

# Characteristics of a Positive Museum Experience (PME)

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## Background

This unusual participatory session was attended by about 40 people at the Visitor Studies Association Conference in St. Louis. The objectives for the session were stated as:

Rather than a panel presentation, we will engage in a participatory process. Through large and small group discussions, we will create a descriptive list of the qualities and conditions that lead to a positive museum experience (PME). The list will represent our empirical and intuitive consensus—from a multi-disciplinary group with a broad range of perspectives. By identifying these criteria, we can more clearly implement and assess the degree of success in creating those experiences for visitors.

My original plan was to do the following: (1) have participants think of positive museum experiences they have had; (2) ask them to share their ideas in groups of four to six people; (3) have each group write down their experiences and put them up on the wall of the conference room; (4) rearrange the items into common types or order them by similarity of content; (5) name the categories which were created; and (6) discuss the significance and implications of the different characteristics and categories. By the end of our allotted 1 1/2 hours, we had all the items posted on the wall and there was minor chaos.

The goal of publishing this article is to try to complete the activity by sorting, naming and discussing the characteristics. Readers may also wish to recreate the activity with another group (e.g., museum staff, volunteers, real visitors) and compare their results with those described here (see Spencer, 1989).

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## The Activity

The session started with some reflections on keynote speaker John Bruer's presentation on cognition and informal learning. Bruer had talked about how cognitive scientists are gaining more understanding of how people think and reason, how misunderstandings affect reasoning, and the ways that novices solve problems differently from experts. He had also explained "natural cognitive style," which includes thinking out loud, self-consciousness, overt reasoning, sharing multiple perspectives and active dialog. This session aimed to promote those models of thinking in our process of discussing the question, "What are the characteristics of a positive museum experience?"

Participants were asked to make their own lists of elements that helped make a museum visit a positive experience for them under two different conditions. The first condition was when they were "novices" (no prior knowledge, training, experience, or specialized vocabulary in the subject of the exhibit) and the second was when they were "experts" (some prior knowledge, training, experience, or specialized vocabulary in the exhibit topic). It was not important what the subject of the exhibit was, where or when it was seen. The purpose of the session was to collect the abstracted characteristics of the experience only, not personal anecdotes about it (see Note 1).

We formed ourselves into small groups. People then shared and compared their lists (see Note 2), chose the characteristics most representative of their group's novice and expert experiences and wrote them down in large print, one idea per page. Then each group put their pages up on the wall (see Note 3).

After rejoining as one large group, participants looked at the comments that covered the wall, and moved the sheets into categories of phrases that seemed to be related. That's where the chaos began. Some nearly identical statements were easy to group, but many others were more difficult. Disagreements over how to interpret the comments were frequent. With 40 people and almost 100 statements on the wall, we weren't able to sort it out.

Some people felt that this activity was difficult or impossible because we as museum professionals could not experience museums as visitors do, whether novice or expert. Our language and perceptions taint our outlook; we find it hard not to be affected by certain things only a staff person would notice. Other participants had not clearly understood the point or the instructions. Jargon and a lack of common definitions confounded us. Since our session time was up, we concluded with a brief discussion and a promise from me to make sense somehow of what we had done and to write it up for the conference proceedings.

## Sorting It Out

I took all the sheets off the wall, brought them home and filed them away. After a month or so, my associate Britt Raphling transcribed and numbered the notes in the two categories of novice (N) and expert (E). We looked over the lists and grouped the comments by similar content, coming up with the following organization and conclusions. (You can do it yourself from the original complete list in the Appendix, listed by number and code—novice (N) and expert (E).)

### Characteristics That Work for Everyone

There are lots of common characteristics between the novice's and the expert's positive experience. Terms that appeared on both lists of positive characteristics included: *surprise* (20N, 31E), *beauty* (13N, 13E), *comfort* (37N, 3E), *a feeling of welcome* (36N, 39E), *a feeling of being in control* (8N, 34E), *variety* (14N, 15E), *real things* (30N, 28E), *personal connections* (28N, 20E), and *something new* (34N, 38E).

Several of the characteristics need to be defined and analyzed by exhibit developers through front-end and formative evaluation specifically for each exhibit. How would you know how to make the information *personally relevant* without knowing some of the connections your audience is likely to make? How would you know how to make the subject *important* or *interesting* without knowing "where they are coming from" about the topic?

Of the characteristics that are stronger for novices or for experts, most can be designed into an exhibit without interfering with the opposite's experience. For example:

- The expert's need for *accuracy, authenticity, and a self-paced, independent* experience would not get in the way of a novice.
- The novice's need for *accessible information, social interactions* and a *manageable size* can be satisfied without offending an expert.

The one characteristic that is unique to experts and may interfere with the novice's experience is an expert's desire to be *challenged intellectually*. This is one characteristic which often receives a disproportionate amount of attention in exhibits, in terms of both the amount of material (usually too much) devoted to that "level" and the number of real experts seeking it (usually too few).

In the activity described here, an "expert" was defined as someone who had some special interest or knowledge about the topic, but not necessarily an advanced academic degree. It is probably much easier to challenge the normal-but-more-than-average-interest visitor than we are prone to think. By posing questions, juxtaposing different points of view, and showing the wealth of "real stuff" cataloged in museums (normally unavailable even to experts), both experts and novices can be challenged. If we assume that to be challenging to experts means that we should be presenting them with

plenty of heretofore unknown FACTS, then this can and will and does interfere with the novice's experience.

As John Bruer said in the conference's keynote address, expertise tends to be very specific. The implication for informal learning environments in museums is this: few real experts will have enough breadth of experience not to find some aspects of any exhibit intellectually challenging.

### How These PME Characteristics Are Similar to Others

The characteristics that emerged in this activity at the Visitor Studies Conference in St. Louis had a lot in common with what visitors and professionals have said in other situations as well. *Characteristics of Ideal Museum Exhibits*, developed by Alt and Shaw (1984), included the following comments that somewhat matched those from the session:

#### Alt and Shaw

it makes the subject come to life  
it gets the message across quickly  
it involves you  
the information is clearly presented  
it's clear what you're supposed to do

#### PME

discovery, wonder, wow  
I didn't have to work to "get" it  
I could connect it to something I know  
clear writing  
sense of order

The characteristics of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's "flow" (1975) that people experience when they have a balance between being bored and being overly challenged also has a lot in common with the VSA characteristics:

#### "flow"

focused attention  
release from everyday  
clear goals  
matched skills  
personal integration  
intrinsically satisfying

#### PME

absorbed in the experience  
wonder, excitement  
easy to follow  
challenged intellectually  
validation of what I know  
no anxiety about the content or setting

Readers can also consult the research conducted by Melora McDermott-Lewis (1990) at the Denver Art Museum which provides additional provocative information about the novice's experience "through their eyes."

### Barriers to Our Understanding of Visitors' Experience

Visitors are surely left out in the cold with the vague terms and jargon that inhibit good communication even between museum professionals. What do we really mean by words like signage, graphics, multi-sensory, affective, learning styles, or conceptual framework? A short paper by Lisa Roberts (1990), of the Chicago Botanic Garden, prompted a flood of responses from readers who wanted to know more about affective learning, revealing how little we understand such an often-used word. We need to define our terms better.

If you can't look at exhibits like a normal visitor anymore, you should re-learn how to do it (see Note 4). Figure out ways to separate the experiences that are fresh and how you are reacting to the "face" of the exhibit (e.g., how does the exhibit make you feel?), from all the clutter "behind" what you are seeing (e.g., wondering what kind of paint was used). If you want to serve visitors better, you'd better remember how to *be* one.

Exhibits that are developed without front-end and formative evaluation often don't take into account the visitors' experience. Without checking your assumptions against the reality of the visitors' perspective—both novice and informed—you can never be sure that the exhibit can really provide a positive experience. Although it is true that no exhibit can be all things to all people, one that integrates response to feedback from visitors will always be more successful for more of its audience (maybe even 51%!).

### Conclusions

A positive museum experience can be enhanced for novices and experts alike if exhibits are conceptualized with all these characteristics in mind and developed specifically through evaluation feedback from visitors. Museum professionals should practice being "professional novice visitors" to keep in touch with the kinds of experiences that are successful and reinforcing for the majority of their audiences. As a supplement to such attempts to self-consciously duplicate a novice's viewpoint, professionals should rely heavily on evaluation to increase their sensitivity to the potential and actual experiences of a novice.

### References

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### Notes

- (1) Anecdotal information of a PME sounds like this: "I was interested in cameras and this exhibit was about photography and contained a fabulous collection of old cameras." *Characteristics* of that PME are: Related to a special personal interest; felt a personal connection with objects; great diversity of objects on display.
- (2) It took longer than I anticipated for groups to share their lists. People like to talk in small groups, and everyone needs their turn to share. Suggestion: Have no more than five people per group, and allow at least 20 minutes.
- (3) Suggestion: Put the sheets up on the wall in the two groups—Novice and Expert. Don't mix them up like we did.
- (4) Roger Miles, of the British Museum of Natural History, has said, "Museum researchers write and exhibit organizers frequently behave as though they never visit museums for pleasure. Shame on them." (1987).

**Appendix**

**Characteristics of a Positive Museum Experience  
“Novice”**

<b>Sample</b>	<b>Novice</b>
1	Personal attention (N)
2	Personal interaction with staff (N)
3	Manageably small (N)
4	Spacious (N)
5	Exhibit was a reasonable size (N)
6	Good signage (N)
7	Social interactions (N)
8	Feeling powerful/control (N)
9	Shared excitement (N)
10	Visual attraction (N)
11	Beautiful fascinating objects (N)
12	Objects displayed well (N)
13	It was beautiful (N)
14	Lots of stuff (N)
15	Interesting mix of objects (N)
16	I was challenged but I “got” it (N)
17	Sense of discovery (N)
18	Wow (N)
19	Sense of wonder (N)
20	Surprise – the unexpected (N)
21	Being struck, discovery (N)
22	Sense of discovery (new issue or phenomenon or thing) (N)
23	Ordered presentation (N)
24	Nice flow of information (N)
25	Sense of order (N)
26	Clear focus (N)
27	Provided a conceptual framework (N)
28	I could connect it to something I know (N)
29	Sense of participation in the events described (N)
30	Real objects (N)
31	Information (N)
32	Accessible information (N)
33	Fit my learning style (N)
34	Appreciation of something new (N)
35	Welcoming (N)
36	Feeling of welcome (N)
37	Comfortable/at ease (N)
38	Excitement (N)
39	I didn’t have to work to “get” it (N)
40	Stimulates imagination (N)
41	Change of mind set (N)

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42	No anxiety re: content or setting (N)
43	Emotionally inviting space (clean, warm) (N)
44	Motivates future interest (N)
45	The issue was important (N)
46	Powerful subject matter (N)
47	I know what it's about (N)

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**Characteristics of a Positive Museum Experience  
"Expert"**

Sample	Expert
1	Experts available for interaction (E)
2	Physically easy to follow (E)
3	Visitor comfort (E)
4	Clever, creative presentation (E)
5	Clear writing (E)
6	Interesting graphics (E)
7	Sense of empowerment (E)
8	Personal validation of what I know (E)
9	Share, Show (E)
10	Sharing your experience (E)
11	Prompts interaction (E)
12	Visually stimulating (E)
13	It was beautiful (E)
14	Objects displayed well (E)
15	Variety (E)
16	Eureka! (sense of discovery) (E)
17	Reinforced sense of wonder (E)
18	Presented concept concretely (E)
19	Ordered/adaptable space (E)
20	Personal connection (E)
21	Personal relevance (E)
22	Personal connection to my life (E)
23	Emotional involvement (E)
24	High quality of objects exhibited (E)
25	The <i>real</i> thing experience (E)
26	Quality/Authenticity (over concept) (E)
27	Unique/priceless exhibit (E)
28	See the "real" thing (E)
29	Accurate information (E)
30	Validate/reinforce perspective or knowledge or value (E)
31	Surprise – the unexpected (E)
32	New information (E)
33	Depth of information (E)
34	Felt in control (E)
35	Able to view at own pace (E)
36	Self-paced (E)



37	Independent visitation allowed (E)
38	A new view (artful, clever, different, revealing) (E)
39	Felt invited/welcome (E)
40	Connection to humanity (E)
41	Prior interest/knowledge (E)
42	Exhibit was effective (E)
43	Challenges intellectually (E)
44	Challenges intellectually (E)
45	Absorbed in experience (E)
46	Well-written text (E)

**Characteristics of a Positive Museum Experience  
"Other"**

Sample	Other
1	Multi-sensory exhibit design
2	Appealed to the affective domain
3	Feeling powerful/control
4	Impact/surprise
	(the above four were not labelled)