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# VISITOR STUDIES IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

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by Paulette M. McManus

The practice of visitor studies and evaluation is alive and flourishing in United Kingdom museums and the tradition of visitor observation, first recorded here at the end of the nineteenth century, flourishes alongside it.

## Large Museums

However, there are still very few full time evaluators on the staff of any museums. To my knowledge, the National Galleries and Museums on Merseyside and the Science Museum, London, are the only museums retaining research officers running research programs full time. This is surprising because the national museums and the larger municipal museums receive a major share of all museum visiting in this country, so one would expect to observe a more obvious visitor awareness focus. In the remaining large museums, some have an education, interpretation or marketing officer who will undertake occasional visitor studies as part of his or her workload; others buy in highly experienced consultancy help, usually of a marketing nature, as they feel they need it; while a few apparently still continue to ignore the issue entirely. Very few visitor study consultants at this level restrict their work solely to visitor studies. This situation, at the top of the tree, so to speak, means that in the United Kingdom the museum profession does not have a semiorganised, professional evaluation community which can supply the natural leadership that will informally monitor standards and levels of creativity and design as American visitor study professionals (both in-house and independent) do. Naturally, informal friendly networks exist, but I suspect they are mainly used for mutual support and information swapping. There is a feeling in the air that

we should become a little more formally organised.

## Small and Medium Sized Museums

There has, I think, been an increase in the volume of visitor studies undertaken by small and medium size municipal and independent museums, as well as museum services, over the past five years or so. Naturally, medium and small sized museums make up the bulk of museum provision and, as we know, often

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work under severe budget constraints. I feel that the welcome flowering of visitor studies in this sector has very likely come about because of the fairly recent easy accessibility of evaluation literature of the “how to do it” variety, and also because recently trained professionals have studied visitor behaviour in their post-graduate vocational courses. The structure of on the job training leading toward an Associate of the Museums Association qualification, a qualification much sought after in the municipal sector, also requires candidates to undertake a small evaluation project. Given this environmental context of little past experience and, perhaps, verbal rather than prac-

tical methods of learning how to design and undertake visitor studies, it can be expected that standards of work may be very variable. I do not think that this matters, at present, as “practice makes perfect” but I do worry that some people may be missing out on developing a feel for the visitor experience and that they may, in consequence, begin to think of visitor studies and evaluations as formulaic procedures. I suspect that many studies done in the small and medium museum environment are undertaken by a member of staff involved in an interpretation project and most work is done on preliminary analysis and formative evaluations.

## The Problem of Student Evaluations and Studies

In the United Kingdom, in recent years, there has been a heavy increase in the number of undergraduate and post graduate courses requiring students to complete a practical project of a survey nature as a part of their assessed course work. Their lecturers often contact museums asking if the students can do a project and, naturally, the promise of free labour can be very tempting. Museums of all sizes allow students to carry out visitor study work. However, any study needs to be carefully planned (by the museum officer or the lecturer), questionnaires need to be approved by the museum, and the students need to be trained to some degree, supervised, and have some knowledge of the museum visiting literature. These requirements are not always met. In recent months, I heard of survey work being undertaken by students without the member of museum staff being aware of who, when

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and where the students were interviewing, and of a survey of the use and reception of a multimedia programme in an art gallery being undertaken by undergraduate management and catering students.

### **The Impact of the National Lottery**

In recent years the National Lottery has had a transforming impact in the museum world in Britain because a large segment of the profits have been devoted to capital projects in the cultural sector. The lottery awarding bodies require business plans and feasibility studies but these are quite often done by companies, often international accountancy firms, who do not specialise solely in museum work. There is a strong possibility of exaggerated projected audiences and future financial problems as a result. Because of the present economic climate, and the supporting opportunities for working on lottery projects, there are more consultants about doing work on marketing and visitor issues. Some of them work for very little and may have little experience or training. Finally, the lottery awarding body does not build a requirement

for the evaluation of the communicative effectiveness of exhibitions into its contracts. This is a sadly missed opportunity for the general promotion of the raising of standards in this field.

### **Audience Advocacy**

Increasingly, education section staff are working as visitor advocates on exhibition teams and helping with evaluations during exhibition content development. The paper by Ben Gammon, of the Science Museum, London, in the previous issue of this journal sets a standard in visitor advocacy which stands as an exemplar for us all.

*In childhood, Paulette McManus was so impressed by the wonder of discovering things in her city museum that she now works as a visitor study and communication consultant to all types of museums, and teaches communication and interpretation to future museum professionals, in order to help ensure that museums are available and accessible to as many people as possible.*

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## **INFORMAL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS RESEARCH SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP**

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The Informal Learning Environments Research SIG (ILER SIG) is a special interest group of the American Educational Research Association (AERA, which can be found at <http://aera.net>). Membership in the SIG does not require membership in AERA, though it is recommended.

The purpose of the Informal Learning Environments Research SIG is to further educational research in informal learning environments such as science centers, museums, zoos, aquariums, and nature centers, and to promote a community of practice interested in establishing and maintaining informal learning environments conducive to better understanding of teaching and learning.

The ILER SIG is new to AERA. After one year of offering sessions on learning in museums and other informal settings at the annual meeting in San Diego, we look forward to an enriched and expanded effort next year.

If you have already joined ILER, please share this information with a friend. The more ILER members we have who also are AERA members, the more sessions we will have at the next AERA meeting.

To join the ILER SIG, mail \$5.00 (checks payable to AERA SIG) to:

Chris Andersen  
Ohio State University  
947 East Johnstown Road  
Columbus, OH 43230

Please include your name, address, phone number, e-mail address, and whether you are an AERA member.

For more information and our most recent newsletter, see our website: <http://darwin.sesp.nwu.edu/informal/>

## **RECENT PUBLICATIONS**

Commissioned by AAM's EdCom, to honor its 25th anniversary, *Museums: Places Of Learning* by George E. Hein and Mary Alexander summarizes what is known about learning on museums. The monograph (published by Technical Information Service of AAM) reviews three different categories of literature: educational

theory, museum education practice, and visitor studies research. It also includes a theoretical framework for analyzing educational theory. Similar material, as well as other topics, are covered more extensively in Hein's recent book, *Learning in the Museum*, Routledge, 1998.