

Wolf probably felt confident that recurrent themes would resonate throughout the data and spurious findings would go unsupported over time.

Wolf, like St. John, felt evaluation research had become too restricted to:

"predominantly classical/experimental studies that have focused on isolated psychological variables, i.e., visitor fatigue, amount of time spent viewing an object. Such forces have not allowed insight into the complex impact that museums have on visitors' experiences. More over, past studies have not been able to inform *programmatic* decisions."

Wolf's Naturalist Evaluation was an attempt to find a cost-effective means to move client museums towards a better understanding of the products they produced, the process by which they produced them, and the impact of these products on the publics they served.

Wolf's methods, (and some of St. John's less rigorous paradigms) are worth consideration today, if you can accept that what you get is informed interpretation rather than research. To the individual or organization wishing to build a firm knowledge base for visitor behavior in their institution, more rigorous methods should periodically supplement any such approaches.

The Evaluation Fun-house

My metaphor for any evaluation method has always been the distorted mirror. Like those fun-house mirrors which add a hundred pounds here, or ten feet in height there, or make us into two-headed monsters with no legs at all, each evaluation (or research!) technique will always distort some aspects of reality and leave some major characteristics or relationships completely undetectable.

If we want to begin to understand the nature of museum experiences we must use a variety of methods, learning bit by bit the distortions that inevitably come with each, and learning bit by bit about those relationships which truly represent the reality we think we are examining.

St. John's paradigms should probably be a part of our evaluation fun-house. So should the cornfield.

And don't ever forget the Wolf.

References

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Footnote

- ¹This critical appraisal was part of a two-step, multi-method evaluation program recommended by a team of professional evaluators consisting of Barbara Birney, Stephen Bitgood, D. D. Hilke, and Harris Shettel.

"There's A Worm In My Corn"

An Allegorical Tale Designed To Shed Almost No Light On The Burning Issues of Exhibit Evaluation But Which Could Conceivably Help To Differentiate Between A "Deep Positivistic Rut" and A Worm

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It's a typical evening meal at the Fox household. Mommy and Daddy Fox and the two little Foxes are looking forward to another pleasant time around the dinner table as they chat about the day's events. A heaping pile of freshly cooked corn-on-the-cob is steaming on its plate, and everyone helps themselves to an ear and begins to happily chomp away.

This scene of domestic tranquility and harmony is shattered by a fit of coughing and spitting as little Tommy Fox expels a mouthful of corn onto his plate and the surrounding

area, followed by a series of strange choking, animal-like noises.

"What in the world is wrong with you?" asks his concerned mother.

"God, its awful - there's a worm in my corn!" says Tommy between gasps.

"Worm?" his father shouts, with a strong note of incredulity in his voice. "What do you mean, worm?"

"You know, Dad, those little, soft, squiggly things....."

"I know what a worm looks like," says Dad, adding a note of pique to the incredulity, "but, you couldn't possibly have a worm in your corn. I bought that corn myself on the way home from work from the finest produce store in town. It was picked just a few hours before I bought it. Not only that, but that happens to be Golden Glow corn which, you may be interested to know, was developed by the U.S. Department of Agriculture. It was also judged to be the best sweet corn by a panel of corn experts from all over the United States. I saw an article in the *Corn Growers Weekly* just the other day that extolled the virtues of Golden Glow corn and it noted specifically that it is 'worm free.' And another thing, *Consumer's Guide* rated it 'number one' out of all the corn tested. And remember, Son, corn is as American as apple pie."

"But Dad, I can see....."

"Don't interrupt me," Dad shot back, "I'm trying to enlighten you about Golden Glow corn so you won't make the same mistake again. Just to show you how misguided you are, we'll conduct a poll right here. Mother, you ate the corn and I didn't hear any gagging sounds coming from your side of the table. In fact, I would have to say that you had a kind of ecstatic expression on your face as you were eating."

Mrs. Fox couldn't admit that she had actually just kicked her shoes off under the table and was rubbing her feet together. Dad plowed (sorry) ahead.

"How would you rate the corn on a scale of 'Excellent,' 'Great,' and 'Above Average?'"

"Well, John," she began tentatively, "I'm certainly no expert on corn, but I guess I would have to say it was 'Above Average.'"

Dad turned to Amy Fox, who was just getting ready to bolt from the room when she heard those unmistakable stentorian tones emanating from Dad's side of the table. It was too late.

"Well, how does Daddy's little trouper rate this wonderful corn?"

"Gee, Dad," she said, as she watched the green thing on Tommy's plate make its way over the edge, "I guess it was

OK, I mean, you know, it was really, you know, not all that bad."

"Way to go," Dad exclaimed, "another rave review for Golden Glow! Well, Son, what do you have to say now?"

Tommy looked down at the table in time to see "it" making "its" way toward the butter dish. "Well, I guess I feel like I must have made a mistake or something. I guess sometimes we don't really know what we think we know - I feel kind of, well, stupid, I guess."

"Well, Son," said Dad with a note of family pride in his voice (he was musically inclined), "we all make mistakes. I'm just glad that you now know how to sort out the real from the unreal, the important from the unimportant. I'm proud of you, Son."

Dad left the room with a(nother) note of authority in his stride. Sis held a napkin to her mouth and headed for the bathroom. Tommy looked at his mother with a mixture of "Aw, Mom, how could you" and "I understand" on his young, but rapidly aging, face. Mom carefully squeezed the worm (which was about to enter the stick of butter) into the folds of her napkin and headed for the kitchen garbage disposal.

The moral of this tale is one, some, all, or none, of the following:

- Worms are in the eye of the beholder.
- Worms are a metaphysical concept, best left to philosophers.
- Some people know worms when they see them and even, on occasion, have suggestions for getting rid of them. For some reason, this characteristic often makes other people very nervous.
- Once you have bitten into a worm, it is really hard to forget it.
- What you find has almost everything to do with where you look.

Worm in My Corn: Reply #2

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For those readers who may be completely mystified by Reply #1 (I must admit, however, I *did* enjoy writing it!), here is a somewhat more traditional and substantive discussion of things that trouble me about the St. John article. First, a few words about the worm for the more literal minded readers.

The analogy between denying the reality of the worm in the corn and the argument put forth by St. John that we are looking in the wrong place (visitor behavior as it relates to exhibits) to learn about the reality of exhibit effectiveness/ineffectiveness, seemed to me to be quite apt. I thought of other analogies that would have served as well - not using patients to find out about a new drug; not using customers to find out how successful a new product will be; not using

trainees to find out if a training course is achieving its objectives; not using students to find out how well a new curriculum is teaching - but since St. James used corn to help demonstrate the "folly" of using experimental procedures to learn about exhibits, I thought the "non-existent" worm in the corn was the analogy of choice.

On to other matters. To point out, as St. John does, that in using the experimental research paradigm one must make a distinction between statistical significance and practical significance is to state the obvious. But, to then conclude that the experimental approach is almost by definition suspect ("limited at best and wrong-minded at worst"), is to take a very large and unfounded leap.