

Museums as Social Spaces & Arenas for Participation



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Overview

- Describe sociocultural context of museums (& learning!)
- Advocate for museums as social learning & participation spaces for:
 - Meaningful interaction & meaning-making
 - Among visiting groups & other visitors
 - Staff-facilitated experiences
 - *Social outcomes*
 - For children: respect people different than me;
 - For adults: Discuss topics with those with differing views;
 - Social value of museums for individuals, groups, community & society; programmes for marginalised groups who typically do not use museums

Sociocultural context of museums

- Visitor arrives with her own S-C context & is immersed in the S-C context of the institution
- All people are born into & develop within a cultural milieu of shared beliefs, customs, values, language & thought
- BUT, cultural differences can complicate this equation:
 - Museums are created by people based on their own cultural values & beliefs;
 - These shape decisions about what is valued, worthy of keeping, caring for & sharing with visitors
 - Visitors may agree or not with these values & beliefs

Sociocultural context of museums (cont.)

- One's culture & background shapes one's perceptions of museums in society, even possibly of content; if one visits, museum may be experienced differently

Nature of learning

- Sociocultural factors key to learning
 - Learning involves others; constructed by interacting & sharing within sociocultural/physical contexts
 - Human brains are wired to learn through stories
 - Intergenerational, school & all-adult groups learn by talking, watching & interacting; even when alone interact with those who created
 - At basic level, learning is identity-building; people use museums to shape/reinforce individual/collective identity; them-not us!!

Museums as social learning spaces & arenas for participation

- Groups bring shared background, history & knowledge
- Understand how others in group learn, their interests, strengths & weaknesses
- Most are choosing to be there; find places like museums interesting & enjoyable
- Converse, collaborate & construct own experience using activities, settings & objects institution offers
- Make meaning together; enjoyable & fun—
"laughing & learning"

Opening Doors: Visitor Engagement Initiative Conner Prairie, Indiana, USA Family Learning Studies



Approach

- Facilitating learning conversations are critical to short-term & long-term impacts of experience
- Effective conversations require give & take of dialogue, with questions & answers, comments & reflections (among family members & with staff)
- Such reflexive & reciprocal qualities are necessary for learning to result
- Study used family group conversations as unit of analysis

75 family visits documented through audio & video

Transcribed data; analyzed for learning indicators & clues to how guests & staff interacted



Findings

- Interpreters dominated "conversations" which were one-way telling at best
- Families were not engaged at all in the meaning-making/interpretative process
- Families attempted to make sense of interpretive encounters AFTER leaving interpreter's presence
- Experience was a lot of work for families & the museum's daily program of living history interpretation was not reaching its potential

Opening Doors Initiative

- Using data collected developed these strategies:
 - Rapport = welcome + engagement during critical first moments of the experience
 - Follow the guests lead versus monologue goals
 - Comfort leads to conversation
 - Empower staff through new training strategy & experience teams
 - Mine other forms of family entertainment and learning for ideas
 - Create a smorgasbord of experiences

Results of Opening Doors Initiative

- Collected data again after these strategies were implemented
- Conner Prairie's attendance increased by 47.5%
- Average family visit was extended from two to three-four hours
- Families are engaged, happy & having meaningful learning experiences
- Led to interpretive changes which continue to serve as a foundation for all conversational interactions with visitors, as well as influencing interpretive text & labels

Some quotes:

- "My whole family, my husband & four daughters had a great time; so much we bought a membership. Thanks again! We learned a lot while having a great time together."
- "We were so impressed at how much it had changed for the better since we last visited when our daughter was little. What impressed us most was how much there was for us to do! The last time we only watched everyone work but this time we were allowed to participate in everything."

Being of value: Fostering & documenting public value & social learning

"In everything museums do, they must remember the cornerstone on which the whole enterprise rests: to make a positive difference in the quality of people's lives. Museums that do that, matter—they matter a great deal."

Stephen E. Weil, 2002

Public value & social learning goals

- Strategic impact *for and with communities*, rather than *institutional* impact;
- Fully connected to fabric & community needs
- If start from institutional perspective, result can be what institution *thinks* community needs (healthy, vital museum!)
- Healthy, vital museum is means toward public good, rather than goal itself

Why now?

Isn't the good work of museums enough & given?

Achieving and documenting public value important because:

- Need to refocus & return to core values & mission
- Being asked by government, funders & public to concretely demonstrate public value for sustainability & funding over time
- Elephant in room: museums may not be as relevant perhaps as professionals working within them want to think

Planning for Public Value

How will *community* be different because museum exists?: Reframe & strengthen activities thru lens of impact *for & with* community:

- Who is/are primary audience(s)? Why?
- What specific needs or wants of audience are being met? How do you know?
- Have "right" people been involved from outset?
- How will you reach audience benefit from activities? How will you know?
- How will *community as whole* benefit from activities? How will you know?

Achieving *intentional* community & social learning outcomes

- Frame & position work of institution within fabric of community & institution; buy-in from top down to ensure centrality to mission & day-day activity;
- Develop theory of action & goals to foster looking *outward* while also developing innovative ideas, values, habits & sensibilities to enable change
- Situate assessments of progress within day-to-day activities of organization as integral part of planning & development

Possible Measures

Urban Institute (www.urban.org)

1. The Outcome Indicators Project

- Track & self-assess community impacts. Four of 14 areas relevant to museum outcomes: Adult Ed. & Family Literacy, Health Risk Reduction, Youth Mentoring & Tutoring

2. The Arts and Culture Indicators in Community Building Project

- Focuses on ways to document how cultural activities, in this case, arts, support the quality of life in a community: cultural vitality & magnetization



A few examples of long-term social learning outcomes

Family learning impacts for children

- **Perspective & Awareness**
 - Independence & autonomy around learning
- **Social Development**
 - Learning to interact with others—peers & adults
- **Interests**
 - Personal & collective interests
- **Knowledge & Skills**
 - Personal knowledge & skills outside of school

Family learning impacts for adults



- Perspective & Awareness
 - Enriched perception of importance of supporting child's learning
- Social Development
 - Enhanced sense of sharing time together
- Interests
 - Increased awareness & appreciation for child's interest, curiosity & creativity
- Knowledge & Skills
 - Boosted confidence, interest & understanding of how to support learning of child

Retrospective Study of Girls-Only Science Programs (+5-20)



Three sets of outcomes emerged:

- Women had lasting & detailed memories of free-choice science programs years later, including of mentors, program leaders & peers
- Contributed to women's science learning broadly
- Contributed to shaping & building women's social capital & personal identity (gender, race-ethnicity)

Science learning outcomes

- Improved attitudes towards & perceptions of science
- Awareness & understanding of science & science careers
- Participation in science communities (career, hobby)
- Identity as confident & competent science learner
- Catalyst for set of cascading experiences that sometimes led to further engagement



Social capital & personal identity outcomes



- Fostered personal confidence & empowered young women to set goals & achieve them
- Developed leadership, mentoring & communication skills
- Fostered gender & racial-ethnic pride & identity
- Built social capital & networks
- Encouraged later civic contribution
- Experiences perceived as unique to settings/activities; "offered something different from school"