opportunity to compare and contrast life today with life in a past time. The flipbook works because it requires conversation. You cannot really do the activity alone. Almost any content could be adapted to this form. Many families spent significantly longer with the interactive than needed to finish because parents discussed the questions with their children.

### Comment Boards

Rather than limiting the flow of information from museum to visitor, comment boards or books offer visitors an opportunity to share their thoughts and state their opinions. It moves an exhibition closer to a discussion rather than simply a presentation from an all-knowing authority. Visitors like to see what other visitors have written. Comment boards can be very helpful tools for exhibit developers to see if key messages are reaching visitors. Positive comments are also a powerful tool to demonstrate the impact of the museum experience; to motivate staff, volunteers, and board members; and to leverage future funding.

## VI. Conclusion

At the USS Constitution Museum, the focus on family learning has revolutionized the organization. The audience is seen as a partner in exhibition development rather than a passive user of the end product. This mindset has spread through the institution, as we test sample signage and even fundraising appeals with members of the target audience. This approach can be liberating, as decisions fall to the audience, rather than to the team member with the strongest argument. The exhibit galleries have come to life with the active participation of museum visitors young and old. Instead of the quiet, reverential tone of a staid art museum, our galleries include conversation and active



Who will be promoted first? The Constitution Challenge game quizzes visitors on the content presented in the exhibit and introduces the element of chance (bad weather, bad luck, etc.).

## SUMMATIVE EVALUATION

Are exhibits and programs ever really finished? Summative Evaluation addresses questions such as:

- Do visitors understand which way you intend them to go?
- Can they find instructions or key text panels?
- Do graphics make sense in place?
- Are there elements of the exhibit everyone seems to miss?
- Does your audience understand the major themes of your exhibit or program?
- How much time does the average visitor spend in the exhibit or program?

**Try this test:** Visitor tracking, timing, and behavioral coding are simple, effective, and honest. Grab a copy of the floor plan and observe your visitors in the exhibition. Where do they stop? What do they interact with or read? Do they talk to each other about your content? How much time do they spend in each part of your exhibit?

participation. We have even found visitors swinging in hammocks and singing sea songs.

Trustees and staff have taken notice of two key facts:

1. Visitors to the hands-on prototype *A Sailor's Life for Me?* spend three times longer in the gallery than visitors to the traditional *War and Peace* gallery.
2. Voluntary contributions per museum visitor have increased from an average of thirty cents between 2000 and 2005 to fifty-one cents per visitor since the installation of the hands-on prototype in 2006.

Since the USS Constitution Museum does not charge admission and relies heavily on voluntary donations, an increase in visitor satisfaction that results in a sixty percent increase in per-person donations is significant. With more than 250,000 visitors to the galleries in 2007, donation box revenue topped \$150,000. The Board of Trustees voted to adopt a new strategy: The USS Constitution Museum will provide a hands-on, minds-on environment where intergenerational groups seeking an enjoyable, educational experience can have fun and learn as they explore history together.

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<sup>1</sup> Susie Wilkening, "Family Visitation at Museums: Historic Sites and History Museums." *Dispatch*, Vol. 23, no. 1, (January 2008): 2-4.

<sup>2</sup> John Falk and Lynn Dierking. *Learning from Museums*. Walnut Creek, PA: AltaMira Press, 2000, 97-98.

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<sup>5</sup> One website that includes Gardner's list of multiple intelligences is [www.thomasarmstrong.com/multiple\\_intelligences.htm](http://www.thomasarmstrong.com/multiple_intelligences.htm).

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## **The Visitors' Bill of Rights**

**A list of important human needs,  
seen from the visitors' point of view**

by Judy Rand

- **Comfort**

**“Meet my basic needs.”** Visitors need fast, easy, obvious access to clean, safe, barrier-free restrooms, fountains, food, baby-changing tables and plenty of seating. They also need full access to exhibits.

- **Orientation**

**“Make it easy for me to find my way around.”**

Visitors need to make sense of their surroundings. Clear signs and well-planned spaces help them know what to expect, where to go, how to get there and what it's about.

- **Welcome/belonging**

**“Make me feel welcome.”**

Friendly, helpful staff ease visitors' anxieties. If they see themselves represented in exhibits and programs and on the staff, they'll feel more like they belong.

- **Enjoyment**

**“I want to have fun!”**

Visitors want to have a good time. If they run into barriers (like broken exhibits, activities they can't relate to, intimidating labels) they can get frustrated, bored, confused.

- **Socializing**

**“I came to spend time with my family and friends.”**

Visitors come for a social outing with family or friends (or to connect with society at large). They expect to talk, interact and share the experience; exhibits can set the stage for this.

- **Respect**

**“Accept me for who I am and what I know.”**

Visitors want to be accepted at their own level of knowledge and interest. They don't want exhibits, labels or staff to exclude them, patronize them or make them feel dumb.

- **Communication**

**“Help me understand, and let me talk, too.”**

Visitors need accuracy, honesty and clear communication from labels, programs and docents. They want to ask questions, and hear and express differing points of view.

- **Learning**

**“I want to learn something new.”**

Visitors come (and bring the kids) “to learn something new,” but they learn in different ways. It’s important to know how visitors learn, and assess their knowledge and interests. Controlling distractions (like crowds, noise and information overload) helps them, too.

- **Choice and control**

**“Let me choose; give me some control.”**

Visitors need some autonomy: freedom to choose, and exert some control, touching and getting close to whatever they can. They need to use their bodies and move around freely,

- **Challenge and confidence**

**“Give me a challenge I know I can handle.”**

Visitors want to succeed. A task that’s too easy bores them; too hard makes them anxious. Providing a wide variety of experiences will match their wide range of skills.

- **Revitalization**

**“Help me leave refreshed, restored.”**

When visitors are focused, fully engaged, and enjoying themselves, time stands still and they feel refreshed: a “flow” experience that exhibits can aim to create.

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WEDNESDAY, JANUARY 11, 2012

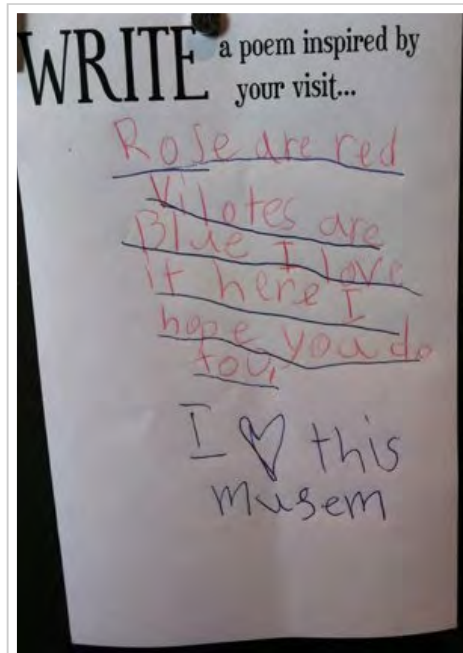
## Yes, Audience Participation Can Have Significant Value

For years, I'd give talks about community participation in museums and cultural institutions, and I'd always get the inevitable question: "but what value does this really have when it comes to dollars and cents?" I'd say that these techniques support audience development, repeat visitation, membership, maybe could even attract new kinds of donors... but I didn't have numbers to back it up.

Now, I do. Or at least preliminary ones. Last week, the local newspaper did a really generous [front-page story](#) on my museum (the MAH) and the changes here over the past eight months since I started. In the summer and fall of 2011:

- attendance increased 57% compared to the same period in 2010
- new membership sales increased 27% compared to the same period in 2010
- individual and corporate giving increased over 500% compared to 2010

We've also had incredible increases in media coverage of museum events (like [that Sentinel article](#)), new programmatic partnerships with several community groups, and private rentals of the museum for community events. After a really painful financial starting point, we've



HI, I'M NINA SIMON.  
LET'S TALK.

I design  
and  
research



participatory museum experiences. I'm the Executive Director of [The Museum of Art & History](#) in Santa Cruz and author of [The Participatory Museum](#). You can [contact me](#), [check out my work](#), [read the book](#), and find me on [Twitter](#).

WHAT IS MUSEUM 2.0?

Museum 2.0 explores ways that web 2.0 philosophies can be applied in museum design. For more information, [click here](#).

This blog features weekly posts, which you can also access via [RSS Feed](#) or by email below.



been in the black every month and have established a \$100,000 operating reserve.

I'm incredibly proud of all the staff, trustees, volunteers, collaborators, visitors, and members who have made this happen. We started the summer with no money and a strategic vision to be a thriving, central gathering place. We just started to try to live up to that vision, partnership by partnership, activity by activity. We're hearing on a daily basis that the museum has a new role in peoples' lives and in the identity of the county. It feels pretty amazing.

It also feels amazing to see some of my theories validated in this way--that giving people the opportunity to actively participate does really transform the way they see the institution and themselves. I can't say that any one experience--working on a collage with other visitors, swinging on a hammock, discovering a participatory display for pocket artifacts in the bathroom--directly contributed to increased attendance and giving. They all have in concert, and they build on each other. We have a LONG way to go to really become that "thriving, central gathering place" in our vision, but it's immensely gratifying to see that we are on the way. It's always shocking to me when a visitor will say, "it feels so comfortable here," or "I love how it's opened up to the community." I can't believe it when I hear words from the strategic plan come out of people's mouths.

There are at least three significant things that have contributed to our success thus far:

1. **A clear strategy.** Our team focused this year on just three things: making the museum more comfortable, hosting new participatory events, and partnering wherever possible. The broad mandate to "open it up" was backed up by a lot of activity on multiple fronts--comment boards, participation-specific internships, program formats that allow us to slot in enthusiastic volunteers easily, more flexible uses of some museum spaces, and a range of options and opportunities for collaborators.
2. **Community response.** Every time we've tried something new, we've gotten lots of support in terms of media coverage and enthusiastic attendance. This community was ready for a museum that reflected the unique creative identity of Santa Cruz. We try to design every new program with a partner organization with an audience for whom that kind of content or format is already appealing. We've had a few programmatic misfires, but for the most part, our new projects are succeeding because the newspaper wants to feature them in the "best bets" and people are game to come out and try. It helps that we're in a small market and we have focused on two audiences--families with kids 5-12 and culturally-inclined adults without children--for whom

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demand exceeds supply in terms of local opportunities for affordable cultural experiences.

3. **Trust and love from our old friends.** Our long-standing donors and board of trustees have been amazingly enthusiastic about the changes at the museum. They supported us financially when we were on the skids, and they are continuing to support the future of the institution. They are excited to see new people in the museum and to hear their friends talk about the museum in a new way. Almost to a person, our donors understand that we are reaching people with a variety of modalities and that they don't have to personally like every experience or element to feel great about the service the museum is doing in the community. We're starting a new campaign based on the "renewed ambition" of the museum and we feel confident about the future.

All of this said, I know we still have a lot of work to do--this truly is just the beginning. Going into the new year, we're focusing on:

- making exhibitions and collections as participatory as our public programs
- transforming our volunteer gallery host program into something more interactive
- helping members feel more like part of the family with us and with each other
- finding and testing out innovative formats for participatory history experiences (it's been easier to get started on the art side, and we are a museum of art AND history)
- figuring out ways to measure impact beyond anecdotes, especially with an incredibly limited budget/staff for evaluation
- pushing forward on partnerships that allow us to reach and support marginalized people in our community

In a week when I'm super-stressed out about the work ahead, it's good to take a minute and celebrate what we've done. Thank you all for helping shape my thinking on museums and for your smart, critical, energetic eye on this work. And the next time someone questions the benefits of letting audiences actively participate, send them to Santa Cruz.

POSTED BY NINA SIMON 

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LABELS: [BUSINESS MODELS](#), [FUNDRAISING](#), [INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE](#), [MUSEUM OF ART AND HISTORY](#), [PARTICIPATORY MUSEUM](#)

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**Nina Simon**, participatory museum advocate, Executive Director of The Museum of Art & History

Update: I gave a talk based on this content earlier this week - you can access the slides here:

<http://www.slideshare.net/nina...>

4 weeks ago

Like Reply



**Kelly Dylla**

Hello Nina, This is truly inspiring work and I've got goose bumps just reading about your successes as well as your strategy moving forward. Thank you for your vision and leadership!

1 month ago

Like Reply



**Michelle DelCarlo**

Nina,

It's so good to see a strategy enacted and come to fruition. Your work inspires me to keep on trusting that meaningful participation by our communities results in financially supported institutions.

Can't wait to try out innovative formats for participation with you.

-Michelle

1 month ago

Like Reply

**Kate**

Nina,

Powered by Disqus

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Warning: Museum Graduate Programs



Congratulations on your successes this past year. It has been great to read about your experiences in the field.

One of your bullets under focuses for the new year strikes me - you mentioned that it has been easier to engage visitors around the arts than it has been to do the same around the history side of things. I'd love to hear more about your experiences and plans surrounding that. I work for a children's museum that has really been shifting it's focus to STEM and I wonder about the challenges we will face in providing participatory opportunities when we have fewer art/cultural exhibits and more STEM exhibits. If your experience has shown that it is somewhat easier to democratize art than history, I wonder how well it can be done with science and the unique challenges those topics can present. Thank you.

1 month ago

Like Reply



**Mark Richard Leach**

Congratulations, Nina! Your risk-taking and experiments are an inspiration to us all. Real impressive is your 100K operating reserve. Keep up the good work and know that we're grateful for your generosity of spirit! Happy 2012!!!

1 month ago

Like Reply



**David Klevan**

Nina, I'm ashamed to say it's been an age since I read your blog. It's so rewarding to come back to it at this point and see all that you have clearly accomplished. Congratulations to and all your colleagues in Santa Cruz!

1 month ago

Like Reply



**Darcie MacMahon**

Nina, I am really enjoying following your work at the museum and using the museum as an idea incubator for things you've been thinking about for so long. Now to see it working is really exciting and interesting. Thank you for inspiring the rest of us to try things out and move our institutions (sometimes very slowly) in this direction. Happy New Year and best for 2012!

1 month ago

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Cath

Hooray! That is all.

1 month ago

Like Reply



Chelsea

Hi Nina,

I'd love to hear about your experience in striving toward and achieving your goal of "finding and testing out innovative formats for participatory history experiences." I work at a museum of ancient art that feels more like a history museum, and I am very curious to learn how to create participatory history experiences. If you could squeeze an entire blog post or article out of this topic, it would be super helpful. Thanks, and great news about your museum!

1 month ago

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Eric Siegel

is it weird to say that I am really really proud of you?

1 month ago

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RIGHT NOWISH I'M...

Mass ukelele singalong in the [@santacruzmah](#) lobby. I never would have imagined I'd tweet these words.

<http://t.co/32ulcQra>  
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7470 readers  
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TUESDAY, FEBRUARY 09, 2010

## How Different Types of Museums Approach Participation

Recently, I was giving a presentation about participatory techniques at an art museum, when a staff member raised her hand and asked, "Did you have to look really hard to find examples from art museums? Aren't art museums less open to participation than other kinds of museums?"

I was surprised by her question. In my travels and research, I've seen all kinds of museums be incredibly successful--and incredibly uncomfortable--with visitor participation. While it's true that art museums have some particular challenges, so do all kinds of institutions in their own ways. This post outlines what I see as the opportunities and challenges for different kinds of museums in pursuing participatory visitor engagement.

### History Museums

- OPPORTUNITIES - History museums are in many ways the best-suited for visitor participation. They are frequently about real people's stories. As cultural anthropology has swung away from a vision of authoritative history and toward the embrace of multiple perspectives, there is potential for those stories to come from all over the place, including visitors themselves. For this reason, I see history museums as best-suited for participatory projects that involve story-sharing and crowdsourced collecting (e.g. [MN150](#)). Because of the incredible popularity of genealogy as an activity, history museums are also excellent places for visitor-generated or -supported research projects (e.g. [Children of the Lodz Ghetto](#)). Finally, because of their social content, they are good places for community dialogue programming and comment boards (for example, consider the [Levine Museum of the New South's](#) extensive use of sticky notes and talking circles). Everyone can have her own personal experience of history.
- CHALLENGES - Despite their support for multiple perspectives, history museums feel strongly about accuracy and authenticity. They also want to avoid stories or perspectives that reflect hateful or offensive views toward other people. Validating and moderating visitors' stories or contributions is often a top concern in history museums. So is maintaining a narrative thread that is intelligible and enjoyable to visitors. Balancing multi-vocal content with a comprehensive narrative can be tricky. Finally, some history museum staff members feel that they should not be dealing with contemporary social issues or that they are unable to facilitate dialogue on contentious topics.

### Art Museums

- OPPORTUNITIES - Art museums are well-suited for creative visitor participation. They show the creative process, and many visitors may be inspired to create their own art in response to that on display (e.g. [In Your Face](#)). While art historians and curators may have their own sense of what interpretations of art are most accurate or valuable, it's generally accepted that everyone has his own experience of art, and that individuals' different interpretations or preferences are acceptable (which encourages some museums [to invite visitors to write their own labels](#)). Finally, many art museums do fabulous, highly participatory projects that are led by participatory artists who work specifically in the realm of [dialogue](#) or [active social participation](#).
- CHALLENGES - Art museums have more significant separations between education departments and curatorial departments than other types of museums. This means that an activity construed as educational (i.e. write your own label) often cannot be placed in the gallery if it is perceived by curators to distract from the aesthetic experience of connecting with the artworks. Ironically, art museums often present the most radical participatory experiences for visitors--but only when led by an artist, not by internal staff members. There is also a strong bias in some art museums against amateur content, which prevents some institutions from encouraging creative participation by visitors.

### Science Museums and Science Centers

- OPPORTUNITIES - Science museums and science centers have a long history of interactive display techniques, which makes them naturally suited to encourage other kinds of active visitor participation. They also have a general visitor-centered "you be the scientist" approach, which elevates visitors' own opinions, actions, and contributions in the context of the museum experience. Finally, they are commonly used by school and family groups as learning places. These attributes makes science museums and science centers ideal for participatory projects that are collaborative and action-oriented. Many science centers support participatory design challenges, [citizen science projects](#), and [nature exchanges](#) that encourage visitors to engage personally and socially in doing science. Some science museums also present dialogue-based programs and exhibits around contemporary science issues, like [race](#), [wealth disparity](#), and climate change. Several also offer adults-only [events](#) or [venues](#) to encourage older visitors to engage with tough topics in modern science.



- CHALLENGES - Unlike history museums or art museums, science institutions do not value multiple perspectives on basic interpretation of science. Theories like evolution and the laws of thermodynamics are not open to visitor reinterpretation. Additionally, the family-oriented focus on fun and shared learning at science centers leads some to shy away from controversial topics or visitor experiences that might be perceived as too complicated to integrate into a family visit. There is also the concern that visitors' contributions are more likely to be off-topic or comment boards used in entirely inappropriate ways, especially by school groups. Visitors are rarely engaged in exhibition development or content production as they might be in art or history museums; participation in science centers is often focused narrowly on teens and young adults who are engaged in formal internships or staff positions.

## Children's Museums

- OPPORTUNITIES - Like science centers, children's museums are highly interactive and visitor-centered. There are many opportunities for visitors to make things both to share and take home in the context of a visit. Children's museums often encourage visitors to explore new ideas and develop [narratives](#) around their experiences, and institutions frequently showcase visitors' stories and creations. In some cases, professionals develop exhibitions or shows with children's participation, as in Capital E Theater's opera, [Kia Ora Khalid](#), which was based on and [developed with young immigrants](#). Some institutions encourage visitors to make personal pledges relative to tough topics, like [prejudice](#), personal health, or environmentalism.
- CHALLENGES - The biggest challenge to visitor participation in children's museums is concern about privacy. Most children's museum staff are not comfortable encouraging visitors to document each other (i.e. take photos of each other's kids), asking for personal data about children, or encouraging children to approach strangers (unsurprisingly). Additionally, many museum staff members assume that family and young visitors are not able to make substantive contributions as participants due to their level of ability and availability.

## A Note on Small Museums vs. Large Museums

While the delineations above are by museum subject matter, there are also significant differences between participatory opportunities in large and small museums. Small museums are more likely to be community-oriented and to be comfortable incorporating visitor-generated content without feeling that it disrupts the overall design of the institution. However, small museums are also less likely to have staff support to maintain and sustain participatory projects over time. While large museums are often beleaguered by endless committee meetings that can hinder the potential for creative new projects, when all the dotted lines are signed, the projects tend to affect more visitors than those of small museums, and may be better funded over time. Frankly, I think small museums win out on this one-- ultimately, they are less focused on authoritative image than large museums and more likely to enthusiastically embrace community involvement.

What kinds of challenges and opportunities exist in your own institution? What types of institutions do you see as most open and closed to participation?

POSTED BY NINA SIMON 

LABELS: [MUSEUMS ENGAGING IN 2.0 PROJECTS](#), [PARTICIPATORY MUSEUM](#)

## 18 COMMENTS, ADD YOURS!:



[Kirsten](#) said...

Yes yes yes. I work at a small history museum and these are exactly the troubles we have with interactive projects. Collecting community stories is a wonderful thing to do, both for visitors and staff (tea with retired ladies as they tell you stories? Don't mind if I do!), but it's very challenging to keep stories topical and to sustain projects over time. My museum is a historic house which brings an additional set of challenges. Where do we present these stories in the context of a domestic space? Are they eternally relegated to the visitors' center? To our website?

[12:33 PM](#)



[jgoreham](#) said...

Regarding the small vs. large institution note- I work in a pretty small institution, and had always presumed that when it came to visitor participatory experiences, that large institutions had the upper hand. I can't remember the last time I participated in something in one of the local small institutions, but I do remember writing down and sticking up on the wall what my fears are at the Canadian War Museum last time I was in Ottawa (small children). I guess we all want what we don't have, huh?

[12:36 PM](#)



[Linda Norris](#) said...

I have a particular affection for those small museums and think they also have another advantage...they can adapt, or even abandon, when things aren't working right without having to go through another huge round of all those meetings. Although it's not always found together, hooray for small and flexible!

[1:09 PM](#)

Dan Spock said...

I think one area where history museums and art museums are liable to overlap challenge-wise in the tradition that the museum is supposed to be about the stuff first and foremost -- the collections. History museums have been slow to recognize that stuff (particularly the more prosaic stuff) is usually more interesting when seen in the context of a story. Quite often history museums are stuffed with representative collections that have few, if any, stories. Art museums have a tradition of connoisseurship that makes it difficult for them to see the value in sharing interpretation with the public in substantive ways. It is not an exaggeration to say that participation in these instances can actually be perceived as a threat.

[4:15 PM](#)



[Erin](#) said...

I find it funny how museums that have an obvious, built-in population (hobbyists, professionals, etc) interested in their museum (mechanics at the automotive museum, scuba divers at the local aquarium, postal workers at the Postal Museum, quilters at the Textile Museum, etc) don't often have a participatory model in place with which to relate to that natural audience.

Maybe it's easier to reach out to a family with no connection to the topic and invite them to pretend to be mechanics from the 1920s than to actually say "Hey group of people with expertise in this field, here's a participatory experience for YOU!"

Folks at the Postal Museum tell me all the time "my great grandma was the postmaster of her town and..." They fax me newspaper clippings related to their family's postal history, they show off badges and mail bags, they ask "Do you have anything about the Nevada postal system here? We're from Nevada and have three generations of letter carriers!" Yet the online project designed to collect their memories (sort of an online Story Corps) is the slowest in coming together and not well funded at all!

What barriers are keeping us from making those connections to folks who ought to be our built-in fans? Are we trying not to look exclusive? Is there some risk I'm missing?

[5:47 AM](#)



[Nina Simon](#) said...

Erin,

I think it's fear of amateurism. But you have a great point. John Falk calls the people you are describing "hobbyists," and one of the strange ironies is that many more general museums of art or history presume they have a lot of hobbyist visitors with deep knowledge, when in fact there are very few of those folks walking through the doors.

I would think for an institution with a large hobbyist population, there is HUGE opportunity for participation--they already have knowledge, enthusiasm, and some desire to contribute! The challenge is to find ways for them to contribute meaningfully--ways to see their stories and objects as positive enhancements instead of annoyances. The answer to that is different for different institutions, but if you can find a project that is worthwhile to the institution AND to your enthused hobbyist population, you can be successful with participation.

[7:34 AM](#)



[jgoreham](#) said...

Hmmm, Erin and Nina, I think those hobbyist people \*are\* already at the museum participating- but as volunteers, not visitors participating in a programme. I work at a museum on an air base and there are a lot of retired service members who didn't leave the region when they retired. They're here right now, restoring an

airplane for us. They don't want to come once or twice with the kids and repair something imaginary, they want to have a place to go to regularly and use those skills. I think the same happened when I did some volunteering at the National Railway Museum in York, UK. There aren't a lot of participatory programmes that were going on in the museum per se, but they had a regular dedicated staff doing restorations on engines. I bet this is true of other transport museums, at the very least.

[12:04 PM](#)

[claire Antrobus](#) said...

goreham - agree about many hobbyists being volunteers. we had my son's 3rd birthday party at the fire station museum in sheffield which is run by volunteers most of who are retired fireman.

In terms of art museums - i think Nina's analysis of the barriers and opportunities is spot on. i'm working on an article on this subject currently and will be interviewing various people from UK visual arts sector about the barriers and opportunities. When I've discussed this issue before with those working in visual arts we commonly find excellent participation in the education department (off site in tucked away discreetly where visitors can't see it) . For those of us working with contemporary art i think it's even more pronounced - in the world view of many curators (and artists) it would be inappropriate to allow others' views or responses in the same space.

Of course - fortunately - there are also many artists who embrace participation as central to how they work too.

[1:09 PM](#)



[Robert C](#) said...

As a history/archaeo small museum administered through a university, I concur completely on the small vs. large museum piece. I thoroughly enjoy that with our staff of 4 full-time, 3 Graduate Assistants, occasional interns, directed studies, etc. that from idea conception to implementation can be a matter of days. The lack of bureaucracy allows us to take full advantage of student expertise that might be around only for a semester. Our new Assistant Director comments often how one of the very real perks in working at our Museum is not having all of her creative ideas end up in a black hole, as in her previous employment. The downside we experience is too much of a shotgun approach because we rely so heavily on skills of transitional folks. There is a constant tension between being true to mission, available resources and stifling creativity. The tension is good, but we need to remain vigilant to the issue.

[7:23 AM](#)



[hds](#) said...

Thank you everyone for the inspiring discussion. Sharing from my own experience at a medium size contemporary art museum which holds experimentalism and hospitality as key values - quality participation is not easy to reach and indeed depends a lot on the openness of curators and artistic directors (meaning - not only on the dedicated mediation teams). A successful example to call in this context is the [Kijk Depot](#) (Dutch for "Viewing Depot") in which visitors were invited to pick a work out of the collection catalogue they desire to see on show, in exchange for submitting a motivation for their request. every two weeks a new exhibition was installed in the Kijk Depot gallery, curated by individual visitors who received a letter to their home inviting them to come enjoy "their" work in the museum. The relevant motivation applications were displayed in the gallery alongside the works serving as the curatorial text. This project for example was developed on purely curatorial basis and derived from the wish to gain the public more access to the "hidden treasures" of the collection and then developed as an experiment in participatory curating. Maybe to mention two experiments we are about to kick off really soon (both have to do with subjects mentioned here by others) - During the next installation period in the museum we will invite visitors to experience the museum backstage, exposing the usually hidden activity of transport and installation. We would like to use this moment to expose the different views museum employees have on art (the technician view, the conservator's..) in order encourage the visitors to feel their view is valid as well. As part of the Transition period we will invite specific interest groups to meet with museum professionals - for example - book collectors to tour the museum archive and exchange impressions with the archivists, we aim to promote the idea of the museum as a knowledge bank not exclusively for art professionals. This program will mean extra pressure on the museum infrastructure and employees during its most tensed period so I'm really curious to see how this will go... The next challenge we are facing - interactive tagging of art works inside the galleries. We started to use tags as alternative meaning generators last November and these were received very positively by the visitors. So far tagging was static - additional information contributed by the curators. Now it's time for the next stage - inviting visitors to tag artworks themselves, reacting or negating the previous information given. Here I can directly connect to what was said here before regarding the collection being the main asset of the Art museum. The challenge is to get visitors to 'own' the collection (in Europe most museums are actually publicly owned..) and use it as a modular

tool for reflecting on identity and cultural issues. With interactive tagging we hope to achieve 'multiple players and multiple meanings in the museum domain'.

[3:52 PM](#)

[Krystallia Sakellariou](#) said...

Participation is a great thing in museums, when it works!

I have found that it works better when there is a natural link to the content of the exhibition.

As a visitor I also think that you would like to know: Why shall I participate?? When you get an answer like: It is a part of the exhibition and your contribution will be displayed, I as a visitor get excited and feel that what I do will actually matter.

But when you get a reply like: Where are interested in YOUR stories, we would like to hear what YOU have to say about this topic, I would feel suspicious...

I am currently working in an art gallery in Puebla Mexico where we are working with one of these participatory projects.

[5:24 AM](#)

[claire antrobus](#) said...

hds - i was really interested to hear your example as i'm working on an article about participation in contemporary art spaces. it sounds like a great project - but your link didn't work. could you re-send?

[12:00 PM](#)



[hds](#) said...

Hi Claire, Thanks for showing interest in the projects, here's the link again (with no HTML coding this time...): [http://www.vanabbemuseum.nl/en/browse-all/?tx\\_vabdisplay\\_pi1%5Bptype%5D=18&tx\\_vabdisplay\\_pi1%5Bproject%5D=3&cHash=962549a21e](http://www.vanabbemuseum.nl/en/browse-all/?tx_vabdisplay_pi1%5Bptype%5D=18&tx_vabdisplay_pi1%5Bproject%5D=3&cHash=962549a21e)

If it doesn't work please go to [www.vanabbemuseum.nl](http://www.vanabbemuseum.nl) and search from there. I will be happy to share more if you wish ([h.zemer@vanabemuseum.nl](mailto:h.zemer@vanabemuseum.nl)), good luck with your research, Hadas

[12:34 PM](#)



[Erin](#) said...

Hi all. I wanted to thank everyone (esp Nina and jgoreham) for your thoughts on this post and subsequent comments.

This Saturday we're doing a panel discussion exploring and commemorating the 40th anniversary of the 1970 postal strike. Postal union folks have come OUT OF THE WOODWORK to RSVP for the program. Most of the postal workers calling have been so excited that we're celebrating their history. At one post office, they passed the phone around to all the employees so everyone could sign up. But many have also admitted that they didn't even know that there was a Postal Museum--and these are folks who clearly have an interest in postal history.

It's great that this program gave the audience the opportunity to clamor for participation and the museum the opportunity to see how numerous and passionate this audience really is. This happy coincidence is making me re-think how our efforts are perceived by this particular audience and how we can do a better, more strategic job of this in the future. We plan to collect their contact information for future oral history projects and give them a coffee reception so they can swap stories together... but we aren't quite reaching the level of participation I think these folks would be even more thrilled to be part of. In any case, being able to actually meet this audience is going to be a very good thing.

[4:20 PM](#)



[Nina Simon](#) said...

Wow Erin - good luck! I hope you can take the opportunity to hear from them about how they'd like to participate in a postal museum and what it could be for them. Have a great program and thanks for sharing!

[9:20 PM](#)

[Padraic Fisher](#) said...

Thanks for this ... as the curator of programs for a soon to open (May 2011) regional social history museum in metro regional Melbourne (Australia, thank you, not Florida) I could not agree with you more. Many museums are ... well frankly ... artefacts themselves. Personally I subscribe to the Antiques Roadshow aesthetic - the object is darn good but the story is great and when the visitor can share their story too? Fantastic!

As a museum we are focused on the stories behind our objects and gathering the stories of those who live, work and play in our region. Sharing stories is our business, it is what connects us. As museum professionals we are storytellers, engaging directly with our visitors through story sharing programs - especially when collecting and considering objects to add to the collection - is the only way to do this.

On a side note: I find the discussion around Erin's comments fascinating. Personally I think, and I know the museum world at-large disagrees, but I think the future of small and mid-sized museums and travelling exhibits is with private collectors. They have a pathological devotion, knowledge and often collection of objects few museums can afford. Private collectors and "hobbyists" (a word I find rather condescending) are a resource of material, expertise and attendance few museums recognize. Sad reality when one realizes that many amateur collectors and enthusiasts possess knowledge and collections of artefacts surpassing many museums. Perhaps the "fear of amateurism" is a fear that the layman may know more than the professional? Just a thought ...

[10:31 PM](#)

Juliana said...

This is all great food for thought, thanks for posting such an insightful article. I'm an intern working on a project at my local zoo to create a display/area for visitor participation, and I've noticed that most discussions of visitor response areas have to do with history or art museums. Each time I hear about one museum's innovative approach to eliciting visitor responses, I try to think how that would work in a zoo setting, but zoos present challenges that not many other museums have. For one thing, we're outdoors, so a computer kiosk or other digitized display wouldn't really work. We've also found that visitors are highly destructive (perhaps the zoo brings out their wild side?), even going so far as to remove signs and take them home; unfortunately, this means we have to be very careful about constructing a response board that visitors won't take apart.

For the most part, I think our challenges fall somewhere between a science museum and a children's museum, but I thought I'd ask if anyone has any stories they can share about creating visitor response boards in zoo settings.

Also, does using social media for participation present a challenge to some museum types more than others?

[11:38 AM](#)



[Leighanne Ortiz](#) said...

Do any of you work at any small museums or know any small museums that have successfully endured through a crisis, transitioned well with changing societies, or been successful amidst a failing economy?

[12:29 PM](#)