"What did you see and do?": A Brief Introduction to Experience-based Exhibits

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There is a story of a Nobel prizewinning physicist who, when asked what sparked his early interest in science, replied that he credited his mother, who did not ask the familiar "What did you learn in school today?" but rather, "Did you ask a good question today?" Likewise, I suggest the more insightful question to ask following a museum visit is not "What did you learn?" but "What did you *see** *and do*?" Good questions and engaging experiences go hand in hand; they initiate and sustain individual inquiry. The "see and do" question recognizes that the strength of exhibits is in actively engaging visitors *and* this is also their primary educational contribution.

When the developer's focus is on what visitors will *learn*, the exhibit almost invariably turns out to be *information*-based. If the goal shifts to what they may *see and do*, however, the exhibit will be *experience*-based. What is the difference? And what difference does it make?¹

Focus on Experience

In thinking about the way exhibits work, most developers have been using a mental model something like: Visitor interacts with Exhibit to yield Learning. While this seems almost obvious, it tends to gloss over the details of what actually happens at the exhibit-what visitors see and do, their experience with the exhibit. To give this experience its due, it is useful to recast the model as two steps: (1) Visitor interacts with Exhibit to yield Experiences; and (2) Visitor processes Experiences to yield Outcomes. This formulation embodies a philosophy of education, going back at least to John Dewey, based on the belief that "all genuine education comes about through experience."

Important insights emphasized by this model are: (1) the direct experience is a function of the physical exhibit, and that is the *only* thing over which the developer has control; (2) whatever the outcomes, they are a function of that direct experience; and (3) both the experiences and the outcomes will be different for each visitor because no two have the same prior experiences or possess the same processing skills.

Dual Exhibit Goals

Traditionally exhibit objectives have been stated in terms of the desired outcomes, and the job of the developer and designer has been to create an exhibit that would lead visitors to those outcomes. Success was judged by the extent to which the desired outcomes were attained. With the two-step model it becomes clear that *two* sets of objectives must be set for an exhibit: both the outcome objectives *and* a set of experience objectives.

The two sets are related, of course, and the developer must have ideas of how the outcome objectives may derive from the experiences; but the exhibit experience is no longer just a means to an end, it is an end in itself. The exhibit developer's job now is deciding what visitors should be able to see and do; the designer's job is figuring out how to make an exhibit that will allow those things to happen; and success is judged by the extent to which visitors engage with the exhibit—actually see and do what it was hoped they would.

Assessing the Outcomes

A focus on the immediate exhibit experience does not evade responsibility for the outcomes, nor does it diminish their importance. Rather it recognizes both the wide range they cover—simply remembering the experience, heightened curiosity, changed attitudes, developing intuition or "physical knowledge", achieving personal understanding,

^{* &}quot;See" is used here as shorthand for all the sensory inputs.

acquiring factual knowledge, and others—and the fact that they are difficult to assess.

Studying the relationship between experiences and outcomes (step 2 of the model), important though it may be, is the business of education research and is something most exhibit projects will not have the resources to pursue.² On the other hand, finding the relationship between the exhibit and the experience (step 1 of the model), is definitely the business of exhibit design, and getting it right through formative evaluation is essential. Fortunately observing visitors interacting with the exhibit or with mock-ups is relatively easy and usually sufficient to determine if the experience goals for the exhibit are being met.

Use of Labels

Perhaps the clearest distinction between information-based and experience-based exhibits lies in their use of labels. Asking "what did they learn" from an exhibit usually means probing what information and factual knowledge visitors have acquired-the traditional meaning of learning. And the only exhibit activity which can lead to that outcome is reading a label (or some other form of information transfer). The physical exhibit is used as a hook to get visitors to read or, alternatively, the labels are thought of as a textbook with the physical exhibit playing the role of an illustration. In either case, for information-based exhibits the intended learning is in the labels.

For experience-based exhibits, on the other hand, educational value lies in the visitor's engagement with the exhibit; it is intrinsic in what visitors see and do. Labels may be used to facilitate visitors' engagement with the exhibit and to extend the experience and connect it to other aspects of their lives, but the label's role is clearly a supporting one.

The Double Benefit

Exhibits which are engaging, meaningful, and memorable have great visitor appeal; they make the museum visit enjoyable and satisfying and encourage visitors to come back for more. In addition, it is these same exhibits which contribute most to the experience base that is necessary for further inquiry and learning.

Becoming exemplary sites for experience-based learning may be the greatest contribution museums can make to education more broadly. While designing exhibits to create experiences is more challenging than designing to communicate information or messages, the dual benefit of yielding a more satisfying visit *and* a more effective educational experience makes this a goal worth pursuing.

Notes

1. The basic ideas underlying "experience-based learning" are not new. Some would trace them as far back as Socrates, and they show up in "inquiry learning," "handson learning," "constructivism," "sociocultural theory," "situated cognition," and other newer education theories. The point here is not to define terms or introduce additional vocabulary, rather it is to present a simple, practical model that allows these ideas to be applied to exhibits. There are many references for further reading, and only a few are listed here. The first presents ideas of John Dewey; the other two expand on the content of this brief article.

- Ansbacher, T., John Dewey's *Experience and Education*: Lessons for Museums, Curator, vol. 41, no. 1, March 1998
- Ansbacher, T., Experience, Inquiry, and Making Meaning, Exhibitionist, vol. 18, no. 2, Fall 1999
- Ansbacher, T., Exhibits and Learning in the Science Center: Another View, The Informal Science Review, no. 18, May/June 1996

2. Most exhibit evaluation has focused on basic measurements of visitor behavior, such as attracting and holding power, or gains in cognitive knowledge (although this is now generally acknowledged to be neither a very likely nor even particularly important outcome of museum visits.) Valuable as these studies have been, they do not touch on other exhibit outcomes. Naturalistic studies (see for example Hein, G., Learning in the Museum, Routledge, New York, 1998) have been useful in this regard, but still have limitations. An alternative approach to studying the more elusive and long-term outcomes-by eliciting people's recollections of museum visits-is currently being developed by Michael Spock and coworkers (see for example, Spock, M., The Stories We Tell About Meaning Making, Exhibitionist, Vol 18, No 2, Fall 1999).