



## Museum Evaluation

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# Museum Evaluation

## Where Have We Been? What Has Changed? And Where Do We Need to Go Next?

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Marianna Adams

**Abstract** This article addresses the ways in which museum practice has grown or shifted in the ways it thinks about, implements, and uses visitor research. A brief overview of the role of government policies, funders, and theorists and thinkers in the field of museum practice provides a background upon which current practitioners think about the role and value of visitor studies. The vision of the future for museum evaluation includes thoughtful discussions about what is worth evaluating, the role of evaluation in interpretive planning, and the problem of sharing and using lessons learned in evaluations across the field.

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I remember a time in the late 1980s when I was writing a proposal for a National Endowment for the Arts grant, and in the section where the application asked us to describe our plans for project evaluation, we could get away with a simple statement such as: “We will have a debriefing session with the project team to determine how well we succeeded.” In grants to other federal agencies or foundations we might write something like: “We will create and administer a survey to teachers who participate in the workshop.”

Since my shift from a museum education practitioner to a museum evaluator sixteen years ago, I find myself looking back with some embarrassment and fondness for that younger woman, doing the best she could, finding meaning and satisfaction in her work, and not having much of a clue about what program evaluation or visitor research meant in her practice.

Has the field of museum practice grown or shifted in the ways it thinks about and implements visitor research? Yes, I have witnessed changes in the field, and conversations with colleagues further support my hunch.<sup>1</sup> Because there is only so much reminiscence that any of us can handle, at the end of every conversation we tend to turn our focus to what the future holds, to where we think the field is going or ought to go in the area of using evaluation to improve practice.

## Influences on Visitor Research

### Government Influence and Funding Sources

Tracing influences and tipping points in the area of museum evaluation and visitor research is tricky territory. Certainly the Government Performance & Review Act<sup>2</sup> and the United Way Outcomes Model<sup>3</sup> in the early 1990s had significant influence on stimulating more interest in program evaluation in general. These initiatives owe their emergence, in turn, to an earlier movement towards outcome-based education in the 1960s and 1970s.

In addition, it is widely acknowledged in the museum field that, since the late 1970s, the National Science Foundation's Informal Science Education (NSF/ISE)<sup>4</sup> program "has played a major role in promoting the use of project evaluation."<sup>5</sup> Evaluation has always been a part of the NSF/ISE program but the emphasis more recently has been on summative or impact evaluation. NSF's intention is to synthesize evaluation results from across exhibitions to get a larger picture of the impact of NSF/ISE funds on science literacy in the general public.

In the 1990s, other Federal funding agencies began to attend to the growing trend toward outcome-based evaluation. For museums, the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS) began a series of presentations and workshops with grantees to convince museum and library practitioners of the benefits of developing a logic model that concisely described the audiences, their needs, outcomes for participants, and a plan for evaluation based on those outcomes. While a logic model is not required, program managers suggest that its inclusion strengthens proposals. IMLS has an entire section on its website dedicated to outcomes-based evaluation.<sup>6</sup> In the grant report guidelines the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) does ask grantees to identify participants' specific learning outcomes, describe the assessment method, and discuss the degree to which learners achieved those outcomes.<sup>7</sup> The National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) appears to be fairly light in reference to evaluation. Its reporting format for grantees asks if the recipient performed an evaluation, suggesting that it is optional.

Private funders and foundations began to reflect the activity of these federal funding agencies by asking cultural organizations to provide convincing evidence that the goals and outcomes were achieved by the program. Corporate and private funders were heard asking question such as: “In my corporation we use the Six Sigma model to help us with our outcomes, so how are you measuring for success?”<sup>8</sup>

### Thinkers Who Got Us Thinking

Practitioners noted a number of thinkers, people whose work influenced their thinking, as influences shifting their approach to visitor research. Thinkers who began to lead the pack in the 1990s that continually surfaced during my recent conversations were John Falk and Lynn Dierking,<sup>9</sup> Stephen Weil,<sup>10</sup> George Hein,<sup>11</sup> and Mark Moore.<sup>12</sup> Certainly, this list is only a tiny representation of all those who have contributed meaningfully to this dialogue over the past two decades. The professional conversation in books, articles, and countless conference presentations were rooted in a constructivist approach to learning and a post-modern way of thinking about museum visitors and, consequently, began to shape how practitioners thought about their visitors as well as about what constituted success and the subsequent ways to measure that success.

### How Practitioners’ Attitudes and Practices Have Changed

As one of my colleagues recently noted, “It is no longer acceptable simply to present information to the public, onsite or online; museums must actively seek ways to engage the public in all their diversity, and to provide a catalyst for deeper meaning-making/enhanced understanding of art, the self, the world. A pretty tall order!”<sup>13</sup> The pressure is on. This means that, as a field, we are much less likely to get away with the lame attempts at evaluation that I, and many of my colleagues, got away with in the 1980s. Nor, I would argue, do most of us want to get away with that any longer.

Some practitioners say that they personally shifted their attitude towards visitor evaluation as evaluators started to engage in more participatory approaches to evaluation. Instead of something done at the end of a program to determine if the museum, and, by extension, the practitioners who implemented the program, did a good job, it has become a collaborative process whereby evaluators and practitioners seek to better understand how visitors benefit from the

museum experience. Evaluation results are not recipes for success but indicators of places where practitioners need to pay more attention, to think about, and to engage in ongoing dialogue with their peers.

As one museum educator noted:

The whole nature of the museum experience is one that we are really looking carefully at. The point is that you need to wrestle and grapple with the key questions: What is the visitor's experience? How can you impact that experience? What difference does what we do make to visitors? We have to set up some way where our staff, within the education department and across departments, can grapple with these questions and, of course, you have to have support from the top. Evaluation and research is the core of change in institutions.<sup>14</sup>

However, moving theory into practice and desire into action is not a linear path. It is always winding, sometimes steep and tortuous. While the "want to" in the practitioner's desire to conduct evaluation is much stronger than ever before, the "can do" is a different matter. Over the past 20–30 years we have seen many museums hire in-house evaluators and make an institution-wide commitment to better understanding their visitors and to engage in continual reflective practice. We have also seen these same museums later reverse their position and make those positions redundant or not re-hire for the position when someone leaves. Certainly, these decisions have a relationship to the health of the economy. In general, evaluation is often seen as a nice thing to do but not a necessary activity, especially in, but not always dependent upon, tighter economic times.<sup>15</sup> I would argue that in most cases, these decisions are rooted in the vision and experience of the executive director. If s/he has a positive personal experience with, and hence, a deep commitment to, reflective practice, and takes a visitor-centered approach to museum practice, then somehow the institution manages to instill visitor studies in the organizational DNA regardless of the vagaries of the economy.

One example of ways that museum practice has shifted over the years is at the Dallas Museum of Art (DMA). Visitor research has been an interest and a commitment of the DMA for decades and the most recent eight-year initiative resulted in the development of the Framework for Engaging with Art.<sup>16</sup> Four key types of visitors emerged from the study and, when creating programming, practitioners keep these types constantly in mind as they develop visitor experiences. The educators at the DMA quickly point out, however, that:



Staff conduct visitor surveys during Late Night's at the Dallas Museum of Art

One should not think that we compartmentalized things, but that there is this awareness of the visitor lodged back in the brain, that the visitor is different from us. We may set up certain perspectives that we suspect will be fruitful, but in general, we are going to be less deliberate about knowing ahead of time where we want people to be. If the focus is on investigation and exploration you don't know what you will find. That is what keeps us interested in our work, too.<sup>17</sup>

Another way that evaluation is affecting practice is in helping practitioners to be more efficient and decide which programs to keep and where to focus limited resources. As one educator noted:

In lean economic times each museum has to remember what makes it unique and useful, and leverage that. At the National Gallery of Canada we have refocused on the word "national" in our title and are directing much effort to engaging a national audience around the national collection.<sup>18</sup>

There do seem to be areas in the country that are more active in audience research and program impact, however. Museums in more highly populated areas have more resources to draw upon and practitioners across museums often share ideas and expertise. Some groups of museums have worked together on learning how to conduct their own evaluations as well as doing cross-museum evaluations together, for example, the recent collaboration of twelve museums and the Visitor Center in Balboa Park, San Diego, CA resulted in a park-wide study of how visitors benefit from their museum experience.<sup>19</sup> This initiative has since spawned numerous internal and cross-museum initiatives aimed at better understanding and serving all their visitors.

Museum practitioners and visitor studies specialists have observed an increase in practitioners wanting to learn how to conduct evaluations themselves. This idea excites and inspires some practitioners while it overwhelms others. The approach appears to be more successful when it is seen as a team effort. Often the team is within a single department but is considered much more effective when the teams are cross-departmental. Getting education, curatorial, visitor services, marketing, exhibition design, and membership to work together, while often challenging, yields amazing results. Evaluators are quick to caution practitioners to be realistic in what they can do on their own. Front-end and formative studies are much easier to implement and analyze than are summative studies. Besides, front-end and formative results are more immediately useful than summative results.

Many evaluators have provided resources and frameworks that museums have used successfully. For example, the Art Gallery of Ontario uses Falk's motivational identities to inform interpretive planning.<sup>20</sup> First, staff members assessed how many of their visitors were in each category, and how satisfied they were with their visits. They used that information to inform ongoing interpretive planning in both temporary and permanent exhibitions. In the past, the Worcester Art Museum and the Dallas Museum of Art used Beverly Serrell's 51% Solution<sup>21</sup> to experiment with interpretive strategies for works of art and were able to change their sweep rate. Practitioners appreciate the deliberateness of Serrell's format and found it easy to do it themselves.

Many practitioners report that having some data to use in decision-making is powerful. As one educator put it:

It's not that I love it but that I *believe* in it. There is some of it I don't love doing, like collecting data, but I value it. It helps me make a better decision so I can go to the next team meeting and say, "I talked to 30 people

and this title doesn't mean anything to our visitors." It has more power than if I just say I don't like it. My job is to represent the visitor and I can't do that if I don't know what they want.<sup>22</sup>

## Future Thoughts

In discussions about what is on the horizon for visitor studies in museums, the focus of the conversations usually shifted to what *ought* to be on the horizon and clustered around the following themes.

### What is Worth Evaluating?

Many museum practitioners say that their supervisors, administrators, and/or funders are only interested in "the numbers" or quantitative data. This kind of information is typically gathered through written surveys. Over the years, I've analyzed the types of questions that museums tend to include in their visitor surveys. Most of the questions museums ask are demographic in nature, such as age, zip code, race, education, and economic levels. **Studies have shown that demographics explain very little if any of the differences in the ways that visitors experience or benefit from the museum experience.**<sup>23</sup> The second most common category of question is related to general satisfaction and that is essentially another way to ask visitors, "How much do you love us?" or, "Tell us what a good job we are doing." What puzzles me about this is that, if you think about it, most museum visitors come to the museum predisposed to be happy. After all, if going to the museum is the way they are choosing to spend their very limited leisure time, isn't it likely that they would choose something they think they will enjoy? Over the years, I've asked museum practitioners who ask this type of question: **"How do the results from that type of survey question help you? How do they influence or change your practice?"** It is a question that, as yet, museum practitioners have not been able to answer. It may make us feel good about our practice for a few moments but it doesn't help us grow.

So, it is important as we go forward, to think carefully about what kind of data will be most useful. The answers to that question will also require thinking more broadly and creatively about methods — ways to get that data. Evaluation is more than the method. In many cases, this will involve educating administrators, board members, and funders as to what type of data is truly useful. It will involve being clear and focused about the purposes and intention of an evaluation. Too often practitioners load up an evaluation instrument to do too much.



They often ask questions just because they can, rather than because it's important information. When a visitor agrees to participate in an evaluation study, s/he is giving us some of their limited and very valuable time. While most visitors are happy to participate, we must always approach the interaction with respect and it is disrespectful to ask visitors to give us information that we won't use.

Another aspect of thinking about what is worth evaluating is to consider when evaluation will be most useful. Typically evaluation is thought of as something done at the end of a project. While summative evaluation of a single project has value, practitioners and evaluators have found front-end and formative studies to be much more useful. Many practitioners observe that doing more front-end and formative studies would add another critical level of information to prevent decisions based on one's own instinct or personal experience. Testing ideas before they are completely written in stone saves museums money and time. In addition, front-end and formative studies are also easier and more realistic for practitioners to do themselves.

### Interpretive Planning and Evaluation

In 2005 the American Association of Museums (AAM), at the request of the Accreditation Commission, solicited input from the field on interpretive planning. AAM notes on its website that, "the Commission is developing written standards regarding how a museum's interpretive activities will be assessed in the accreditation process."<sup>24</sup> Sadly, no other action has been taken by AAM yet, the "buzz" about interpretive planning has increased. Gradually more museums are developing standards but the presence of evaluation is rarely a part of that process. When interpretive plans are developed by museums, they are only as useful as the degree to which they reflect the needs and interests of the visitors. Evaluation studies are critical to the creation of a meaningful interpretive plan. In addition, a good evaluation plan should articulate what success looks like, and how visitors will benefit from various museum experiences. This, in effect, creates a research agenda for the museum.



### Sharing and Using What We've Learned

Practitioners frequently express frustration because they cannot get access to evaluation results from other museums that they feel could help them in their practice. Most evaluation studies are not published and when they are they are not always easy to locate or access. InformalScience.org<sup>25</sup> is a website that invites museums and evaluators to submit their evaluation and research reports online,

making it the best single source of unpublished findings. However, it is not comprehensive, as some museums are reticent to share their reports; many non-science museum practitioners do not know about it, so they don't know they can post their reports; and finding relevant projects on this website is not as easy as we might hope.

While getting more report findings out to practitioners is critical, even though the logistics are still challenging, making effective use of what already has been well-published is even more important. Despite the substantial and fairly well-known studies, such as learning and brain research, museums continue to make the same mistakes over and over. For example: label fonts are still too small, there is too much text in general, exhibitions still suffer from content overload and organizational structures that visitors don't get.<sup>26</sup> Although some museums have experimented successfully with alternative interpretive strategies, it is still a more unusual occurrence than it ought to be.

To compete effectively for the limited leisure hours, museums need to use existing evaluation and research findings to stimulate staff, to ask and answer the hard questions, to find ways to surprise and delight their visitors. I invite you to begin that process with your colleagues.

### Notes

1. I am deeply grateful for the time my colleagues spent in talking with or writing to me about this issue. They all gave me great insights and direction for this article: Gail Davitt, who also had this conversation with the education department staff at the Dallas Museum of Art, Julia Forbes at the High Museum of Art, Cynthia Moreno at the Speed Art Museum, Megan Richardson at the National Gallery of Ontario, Judy Koke at the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, and Beverly Serrell of Serrell Associates.
2. GPRA was passed by Congress in 1993 to make federal agencies more efficient and because "Federal managers are seriously disadvantaged in their efforts to improve efficiency and effectiveness, because of insufficient articulation of program goals and inadequate information on program performance." Additionally, GPRA was designed to assist congressional decision-making by providing meaningful performance measures of federal agency activities. (Office of Management and Budget: The Executive Office of the President, 1993, Section 2). GPRA asked agencies to determine:
  - Inputs = resources dedicated to or consumed by a program,
  - Activities = how the inputs are used to fulfill the mission through the program,
  - Outputs = direct products of the program activities, measured as the work accomplished, and
  - Outcomes = benefits and/or changes in the targeted population of a program.
 For more history of GPRA see: <http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/sped/tri/evalwkshp.htm> & <http://aad.uoregon.edu/culturework/culturework28.htm>
3. The United Way's Outcomes Model, created in 1995, was "a specific and canonized evaluation process, streamlining reports by funded organizations. Additionally, it allow[ed] for a unified reporting system, cutting down costs and time by combining many different evaluations into one." See: <http://aad.uoregon.edu/culturework/culturework28.htm>

4. "The Informal Science Education (ISE) program at the National Science Foundation (NSF) invests in projects designed to increase interest in, engagement with, and understanding of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) by individuals of all ages and backgrounds through self-directed learning experiences. In addition to these public audience impacts, projects must demonstrate how they seek to advance the knowledge and practice of informal science education." David A. Ucko in Alan J. Friedman, ed., *Framework for Evaluating Impacts of Informal Science Education Projects: Report from a National Science Foundation Workshop* (2008): 9–13. See: [http://caise.insci.org/uploads/docs/Eval\\_Framework.pdf](http://caise.insci.org/uploads/docs/Eval_Framework.pdf)
5. Ibid.
6. IMLS has a dedicated section on Outcomes Based Evaluation at [http://www.imls.gov/aplicants/outcome\\_based\\_evaluations.aspx](http://www.imls.gov/aplicants/outcome_based_evaluations.aspx)
7. In the abstract of a proposal you are requested to articulate the outcomes for your project.
7. See: <http://www.nea.gov/grants/apply/GAP12/AWreporting1.pdf>
8. Conversation with Cynthia Moreno, Head of Education, Speed Art Museum, Louisville, KY, October 25, 2011.
9. John H. Falk & L. Dierking, *The Museum Experience* (Washington, DC: Whalesback Books, 1992).
10. Stephen E. Weil, *The Museum and Other Meditations* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1990) and *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Books, 2002).
11. George E. Hein, *Learning in the Museum* (New York: Routledge, 1998).
12. Mark H. Moore, *Creating Public Value: Strategic Management in Government* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).
13. Correspondence with Megan Richardson, Curator of Education, National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, CN, October 20, 2011.
14. Conversation with Gail Davitt, Head of Education, Dallas Museum of Art, Dallas, Texas, October 7, 2011.
15. I am drawing on Harry Broudy in his description of how school administrators and often parents think about the importance of arts education in the schools—nice but not necessary. Harry S. Broudy, "Arts Education: Necessary or Just Nice?" *Phi Delta Kappan* 60, no.5 (January 1979):347-50.
16. Bonnie Pitman & Ellen Hirzy, *Ignite the Power of Art* (New Haven: Yale University, 2010).
17. Conversation with Gail Davitt.
18. Correspondence with Megan Richardson.
19. The Audience Experience professional development initiative was created and implemented by the Balboa Park Learning Institute in San Diego, CA in 2010-2011. [www.bpcp.org](http://www.bpcp.org)
20. J. H. Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast, 2009).
21. Beverly Serrell, *Paying Attention: Visitors and Museum Exhibitions* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1998).
22. Conversation with Julia Forbes, Shannon Landing Amos Head of Museum Interpretation, High Museum of Art, Atlanta, GA, October 25, 2011.
23. See: J. H. Falk, *Factors Influencing Leisure Decisions: The Use of Museums by African Americans* (Washington, DC: American Association of Museums, 1993) and *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2009).
24. <http://www.aam-us.org/museumresources/ic/ie/planning/ncip/> (page accessible to members only)
25. <http://informalscience.org/> Note: Although evaluation and research reports from all types of museums are welcome on the site, the presence of the word "science" has dissuaded many art and history museum practitioners from checking out the site.
26. Conversation with Beverly Serrell.

### About the Author

Marianna Adams, Ed.D., is President of Audience Focus Inc., which provides evaluation, interpretive planning, and professional development services for museums and cultural organizations. Previously, Dr. Adams spent 12 years as Senior Researcher at the Institute for Learning Innovation, designing and implementing a wide range of research and evaluation studies across the country. She headed education departments at the Ringling Museum of Art and Museum of Art in Ft. Lauderdale, FL; served as National Principal's Initiative co-coordinator for Teacher Institute at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC; taught public and private school; and worked with emotionally disturbed children.