Evaluation, Research and Communities of Practice: Program Evaluation in Museums

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Abstract. Museums present different contexts for learning, particularly when compared with places such as schools, universities and libraries. They have been described as free-choice learning environments visited by a broad range of people. Museums have the opportunity to shape identities, - through access to objects, knowledge and information visitors see themselves and their culture reflected in ways that encourage new connections, meaning making and learning. However, across the world museums are finding themselves competing with other leisure and learning experiences in an increasingly global world. The long history of audience research in the cultural sector demonstrates the interest museums have had in their visitors over time. This paper outlines the development of audience research in museums, the context within which it operates, and describes the processes of audience research through a series of case studies drawn from the work of the Australian Museum Audience Research Centre. It is argued that the shift in museums from mission-led program development to balancing content and audience needs through a transaction approach requires a broader research-focused agenda. While traditional ways of conducting evaluations are necessary and useful, to remain viable audience research needs to be more strategic, working across the sector in new ways and utilising new methods. How programs impact on users and facilitate learning about a wide range of key issues that museums are concerned with is a leadership role that audience research can take across both the cultural sector and other free-choice learning contexts. To achieve this, a communities of practice approach is suggested as a potential framework for audience research in the contemporary museum.

Keywords: audience research, museum evaluation, museum learning research, visitor evaluation

The Context of Museums

Museums present different contexts for learning, particularly when compared with places such as schools, universities and libraries. They have been described as free-choice learning environments1 and are visited by a broad range of people. Museums have the opportunity to.

1 Falk, J. and Dierking, L., Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 2000).
shape identities. Through access to objects, knowledge and information visitors see themselves and their culture reflected in ways that encourage new connections, meaning making and learning. However, across the world museums are finding themselves competing with other leisure and learning experiences in an increasingly global world, in what has been called “The Experience Economy,” where people engage in highly memorable, rich experiences across a range of environments.

Museums have always seen themselves as having some kind of educational role. The earliest museums were founded on the premise of “education for the uneducated masses.”

“Cabinets of curiosities” were established to [...] “raise the level of public understanding [...] to elevate the spirit of its visitors [...] to refine and uplift the common taste.” Current discourse has identified the need for a changing our conception of museums as places of education to places of learning, that respond to the needs and interests of those who visit and use their services. Museums have shifted from being repositories of knowledge and objects to a “[...] multifaceted, outward looking role as hosts who invite visitors inside to wonder, encounter and learn.” Museums are an important part of a broad educational framework, complementing other forms of learning, and, therefore, must be both [...] understood and promoted as integral

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parts of a society-wide learning infrastructure.  

Museums are considered to be free-choice, or informal, learning environments, where free-choice learning is defined as "[...] self-directed, voluntary, and guided by individual needs and interests — learning that we will engage in throughout our lives." Additionally, museums are also viewed as integral components of the leisure sector.

Further to this, the demands of the "information age" raise new issues for museums to consider, particularly regarding access. Some scholars have argued that museums need to move from being suppliers of information to providing usable knowledge together with the tools for visitors to explore their own ideas and reach their own conclusions. This is because increasing access to technologies, such as the internet, "[...] have put the power of communication, information gathering, and analysis in the hands of the individuals of the world." In this sense, the museum needs to become a mediator of information and knowledge for a range of users to access on their own terms, through their own choice, and within their own place and time: "The role of museums in the future [...] lies in legitimising information and information processes and in being an advocate for knowledge as the province of the people, not the sole property of the great institutions."

The twenty-first century poses many other challenges for museums. These include decreasing attendances worldwide due to increased competition and a proliferation of leisure choices for a more sophisticated and demanding consumer; decreasing budgets and limited resources resulting in the need to operate on a business and commercial basis and collaborate with a wide range of partners. As well, museums must become more relevant and responsive to a range of pressing


social and environmental issues such as population and sustainability, social justice and indigenous rights.\textsuperscript{15} 

The increasing focus on performance measurement and program evaluation is a particular dilemma for museums. It has been claimed that the need to demonstrate measurable outcomes of programs may lead to providing shallow experiences that are assessable in superficial ways.\textsuperscript{16} This is especially relevant in what has been called “the numbers game,” where museums have to prove their value through bringing in large numbers of visitors, along with an economic imperative to generate revenue.\textsuperscript{17} However, this emphasis on visitor numbers is being questioned through the proposition that museums need to concentrate on visitor experiences and learning. Weil argued that museums need to change their views from being about something to being for somebody.\textsuperscript{18} A useful idea put forward was to focus on “[...] not how many people visit museums but how valuable are their visits.”\textsuperscript{19} What are visitors learning and how are they inspired to change, think and act differently as a result of their visit? This requires museums to study not only what counts as learning but “[...] what else counts as learning”\textsuperscript{20} and to whom.

The contexts that museums operate in and the challenges they face have resulted in a conceptual shift for museums, from being primarily


\textsuperscript{19} Kimmelman, M., 2001, not pagged.

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curator-driven to becoming market-responsive, focusing on the needs of audiences and their learning. This requires audience research to play a key role in the contemporary museum through its focus on program evaluation and in providing information for both management planning and program development.

**Audience Research in Museums**

Audience research is a discipline of museum practice that provides information about visitors and non-visitors to museums and other cultural institutions. It is a strategic management tool providing data to assist museums more effectively plan and develop exhibitions and programs, meet their corporate goals, as well as to learn as organisations. As McManus pointed out “…audience evaluation is fundamental to all aspects of museum planning. If changes are to be made in any avenue of institutional endeavour they need to be informed by a comprehensive description of the audience and its likely behaviour.”

A range of methods are used to address issues such as who visits cultural institutions and why; visitor behaviour; satisfaction and learning, as well as who does not visit and why. Areas examined include visitor demographics, behaviour, leisure habits and learning strategies, with both current and potential audiences studied. Methods are chosen in accordance with the questions that need to be answered. As Screven noted:

The most popular methods for obtaining visitor information range from structured and open-end interviews and informal conversations with visitors to tracing visitor movements through

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22 This field of practice is also known as visitor studies, visitor research, evaluation and market research. I am using *audience research* in this paper to encompass all these terms.

23 I am using a modified version of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) definition of a museum. For the purpose of this paper the term “museum” covers cultural institutions including natural history; general social history museums; historic houses; art galleries and Aboriginal Keeping Places. The common element is a collection which is used as the basis for research, exhibitions and other programs.

exhibits, questionnaires measuring cognitive learning, rating scales for measuring attitudes, and unobtrusive observations of stops, time spent, exhibit usage, and reactions to mocked-up exhibit components.\textsuperscript{25}

Other methods used include video and audio taping visitors, focus groups and telephone surveys, with the latter two also applied to researching potential audiences and non-visitors.

One way of explaining the relationship between audience research and museum practice has been described as the "transaction approach" (Figure 1). In this model audience research becomes the intermediary between mission and market approaches to museum programming, ensuring that programs and exhibitions are

[...] informed by the transaction between the body of knowledge to be communicated on the one hand [mission], and the public's interests, initial biases, and understandings of the subject matter on the other [market]. The goal of such a transaction is informative, challenging, and enjoyable dialogue between the museum and its diverse audiences.\textsuperscript{26}

\begin{figure}[h]
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\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure1.png}
\caption{A transaction approach to museum program development (adapted from Seagram, et al.\textsuperscript{25})}
\end{figure}


Within this paradigm, the transaction occurs in the bringing together of both organisational goals and audience requirements to develop programs that satisfy the needs and objectives of both.

**Early Audience Research**

The long history of audience research in the cultural sector demonstrates the interest museums have had in their visitors over time. Studies have been conducted since the late nineteenth-century, with one of the first undertaken with museum visitors to the Liverpool Museum, United Kingdom, in the 1880s. It is worth reflecting on this early work as it forms the foundations of the theoretical basis, methods employed and the use of audience research in the contemporary museum.

Pioneering audience research was undertaken by Benjamin Gilman in the early twentieth-century. Gilman focused on the physical problems experienced by visitors when looking at poorly-designed exhibits that he felt were meeting an aesthetic and curatorial prerogative rather than a visitor-focused one. This resulted in what he called “museum fatigue,” a term that is still used widely in museums today. Gilman spent many hours studying and photographing visitors in a range of uncomfortable positions as they viewed exhibits and showcases in museums. The significance of his work is in the simple, yet sensible, recommendations he made for designing exhibitions that still resonate today. His work also formed the foundations of what was to become a rich and prolific field of museum practice.

Edward Robinson and Arthur Melton built on this early work through measuring the effectiveness of exhibits in promoting visitor learning. These researchers were influenced by moves in the United States in the 1920s and 1930s to see museums as public institutions—places for the “masses” rather than for exclusive interest groups. The role of audience research was valued as a way to demonstrate educational outcomes across broader socio-economic groups:

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Robinson believed museums offered the public a unique educational opportunity that could be realised only if museum exhibits and programs were innovative. Furthermore, it was essential to evaluate any innovations made, to assure that the public really did benefit.32

Being psychologists, methods used by Robinson and Melton were often behaviourally-based, such as recording visitor pathways and time spent in the museum, as well as experimental studies and educational testing.

An exponential increase in audience research was experienced during 1970 – 1990 with a focus on audience surveys and questionnaires and further use of experimental designs in measuring educational outcomes and behaviour. A lot of effort was expended in developing appropriate methodologies that were well-designed, reliable and valid.33 Screven, in particular, based much of his work around evaluating the effectiveness of exhibitions. He argued strongly for the importance of evaluation at all stages of program development, especially early on to help guide planning for visitor-centred experiences.34

Understanding the motivations and perceptions of visitors and non-visitors was another issue addressed in detail during this time. The work of Hood in researching why people did and did not visit museums helped further knowledge about how to best program for broader groups of people.35 Hood found that six concepts affected the decisions that people made about their leisure choices—being with people (social interaction); doing something worthwhile for the self or others; feeling comfortable and at ease in the surroundings; challenging new

experiences; the opportunity to learn and actively participating. The legacy of this range of work during this time was in legitimising audience research as an important and relevant field of museum practice, as well as a scientifically rigorous one.

*Audience Research in the Contemporary Museum: A Case Study*

In the current century audience research is increasingly focused on visitor experiences and learning. However, there is great variance in the number and types of museums that are actually engaged in this work, whether they have evaluators on staff. Museums also vary in how they use the gathered data for other purposes, such as in strategic management and planning, in funding submissions and in areas of museum business outside of public programs.

Contemporary audience research encompasses a broad range of approaches across a diverse range of museums. These are demonstrated in this paper through the work of Audience Research Centre located at the Australian Museum, Sydney. The Australian Museum was established in 1827 and is Australia’s oldest natural history and anthropological museum. The mission of the Museum is to “Research, interpret, communicate and apply understanding of the environments and cultures of the Australian region to increase their long-term sustainability.” The primary functions of the Museum are to undertake scientific research and manage the vast range of collections across zoology, mineralogy, palaeontology and anthropology. Public communication and learning through physical exhibitions, public programs, publishing, regional outreach and on-line delivery of services are key ways the Museum makes information, collections and research available to a wide range of audiences locally and globally.

The Australian Museum Audience Research Centre (AMARC) was established in 1999 to facilitate and undertake innovative research into visitor experiences and learning issues both within the Australian Museum and across the cultural sector. The objectives of AMARC are to:

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37 See [http://www.amonline.net.au](http://www.amonline.net.au) for further information about the Australian Museum.

38 More information about the work of AMARC can be found at [http://www.amonline.net.au/amarc/](http://www.amonline.net.au/amarc/)
• feed audience research information into program development, policy and planning;
• serve as a networking hub linking the Museum with other organisations, universities and research institutions that are undertaking research in complementary areas;
• generate funding for audience research through grants and commercial work;
• publicise and disseminate research results; and
• act as an advisory body.

To achieve this, a wide range of evaluation and research projects are undertaken, both with specific Museum exhibitions and programs, as well as addressing broader research questions. Studies range across the spectrum of different types of research that employ a range of methodologies with a diverse range of participants and stakeholders. The types of audience research undertaken by AMARC discussed in this paper are market research, program evaluation and exhibition evaluation. Additionally, a research project looking at wider industry issues is also briefly described as an example of a large externally-focused study with a broader agenda.

*Market research* is a term used for studies that look at actual and potential audiences, including non-visitor.s These are usually targeted towards the ways museums communicate with their visitors; uncovering perceptions people hold about museums; branding issues; barrier analysis focusing on non-visitor.s; and segmentation studies that group people according to their personal preferences and leisure behaviour.39 The kinds of methods used include surveys (face-to-face and telephone); focus groups; literature analysis and environmental scans. To illustrate this, in 2002 the Museum commissioned a telephone poll of 800 Sydney residents to research perceptions held about the Museum, especially in comparison to a range of other Sydney institutions including Taronga Zoo, the Powerhouse Museum and the Art Gallery of New South Wales. Information was gathered about visitation to venues across Sydney; attitudes to these venues; attitudes to and understanding of the work of the Australian Museum; as well as perceptions of non-visitor.s. Leisure habits and participation in other activities, such as sport and cinema visiting, were also addressed. Questions were based on previous studies undertaken in 1986, 1992

and 1996 to enable a long-term comparison of changes in perceptions, attitudes and visiting patterns. Findings from this study were used in the development of a successful major funding submission to the New South Wales Government to upgrade the Museum’s public spaces.

In a museum context program evaluation accounts for "[...] the totality of a program and its relationship to the carrying out of the mandate and objectives of the whole institution in which it is sited". AMARC has conducted program evaluation for the Museum’s Aboriginal Heritage Unit for the past 6 years. Examples of projects undertaken within a program evaluation framework include needs analyses with Indigenous communities; evaluating the Unit’s annual community workshops; a series of oral history interviews documenting the establishment of Keeping Places/Cultural Centres in New South Wales and testing the early development of a CDROM, *Keeping Culture*, produced by the Unit. Most recently, options for e-learning and website development were researched in close consultation with Indigenous community representatives to provide guidance to the Aboriginal Heritage Unit about future directions for online provision of services.

Working with Indigenous people poses special challenges beyond those faced when conducting evaluation studies with other communities. Developing methodologies that are culturally appropriate and respectful, along with building relationships are vital for a successful outcome for both groups involved in the evaluation. Using the Museum’s Indigenous staff throughout the evaluation process, building trust, giving continuous feedback and acting on the results are also critical for successful outcomes. Through using the results of these evaluation studies the Aboriginal Heritage Unit has been able to demonstrate the value of their work to a wide range of stakeholders, as well as continually improving their services to Indigenous people, thus meeting a key mandate of the Australian Museum in cultural heritage management.

41 See http://www.amonline.net.au/ahu/index.htm
43 For further information and online papers about this work see http://www.amonline.net.au/amarc/research/indigenous_evaluation.htm
A more specific form of program evaluation undertaken in audience research is exhibition evaluation. It is a process of "[…] obtaining information about visitors that ultimately can contribute to the effectiveness of an exhibit and its interpretive components on visitor behaviour, interests, or the exhibit's ability to communicate". Exhibition evaluation consists of four stages undertaken throughout the development process to test the effectiveness of an exhibition's messages and interpretive approaches, as outlined in Figure 2.

This figure demonstrates that the early phases of exhibition planning and design require more time and more detailed evaluation. Screven concluded that the stages that were more likely to contribute to the effectiveness of the exhibition were planning which incorporates front-end evaluation, and the design phase which utilises formative evaluation. However, a rigorous summative evaluation process is critical to ensure continuous effective planning and development. Remedial evaluation in also valuable in providing feedback to make immediate improvements to refine an exhibition.

The first stage, in front-end evaluation, occurs during exhibition development to gauge audience interest levels and prior knowledge.

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about a subject. Front-end evaluation can help in identifying and finalising the project brief, forcing developers to focus on audience needs and how these can be best met. A variety of methods are used including focus groups;\textsuperscript{46} surveys and questionnaires;\textsuperscript{47} unstructured and semi-structured interviews; informal conversations and feedback; online surveys and community/stakeholder workshops. Other resources consulted include existing market research studies, literature reviews and evaluation reports for similar projects.

One important front-end evaluation study was conducted by AMARC in close consultation with the project development team for the 2003 exhibition \textit{Death: The Last Taboo}.\textsuperscript{48} As the topic of death had the potential to be controversial, care was taken to work closely with the team at the early stages of the project to identify what information was required. Five focus groups were undertaken with visitors to museums to understand their general attitudes towards death; gauge interest and expectations in the topic of death; and provide guidance about content and presentation. An important aspect was to test how far the Museum could go in showing objects and visual material that could be considered “gruesome.” Overall, it was found that the target audience for the exhibition were adults, and that visitors expected the exhibition to have both a scientific and a cultural focus. Most felt that showing confronting objects and visuals within the context of the Museum and its collections was essential for visitor engagement and learning, rather than just for morbid curiosity.

The second stage of exhibition evaluation, \textit{formative evaluation}, occurs during the development and production phases to test physical exhibition components, such as text, graphics, object placement and interactives. Undertaking formative evaluation during the development stage using mock-ups of proposed exhibits, text panels and labels, as well as other communication tools, allows the findings to be incorporated into the finished product and to “[...] spot designs that do not work or communicate before it is too late to improve them.”\textsuperscript{49} Repetitive methodologies are used to incorporate results from each study until the developers are satisfied with the items being tested. Smaller-scale samples of people are involved, using semi-structured

\textsuperscript{46} For information about how to conduct focus groups see http://www.amonline.net.au/amarc/research/methods.htm#focus

\textsuperscript{47} For information about how to undertake surveys and questionnaires see http://www.amonline.net.au/amarc/research/methods.htm#visitor

\textsuperscript{48} See http://deathonline.net/

interviews in conjunction with cued and non-cued observations. Other useful techniques is workshopping ideas and mock-ups with staff and special interest groups.

AMARC conducted a large formative evaluation for the Museum’s 1998 semi-permanent exhibition *Biodiversity: Life Supporting Life*. A series of studies were undertaken with a variety of visitors, including children, to test understandings of a range of concepts and scientific terms; to see what information visitors wanted in specimen labels; piloting potential names for the exhibition as well as interest in a range of merchandising options. In addition, mock-ups of text panels, information boards and orientation maps were examined for readability, attraction and usefulness. A fascinating study was also conducted with children who were asked to draw what they thought a scientist looked like in order to understand perceptions about the work of scientists. Using a method that had been developed to analyse these drawings in other contexts enabled results from the Museum sample to be compared with these other studies, noting similarities and differences in their views about science and scientists and how these could be addressed in the exhibition.

Stage three remedial evaluation, is conducted immediately after an exhibition or program opens to see how all parts work together in order to make practical suggestions for immediate improvements. It focuses on physical and architectural features such as lighting; placement of thematic headlines; entrances and exits; as well as psychological factors including orientation, crowding, thematic layout, information overload and fatigue. The aims are to check that the program “works” in a practical sense; to determine what maintenance/resources are needed; to improve the short or long-term effectiveness of the program for visitors; and to provide some early insights into how visitors engage with the program. The methods used include observations; informal feedback from visitors and staff; feedback sheets; comments books; surveys and interviews.

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51 For detailed results of these studies see http://www.amonline.net.au/biodiversity/exhibition/audience.htm

A remedial evaluation was conducted for the *Australia’s Lost Kingdoms* exhibitio[n](http://www.lostkingdoms.com) that was shown at the Museum from August, 2000 to April, 2001. As the exhibition opened just prior to the Sydney 2000 Games of the XXVII Olympiad, the timing of the evaluation was especially critical as the Museum needed to know where it was positioned within the myriad of programs and special events held across Sydney during this period. Also, as the exhibition was on show for a long time (247 days) understanding how visitors found out about the exhibition, how they were using it and what they thought about it was important information that was fed into the marketing strategy for the Museum over the following months.

The final stage of exhibition evaluation, *summative evaluation*, uses a variety of methods at the conclusion of an exhibition or program to check whether it delivered the messages that were intended and what learning occurred. As well, visitor behavior and satisfaction and the success of the marketing strategy is determined. A combination of internal sources (project development team, other staff) and external feedback (visitors, special interest groups, other stakeholders) are consulted. Summative evaluation provides feedback about achievement of objectives, information on how a program is working overall and how people use it, what they learn from it, or how they are changed by it. In addition, the relationship between the program costs and outcomes is identified through a cost/benefit analysis.54 Large scale visitor surveys; structured observations; tracking studies;55 formal testing with visitors or groups; in-depth interviews; critical appraisal; media/ critical reviews and other feedback is gathered and reported for an in-depth analysis of the program’s success.

During 2004, a large summative evaluation was conducted for the exhibition *Uncovered: Treasures of the Australian Museum*.56 This was an important exhibition as it directly showcased highlights of the Museum’s collections and research and demonstrated to visitors the extensive behind-the-scenes work of the Museum. An enormous number of staff were involved during the development phase as the exhibition was directly related to them and their work. As a result, staff became passionate about the exhibition and interested in how visitors were

53 See [http://www.lostkingdoms.com](http://www.lostkingdoms.com)
55 For information about tracking and observation studies see [http://www.amonline.net.au/amarc/research/methods.htm#track](http://www.amonline.net.au/amarc/research/methods.htm#track)
reacting to it. Additionally, as the Museum will be re-developing its exhibition spaces in the future, understanding how visitors respond to collection objects and what contextual information they required was a key objective of the evaluation. Coupled with this was the need to seek feedback from a range of stakeholders in the exhibition, including the new executive management team. This also demonstrates the inherently political nature of evaluation and audience research. As there were many stakeholders in the Uncovered exhibition ensuring they all have a voice within the evaluation process can be tricky. To accomplish this a range of projects were undertaken that involved staff, while using new and innovative methodologies. These included visitor surveys; focus groups with people that had visited the exhibition three months previously; a tracking study; recording and analysing visitors’ conversations and an exhibition critique using external museum professionals to provide feedback.\(^{57}\) A website was established on the Museum’s intranet with results regularly posted and comments sought from staff as each study was being undertaken. For example, a sample of transcripts from the visitor conversations were posted to the site so that Museum staff could see the raw data for themselves and what visitors talked about while they were in the exhibition. Additionally, a list of “lessons learned” was developed and posted to the site, again for staff review and comment. This resulted in engaging those in the Museum who had not previously been very involved in audience research and encouraged them to both own the process and the results. This evaluation also provided key information about visitor responses to, and understandings of the work of the Museum, for input to future exhibition development.

An example of a major research project is Exhibitions as Contested Sites: The role of Museums in Contemporary Society, a three-year Australian and international research project. This was funded by a grant from the Australian Research Council with partners the University of Sydney History Department, the Australian Museum, Sydney and the Australian War Memorial, Canberra.\(^{58}\) This project is investigating the role of museums with an emphasis on how institutions can effectively deal with the challenge of mounting exhibitions on

\(^{57}\) The range of methods employed in this evaluation demonstrate the need to address privacy and ethical issues in audience research. Within Australia, as in many other countries, research is governed by strict ethical rules and privacy legislation. Further background information about ethics and audience research can be found at http://www.amonline.net.au/amarc/about/ethics.htm

\(^{58}\) More detailed information about this research project can be found at http://www.amonline.net.au/amarc/contested/
controversial issues and sensitive topics. The research component includes quantitative surveys with the general public, museum visitors and museum staff; qualitative focus groups with museum visitors and staff, both in Australia and internationally; and a review of the role of the media, including depth interviews with journalists and museum publicists.

Results from the quantitative studies so far show that people strongly support the role of museums in providing information about important and controversial issues as long as they provide mechanisms for visitors to make comments about them. The qualitative phase of the project has found that participants exhibited strongly held views that museums should not lead public debate, but should act as an objective source of information, especially in this current political climate. People recognised that as there were so many different information sources available, working out which are reliable is a major challenge. Although museums were generally seen as trustworthy sources of information, there were some concerns about the ability of museums to present objective views about a topic; the ways that they could make their own position explicit; how they could present many voices and divergent/contradictory facts and points of view; and how to assist visitors to make up their own minds. Although focus group respondents were clear about the general educational role of museums, particularly in children’s learning, the Contested Sites project is demonstrating that when presented with difficult and controversial issues the ways people see museums dealing with these needs serious reflection about the capability and authority museums have to do this. The findings from this major body of work are still being analysed in-depth and will lead to a series of industry publications, guidelines and recommendations, with further research currently being undertaken with art museums.

From Evaluation to Research: Developing Communities of Practice

What is the future for audience research and evaluation in museums? What values are placed on evaluation and research within organisa-

tions? When does evaluation become research and when is research evaluation? The shift from a mission-led program development to a transaction model (as outlined previously) means that museums need to move beyond an evaluative culture to a research one that focuses on visitor experiences and learning that, in turn, contributes to organisational learning and change. There has been broad discussion in the literature about the differences between evaluation and research. Yet it has also been acknowledged that the "[... ] methods used by both researchers and evaluators – observation, interview, document review, etc. – are identical." If this is the case, what are the differences and why does this matter?

It has been argued that there is a lack of coherence and theoretical base for museum audience research because in the past museums conducted evaluation studies that were narrower in focus and not necessarily grounded in a theoretical framework. This happened primarily because funding for programs, particularly in the United States, usually required specific evaluation studies to be undertaken for particular programs as a condition of receiving a grant. Coupled with this is the issue that audience research and evaluation programs are based predominantly in scientific institutions that value empirical and positivist approaches to research. As a result, studies were usually based on quantitative methods, being rigorous and tightly focused.

According to Hein, evaluation is typically targeted towards a specific outcome that meets an identified need. Evaluation is a practical exercise of limited application, usually only to the specific topic of the study, and characterised by short time frames. On the other hand, research is typically conducted for the purpose of increasing knowledge that can be generalised across a discipline. For example, research in museums would result in outcomes that could be applied across a

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range of institutions and programs, addressing questions like "what are the optimum conditions for learning," whereas an evaluation would usually be contained within the one institution or program, looking at issues such as "what did visitors think of a specific exhibition."65

However, there are instances where, through analysis and mining of data collected over a period of time and across studies, evaluation can contribute to a broader knowledge about a specific subject. This is known as meta-evaluation or meta-analysis. Miles stated that much of the work undertaken with both museum visitors and exhibitions has been to build up a "[...] natural history of museum visiting."66 However, it is also possible to do this through a meta-analysis of evaluation studies that track trends and changes over time. For example, an overall picture of visitor learning at the Australian Museum across a broad range of programs and audiences was drawn through a meta-analysis of a number of audience research and evaluation projects that compared questions asked relating to visitor learning and how the results of these supported key themes about learning from the literature.67 Although Hein acknowledged that meta-analysis was one way to overcome the limitations of evaluation studies, yet he identified that the major problem with this type of analysis is that it requires "[...] qualitative judgements about the overall conclusions [which] frequently lead to controversial discussions about the "strength" of the findings."68

Miles69 acknowledged that a distinction needed to be made between evaluation and research in order to understand the context and meanings of this work in museums. He stated that the role of evaluation was to give practical feedback and guidance about how to improve programs, and the role of research was to answer big, important questions that have broad applicability beyond one museum or program. However, Miles focused merely on exhibition evaluation which does tend to have more practical applications, rather than the strategic uses to which evaluation can be put, for example, in trying to better understand the motivations of visitors and non-visitors, in responding to

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future needs and in providing information for management to contribute to organisational change.

Schauble, et al.\textsuperscript{70} highlighted that the need for an underlying theory of museum learning research was to assist in unearthing questions that need studying, to point to what is central in findings and to provide an integrating structure. Research should account for meanings made within a social context, rather than on facts learned. They identified "sociocultural theory" as an appropriate underlying theoretical framework for museum audience research. This theory accounts for the interplay between "[…] individuals acting in social contexts and the mediators – including tools, talk, activity structures, signs and symbol systems – that are employed in those contexts."\textsuperscript{71}

Merriam and Simpson defined research as "[…] a systematic process by which we know more about something than we did before engaging in the process".\textsuperscript{72}

They further asserted that

The defining characteristic of research is that it is a systematic, purposeful, and disciplined process of discovering reality structured from human experience. Research is a matter of process as well as outcomes. The results of research efforts may not be what are expected. Whether or not an investigation leads to uncovering truth is only of immediate concern.\textsuperscript{73}

Unlike other writers in this area, they considered that evaluation was an applied form of research because "[…] it is involved in immediate problems and is likely to have an immediate impact upon practice".\textsuperscript{74} Again, they reinforce the idea that evaluation provides practical information that decisions can be based on, with the main difference being in the questions asked, not the methods used. However, these ideas also recognise that evaluating museum exhibitions and programs can be challenging and complex. Careful attention must still be given to research design, drawing on methodologies from


a wide range of disciplines while ensuring that the act of gathering
data does not impact on the behaviour of the visitor.75

Over time both general program evaluation in museums and research
into museum learning has become more qualitatively based rather
than quantitatively focused. During the last five years, in particular, there has
been a growing number of studies which involve unobtrusive audio or
video-recording of visitors' behaviours and conversations.76 A range of
new research into learning in museums, undertaken by the Museum
Learning Collaborative in the United States,77 included discussions of
learning conversations in art, history, natural history, science, living his-
tory museums and other outdoor venues. These researchers recorded and
analysed visitor conversations and investigated the meaning-making re-
vealed through them in social groupings, within part or whole exhibi-
tions, as well as in visitors' everyday lives. This work demonstrates the
trend towards an increasing emphasis on audience research that gives
voice to the visitors themselves78 and that builds together into a "[...]"
Table 1. Comparison of research and evaluation

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<th>Evaluation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Uses creative and new methodologies</td>
<td>Uses specific, rigorous methodologies</td>
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<td>More flexible and less outcomes based: analytical and critical</td>
<td>Focused on practical outcomes</td>
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<td>Long-term</td>
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<tr>
<td>Often large-scale with broad, open-ended questions</td>
<td>Smaller in scale and focused on explicit questions about a specific program</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questions may change during course of study</td>
<td>Questions usually remain the same</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Speculative: generates more questions</td>
<td>Applied: generates answers and recommendations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informs decision making in the long-term across a practice</td>
<td>Informs decision making in the short-term within a specific organisation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

multilayered, compelling, accurate, but still comprehensible story: a story of real people, living real lives”.

Following from this, the major difference is that research is based within a theory of practice with an underlying set of guiding principles, and evaluation is based within a practice, being practical, fast and outcomes-based. Table 1 shows how research and evaluation are different, yet complementary.

In summary, these arguments suggest that the future of museum audience research needs to become a museum learning “community of practice”. Communities of practice are defined as “[... self-organised and selected groups of people who share a common sense of purpose and a desire to learn and know what each other knows”.

As well, they “[...] share expertise and passion about a topic and interact on an ongoing basis to further their learning”. Relationships over time and across contexts are important, as is the relation to many other communities of practice that co-exist and overlap. For

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museum audience research this means that research will be theoretically based; undertaken across a range of institutions; collaborative, both within the industry and the wider research community (especially universities); longitudinal; creative and innovative with wide ranging methods; and related to other learning experiences, showing connections and relationships. To achieve this means that evaluators and researchers working across the museum sector need to acquire a suite of new skills; demonstrate new ways of thinking; and generate new models of working together in order to remain relevant within their institutions and their operating environments.

Challenges for Audience Research for Museums in a New Century

The current mix of internal staff evaluators, external consultants and university researchers provides opportunities for museums to undertake innovative research in partnership with a wide range of organisations and to access funding not previously available. The challenge, however, is in using research findings in ways that will enhance visitor experiences and learning while questioning museum practices that are often embedded in long traditions and institutional customs. Changing the ways that professionals operate and think is critical in order for museums to survive and prosper in this new century.

Audience research in museums is uniquely placed to add value to organisations, not only through attending to the interests, learning needs and understandings of those who use their services, but to provide a meaningful and strategic role in the learning that takes place within the organisation. If museums see themselves as places where people learn, they must also see themselves as places where those who work in them also learn: learning organisations. In its broadest sense organisational learning is about embracing change and using it in innovative ways - learning from past actions and present situations in order to grow, develop and remain sustainable for the future.

Essential elements for the twenty-first century organisation have been identified as passionate leadership, bold vision and an ability to recognise and respond to the needs and characteristics of current and future users. Investing in performance, as well as monitoring and

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developing human skills and knowledge are also key drivers for success. Museums are organisations, and as such, need to be cognisant of how they operate as learning organisations in order to shape their destiny. Audience research has a key role to play in organisational learning through its strategic role and outward-focus which contributes to organisational survival and sustainability.

Monitoring the business environment and general trends in order to better understand current and future consumers and the marketplace are important activities for audience researchers. Increased use of web-based technology will be vital in data gathering and analysis, as well as in the dissemination of information, both within an organisation and across industry. New methods and ways of working will need to be found, engaging staff at all levels of the organisation, as well as solving practical problems collaboratively across industry. These issues were highlighted in a key report which recommended that “[…] museums should make educational research and evaluation a high priority … [and that] an independent museum learning research committee should be established to develop a national research agenda”.\(^{66}\) Since this report, the Museums Archives Libraries Council has taken a leading role in areas of social inclusion and measuring learning and impact across the cultural sector in the United Kingdom,\(^ {87}\) which has provided a useful template for others to adapt and learn from.

If audience research meets these challenges it will become truly strategic and useful by contributing to improved museum professional practices. Through monitoring and measuring success audience research can demonstrate that museums make a difference, help them improve their performance and, ultimately, contribute to organisational sustainability. As Benjamin Gilman, the pioneer of museum audience research, noted over 80 years ago in 1918:

To fulfil its complete purpose as a show, a museum must do the needful in both ways. It must arrange its contents so that they can be looked at; but also help its average visitors to know what they mean. It must at once install its contents and see to their interpretation (1918).\(^ {88}\)

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\(^{87}\) See [http://www.inspiringlearningforall.org/](http://www.inspiringlearningforall.org/)

How programs impact on users and facilitate learning about a wide range of key issues that museums are concerned with is a leadership role that audience research can take across both the cultural sector and other free-choice learning contexts. Ten years on, when asked the question "[...] what difference did it make that your museum was there?" audience research is, and should be, well-placed to provide some answers.

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