Importance of Interpretive Inquiry in Studying Museum Settings

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In my experience as an arts educator researching museum visitor experiences I have found that interpretive inquiry can be informative, absorbing, and provides rich data. I first experimented with interpretive inquiry in 1986 in a study of school visitors to the *Discovery Gallery* at the Royal Ontario Museum (Freeman, 1989; Soren, 1986). Then in a cross-site inquiry I used the methodology to compare visitor experiencing across three very different settings – at the Gibson House Living History Museum, at a temporary installation of contemporary art at the Art Galley of Ontario (AGO), and at the *Hall of Technology* at the Ontario Science Centre (OSC) [Soren, 1990]. As an outsider to these institutions, I have found this form of inquiry particularly effective, not only for finding out about visitors' reactions to a museum environment, but also for examining visitor outcomes expected by those producing the environment. From the insider's perspective, the former Chief of Education at the Ontario Science Centre validated the effectiveness of the approach during a recent presentation at the Canadian Museums Association conference (Fowles, 1991). He commented:

> "I really feel that Barbara should be congratulated on the perceptive way in which she analyzed these three institutions. . . . I find it a little bit unnerving to find someone who is able to read us better than we read ourselves."

What *is* interpretive inquiry? In education, interpretive research attempts to find human meaning in socially and culturally organized environments for learning (Erickson, 1986). The research method common to interpretive approaches is firsthand, intensive, long-term participant observation in a field setting. If one wants to find out about educational experiences in a museum setting, an interpretive researcher records what happens in the setting by writing field notes about observations and conversations, audio or videotaping interviews, collecting documentary evidence, such as policy statements, missions, mandates, visitor surveys, admission statistics and comments, and any other information which will help to inform the inquiry. These data are then analyzed, reflected upon and reported, in part, by means of detailed description using narrative vignettes and natural conversation.

Interpretive methods often need to be used in educational research, suggests Erickson, because everyday life in educational practice tends to be

invisible. In order to understand practice it is necessary to document concrete details of practice. In an educational situation, according to Lincoln and Guba (1985), different interpretations are likely to be meaningful for different realities. The validity of interpretations depends heavily on local particulars and values of the investigator and individuals in the setting. In interpretive inquiry each situation is understood as idiosyncratic and unique and examined as a case study. The research design for each case study has to be emergent, in a continual state of evolution and open-ended, as the investigator attempts to understand the situation being studied. By comparing different settings one can better understand the meaning of actions and clarify what is happening in a particular setting being studied.

Examples of interpretive inquiry in the museum field are the studies reported by Robert Wolf between 1978 and 1988 (Glaser and Spiess, 1988). In these studies, Wolf intended to capture what actually occurs in museum settings. He aimed at interpreting more than judging what impact a museum exhibit or program was having on all those concerned with the phenomenon. Current and spontaneous activities, behaviors and expressions were observed and different values and perspectives of staff and visitors which existed, *in situ*, in the natural setting were examined. Although Wolf's studies were clearly portrayed and informative of the museum environments studied, why have there been few interpretive studies reported outside of Wolf's work?

One problem may be that interpretive data which amasses reams of field notes, mounds of documentation, pages of transcripts are somewhat formidable to analyze. The information gathered, comments heard, behaviors observed must be organized into topics, themes, and patterns. It took from three months to one year for me to finally feel sure that I knew how and why each museum environment I was investigating had been produced for the casual visitor and what experiences visitors were having in the settings created. Nonetheless, the following data illustrates how we can come to understand the museum visitor experience from the perspective of museum workers planning an environment and visitors reacting to the milieu provided.

At the Gibson House and the Science Centre I found little documentation of educational intentions or visitor experiences valued by museum workers who had originally developed each setting. It was historiography or a form of history-telling (Walsh, 1967) which I found most useful for understanding how deliberations and decisions about the production of environments had been made. Narratives from directors, curators, designers, educators, consultants, marketing, public relations and technical staff, security guards and volunteers ultimately offered me an overall picture of the process of decision-making about objects, ideas and phenomena presented in each setting.

The Gibson House Living History Museum

For instance, at the Gibson House the contractor for the site, a military historian, commented on decisions for the restoration of the Gibson House which were based upon strong feelings about how history ought to be taught:

> "You can't teach history by talking about things. You've got to teach history by talking about people. . . .It's one of the things that made Canadian history so dull. Since it's inception it has been talking about ideas and philosophy and politics rather than talking about people and how they were affected. Therefore, you really have to try to establish your exhibit areas in order to best portray the people who lived there and the people of their times.
>
> It rubs off on you rather than what you're specifically taught. You absorb the atmosphere of the place. You get a sense of feeling what it was like to be there."

Decisions about what type of museum the Gibson House was going to be were based upon the restorer and the re-creator's experience with historic restorations as teaching tools:

> "I have a background of stepping into the past – a complete immersion in another period that could envelop a visitor with an historic restoration. And what a teaching tool that was, for both adults and young people. I had a total commitment to that. I felt that was a much stronger way of interpreting history than the traditional gallery showcase kind of interpretation."

She valued historic restorations which attempted to create a period in time "into which people could step and make that quick transition back a century or more." The quality of life, the everyday decisions that were being made, are important. What was affecting people? What were people doing and saying and wearing and talking about? A lot of outside information is needed in interpreting the museum to the public so that visitors may attain a feel for the period and the community. There are, also, salient points in the story to be told about the life and times of the Gibson family that need to be covered by the volunteer costumed interpreters.

How do visitors react to this recreated environment? Information about the meaning of the experience for visitors was easiest to access in the parlour as interpreters told stories about the Gibson family and life of the times, or in the kitchen by the warm hearth with the aroma of scones baking and cider boiling as visitors told stories about their own related experiences. One of the more typical nostalgic reactions was:

> "Look at the piano. Isn't it something? Look at the stool. We had one just like it. The horsehair – did that ever work when you sat on it! It prickled. There's nothing as hot as horsehair. Horsehair was put in children's boots – warmest thing you could

> use to keep toes from freezing. Feather tick, we used to call them polly asses in Brownies! I slept in one at my grandmother's. It was terrific."

Some unexpected associations emerged as well from which I learned about the personal meaning and relevance of the Gibson House visit for individuals. The Gibson House visit prompted one visitor to tell the story about her own great-great-grandfather who had come to Long Point, Ontario, from England in 1791 as a squire or landowner. He married three times and his 650 acre estate is now the site of an historic house. He was a friend of the Empire Loyalists. She explained:

> "It's the only place in Canada where sassafras is grown, a Carolinian plant. You cannot cut down the trees there. A lot of families died of smallpox – a lot of headstones. There were many fires in the old days. Everything was often lost. So, I'm glad they have salvaged what they have salvaged."

Another visitor was particularly taken with the responsibility the Gibson children took and the extent to which they helped out because her husband was very ill and couldn't do what he use to do. Since he was very exacting, he had never included their three sons in tasks and now found it hard to accept that the job is not done as he likes it, but it must get done. In contrast, she perceived that the Gibson children had to be taught, supervised by their mother and father, so that over a long period of time they were able to do tasks on their own.

A longtime volunteer commented that children who come with their parents start to feel, often, a generational link because almost invariably Mom or Dad say somewhere around the House, "Grandma had one of those. When I was a kid I . . ." She wondered if, when they go away and are talking at the supper table, that pull between generations grows. She also found that new Canadians who are really suffering culture shock can feel an affinity with the house and an identity with the Gibson family members. For instance, a nine-year-old child from Lebanon had no sense of the Gibson House being an old house. "It was comfortable. 'My grandmother – we cooked like that in Syria.' And she immediately set about – she knew why the wood was piled up, where the stuff was." An important role of the House in the community, as the restorer had intended, is to serve as an ethnic multi-cultural base where today's immigrants can identify with the story of an immigrant family of the 1850's.

Ontario Science Centre's *Hall of Technology*

Museum workers producing the *Hall of Technology* at the Ontario Science Centre valued very different experiences for their visitors. As the Chief of Science explained:

> "We try to emphasize the things that work well in our medium and let people use those as pieces that fill in the conceptual framework that they already have in their mind, which might be very simple. Or it might just provide some new headings under which they can collect information as they go through life."

The anticipated pathway of the visitor through the *Hall* tends to be a "sense of ramble" rather than a "linear, continuous, tell-people-everything method." Developers attempt to provide options and variety for visitors to a milieu like the *Hall of Technology*. The Coordinator of Exhibitions at the time the *Hall* was produced elaborated:

> "We need contrasts. We need big things, little things, old things, new things, fast things, slow things, puzzling things, humorous things, things for little old ladies, thing for little kids. We need options – lots of options. We need things that you wonder at, things that are beautiful, things that are weird, yucky. One thing is that human side of trying to think hard about the nature of the visitor and what they enjoy and don't enjoy – giving options. What are the first questions that come to the visitor's mind? That is the way we look at it."

Further, there is an active attempt to make objects as provocative as possible by developing "hot ideas" into "visual magnets" so that visitors initially become curious and interested in approaching an object. Then, during a visit "things may begin to click and intrigue" individuals, suggested the Director General at the time of the study. As he reflected:

> "The difficulty we have in answering the question, 'What does it do to people?' is that the connections happening don't happen in a conscious way. So, if you said to somebody as they're leaving the place, 'What happened to you?', they wouldn't say, 'My goodness, I got all sorts of connections.' It may happen three weeks from next Tuesday. 'That's fascinating. There was something about that bridge which was rather like the thing over there (at the Science Centre).' "

Are visitors to the *Hall of Technology* able to make some sort of connection which could grow later with associations made during experiences in life? The cooperative nature of experiencing seemed to serve to strengthen relationships between individuals visiting in groups. For instance, a single parent who works in a factory commented about his visit, "I learned how to get along with my sons." He always "blew up at confrontations and walked away." He realized after his visit that he was learning to change that. "I'm beginning to grow up."

Technology specialists seemed to enjoy feeling comfortable and familiar with objects and experiences of phenomena in the *Hall*. They liked to

confirm their own expertise. For example, one artist who studied color perception in Psychology classes discussed her strategies for working with a Color Match computer game:

> "By blurring her eyes, she could see when the color vanished. 'At that point the match is basically right.' She then focused her eyes and fine-tuned and concentrated on the edges. 'When it gets really close you can't see the difference between the colors at the edges.' "

The visitors less informed about *Technology* seemed to be particularly interested in how technology displayed is used in their daily living situations. An older man from Michigan was particularly interested in the *Foundry* because he watched molten metal poured in an automobile factory near where he lives. He was curious that it was different from the *Foundry* at the Science Centre in that the sand was not re-cycled, but shovelled into a trough, wet, and used for landfill. He asked the host on duty about that difference. (The host later commented that he had not told the man that the landfill from the Ford plant could be unsafe, causing diseases and infections. The host tried not to worry visitors and would rather their doctors tell them about these kinds of dangers.)

Finally, the following interaction at *Color Matching* highlighted how social experiencing and sharing of successes helped many visitors to leave feeling proud of their personal accomplishment and satisfied with their skill in working with color as a technological phenomena:

> "A young man calls out to a couple at the other color monitor, 'I've got a real tough one over here. Look at this one, this is a toughy. So close, yet so far. I've got to think this one out. I got it. Very good! Ahh. Not good enough.' His male friend comes over and the man says to him, 'The bottom one (the color plate) you tried? That one's difficult,' and his friend returns to the other computer. He tries the Red/Blue/Green system 'I'm getting it now. There. Fantastic! I haven't lost it as far as science goes. Look at that. Perfect. Hey, Ed, what was your best one? Look at me. Fantastic. Science major, that's why. . . . I wish they would have that for every imaginable color. Incredible pleasure with that game!' "

Art Gallery of Ontario's *Viewpoints: Approaches to Contemporary Art*

At the Art Gallery of Ontario I was able to observe naturalistically the deliberation process in which the educators were engaged for *Viewpoints: Approaches to Contemporary Art.* I watched and listened during the months of preparation for the installation, particularly as the interactive devices were being developed. As the educators said they were attempting:

> " . . . to initiate a process where mental activity begins and questions are asked about one's own response to the work. Through a process of that examination and exploration of the work in the context of one's own reaction, one discovers new things about the works."

Question-and-answer, the educators felt, best qualified the process that they expected to set up. They considered it a particularly effective strategy for visitors singly or in small groups to be engaged with objects.

During their planning of interpretive aids, there was disagreement amongst educators whether visitors would want to be provided with information through fact-feeding or through fact-finding, particularly in computer explorations developed. There was a feeling by one member of the group that they, as staff, had gone through their own exploration to find out about an object like Paladino's *Viandante*. Why shouldn't the visitor be invited to guess or discover some of the symbolism? Why give visitors all the facts about Dante? Extra facts just confuse; they're "extra baggage." Alternatively, another planner believed strongly that visitors would turn off the machine immediately with that approach. Why should visitors believe them as authorities? What is said must relate to some provided evidence. Was adding more information merely satisfying the educators' need to cover information or did the viewer really need a certain historical context in order to understand a work? Was more fact necessary for an understanding of an object or were more facts not retained and only extraneous to the message?

Again, how did the visitor experience this animated installation? Visitors knowledgeable about technology were somewhat critical of the technological aids produced. For example, a visitor who had spent about five minutes at one of the Exlorapainting computer programs pointed out that in the computer game your eye remains where the mouse was in the last frame. So, when you have options, such as body language or color, you tend to look at the boxes where you last clicked as opposed to the explanation at the top of the screen. He found that the elements of the work that the visitor was to explore were very obvious. An artist and avid museum goer found the material "a bit simplistic." She wondered if the artists had contributed to the animation and was surprised that they had not been consulted. A former teacher and member of the AGO commented that the computer games were "not meant to be condescending, but they are for about a junior high grade eight level." Another visitor wrote in the visitor comment book:

> "I resent that the mystery of discovery should be taken away – everything is *neatly* explained. How sad that a work should have a 'correct interpretation.' "

In contrast, a senior secondary school student who "paints a lot" was fascinated with the Paladino as "the most dramatic, magnetic work here."

The flipper "helped a lot," but the audio was most effective because it had "drama and a richness of language" which served "as an inspiration" for the work. She found that the computer game was "interesting, but not helpful" for her understanding of the work. Two other secondary school art majors commented that the instructional aids help to focus "on who and what to look for." They felt that the aids "should be a prelude to everything else in the galleries and not in the back room of the AGO."

Not unlike the *Hall of Technology*, the gallery environment at the AGO was transformed from a generally quiet and subdued space to a room full of laughter and discussion. Children, students, and particularly the crowd of people typically clustered around the *Color Match* game (which had been borrowed from the Ontario Science Centre to animate a Molinari painting) contributed to an energetic atmosphere which drew people into the gallery from the top of the stairs. Visitors sometimes used one another to understand the use and intent of instructional aids as in these field notes:

> "A man sitting beside me across from the color game said he was down earlier and got 'Excellent' and 'Terrific' on the game, so he brought his daughter down to play it, but there had been a line-up at the game since he had come. A woman asks him, 'How do you do it?' 'Just play with the levers,' he says. 'It's just trial-and-error. I didn't go that deep. I just tried it twice.' While waiting the father and daughter go over to the Danby and read the text panel. They look closely at the work. Another couple tries on the mask beside them and they all laugh. 'If you get magical powers I want to know about it!' says the woman to her male companion. 'It's a once in a lifetime,' he says. 'You have to look ferocious,' she adds. The first man with his daughter tries on the mask. The woman looks back very briefly at the picture."

Conclusions

What meaning did I make from this type of data? I found that, although very different products were presented to the visitor at each of these three institutions, the intended visitor experience and the actual visitor experience had commonalities. Generally, each institution seemed to be providing ***edutainment*** type encounters (For discussions about the museum as educator and entertainer see MacDonald, 1986, 1988; and Weiss, Weinstein and Dykes, 1988). Education was provided in the form of personally meaningful experiences with human facilitators or interpretive aids in the setting which provided information with contemporary relevance for visitors. Visitors were entertained with performances from interpreters, hosts or demonstrators and by interacting both with communication technologies and, equally as important, with other visitors at displays. Visitors less knowledgeable about the subject matter presented appreciated and seemed to gain some understanding from these edutainment

opportunities. Visitors with more specialized knowledge about the subject matter sometimes resented the intrusion of edutainment aids, wanting to confirm their expertise and appreciate the objects and phenomena displayed in a more contemplative, "sacred grove" atmosphere (Ripley, 1969).

The benefits of interpretive research for museum settings should be evident. The data gathered is informative, textured, full of meaning which can help researchers understand the complexities of each situation. The data can also serve to sensitize exhibit producers to the diverse kinds of experiences visitors have in their galleries, halls and exhibit areas.

The most problematic issues are time and cost and finding researchers with an interest and expertise in this type of research. Training staff on site – who are often called *interpreters* – to be interpretive researchers may help to resolve these problems. The staff on the floor know best both the intentions of those who have produced the exhibits and the visitors' experiences within the setting. Human facilitators, such as costumed interpreters, docent or hosts, are in the best position to be *key informants* (Patton, 1980). Training educators who work with the casual visitor as interpretive researchers will reduce the time and cost of this type of inquiry and give these public educators opportunities to better understand intended and actual visitor experiences. Subsequent feedback to exhibit designers will also provide opportunities for public educators to input into the exhibit production process.

Finally, a secondary problem for me in these studies had been the frustration of being unable to determine what individuals actually learn during a museum visit. Tracking and brief, unobtrusive conversations with visitors after an experience in a setting do not help us to determine what people learn. I have come to believe that "a gestation period of perhaps days or weeks or months," as I was told at the Science Centre, is needed for visitors to understand an initial emotional or cognitive connection that may have been made during a museum visit. I suggest the solution to this problem may be to initiate longitudinal interpretive studies of visitors in order to see how day-to-day experiences and several visits to museums and attendance at other cultural events help individuals to make connections and contribute to an individual's process of lifelong learning.

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