

# **Planning for a Future: Teaching and Training in Visitor Studies**

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## **Introduction**

All around us, the demand for high quality visitor evaluation and research is growing. For example, the National Endowment for the Humanities has recently formulated a set of guidelines for evaluation to ensure that all NEH funded museum projects include a sound and solidly executed evaluation. The American Association of Museums' Curators' Committee has recently asked the American Association of Museums' CARE Committee to provide guidelines on exhibit evaluation to be included among the criteria for future submissions to their annual exhibit competition. And students and professionals, now more than ever, are searching for guiding materials to help them learn how to design, implement, and understand visitor studies.

As visitor research and evaluation continues to evolve into a recognized and mandated component of museum, site, and recreation practice, we need systematic and thoughtful educational efforts in order to produce future generations of competent evaluators; to educate people at those institutions that might not be able to hire the outside evaluation consultant; and to help ensure knowledgeable managers and administrators who can work with evaluators in an effective and confident manner. We are long past the need for a small club of practitioners, but it is the responsibility of those who do possess the skills and knowledge to help chart the course for a future for visitor studies. One way to ensure that future is to set an agenda for teaching and training in visitor studies.

This is not an easy task. There are many questions and concerns that immediately arise--questions of quality, standards, authority, training. Who should and shouldn't be conducting visitor studies? What should and shouldn't those studies look like? Yet while we're busy debating these issues, people need information and guidance. How can we best provide it? The Visitor Studies Association, the Committee on Audience Research and Evaluation (CARE) of the American Association of Museums, and other organizations stand ready to lend institutional support to training projects and efforts. It's up to us to offer some recommendations.

## The Session Format and the Charge

The purpose of this VSA session, conducted in audience participation style, was to provide a forum for professionals to begin to discuss visitor studies training needs and to brainstorm action agendas. The panelists for this session were Minda Borun, Director of Research and Evaluation at the Franklin Institute Science Museum, Associate Professor at the University of the Arts Museum Education Program in Philadelphia, and current Chairperson of the AAM CARE Committee; Jeff Hayward, Director of People, Places and Design Research in North Hampton, Massachusetts, who has conducted extensive evaluation work with numerous museums, including the Field Museum at Chicago, and the Minnesota Historical Society; and Lois Silverman, Assistant Professor of Recreation at Indiana University, Director of the Center on History-Making in America, current Vice-Chairperson of the AAM CARE Committee, and session chair. To begin the session, each of the three panelists offered preliminary thoughts on the training needs of one of three very broad audiences, defined for the purposes of discussion, as follows:

- 1) university students, particularly those in undergraduate and masters programs, such as museum studies programs, who are often beginning professionals;
- 2) mid-career professionals, particularly those who want to learn how to conduct visitor studies themselves but may not have much experience or background; and
- 3) upper level management, people who are likely to hire and work with evaluators rather than conduct studies themselves, but who need to understand the process in order to work effectively with evaluators.

After the brief opening presentations from the three panelists, the session audience was asked to form 3 discussion groups: one to address the training needs of university students; a second to address mid-career professionals; and a third to address upper level management. The three panelists acted as facilitators for these groups. The groups were then charged with the task of answering two questions:

- What are three of the most pressing needs regarding visitor studies training for the particular audience you have been asked to discuss?  
and
- What are three actions, steps, or projects that could be implemented in order to begin to address these needs?

After 25 minutes of small group discussion, a reporter from each group summarized and presented the groups' conclusions to the entire session audience. Presented below are the panelist's preliminary remarks, together with the group's recommendations, for each of the three "audiences."

### **Training for University Students: Opening Remarks**

Lois Silverman, panelist: There are many issues to discuss regarding visitor studies training for university students, but I'd like to raise three in particular:

- 1) curriculum content;
- 2) the availability of training opportunities for students; and
- 3) the issue of training personnel.

First, what curriculum is actually needed in visitor studies for the relative beginning professional in a university based program? Judging by the courses that are presently available, it doesn't seem that any clearly set standards or beliefs about curriculum content exist at this point. I believe that visitor studies training should include social science training, exposure to and understanding of museums and other recreational sites, exposure to the literature on visitors from a variety of academic disciplines, and training in research skills, including the ability to create and test theory. Students need practical skills - the ability to design the study and carry it out - but they also need to know how to think creatively and theoretically about museums, about their role in society, and about the nature of the visitor experience. So what should the curriculum look like in order to achieve the right balance?

My second concern is that the availability of visitor studies training for beginning professionals is also widely variable at present. Simply by word of mouth, I've learned that visitor studies training in existing museum studies programs ranges from a two-year masters program that includes only one guest lecture on evaluation and research in the entire program, to those that have 1 or 2 required courses. More often than not, visitor studies courses are electives rather than required courses. I believe that other variations exist, but we don't really know, since there hasn't been a systematic look at visitor studies curriculum in the last several years, during which time new programs have been founded and further developed. However, I do think it's safe to say that while there may be exceptions, most programs don't seem to include visitor studies training as an integral component of the curriculum. Students seeking training for museum, site, and recreation careers today don't encounter much intensive visitor studies training. How can we remedy this? When and how can visitor studies be made an integral part of existing training programs? And when and how can we develop and offer an advanced degree program in visitor studies?

Last but not least, who will do the teaching? Many of us are involved with, or consulting to university based programs, but the relatively small pool of people who currently possess the skills to teach visitor studies are not always available or logistically able to teach a semester long course. Is this the only format for training university students? Other possibilities include guest lectures, the preparation of teaching materials and textbooks,

and seminars. We need to consider other ways to train trainers, as well as students.

### **Training for University Students: Discussion Group Recommendations**

Lisa Mackinney, group reporter: There are two groups that fall into this category; students in museum studies programs, and students in social science programs, who do not necessarily know much about museums. We talked mainly about museum studies programs, but kept offering perspectives on what was happening in other disciplines as well. The actions we'd like to suggest proceed fairly directly from our recommendations. First of all, we think that a critical first step would be to find out what is out there now by reviewing the curriculum of the different museum studies programs in existence in the U.S. and abroad. We talked a bit about how we could gather that information. Secondly, we felt that it's very important to promote and organize internship opportunities, especially within formal graduate training programs, and to find out which people within the existing visitor studies organizations would be available to take on interns. Related to this topic, we discussed the importance of offering university credit whether or not the intern could be paid, and of thinking imaginatively about how the American Association of Museums could promote the availability of such internships. Third, we talked a lot about the need to integrate some kind of visitor studies as a required course in all museum studies programs. Even though our field is enriched by having people come from a variety of different disciplines at the PhD level, students need to learn the basic vocabulary, literature, and procedures of visitor studies.

### **Training for Mid-Career Professionals: Opening Remarks**

Minda Borun, panelist: The way I see it, there are 2 broad groups of students for mid-career training opportunities in visitor studies: social scientists, researchers, and evaluators who have not worked in the museum setting; and museum professionals--educators, designers, exhibit developers, marketing staff, writers, and others --who do not have research training but do know the museum profession. Each group is familiar with only one part of the knowledge and skills and experiences needed to conduct visitor studies in museum settings.

For the first group, the social science researchers, I think the kind of 1 or 2 day workshops we hold at the Visitor Studies conference and before the AAM meetings is fine. But since we do the workshops at museum meetings, we don't get the social science researchers; we get the second group, the museum professionals. For the museum professionals, I think these short workshops are inadequate to provide basic research training. Sometimes I think that we might even be doing more harm than good in

conducting these workshops because we may be giving people the feeling that they've become evaluators overnight. Whereas the intent of the workshop is simply to familiarize participants with the concepts, practices, and vocabulary of visitor studies so that the participants can either get further training, or work with professional evaluators to carry out good studies. So how do we provide training opportunities for those two groups of mid-career professionals that provides each with the information they need?

In talking to museum professionals about visitor studies, I do not think we have been successful in conveying the scope of training needed to fully understand issues like sampling, instrument construction, and experimental design. All too often, we hear discussions of the relative merits of qualitative versus quantitative evaluation techniques and we have factions of advocates for one or the other. To my way of thinking, such methodological issues really have little meaning when they are divorced from a consideration of what kind of questions you're asking and the information you're seeking. It's like saying: "Which is better, a ruler or a tape recorder?" They are both tools, it depends on what you want to accomplish. Generally, these tools work well together to answer museum impact questions. So an important issue to consider is how we can create longer term training opportunities for the museum professional group - more than the 1 or 2 day workshop.

I have a little bit of data to report. It is based on a brief questionnaire given to a group of museum directors and education directors who came to a morning brainstorming session at the University of the Arts to talk about training for mid-career professionals in the Philadelphia area. In particular, I looked at those issues related to visitor studies, and 38% of the people were interested in the topics that interest us--learning theory, human development, evaluation techniques, visitor studies, and audience development. We talked to 25 people who came to the meeting. Here are some of the questions posed, and their responses to them:

When should classes be held? The greatest number of people wanted to see classes on weekday afternoons. How many weeks should classes be? Once a week for 4 weeks. Is college credit important? The group was split. But most people said credit wasn't important unless their institution required credit in order to provide tuition reimbursement. Who should pay the tuition? The answer was either the museum or the employee. This is an encouraging glimpse of an audience for further training.

A related concern is disseminating the results of past visitor studies. In the 70 years since the work of Robinson and Melton, a lot of research has been done. The ILVS Bibliography is about 3 inches thick, and yet, we still hear statements like, "No one's showed that learning takes place in museums." Of course, there's plenty to study and new approaches and technologies to try, but there still is no point in reinventing the wheel. The problem is that museum professionals generally don't have the time or

inclination to keep up with the visitor studies literature. So I think it's up to us to explore new vehicles, other than print, for disseminating information.

### **Training for Mid-Career Professionals: Discussion Group Recommendations**

Ellen Guisti, group reporter: We talked about a number of issues; I'll just run down our list. One, we need different types of information, for our own staff or to be generalized, which relates to the quality of the data that is collected. Two, there is the problem of institutional support for professional development. We support the museum paying for a course, or at least allowing you time away from your work. Three, we need to understand the learning process in order to develop self-instructional materials so that people who want to learn these things can know what they need to look at and can develop their own program. Fourth, workshops can be repetitive: they are usually introductory. We need different levels of workshops. Then people suggested developing a regional resource list in order to follow up on courses or workshops, so that you know a university in your area that you could go to in order to get more information. We also talked about the problem of having a list of advisors and the strain on those advisors, and wondered if there was a way to compensate them for their time and advice. It was also suggested that we could develop a one week course for evaluators, similar to the Museum Management Course, perhaps sponsored by the Institute for Museum Services, that would go into greater depth than the one day workshop. And we talked about developing a training packet with a video, or satellite broadcast accompanied by reading material. These are some ways of sharing the results of the work we do that would not force people to read more than they had an inclination to. Someone suggested having co-sponsors for AAM meeting events in order to broaden the base of people who are interested in visitor studies. Last but not least, we also talked about promoting internships between museums and universities.

### **Training for Upper Level Management: Preliminary Remarks**

Jeff Hayward, panelist: The third audience consists of people who will be working with evaluators, which might include upper management, administrators, managers, department heads, and supervisors. But this broad category might also include personnel in funding agencies and foundations, as well as designers, public relations departments, and so on, although their needs and interests are extremely different.

Let's consider what problems might be solved by some type of training. One of the first problems that we could acknowledge is that evaluators are sometimes misperceived in our role. "Training" could help to educate

people about the role of evaluators -- for example, as collaborators in a process, not judge-and-jury of the process. A second problem is that there can be major misunderstandings about the nature and scope of evaluation, if administrators are inexperienced with evaluation. For example, evaluators are sometimes called in to evaluate an exhibit with the assumption that it will only take a couple of days; training could help to distinguish between "critiques" and "evaluation." The third problem is that people are eager for data, but often don't know how to interpret it or how to judge its quality. Ideally, training could help people realize that they have to put the data into some kind of context, and that it's important to have their researcher be concerned with the quality of data.

So there are a number of reasons why training could be useful for administrators and other upper level people. Training could help people:

- to realize that evaluation is a useful activity, not a threat;
- to budget for evaluation in a timely and appropriate way;
- to be better consumers of evaluation, and
- to deal with evaluators in a professional way.

The flipside is that those of us who do evaluation could also benefit from better understanding the perspectives of our clients. If this is a training opportunity, I hope it's a two-way street.

What of their needs, and their needs and perceptions of what they would get out of training? I think the overview of evaluation, the phases, the purposes, and the timing - that very basic stuff - is exactly what many people need to hear. They need to hear it in an enthusiastic way, in a way which relates to their time schedules, and which answers their questions about the process, such as: who's involved in this? How much of the staff time does it take? Who's going to attend meetings? Who's going to be the final decision-maker? Who's the liaison with the evaluator? What are our other resources that we need to bring to bear upon this process?

What are strategies for addressing these needs? One is workshops for small targeted audiences. Right now, this is occasionally done for specific foundations and institutions. An experienced evaluator comes in and does a workshop across departments for 15-20 people, explaining the process. More structure and guidance for those workshops might be very useful. A second strategy is that we evaluators might prepare some notes for ourselves on how to deal with the people who work with us and what their issues are. How can we help them to see and understand their role in the process of evaluation?

### **Training for Upper Level Management: Discussion Group Recommendations**

Randi Korn, group reporter: First, we acknowledge that upper management has a very broad definition. This audience consists of many sub-groups, but we've identified two important ones: absolute decision-

makers, who could be in museums, but also in funding agencies like NSF; and collaborators, people who are directly involved in the evaluation. We then identified 4 needs. First is to demystify evaluation. Second is to give this audience some grounding in the visitors' perspective, whether it be through reading or first hand experience talking to visitors or collecting data. Third, they need to be able to evaluate proposals, to tell a good evaluation from a bad one, and to know how to evaluate the work of evaluators. And fourth, they need to know how to prepare their staff for an evaluation. To help them, we need make them aware of the pitfalls in the process.

Specifying actions to address these needs was a little harder to do, but we have three recommendations. First, we think that upper management must be taught that when an evaluation project is starting, all the collaborators within the museum need to attend. Secondly, this audience needs exercises in using data, and in conceptualizing different scenarios of findings, in order to get them comfortable with the idea of using the information that they will be given. And third, there is a great need for disseminating more information on visitor evaluation and research, yet we were stumped here because we realized the collaborators are probably from many different fields, ranging from public relations to marketing to exhibit design. Basically, we need to be everywhere: to go to their meetings, to publish in their journals, and to be able to give them an easy way to access what we're doing.

## Conclusion

This preliminary discussion on teaching and training needs for visitor studies produced a variety of excellent ideas, and raised a number of engaging challenges. While session participants considered the training needs of three different audiences, five key issues emerged, practically "across the board:" 1) the existence of subgroups within each large "audience," each with different needs; 2) the need for systematic assessment and review of existing training activities for each audience; 3) the need to consider new and appropriate training formats for each audience; 4) the prospect of "internships" with trained visitor study personnel; and 5) the overwhelming need for more and better dissemination of visitor studies information.

Thanks to the hard work of all who attended this session, we have taken a critical first step toward setting an agenda for teaching and training in visitor studies. Through the auspices of the Visitor Studies Association, AAM CARE, and our own institutions, we must now begin the difficult work of widening the discussion of this agenda, and designing and implementing projects and activities to meet the existing needs. We hope that you will join us in ensuring a healthy future for visitor studies.