

activities or entertainment—in essence, they were bored to tears. Filling out questionnaires served as an effective and welcome diversion from the wait. In fact, we were often in the enviable position of visitors asking us to include them in the sample! We also found that the quantity and quality of responses were reasonably good, presumably because visitors had ample time to contemplate each question.

The lesson here is to do your homework well—select recruitment places where there are signs of collective boredom or there are few competing activities. This strategy works particularly well with families with children—simply recruit respondents at places where children are likely to be engrossed such as play areas, children’s theatres and computer corners. If children are occupied, parents, grandparents, and carers are more likely to have the time and inclination to answer questions.

### **5. Not all small packages are good things**

Although our research targeted adults, we were surprised to find that many of our early questionnaires were liberally decorated with scribbling and drawings that were obviously the work of children. In some cases, parents were even observed passing their questionnaires on to adolescents and

children “to keep them amused”. After processing one too many such works of art, it became obvious that we would have to firmly stipulate that children could only draw on the back of the questionnaire. This did help to reduce the number of unusable questionnaires, though in future we intend to include a separate children’s sheet with space for drawings and comments. This should keep children busy and allow carers sufficient time to complete their own questionnaire properly.

Unsupervised children can also create havoc. One night at Mon Repos a young child removed several completed questionnaires from the researchers’ belongings and scribbled on them to the point where they were unreadable. We had no option but to discard them all. Another night we unknowingly recruited a six-year old researcher who “worked the line” behind us collecting completed questionnaires before we had distributed the matching post-visit ones. All we could do in this case was go back along the queue asking visitors to identify their hand writing and reclaim their questionnaires. While this enabled us to avert a data collection crisis, it did put a substantial dent in our professional image! The lesson here is to secure your belongings tightly and keep your eyes on the kids, regardless of how angelic they look.

### **THE MORAL OF THE STORY**

In hindsight, many of the pitfalls in this line of research (as in fact in all research) can be overcome with careful planning and attention to detail. Unfortunately, though, some of the dangers specific to each setting are not immediately obvious, and do not appear until after data collection procedures have been trialled and approved. Each new setting brings its own challenges, and with every turnover of field research staff, the results of valuable “trial and error” learning are often lost. When all else fails, we generally resort to duck impersonations—calm on the surface, but always paddling like the dickens underneath!<sup>1</sup>

### **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The authors wish to acknowledge their intrepid researchers Nigel Bond, Linda Peach and Michele Leiminer, who have joined us in fearlessly battling the elements, and putting their lives and professional dignity on the line in the name of Visitor Studies.

### **ENDNOTE**

1. This quote is usually attributed to actor Michael Caine.

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## **Data Collection in a Modern World (Or When Bad Things Happen To Good People):**

*Kerry Bronnenkant and Cheryl Kessler*

The authors of this article are reporting on the accumulated wealth of knowledge and experiences of their colleagues at the Institute for Learning Innovation and thank them for sharing their stories. The Institute is a not-for-profit learning research and development organization committed to better understanding the nature of free-choice learning and its role in a Learning Society. Its mission is to study, support and advocate for free-choice learning—learning that fulfils the life-long human quest for knowledge, understanding and personal fulfilment. The Institute was established in 1986 in Annapolis, Maryland.

## Visitor Studies Bloopers

As researchers and evaluators much of our time is spent in the field collecting data and working with our collaborators. This aspect of our work can be very eye-opening, interesting and fun as we get to witness visitors engaged in the programs, exhibitions, workshops, and other activities that we have often been involved with for some time. It also leads to a lot of good “war stories” to share around the lunch table. For this article, we invite you to the table for some of our best (or worst as the case may be) data collection field experiences. We have organized these into three themes. Some of you will recognize these scenarios, while others will hopefully learn how to plan for, deal with, or simply avoid these memorable situations. We hope all will at least get a good laugh.

### 1. Location, location, location!

As we travel forth to a variety of venues (art museums, zoos, aquariums, children’s museums, etc.) one thing that continually has to be accounted for is location. As they say in the real estate game it is all about “location, location, location,” and it is no different in our line of work. Having collaborators spread out across the United States can make site visits quite challenging. Sometimes just getting to a site can become an issue. We could probably each write a novel on all the travel-related fiascos we have encountered just trying to get to where we are going. Traveling as we do by planes, trains and automobiles we risk delays, cancellations, and breakdowns.

Oftentimes sites don’t know where to recommend you stay in the area—after all, they live there and don’t ever require hotels. Where you end up for the night can be tricky, as one of our researchers found out when they accidentally booked themselves into a hotel of ill repute. Obviously not all of the

amenities were listed on the website! Several of us have found ourselves in sketchy neighborhoods or ended up eating at very bad restaurants. These may seem like minor inconveniences on the surface. However, when you consider that you are the driving force behind having or not having a successful data collection session, all of these issues become very important.

For some venues, attendance is highest during the summer months. If you’re going to be outdoors, you’ll probably remember to wear a hat and sunscreen. But what about making your interviewees comfortable? One of our colleagues found themselves working in sunny Las Vegas collecting data off site at a “big box” store at a local shopping center. Unfortunately, they were not allowed to collect data inside and were forced to set up their metal tables and chairs outside in the 100°F plus weather. While successful in inviting folks to sit down and to talk for a few minutes, when those agreeable people sat down they immediately jumped up again since the chairs were blazing hot. Needless to say, data collection had to be stopped for the day.

Local “wildlife” can also impact data collection (as noted by the other two contributions to this series). On a data gathering trip to an aquarium, data collectors had to deal with swarms of mosquitoes that wanted to be wherever the action was. The site had been “virtually” scouted out online and it appeared that there would be shade and plenty of space outside to set up a table and chairs. Indeed the site did have ample space right at the entrance enabling data collectors to catch visitors both before and after their visit. But those darn mosquitoes! There were swarms and swarms of mosquitoes all around the entrance and no one would stop for a minute, let alone five or ten to complete a survey.

The onsite staff had not thought that the mosquitoes would be a problem, after all they all dealt with them on a daily basis, why would the visitors complain? Ultimately, data collection was moved inside and bug spray was offered to visitors as an incentive to take the survey.

### *What you can do*

In an ideal world we would all have the chance to go and visit the site before doing data collection, check out where the evaluation/research will take place, get a feel for the place and see what kind of amenities are present. However due to budgets often being tight and time always a limiting factor often we do not see a place till we are arriving to gather data. Asking site staff is always advisable (but not always useful) and because we live in the Information Age we can use Google to obtain some information. In fact, some of us make it a point to “google” for maps and photos of the site, amenities on and off site, directions, and weather forecasts. As the Boy Scout motto says, “Be prepared,” making sure that you arrive with your own first aid kit, sunscreen, mosquito repellent, water etc. will help to ensure a good data collection experience.

### 2. Visitors gone wild

In our experience, engaging with the public can range from uplifting encounters to awkward and emotional interactions. If, as a field, we were able to sit around the proverbial campfire to swap stories, we would no doubt hear recollections of the times we felt validated by visitors’ comments, assured that our work was meaningful, and lucky to be paid to observe and talk with people. On the other hand, those stories would most likely be overshadowed by tales of visitors’ odd behavior. It seems that no matter

where you are you can always expect people to do unexpected things. From the Institute's well of interesting visitor behavior, we offer a few of the strange and awkward situations in which we have found ourselves.

There's the one about the researcher who was tracking a couple in an exhibition, when the person being tracked shoplifted a pair of sunglasses! The researcher was not sure what to do but was determined to complete the track which they did. Although later they wondered "How do you code *shoplifting*?" Then there was the incident of a researcher witnessing atrocious parenting. While interviewing a mother, whose 4 year old child was in tow, in mid-sentence the child became fussy. The parent turned around and slapped the child. This in itself was upsetting, however, the parent then turned round and continued answering the question, leaving the researcher shaken and unsure how to proceed. Another researcher collecting data at a Jewish museum on Holocaust Remembrance Day encountered an elderly woman frantically looking for the only remaining photo of relatives who died during WWII. With tear filled eyes, the woman explained that she was the only surviving member of her family and had given a copy of the photo to the museum. She then lost the original and now wondered if the museum had lost the copy since she didn't see it on the wall. The woman's strong emotion so affected the researcher that they ended data collection early that day.

Then there are the more run of the mill, everyday bad visitor behaviors or visitors doing things they shouldn't be doing like walking up the down escalator, running in the halls, touching things they should not be touching, bringing food and drink where it should not be brought. What is a researcher to do?

### **What you can do**

Having clear communication with site staff is a key to understanding as many potential visitor-based issues as possible. Ask upfront about as many scenarios as you can think of or have experienced so that you have an official stance on which to operate. Remember that your role is to gather data from the public. While you are not a member of site staff (even though often times it feels that way and visitors do not know any differently) it's important to follow their rules as well as possible.

### **3. Forces of nature**

So there you are, on the road collecting data, away from home and in a strange city or state; suddenly the news comes on announcing a hurricane is heading directly for your locale! Sounds like a movie but this has happened to several of us. Acts of God, as the airlines label it (or forces of nature as we like to say), can happen at any time. Just this past summer, two data collectors found themselves "on hold" when a severe weather warning—as in "a tornado is likely to touch down here anytime"—cleared the living history site where they were collecting data. Happily, the storm passed—with only rain hitting the ground—and data collection resumed.

Some researchers visiting a hurricane-impacted site just after the storm intended to interview young people about some program materials that focused on observing butterflies. What they found, however, was that the participants had been unable to complete their observations because the butterflies had literally been blown away. Similarly, there was limited or no power for doing scheduled website testing.

A power outage nearly shut down data collection for one researcher who was trying to collect data at a science center

the day after the 2003 blackout of the entire eastern seaboard! The science center happened to be in one of the only locations with electricity so there was no shortage of visitors. Unfortunately, few visitors were in the mood to talk to the researcher and, if they were amenable, wanted to talk only about the blackout. The researcher had to be very patient and allow visitors to share their blackout stories in order to get visitors to a place where they could shift their attention to answering evaluation questions.

### **What you can do**

While it's difficult to actually prepare for Acts of God, arranging your safety is a priority. If you are able to conduct your data collection, know that it may take longer and require more probing to focus visitors to reflect on and articulate their experiences. If that's not possible, pack it up and try again when conditions are more favorable. Keeping a sense of humor, being sympathetic and adaptable is critical.

### **WE WOULDN'T HAVE IT ANY OTHER WAY**

Despite all the challenges mentioned in this article, one thing that is constant is that gathering data is never boring, nor does it ever unfold in quite the same way twice. The work we do is exciting and unique and provides us the opportunity to visit and work with some of the best free choice learning sites in the country. So despite the surprises and challenges of collecting data in this modern world, we wouldn't have it any other way.