

Enhancing the Confrontation Gallery at the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute

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The Civil Rights Institute

The Civil Rights Institute in Birmingham, Alabama, officially opened its doors on November 16, 1992. Since so many significant events of the civil rights movement for African-Americans occurred in the city of Birmingham, it is only fitting that the Institute focuses on Birmingham's civil rights history. However, the Institute also includes descriptions of many other significant events in the civil rights movement, including a gallery on the general issue of human rights.

1. *Barriers Gallery*. This Gallery was designed "to give a feeling of what everyday life was like for blacks in Birmingham, and elsewhere, during the post-war era." Exhibits simulate "white" and "colored" drinking fountains, an iron ore mine, a church, an African-American theater, segregated class rooms, a home, a business office, and a courtroom. The inequalities of this "separate but equal" era are illustrated by comparing the resources allocated to African-American and white American education.

2. *Confrontation Gallery*. The Confrontation Gallery, a partially darkened room immediately following the Barriers Gallery, consists of fourteen life-size black-and-white photos of people on vertical sheets of plexiglass placed around the room creating an ambiguous pathway. These visual images are accompanied by recorded voices, randomly coming from different parts of the room, to exemplify the wide range of conflicting attitudes at the beginning of the civil rights movement. Voices can be heard repeating the conflicting attitudes at the time the civil rights movement was about to begin: "Separate is equal" and "Don't he know that the colored entrance is around back?" The purpose of these voices is to instill a feeling of tension in the visitor to illustrate the social atmosphere at the beginning of the civil rights movement. On the far wall of the Gallery is an outline of a KKK rally with an image of a burning cross. Here also is a well-lit label titled "Bombingham" which describes some of the violent confrontation between the white extremists and blacks.

3. *Movement Gallery*. As visitors leave the Confrontation Gallery, they enter the Movement Gallery which chronicles the major events of the black civil rights movement and focuses on Birmingham and its surrounding geographical area. This Gallery leads the visitor through the 1955 bus boycott in Montgomery and the voting rights march from Selma to Montgomery in 1965. Time line graphics unify the different areas of this Gallery. Highlights of the movement include: the Birmingham jail cell occupied by Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., the bus burning in Anniston, Alabama, and the use of water hoses and dogs by the Birmingham Police to stop civil rights demonstrations.

4. *Human Rights Throughout the World*. This final Gallery, opened in April, 1994, conveys the international scope of the movement for human rights with banners, photographs, and quotes from people around the world voicing their struggles with basic human rights. Also included are a video describing the Declaration of Human Rights, touch-screen computers allowing an in-depth look into different countries' human rights struggle, and touch-panels with audio and text describing the human rights problems of individuals around the world.

The Institute has received considerable (and extremely favorable) attention from the public media, including articles in the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Southern Living* magazine. Publicity and marketing efforts have apparently been very successful in attracting many to the Institute. In the first month, the Institute received over 31,000 visitors and over 200,000 were expected the first year.

The Problem and Purpose of the Enhancement

Based on the initial evaluation involving self-reports and casual observation, it was believed that the Confrontation Gallery could be further improved by enhancing the gallery in a way that would increase visitors' attention to the recorded voices and thus make clear what the conflicting attitudes were at the time that the civil rights movement began in the 1950s and 60s. Visitors appeared to be confused and could not identify which photograph corresponded to which voice. Visitors tended to walk relatively quickly through this area.

The purpose of this study was to enhance the Confrontation Gallery by placing written text on the plexiglass photo panels that corresponded to the audio-recorded statements. Text placement was completed in two phases to assess the possibility that having written text on all panels would create competition for attention and result in less attention.

The procedure used in this study is generally called "remedial evaluation" (Bitgood & Shettel, 1992; Screven, 1990) and it involves enhancing a completed exhibition using visitor data. The procedure involves three major steps: (1) collect visitor data on the exhibition's

effectiveness; (2) make changes in exhibit elements that do not appear to be performing in an optimal manner; and (3) collect additional visitor data to assess the impact of the changes. Evaluation after the exhibition is installed can be particularly effective for identifying and correcting problems that arise when all of the individual elements are put together. Such problems include elements that fail to fall within visitor sight lines, circulation problems, and distracting stimuli from other exhibits.

Method

This study was conducted in the Confrontation Room Gallery of the Birmingham Civil Rights Institute, Birmingham, Alabama. Initially, the Gallery consisted of only an introductory panel with text, 12 panels with no text arranged in sets of two, and the "Bombingham" label on the back wall (as previously mentioned). Written text were added to the photo panels in two phases. Figure 1 is a diagram of the exhibit gallery illustrating the location of the plexiglass panels and the "Bombingham" label on the back wall.

Recording procedure: tracking. The first visitor to enter the gallery was selected and observed until he or she left the gallery; then, the next visitor to enter the gallery was selected, and so on. As visitors were tracked through the gallery, the following events were recorded: (1) total time in the gallery area; (2) time stopped and viewing plexiglass photo panels; (3) time spent reading text and labels; (4) estimated age, race, gender, and number in group.

Rating scale. Visitors were systematically selected as they departed from the exhibit area according to the following procedure. The first individual to exit the exhibit was approached and asked to complete a short survey about the Confrontation Gallery. When the survey for the first visitor was completed, the next visitor to exit was selected and the process was repeated. The survey included 12 statements (e.g., "The exhibits are enlightening," "It makes history come to life ") as well as demographic information. Table 2 lists the items rated on this survey. Each item was rated on the following scale: "Strongly Agree," "Agree," "Neutral," "Disagree," and "Strongly Disagree."

The study involved three phases:

1. *Baseline.* Before any text was added to the plexiglass photo panels, observations were made by tracking visitors through the exhibit gallery from the time they entered the Gallery until the time they left. Baseline data were collected on three successive Saturdays during the month of May. A total of 42 visitors were observed during this phase. In addition, a sample of 51 visitors were given the rating scale to complete.

2. *Text-1 condition.* Written text labels were placed on five of the twelve photo panels, two on Panel set 2, one on Panel set 3, one on Panel set 4, and one on Panel set 7 (See Figure 1 for the location of these Panel sets). The written text material corresponded with the voice of the individual making the statement on the overhead audio tape. This condition was in effect on three successive Saturdays during May and June. A total of 84 visitors were observed during this phase.

3. *Text-2 condition.* Written text labels were placed on all of the remaining plexiglass photo panels in the Gallery. Thus, a total of 12 written statements plus the orientation or introductory statement were present during this phase. Data were collected for three successive Saturdays during the month of June. A total of 54 visitors were observed during this phase. In addition, 75 rating surveys were collected.

Results

Visitor Demographics

Visitors were more likely to be African-American (78.5%) than white (19.1%) or Asian (2.3%). Females represented 71.7% of the group. The most frequent age ranges were 31-40 (27.3%) and 41-50 (26.7%). Other age ranges included: under 21 years (16.3%), over 50 years (15%), and 21-30 years (14.7%). Educational levels were varied with 12.9% having less than high school graduates, 16.2% stating they were high school graduates, 26.7% having some college, 21.1% reporting graduation from college, and 23.1% reporting post graduate education. Over 67% reported that they were visiting with an organized group and over 30% with family or friends. The percentage of first visits was 88.7%. Most visitors came from within a 50 mile radius.

Tracking Data

Table 1 summarizes the tracking data showing significant changes in bold. The observational data clearly show a dramatic impact resulting from text placed on panels. Total time in the gallery increased dramatically from Baseline (24.6 sec) to Text-1 Condition (78.2 sec) and finally to the Text-2 Condition (117.1 sec). The percent of visitors stopping at individual panels and time of stopping also changed dramatically through the study.

Baseline condition. Very little time was spent looking at the plexiglass photo panels or walking through the room, with only an average of 29% of visitors stopping and viewing time for the total gallery only averaging 24.6 seconds. When visitors did stop, they remained stationary for only a very brief period of time.

Text-1 condition. When the written text was placed on five of the twelve panels (see Figure 1), the average time viewing these panels rose

significantly, with an average of 42% of visitors stopping. In addition, total time spent in the Confrontation room (78.68 seconds) was more than twice that of Baseline. In addition to a dramatic increase in stops at the panels where text was added (50% of visitors stopping for an average of 52.17 seconds), there was a decrease in stops at panels in which no text was added (7% of visitors stopping for an average of 10.83 seconds). Visitors not only increased attention to exhibit elements with text, they also redistributed their attention so that panels without text received less attention.

Text-2 condition. Viewing time and the percentage of visitors stopping continued to increase dramatically. An average of 71% of visitors stopped and average total viewing time was increased to 119.8 seconds. Changes in visitor behavior toward the introductory panel and the "Bombingham" label were also noted. For the introductory panel, percentage of visitors stopping dropped in the Text-1 condition (40%) from the baseline (59.5%) and rose again in the Text-2 condition (65.7%). Viewing time showed the opposite pattern peaking at 10.27 seconds during the Text-1 condition. For the "Bombingham" label, the percentage of visitors stopping increased throughout all conditions and viewing time peaked again during the Text-1 condition at 39.52 seconds. The reason for these changes is not known. Perhaps increased attention in the total room increased attention on these beginning and ending panels as well, or possibly some other outside manipulations were responsible.

Rating Scale Data

Results of the rating scale data are presented in Table 2. Interestingly, before the text was added, visitors reported that the gallery "Made me feel more angry" (61.9% agree) than after the text was added (55.2% agree). The percent disagreeing with this statement increased from 14.3% before text to 27.6% after text. At the same time agreement to the statement "It makes me feel depressed" increased from 32.8% to 48.3%. The percentage of agreement with the statement "The experience was emotionally uplifting" decreased from 76.6% to 59.0% corresponding with the addition of written text. There was also an increase in the percentage of disagreement with this statement associated with the addition of written text. Finally, the statement "I find it difficult to believe that these events really happened" received a different amount of agreement-disagreement after the text was added. Percentage of agreement decreased from 24.7% to 7.0%, and percentage of disagreement increased from 60.1% to 93.1%.

Discussion

As shown by this study, remedial evaluation significantly influenced the impact of an exhibit gallery. A small change in exhibit design can produce a great change in the exhibit's impact as a whole. In the

Confrontation Gallery, supplementing the audio with written text significantly increased time in the gallery and time viewing each panel. In addition, survey ratings associated with this gallery changed. For example, to some extent, feelings of anger appeared to be replaced by feelings of depression.

The increase in the percentage of visitors stopping and the dramatic increase in viewing time from the Text-1 condition (with five written text labels) and the Text-2 condition (with 12 text labels) was surprising in light of Melton's (1935) report that increasing pictures in an art gallery resulted in increased competition for visitor attention and ultimately led to decreased attention to each picture. We can only speculate why such competition for visitor attention did not occur in this study. Perhaps written text more than audio messages is a more effective method of causing visitors to stop. Once stopped, visitors are more likely to focus on the educational point.

Since the purpose of the Confrontation Gallery was to create tension by presenting the conflicting attitudes at the beginning of the civil rights movement, the changes seemed to be consistent with this goal. There were changes in the survey ratings, although the specific meaning of these changes is open to interpretation.

References

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- Melton, A. (1935). *Problems of installation in museums of art*. American Association of Museums Monograph, New Series No. 14. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums.
- Screven, C. G. (1990). Uses of evaluation before, during, and after exhibit design. *ILVS Review: A Journal of Visitor Behavior*, 1(2), 36-67.

Table 1
Percentage of Stops and Viewing Time for Each Panel set

	Baseline		Text-1 (Panels 2,3,4,7)		Text-2 (All Panels)	
	% Stop	View Time	% Stop	View Time	% Stop	View Time
Intro panel	59.5%	6.88 sec	40.0%	10.27 sec	65.7	10.04
Panel set 2	14.3	4.17	63.5	11.57	88.5	11.28
Panel set 3	4.8	3.00	35.3	7.53	60.0	10.33
Panel set 4	23.8	4.50	63.4	6.85	77.1	10.82
Panel set 5	21.4	8.89	5.9	6.00	65.7	6.75
Panel set 6	21.4	3.78	7.1	4.83	62.8	7.82
Panel set 7	11.9	4.40	40.0	7.12	60.0	10.62
Bombingham	78.6	18.46	84.5	39.52	88.5	37.61
TOTAL TIME		24.60		78.68		119.8

Table 2
Rating Scale Results Before and After Text Enhancement

Item	Before Text		After Text	
	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>	<u>Agree</u>	<u>Disagree</u>
Exhibits are enlightening	89.1	10.9	94.1	6.9
Make history come to life	92.3	0	93.1	0
Thought provoking	82.3	4.8	82.7	10.4
Make me angry	61.9	14.3	55.2	27.6
Make me feel depressed	32.8	37.5	48.3	37.9
Make me want to learn more	93.6	1.6	86.2	6.9
Information is confusing	4.9	82.0	7.0	89.6
Emotionally uplifting	76.6	7.9	59.0	18.5
Easy to understand	87.7	4.6	92.9	3.6
Interesting	93.6	3.2	100.0	0
Learned something new	89.3	4.6	82.7	10.4
Difficult to believe	24.7	60.1	7.0	93.1

