



2026 CONFERENCE ABSTRACTS



Introduction

Welcome to the 2026 Visitor Studies Association Annual Conference Abstracts!

These abstracts serve as an overview of the vibrant conversations that took place this year at the in-person conference in Kansas City, MO.

Previous Conference Abstracts are available online at
<https://visitorstudies.org/conference/past-conferences>

The 2026 VSA Conference Abstracts were compiled by Kari Ross Nelson with the help of Jennifer Bawden, Juli Goss, Rebecca Nall, Garrett Stone, and Samanth Tonumaipea.

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Tuesday, July 21

Concurrent Session 1: 11:00 am-12:00 PM

Vibe Check: Experience Design for Visitor Studies

Victoria Threadgill, Space Center Houston

Megan Harwell, Space Center Houston

Donnelly (Dolly) Hayde, COSI's Center for Research and Evaluation

Projects and Methods

Purpose and Importance

This session will explore the importance of considering the guest experience context when designing evaluation methods. We will explore the importance of understanding who your audience is, what design choices might best suit the information you are trying to gather, and questions to consider when designing interfaces for data collection.

- Participants will be able to effectively think through key considerations for designing engaging data collection methods.
- Participants will become familiar with examples of creative solutions for supporting positive visitor experiences with data collection.
- Participants will consider the principles and practices of informal learning environments when designing methods to suit their unique context. (Evaluator Competency B)

Abstract

By considering experience design in developing data collection methods, we can situate visitor studies as a positive experience that invites visitors to contribute knowledge while also honoring their time and presence in our spaces. Moving to more creative methodologies also provides opportunities to collect systematic data that authentically reflect guests' thoughts, values, and experiences and "make sense" in context.

Understanding when and how to get creative with evaluation methods will set the stage for the quality of data you collect. In the right context, embedding evaluation techniques that enhance visitor experiences has the potential to lead to longer engagement and, therefore, more affordances for gathering richer, more comprehensive data. Adapting and expanding beyond traditional methods can also support more inclusive visitor studies by allowing evaluators to gather multiple types of data in ways that more authentically reflect diverse audience perspectives. Doing so with intention can create an opportunity for a more meaningful experience for both the visitor and the evaluator and yield data that represents deeper and broader guest involvement.

In our presentation, we will provide examples of methods we have designed to support visitor engagement that build on design considerations such as responding to context, visual appeal, and usability. We will then invite attendees to participate in an interactive activity. This element of the session will give all present a chance to think about employing creative mechanisms for engaging visitors in various scenarios and reflect on how they might employ these techniques in their own work contexts.

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Beyond Single Studies: Leveraging Cross-Exhibition Analysis

Paula Lynn, National Gallery of Art

Carolyn Bevans, National Gallery of Art

Projects and Methods

Purpose and Importance

Exhibition evaluation is a core practice within visitor studies, yet findings are often treated as project-specific rather than cumulative. This session introduces retrospective synthesis—cross-exhibition analysis of accumulated evaluation studies—as an underutilized but powerful tool within the visitor studies toolkit. Drawing on more than a decade of front-end, formative, and summative exhibition research at the National Gallery of Art, presenters demonstrate how analyzing studies collectively can surface durable patterns in visitor experience that are less visible within individual projects.

The session explores three recurring insights that emerged across exhibitions: how visitor attention can be re-engaged through variety and comparison, how prior knowledge can be intentionally supported through design, and how meaningful engagement with interpretive elements relates to visitor satisfaction. Participants will examine how these patterns became more actionable when synthesized across studies and how they informed exhibition planning, interpretive strategy, and institutional decision-making.

Attendees will leave with a clearer understanding of retrospective synthesis as a distinct evaluative practice, strategies for leveraging accumulated research more effectively within their own institutions, and ideas for translating recurring findings into broader organizational insight and influence.

Abstract

What insights only emerge when exhibition studies are viewed together? This session examines retrospective synthesis as a practice for transforming accumulated exhibition research into actionable institutional knowledge. While exhibition evaluations frequently generate valuable findings, those insights often remain tied to individual projects, limiting their long-term influence on design and decision-making.

Drawing on more than a decade of exhibition studies conducted at the National Gallery of Art, presenters demonstrate how treating multiple evaluations as a collective dataset can reveal recurring patterns in visitor experience. Rather than focusing on specific methodologies or exhibition case studies, the session centers on what sustained exhibition research can teach institutions over time.

Through examples drawn across multiple exhibitions, presenters highlight three cross-cutting insights that consistently surfaced through synthesis: (1) visitor attention is patterned and can be strategically re-engaged through variety, juxtaposition, and comparison; (2) prior knowledge functions not only as a visitor characteristic but also as a design outcome that exhibitions can intentionally support; and (3) deeper engagement with interpretive elements is strongly associated with visitor satisfaction. The session also reflects on the interpretive work involved in synthesis, including determining which findings merit aggregation, navigating inconsistencies across studies, and translating patterns into forms that resonate with exhibition teams and leadership.

Rather than presenting a formal meta-analysis framework, this session positions retrospective synthesis as a practical evaluative tool that increases the value and strategic impact of existing research. Participants will be invited to reflect on their own institutional bodies of research and consider what recurring patterns may already exist but remain underutilized.

Customization, But Make It Consistent: Department-Wide Evaluation Of Detroit Zoo's Educational Programming

Zahraa Aljebori, Detroit Zoo

Laura Weiss, COSI's Center for Research and Evaluation

Facilitated Discussion

Purpose and Importance

How do you evaluate over 200 programs serving audiences from preschool through adulthood in a way that provides enough consistency to make comparisons, while also enough customization to provide tangible findings? Instead of continuing to evaluate each program in isolation, the Detroit Zoo's Education team embarked on a department-wide evaluation effort.

This session will cover considerations specific to department-wide evaluation. An important aspect of a department-wide effort is the need for collaboration and developing a shared language around evaluation. This includes identifying shared goals for the evaluation, a common system or strategy for conducting the evaluation, and learning outcomes applicable across programs (e.g., the Zoo's mission) and specific to individual programs. Ultimately, a department-wide evaluation should enable a department to systematically review the collective impact of educational programming across all audiences, compare impacts between programs, and make decisions about their programming portfolio.

Session attendees will become more aware of the different considerations needed to plan, manage, and conduct department-wide evaluation. They will also be introduced to the unifying system used by the Zoo - the Informal STEM Education Evaluation (ISEE) system - and learn how its tools can be used to support department-wide evaluation.

Abstract

The Detroit Zoo's educational programming is robust, with over fifty program categories and 200 programs serving audiences from preschool through adulthood. Evaluation lacked consistency, accessibility, and usefulness. Evaluation practices varied from program to program, highly dependent on the individuals leading them. Too many programs relied solely on anecdotal feedback. Although a basic universal form existed, it was insufficient and outdated and inconsistently used across programs. This shortcoming was often addressed by creating individual evaluation forms for each program. The lack of a centralized form and database to store and organize evaluation results made it difficult to access, analyze, or share information across teams, hindering the ability to make data-informed decisions to improve and strengthen educational offerings across departments.

When the Zoo explained their challenges to COSI's Center for Research and Evaluation, a potential solution came to mind - the Informal STEM Education Evaluation (ISEE) system (Weiss et al., 2022). Consisting of four "unification tools" - Strategic Outcomes Framework, Educational Environment Objectives, Customizable Questionnaire, and Unified Reporting - ISEE is designed to help plan, implement, and evaluate programming towards its intended educational outcomes. Unique to ISEE is its ability to provide both customized evaluation for individual programs and unified reporting across programming, making it a good fit for the Zoo's needs.

This universal evaluation tool is being used to help identify which programs are thriving and where improvements are needed. With more than 50 program types, the Zoo must strategically focus staff time and resources, and this system will provide clearer insight into which offerings are most effective and which may need refinement, reduction, or elimination. While ISEE will not be the sole determining factor in these decisions, its consistent use across all programs will provide an objective way for comparing programs to which team members have emotional attachments.

Additional Links

<https://detroitzoo.org/learn/>

<https://cosi.org/about-cosi/cosi-cre>

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Concurrent Session 2: 1:15 pm-2:15 pm

Data as a Bridge: Integrating Internal Processes to Better Serve Priority Audiences

Mac Cannady, Lawrence Hall of Science
Seth Harthun, Lawrence Hall of Science
Claudia Bustos, Lawrence Hall of Science
Kelly Grindstaff, Lawrence Hall of Science

Facilitated Discussion

Purpose and Importance

Cultural institutions often face a frustrating paradox: they possess vast amounts of visitor information but lack actionable insights. Data from surveys, CRMs, and community feedback frequently becomes trapped in departmental silos, preventing a unified understanding of the visitor experience.

The purpose of this session, "Data as a Bridge: Integrating Internal Processes to Better Serve Priority Audiences," is to provide attendees with field-tested strategies to dismantle these internal silos. Drawing from an IMLS-funded initiative at The Lawrence Hall of Science, the session will explore how to establish cross-functional data teams and

transition from top-down mandates to collaborative, data-informed models. It moves beyond the mere mechanics of data collection, offering practical approaches for operationalizing shared data streams across an institution.

The importance of this work lies in its direct impact on equity and audience engagement. By integrating disparate data sources and empowering frontline staff, institutions can effectively center equity in their decision-making processes. Ultimately, this holistic approach to data strategy is essential for museums to genuinely understand and better serve their priority communities—evolving from being merely "data-rich" to becoming insight-driven organizations that foster meaningful, audience-centric growth.

Abstract

Many cultural institutions face a common paradox: they are “data-rich” but “insight-poor”. While museums routinely collect vast amounts of information—ranging from COVES exit surveys and CRM transactional records to qualitative community feedback—these data points frequently remain trapped within departmental silos. Marketing sees the “who,” education sees the “how,” and leadership tracks the financial bottom line. These distinct perspectives rarely converge, preventing a holistic understanding of the visitor experience and hindering an institution's ability to quickly adapt to community needs.

This facilitated discussion introduces a framework designed to break down these internal barriers. Drawing from an IMLS-funded initiative at The Lawrence Hall of Science, UC Berkeley, titled Harnessing Data for Audience-Centric Growth, presenters will share how they established a cross-functional Data Strategy Team. The session shifts the conversation from the mechanics of data collection to the applied methodology of organizational behavior, demonstrating how to transition from top-down mandates to collaborative, data-informed models that empower frontline staff.

Following a brief 15-minute case study highlighting The Lawrence's journey and the role of internal "Reflective Partners," attendees will engage in a 45-minute structured dialogue. Facilitators will guide small-group interactions exploring how participants can map internal stakeholders, cultivate data literacy among non-research staff, and establish collaborative "data rituals" within their own organizations.

A central focus of the conversation will be centering equity in data strategy. We want to ensure that data-driven decision-making remains responsive to the needs of chronically marginalized communities rather than just optimizing for the majority. Attendees will leave with practical approaches to operationalizing shared data streams, ultimately mapping out paths to transform visitor studies into the operational heartbeat of their museums.

Exit Surveys – Tips And Tricks For Success

Elisa Israel, Saint Louis Science Center

Beth Katz, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County

Christopher Landeros, California Science Center

Rachel Lindsey, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

Panel Presentation

Purpose and Importance

Exit surveys are a key part of the visitor studies toolkit. They provide a wealth of information about visitors, but collecting sufficient data can be difficult. Presenters, representing two science centers, a natural history museum, and an art museum, three of which have free general admission, will share challenges they face implementing an ongoing exit survey and how they have addressed them. Topics will include: tips for recruiting, training, and motivating data collectors, approaches for managing ongoing surveys, and how to apply these to both facility exit surveys and exhibition exit surveys.

Attendees will come away from this session with:

- Strategies for managing large-scale exit survey projects, including topics such as scheduling and accounting for multiple facility entrances.
- Examples of hiring/recruitment strategies for data collectors (both paid and volunteer).
- Examples of training scenarios that support data collectors to be successful with recruiting participants.
- Strategies for keeping data collectors motivated and engaged.

Abstract

Challenges such as high refusal rates, scheduling, and making the case for staff support can make the process of doing exit surveys difficult. Presenters will share the challenges they have faced and how they have addressed them in order to maintain reliable exit survey datasets. They will also note areas where they are still struggling.

The four institutions represented on this panel all participate in the COVES collaboration, where they are tasked with collecting hundreds of exit surveys from visitors year-round, using a common instrument and a shared data collection protocol. Although COVES is a commonality for us, we each approach the process a little differently in that data collectors may be full-time staff, part-time staff, volunteers, and/or staff from other departments, so the variety of approaches we use should provide session attendees with a range of examples that can be applied broadly.

Panelists will address persistent challenges such as refusal rates, staff turnover, and scheduling difficulties not as barriers, but as ongoing constraints that many of us are navigating. They will share how they are adapting their approaches to meet targets and maintain data integrity, while also reflecting on what remains difficult and unresolved.

The goal of this session is to share a range of approaches that have worked in our varied settings and have enabled us to successfully implement exit surveys and collect reliable and representative data, even as we work through evolving challenges. We expect that many in the audience are grappling with similar issues, and we hope to create space to learn from one another's experiences and strategies. Attendees will leave with practical ideas, as well as opportunities to contribute their own insights, strengthening collective understanding of how to sustain exit survey efforts across diverse contexts.

Ripple Effect Mapping: The program ended... and then what happened?

Michelle Lentzner, J. Sickler Consulting

Projects and Methods

Purpose and Importance

This session will give participants a broad introduction and understanding of Ripple Effect Mapping (REM), a methodology rooted in appreciative inquiry and historically used to evaluate communities of practice and extension programs. Participants will learn about the REM methodology, the types of programs and experiences it is well-suited to, and the basics of how to facilitate a REM session and analyze the resulting data. The second half of the presentation will consist of an interactive REM session, in which attendees generate their own REM data about the VSA conference experience to see the method in action.

REM is currently underutilized in the museum field; few informal learning institutions are even aware of this approach. However, REM offers some unique benefits that are hard to access through other methodologies. REM excels at capturing long-term impacts that are often missed with immediate post-program evaluation. Additionally, REM often captures unexpected or unplanned-for outcomes that would have been overlooked with other methods. For a museum with long-standing, recurring programs targeted at communities or interconnected individuals, REM can offer evidence of outcomes that are often considered pie-in-the-sky for other evaluation methods.

Abstract

Ripple Effect Mapping (REM) is a methodology currently utilized most often in evaluating programming related to communities of practice and community development, such as

extension programs (Kollock et. al., 2012; Emery et. al., 2015). REM relies on data from a participatory group process sometime after a program has ended, similar to a focus group, to document and link changes that occurred among participants and their communities in the weeks, months, and even years after a program occurred.

In REM, the program is centered as a primary catalyst, which ripples out into the community through program participants in any number of ways. These qualitative data are then analyzed and visualized into a map or bullseye, in which the program is at the center, and the outcomes radiate out in the order of occurrence or reach. Optimally, outcomes can be linked by “and then” statements as they get further and further from the central occurrence of the program itself. For example, “I attended the program... and then I went home and did more research online... and then I decided to do it myself at home... and then I talked to my neighbor about it, and they tried it, too...” and on and on, across all the ways that participants described experiencing the program’s effects.

In this session, examples of completed Ripple Effect Maps will be shared from the presenter’s own work as part of J. Sickler Consulting, which includes maps about recurring museum programs, communities of practice, and professional development, as well as publicly available REM visualizations from other fields.

While the utility of Ripple Effect Mapping is largely limited to a specific type of programming or experience and requires ample time and funding to conduct, the Visitor Studies community as a whole would benefit from greater awareness of this methodology. Ripple Effect Mapping is a useful, highly specialized tool within an evaluator’s toolkit that can generate unique and valuable insights about how museum programs and experiences affect individuals and communities over time.

References

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Concurrent Session 3: 2:45 pm-3:45 pm

Uplifting Children And Families' Voices Through Evaluation Choices

Syd Overtoom, Children's Museum of Indianapolis
Lok-Wah Li, Boston Children's Museum
Courtney Ball, Discovery Place
Samantha Tonumaiepa, Thanksgiving Point Institute

Panel Presentation

Purpose and Importance

This session seeks to engage museum and other non-profit professionals to explore effective and intentional evaluation methods that give meaning to children and families' voices. Coming from 4 different institutions, each panelist will highlight what has worked well and/or what they have learned by way of these tools when working with children and families. The conversation will focus on how these institutions prioritize those voices through evaluation methods that can be applied elsewhere. Session attendees will be encouraged to reflect on their perception of evaluation work with children by way of discussion and with pre- and post-reflection questions. Additionally, they will see the instrument design of physical tools and learn about the diverse methods used to conduct research at each institution, and take home sample evaluation tools and/or frameworks that help them work with children and family groups more intentionally. We hope session attendees, especially emerging professionals, will feel encouraged to push forward in this field and extend their skillset by way of using evaluation methods and tools to support children's voices and the input of families at their institutions.

Abstract

During this session, attendees will hear from 4 panelists, each from a distinct institution; 2 children's museums and 2 family-centered science museums, each with catered content towards their target audiences. Focusing on institutional frameworks and diverse methodologies, the panelists will walk attendees through how they get children and families engaged in their evaluation practices by sharing their specific studies and/or tools. These methods embed evaluation directly into the visitor experience in a way that is accessible not just for the adults, but the children who are just as active (if not more!) in the programs, exhibits, and interactive play. This session asks attendees to potentially reconsider what evaluation with children and families as a typical audience can look like when the institution advocates for their opinion along with their interactivity.

Evaluation Methods:

At Boston Children's Museum, evaluators conducted observations of families engaging in hands-on activities, followed-up with interviews that engaged both children and adults, gaining input from a group, adult, and child perspective. This study used the LEGO Learning Through Play Experience tool.

At Thanksgiving Point, the influence of STEM programming was analyzed by a pre- and post-evaluation activity, seeing what children thought a scientist looked like and reflecting on their growth and knowledge of the world, particularly any extension.

At The Children's Museum of Indianapolis, lessons learned from previous object-rich exhibits influenced creating a more effective exit survey tool that provided insight on how children and adults can answer the same questions differently.

At Discovery Place, a gamified activity allowed children to engage in an evaluation method that felt natural, fun, and developmentally appropriate while still generating valuable insight for the institution.

Additional Links

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1_4PmsjxyKkP0MbnehaxA54qxoPbVVPlv

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<https://learningthroughplay.com/learning-through-play-experience-tool>.

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Scalable, Visitor-Centered, and Time-Saving Lessons Learned From Retail And Ethology

Victoria Eudy, Missouri Historical Society

Projects and Methods

Purpose and Importance

Museums are increasingly expected to make timely, audience-centered decisions while operating within significant constraints on staffing, time, and resources. This session explores two rapid evaluation approaches, scan observation and retail-derived audience segmentation, that can help visitor studies practitioners identify large-scale behavioral

and audience patterns efficiently while expanding the methodological toolkit available to the field.

Abstract

This session introduces two cross-disciplinary evaluation approaches designed to support rapid, large-scale audience understanding in museum settings: scan observation and marketing-derived audience segmentation. Grounded in applications at a large metropolitan museum and the Missouri Historical Society, the presentation examines how methods adapted from animal behavioral science, retail, and marketing can expand the visitor studies toolkit while addressing institutional pressures for timely, actionable insight.

Additional Links

Kashkin, V., Elafi, R., & Issafi, H. (2025). Digital transformation of audience intelligence: a comparative study of the programs. *J. Lifestyle SDGs Rev*, 5(2), e05023.

Syrjälä, H., Ruiz, C. D., Leipämaa-Leskinen, H., & Luomala, H. T. (2025). From consumers to consumption: The socio-technical assemblage of the persona in market segmentation. *Journal of business research*, 194, 115387

Bang! Clang! Waaaahhhh! Exploring How Sound Impacts Visitors' STEM Learning

Laura Weiss, COSI's Center for Research and Evaluation

Justin Meyer, COSI's Center for Research and Evaluation

Donnelley (Dolly) Hayde, COSI's Center for Research and Evaluation

Joe E. Heimlich; Retired from COSI's Center for Research and Evaluation

Projects and Methods

Purpose and Importance

Ambient sounds (natural, intentional, amplified or muted) contribute to the acoustic experience and can drastically change how informal learning spaces affect visitors' STEM learning. Despite evidence that sounds impact people physiologically and emotionally (e.g., Münzel, et al., 2018; Eerola & Vuoskoski, 2013), few studies have explored this in informal STEM learning (ISL) spaces. The NSF-funded Sound Travels project (DRL-2215101) is researching how soundscapes affect visitors in informal STEM learning (ISL) settings and how practitioners can use this information to support visitors more effectively.

During the session, participants will be introduced to methods for measuring visitors' perceptions of ambient sound and will learn about approaches for collaborative data

exploration and meaning making with partners. We aim for participants to leave the session feeling inspired to think about sound in museum/ISL spaces more intentionally and consider applications for our research findings in their work.

While our work is still in the exploratory phase, there are indications that positive experiences of soundscapes may have a strong, positive effect on learning in ISL environments, while negative experiences of soundscapes may not have a strong effect.

Abstract

The Sound Travels project brings together informal STEM learning (ISL) researchers, designers, and educators to 1) broaden the research foundation for sound design in ISL experiences, and 2) begin to consider exploratory design recommendations for working with sound in ISL institutions. Our research seeks to learn 1) how soundscapes are used by ISL practitioners, 2) the qualities of soundscapes at ISL sites, 3) how learners at ISL sites experience sound, and 4) how qualities of soundscapes correlate with indicators of learning.

The four research sites for this project represent different ISL institution types in Columbus, Ohio (zoo, metro park, conservatory, and science center). At each site, we collected data in two “zones” reflecting distinct types of experiences for visitors (e.g., indoors vs. outdoors).

We used three data collection methods: 1) AudioMoth loggers to constantly record ambient sounds during data collection hours, 2) a 5-minute visitor exit questionnaire about their experiences with sound in that zone (n=1094), and 3) a “Sound Search” activity where visitors used a tablet to record sounds that made them feel curious, uneasy, peaceful, or energized as they explored the zone (n=159).

Analyzing data from the questionnaire, we observed an association between people’s reported experience of the soundscape and people’s reported learning engagement outcomes. Our findings suggest that, even conditional on other factors, visitors’ reported experiences with sound within an ISL experience seem to have an important role in what they take away.

From the Sound Searches, we found that individual sounds hold a range of meanings to people. Visitors recorded many of the same sounds to represent different emotional states, though certain emotional associations were less frequently named for specific sources of sound. Overall, visitors talked about sound in ways that were similar to ISL practitioners’ descriptions of sound in the same settings.

Additional Links

<https://informalscience.org/project/research-understand-and-inform-impacts-ambient-and-designed-sound-informal-stem-learning/>

<https://www.terc.edu/soundtravels/>

<https://cosi.org/about-cosi/cosi-cre>

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- Zhang, J. D., & Schubert, E. (2019). A single item measure for identifying musician and nonmusician categories based on measures of musical sophistication. *Music Perception*, 36(5), 457–467. <https://doi.org/10.1525/mp.2019.36.5.457>

Wednesday, July 22

Concurrent Session 4: 1:45 pm-3:45pm

From Findings to Insights: Communicating Visitor Data through Storytelling

Carolyn Bevans, National Gallery of Art
Bryn Pernot, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

Mini-Workshop

Purpose and Importance

Visitor studies professionals are increasingly expected not only to collect and analyze data, but also to communicate insights clearly and persuasively to diverse institutional audiences. Yet research findings are often shared through dense reports or slide decks that obscure meaning rather than support action. This workshop positions storytelling as a foundational tool for communicating visitor data in ways that are accessible, strategic, and actionable.

Through guided exercises and real-world examples from the National Gallery of Art and Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, participants will learn practical approaches for transforming findings into insights and for communicating those insights in ways that resonate with stakeholders. The workshop focuses on applying narrative structure, audience-centered visualization, and presentation design principles to improve how visitor research is communicated across teams and organizations.

Participants will leave with tools for distinguishing findings from insights, developing clearer and more purposeful visualizations, and designing presentations that prioritize meaning over information overload. The session also provides opportunities for hands-on practice, peer feedback, and iterative revision using participants' own datasets or provided sample data.

By strengthening participants' confidence and effectiveness in communicating research, this workshop supports more impactful institutional conversations and helps elevate visitor perspectives in organizational decision-making.

Abstract

Data does not speak for itself—stories do. Building on established practices, this hands-on workshop explores how visitor studies professionals can use storytelling principles to communicate research findings more clearly, persuasively, and strategically. As visitor research plays an increasingly central role in institutional planning and decision-making, the ability to translate data into actionable insight has become a critical professional skill. The workshop begins by examining a foundational question: What is this report meant to achieve? Participants will explore how audience, purpose, and institutional context should shape every communication decision, from chart selection to slide headlines. Presenters will introduce practical frameworks for distinguishing findings (what the data show) from insights (why the findings matter) and demonstrate how narrative structure can strengthen interpretation and reporting.

Drawing on examples from the National Gallery of Art and Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art, the session covers key principles of effective visual communication, including reducing visual clutter, embedding labels and legends directly into charts, developing takeaway-driven headlines, and aligning slide layout with narrative intent.

Participants will analyze examples of effective and ineffective data presentations and discuss how design choices influence comprehension and stakeholder engagement. The majority of the workshop is dedicated to guided practice. Participants will revise or create visualizations using their own datasets or provided sample data, such as exhibition exit surveys and program feedback summaries. Facilitators will provide coaching and structured peer feedback throughout the process.

By integrating storytelling, visualization, and slide design into a cohesive workflow, this workshop equips participants with practical tools they can immediately apply to communicate visitor research in ways that support clarity, engagement, and institutional action.

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Don't Break the Flow: Incorporating evaluation as part of the guest experience

Nette Pletcher, Beez Kneez Creative
Jennifer Gauble, Saint Louis Zoo
Erin Tate, Saint Louis Zoo
Amy Niedbalski, Saint Louis Zoo

Mini-Workshop

Purpose and Importance

Meaningful evaluation can be conducted in a manner consistent with the visitor experience, as they navigate through your exhibits, engage in your programs, or participate in your special events. This session offers original and even playful methods of engaging guests in the evaluation process. Using examples from past evaluation projects at zoos and museums, we will explore effective methods for collecting data from visitors in real time, while maintaining ethical standards for collecting valid data. We are sharing our

favorite visitor engagement techniques for evaluation, including magical moments in something as basic as collecting demographics. In this mini-workshop, attendees will acquire new ideas for creative data collection strategies and measurement techniques for use in informal learning environments. Attendees will understand ways to modify standard evaluation instruments and protocols to engage underrepresented audiences and be able to apply participatory evaluation techniques, with a sense of fun, effectively.

Abstract

Evaluation in museums, zoos, and aquariums does not occur in a vacuum. Evaluation in these spaces occurs on our exhibit floors, amidst constant distraction, and even during programs occurring outdoors in inclement weather. In other words, evaluation is part of the complex and varied visitor experience! Naturally, then, evaluation approaches should align to that experience. They cannot exist separately nor should they be designed without the full visitor experience in mind. This session explores effective methods for collecting data from visitors in real time, as they navigate through an exhibit, engage in a program, or join a special event, based on cases from our own experiences. You will hear both the advantages and limitations to these approaches.

As visitor studies professionals, we are all too familiar with the challenges of soliciting input from guests who are generally not inclined to interrupt their pleasant day out in order to answer our carefully crafted questions presented in clinical fashion on an iPad or clipboard. Fortunately, we can craft evaluative experiences that delight our visitors while still adhering to industry best practices around ethical data collection and cultural relevance. It is possible to conduct pain-free evaluation and match the methods to the style and tone of the informal learning environment.

By designing evaluation with the full visitor experience in mind, we are more likely not only to attract interested participants for our studies, but also to collect more meaningful data from a wider variety of guests. Matching the evaluation protocol to the tenor of the zoo or museum space and audience make up helps to achieve our data collection goals while maintaining fluidity of the visitor experience.

This session will provide you with energizing new ideas for your evaluation toolkits and you'll be able to share your own innovations for evaluation.

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Prompt Like You Mean It: A Hands-On AI Workshop

Laureen Trainer, Trainer Evaluation
Vishakha Ramakrishnan, Peridot Projects

Mini-workshop

Purpose and Importance

AI assistants are trained in ways that make them lean toward agreement—even when you’re wrong. In this session, you’ll learn to spot that sycophancy, then build the skills to counter it: moving from quick, one-off prompts that produce vague answers to structured prompts that demand evidence, push back on assumptions, and surface uncertainty. We’ll quickly review the basics, then spend the session focusing on hands-on practice with real examples you can apply immediately.

Concurrent Session 5: 4:15pm-5:15pm

Strengthening Exhibitions and Experiences through Community Collaboration

Dr. Eleanor Hill, Denver Museum of Nature & Science
Alyssa Carr, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art
Julie Weber, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art
Roslyn Esperon, The Walters Art Museum

Panel Presentation

Purpose and Importance

Collaborating with community increases audience engagement and reduces costly mistakes, strengthening our projects. While such collaboration can feel daunting, expensive, and time consuming, community-based research offers valuable benefits! In this session, presenters from three institutions will share examples of how they have successfully utilized museum driven community collaboration, tips and tricks, and lessons learned.

Through a combination of presentations, small group discussions and Q&A, attendees will leave this session with a greater understanding of the benefits of involving community in design. They will have the opportunity to reflect on their own approaches to involving community in design and develop new ideas for where they could utilize community collaboration strategies in their work. Regardless of the resources available to them, attendees will build knowledge of strategies for collaborating with community members. Strategies will range from those that can be accomplished with a low level of institutional resources and those that require a high level of resources.

Abstract

This panel session will share examples of how three institutions have successfully utilized museum driven community collaboration to steer their projects. The presenters will share the benefits of community collaboration, examples of how they have utilized community collaboration, and lessons learned. Examples will demonstrate how community collaboration can be scaled up or down, depending on the available resources. The session will include presentations, small group discussion, and Q&A.

The first presentation will focus on the use of front-end evaluations to capture visitor feedback across the course of three special exhibitions at the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. The presenters will explore how museum visitors were recruited, how front-end testing influenced the exhibition planning process, how multiple iterations refined the process over time, and describe the continuing evolution of visitor engagement in exhibition planning.

The second presentation will highlight how community advisory groups have provided input in the multi-year exhibition development process at The Walters Art Museum. The presenter will explore how the museum creates community advisory groups, describe the range of topics advisors consult on, and provide examples of how advisors' feedback have resulted in tangible changes. The presenter will share learnings from navigating complex and culturally sensitive topics with advisors, opportunities others can use to create platforms for community members, and ways to sustain community relationships.

The third presentation will share how the Denver Museum of Nature & Science hosted community design workshops to inform the redesign of their Gems & Minerals exhibit. The presenter will share their approach to designing the workshops, recruiting participants, facilitating the workshops, and sharing the findings with the redesign team, as well as some takeaways, and lessons learned. The presenter will show how the design workshops fit into the overall community collaboration strategy for the gallery redesign and their institution's broader approach to community collaboration.

Introduction to IMLS's National Museum Survey Data Portal

Helen Wechsler, Office of Museum Services, IMLS

Marisa Pelczar, PhD, Office of Research and Evaluation, IMLS

Projects and Methods

Purpose and Importance

This session introduces museum research and evaluation professionals to the IMLS National Museum Survey (NMS) Data Portal, a new tool designed to provide accessible, nationally representative data about U.S. museums for the first time. Because comparable, fieldwide data has long been limited, the portal offers an essential resource for benchmarking, planning, advocacy, and research.

By sharing both the development process and a guided demonstration of the portal, this session will help attendees understand how to use NMS data to add national, regional, and discipline-level context to their own work. Participants will learn how design decisions were informed by user experience testing and collaboration with subject matter experts across the museum ecosystem.

Attendees will also have dedicated time to explore the portal, ask questions, and provide feedback to help refine future iterations of this foundational dataset and ensure its continued value to the museum community.

Abstract

For the first time, the U.S. museum field has access to nationally representative data through the Institute of Museum and Library Services' National Museum Survey (NMS). Developed with sustained input from museum professionals, researchers, and subject matter experts, the NMS provides the sector with a foundational dataset that fills a long-acknowledged gap in fieldwide information. To ensure these data are truly accessible and useful, IMLS created the NMS Data Portal—a public, interactive tool designed through two rounds of user experience testing to meet the diverse needs of institutions of all sizes and disciplines.

This session introduces attendees to the NMS Data Portal and demonstrates how museums can use the platform to understand their own work in national, regional, and discipline-specific contexts. Presenters will share the process behind developing a tool that balances analytical rigor with user-friendly design, highlighting how field guidance shaped both content and functionality.

The session includes a guided tour of the portal, showcasing key features such as customizable cross-tabs, interactive data visualizations, response rate information, and

explanations of weighting and data suppression. Attendees will see how these components work together to support uses ranging from evaluation and strategic planning to grant writing and sector-wide research.

The second half of the session invites participants to engage directly with the tool, ask questions, explore data scenarios, and share perspectives on how the portal can further evolve. Discussion may include opportunities for expanding available metrics, refining visualizations, and improving user pathways in future survey cycles.

By the end of the session, attendees will understand how to navigate the NMS Data Portal, interpret its outputs responsibly, and apply NMS findings to their own institutional or research needs—all while contributing ideas that will shape the future of this new national resource.

Additional Links

www.imls.gov/publications/institute-museum-and-library-services-imls-national-museum-survey-nms-pilot-summary

www.imls.gov/nms

Beyond Double-Barreled Questions: Using the MEASURE Approach to Develop Surveys with Rigor

Kari Ross Nelson, Thanksgiving Point Institute,
Samantha Tonumaipaa, Thanksgiving Point Institute

Projects and Methods

Purpose and Importance

Visitor studies practitioners are well versed in survey best practices — avoiding double-barreled questions, using clear language, attending to format and scale. Yet strong item wording alone does not guarantee an instrument that produces credible, defensible findings. This session presents a tool for systematic, evidence-based instrumentation: the MEASURE Approach (Kalkbrenner, 2021), a seven-step empirically supported framework for developing and validating survey instruments. We describe the tool then demonstrate its application in an IMLS-funded, multi-museum study of the Museums for All initiative.

Abstract

Background

In 2023, Thanksgiving Point Institute (Lehi, UT), Santa Cruz Children's Museum of Discovery (Santa Cruz, CA), and Regnier Family Wonderscope Children's Museum (Kansas City, MO) received an IMLS National Leadership Grant (MG-252983-OMS-23) to investigate the experiences of visitors participating in income-qualifying admission programs, as exemplified by the Museums for All initiative. Building on two prior pilot studies, the research team scaled data collection to 30 museums nationwide. This expansion necessitated a rigorous, systematic approach to instrument development to ensure findings would be reliable, valid, and generalizable across diverse institutional contexts and meaningful to the broader museum field.

Methods Employed

We employed the MEASURE approach to address this challenge. As described by Kalkbrenner (2021) MEASURE is an acronym comprised of the first letter of seven steps for developing and validating a survey instrument:

1. Make the purpose and rationale clear
2. Establish an empirical framework
3. Articulate theoretical blueprint
4. Synthesize content and scale development
5. Use expert reviewers
6. Recruit participants
7. Evaluate validity and reliability

We progressed through these steps collaboratively as a research team, with our advisory board and community experts, and finally with visitors. Each step strengthened not only the instrument itself, but the team's collective confidence in the data it would produce.

Data/Analysis/Findings

The process resulted in a 28-item survey comprised of closed- and open-ended questions exploring constructs connected to our research questions, namely perceived benefits, barriers, belonging, and intentions for future visits. Through statistical and thematic analysis, we found that income-qualifying programs bring in new, diverse audiences who report higher barriers to museum attendance, but also higher perceived benefits compared to general-admission visitors. At a time when museums face increasing scrutiny around public value and equity commitments, these findings provide timely evidence that access initiatives can meaningfully advance both institutional missions and community impact.

References

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The Easy Button: Automating Survey Infrastructure for Field-Wide Impact

Mac Cannady, Lawrence Hall of Science
Melissa Collins, Lawrence Hall of Science

Projects and Methods

Purpose and Importance

Join this "Projects and Methods" session to explore the STEM Impact Hub, an automated survey infrastructure developed to streamline survey creation and data analysis. We will detail the technical architecture—how it integrates Qualtrics and Google Suite to automate complex survey logic and reporting workflows. This approach reduces administrative labor for visitor studies staff, allowing more focus on high-level synthesis and impact. The Hub also addresses the challenge of isolated studies by establishing a collective, aggregate database using standardized, field-vetted scales. Learn how this capability lets you contextualize your institution's results, for example, comparing your 4.2 out of 5 on STEM identity against a national average of 3.8. We invite you to examine our automated pipeline with us. Your feedback on our scale selection and reporting templates is crucial to refining this resource, strengthening our collective capacity to generate deep, national insights about visitor impact.

Abstract

Visitor studies often suffer from fragmented workflows, where institutions continuously reinvent the wheel for individual studies. This "Projects and Methods" session introduces the STEM Impact Hub, an innovative survey infrastructure designed to streamline survey construction, automate analysis, and elevate how we measure visitor impact. By detailing the hub's technical architecture, we will demonstrate how integrating Qualtrics with the Google suite eliminates manual reporting bottlenecks. This automated pipeline transforms raw data into standardized, actionable reporting templates, significantly reducing administrative labor for visitor studies staff so they can focus on high-level synthesis and strategic impact.

The development of the STEM Impact Hub is driven by two persistent industry challenges: limited capacity for visitor studies, and isolated, single-institution studies that lack

external context. Evaluation as a whole, and especially visitor studies, tends to operate on shoestring budgets, asking for mountains while funding molehills. And when it does work, an organization might know its internal metrics but often lacks the baseline data needed to benchmark performance. The Hub addresses this by establishing a collective, aggregate database built on standardized, field-vetted scales.

Aligned with the conference theme of applied methodologies, this session goes beyond a technical walkthrough. We invite attendees to actively critique and discuss our scale selections and reporting layouts. The conversation will focus on how this collaborative infrastructure can be refined to better serve diverse organizational needs, ultimately strengthening our collective capacity to generate deep, national insights and advocate for the vital role of cultural institutions.

Thursday, July 23

Concurrent Session 6: 10:45 am-11:45 am

Turning the Tables: Co-Designing an Evaluation Playbook Through Design-Based Research

Kari Ross Nelson, Utah State University

Projects and Methods

Purpose and Importance

The relationship between evaluation theory and its application in museum practice is tenuous. Despite decades of calls for more rigorous informal learning evaluation, studies show that museum evaluators rarely draw on formal evaluation theory in their work. The research presented in this session addresses a central question: how might we strengthen museum evaluators' ability to use evaluation theory intentionally and effectively?

To answer this, I employed design-based research (DBR)—a collaborative, iterative methodology—to co-design a practical playbook for applying the general logic of evaluation in museum contexts. VSA community members served as active co-designers throughout, ensuring the resulting tool is grounded in real-world practice.

Attendees will leave with two key takeaways: a working understanding of DBR as a methodology applicable to visitor studies, and hands-on familiarity with the resulting evaluation playbook. More broadly, this session models how academic knowledge and

practitioner expertise can be productively integrated through co-design—yielding tools that are relevant, usable, and owned by the communities they serve.

Abstract

For decades, scholars have called for stronger evidence of museums' benefits, with some arguing that more rigorous application of evaluation theory could help provide it (Falk and Dierking, 1995; Weil, 2023, Smithsonian, 2004; Grack Nelson & Tranby, 2015; Fu et al., 2016; Teasdale, 2022). Yet a review of evaluation reports on informal.science.org found that museum evaluators maintain only a tenuous connection to evaluation theory (Ross Nelson, 2023). Design-based research (DBR) offered a promising avenue for closing this gap.

DBR is characterized by collaboration between researchers and practitioners, iterative testing and refinement of theory-based solutions, and a dual commitment to advancing theory while directly impacting practice (Barab, 2022). Its iterative nature—with evaluation built into each cycle—makes it particularly resonant for visitor studies audiences.

Methods and Process

Following Herrington et al.'s (2007) four-phase DBR framework, this project engaged VSA community members as co-designers across all phases: identifying practical problems, developing solutions informed by existing design principles, iteratively testing and refining those solutions, and reflecting to produce actionable design principles. Co-design positioned practitioners as experts whose knowledge was essential to the process.

Findings and Outcomes

The result is a playbook focused on the general logic of evaluation, iteratively refined through practitioner feedback and real-world testing. The tool translates evaluation theory into steps and prompts that museum evaluators can apply directly in their work.

Session Structure

The session's first half introduces DBR methodology through direct instruction and a small-group case exploration activity using documented museum DBR examples. The second half tours the playbook itself and engages participants in a "plus-delta" co-design protocol, inviting them to identify strengths and suggest refinements—mirroring the co-design process and fostering practical ownership of the tool.

References

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Additional Links

Prototype of the co-designed [Logic of Evaluation Playbook](#)

From Data to Dialogue: Evaluation of Multilingual Exhibitions

Alyssa Carr, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

Maia Werner-Avidon, MWA Insights

Bryn Pernot, Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art

Rafaela Brosnan, Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art

Panel Presentation

Purpose and Importance

Multilingual interpretation expands access, deepens visitor understanding, and signals institutional welcome and trust. Presenters will share what it takes to sustain multilingual work over time: aligning design and curatorial processes, budgeting realistic time for translation and review, clarifying institutional voice and roles, and developing institution-specific criteria for when and how new languages are introduced.

This panel builds upon a 2016 VSA session that called on visitor studies professionals to move beyond mere translation to rethink multilingualism as a matter of identity, social practice, and power. Presenters will discuss evaluation methods that include equitable survey design, focus groups, and community partnerships. Participants will learn about the importance of design choices, tone, and methodology, and will be encouraged to share their own experiences with multilingual interpretation. Participant and presenter conversations may cover: Translation policies in organizations, Privileging of language order (design/positioning of translated materials), and translation and fielding of evaluation instruments.

Abstract

Our first case study will focus on the influence evaluation has had on the development of standard policy for bilingual exhibitions. The Nelson-Atkins partners with a professor of linguistics to adjust the way translated instruments are designed and presented to visitors. Equitable survey instruments have increased the use of Spanish in open-ended questions and led to increased engagement. Evaluations, including a Spanish-language focus group, show that representation, appreciation, and future visitation are all influenced by multilingual interpretation. Findings from evaluations continue to inform emerging practices that prioritize transparency, community dialogue, and feasibility in exhibitions.

Our second case study will explore evaluation of multilingual interpretation over eight years at the California Academy of Sciences. In 2018, the Academy opened its first multilingual exhibition with interpretation offered in four languages. Findings from in-language focus groups showed that the impact went far beyond content understanding,

contributing to changes in parent/child dynamics, feelings of welcome, and perceptions of the museum. Over time, the Academy has evolved its approach to multilingual interpretation, transitioning to digital labels and QR codes. Later studies have shown the importance of considering visitor habits and preferences, as well as design choices, when relying on newer technologies as tools for multilingual interpretation.

The final presentation from Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art will discuss how multilingualism has evolved from an ad-hoc effort into an ongoing institutional commitment shaped by visitor research, cross-team collaboration, and iterative practice. Spanish-language interpretation is now a standard component of exhibitions, and evaluation has informed the use of bilingual resources. Sustaining this work depends on operational realities such as timelines, workflows, and institutional voice. As the Museum expands to include Marshallese and Indigenous languages, it is exploring how language inclusion can be guided by audience context, community collaboration, and practical constraints.

References

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Process Evaluation: Optimizing Projects, Programs, and Participants

Rita Deedrick, Deedrick Consulting

Amanda Krantz, Kera Collective

Projects and Methods

Purpose and Importance

The purpose of this session is to explore process evaluation, a type of evaluation that focuses on how projects and programs get implemented. Process evaluation is not discussed as widely as other types of evaluation, and presenters suspect that it is not well known and is, therefore, underutilized. Process evaluation improves processes in service to projects, programs, and partnerships, paving the way for better outcomes even when (especially when) they reveal challenges. Given this focus, process evaluation results are often internal to organizations and project teams and not widely disseminated outside the organization and project team. However, organizations that engage in process evaluation can bolster their reputation by showing funders and other supporters that they want to do their best work and are willing to learn how to make that happen. Engaging in process evaluation provides professional development for the museum practitioners who are

engaged in the processes and, by extension, the field. The goal of this session is to bring this underused evaluation approach to light and to inspire and inform its use.

Abstract

Overview

Process evaluation is not about what a project or program is working to accomplish; rather process evaluation is about how the work is getting done. The session will begin with a high-level overview of process evaluation and how it differs from other types of evaluation, including its responsiveness to scenarios (i.e., it can take many forms) and how the evaluation questions differ from most other visitor studies evaluations. References and resources will be provided to form a basis for the session.

Real-World Examples

Each presenter will discuss their use of process evaluation in projects, providing real life examples of process evaluation in action and its effect on the projects. Projects highlighted include (a) the privately-funded Chronicling Resistance project that brought together library archivists and activists; (b) the co-creation process for a NASA-funded planetarium show; and (c) Sound Travels, a four-year collaborative research project funded by the National Science Foundation (DRL-2215101).

Full-Group Discussion

After showcasing real-world examples, the presenters will compare and contrast these examples and open the discussion to session attendees including opportunity for questions and answers. The presenters will co-facilitate discussion with the intention of having audience members envision ways process evaluation could be useful for both internal projects and programs as well as complex, multi-partner projects. As time permits, we'll discuss barriers and pitfalls of conducting process evaluations, and how participants could incorporate elements of process evaluation into practice.

References

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Using Cognitive Interviews to Understand Belonging Across Adult Visitors

Diana I. Acosta, Ph.D., Griffin Museum of Science and Industry

Projects and Methods

Purpose and Importance

Belonging is considered a fundamental need for all humans (Maslow, 1958). In cultural institutions, supporting visitors' sense of belonging is a crucial aspect of the visitor experience. If visitors feel that they belong, they are likely to step inside, have a better experience and visit again. If they feel that they do not belong, they are unlikely to visit at all or to return. But what exactly does belonging mean, and do people of different racial,

ethnic, and gender identities have similar or different interpretations? Further, what does belonging look like in practice when these guests visit a museum? In this presentation we share findings from a cross-cultural validation study that addressed these questions by engaging adult visitors in cognitive interviews of the Cultural Institution Belonging Instrument (CIBI; Price & Applebaum, 2022). Attendees will learn about these new research findings and engage in discussion around belonging at their own institutions and the voices they need to include to explore what belonging means to their guests.

Abstract

We present findings from a qualitative study that asked adult visitors of Griffin Museum of Science and Industry (Griffin MSI) to share their definitions of belonging. During a cognitive interview, participants answered questions from the Cultural Institution Belonging Instrument (CIBI; Price & Applebaum, 2022), a survey designed to assess visitors' sense of belonging in museums and other cultural institutions and described their reasoning for their answers. Across 40 interviews conducted with guests of varying racial, ethnic, and gender identities, we found more similarities than differences in their definitions. Most adults described belonging as feeling welcome and included and feeling safe and comfortable. As part of the interview, we also asked the participants to share a real-life example of a time when they felt they belonged or did not belong to give their definitions some context. There was a wide range of examples shared, with almost half of the adults referencing their racial, ethnic, or gender identities as being related to their experiences of belonging in some type of way. For this presentation, we highlight the responses from six participants who organically shared an example of belonging at Griffin MSI. Among this subset of guests with diverse identities, we observed that adults often referred to specific exhibits or programming within the Museum that made them feel like they belong. Sometimes, these experiences connected directly to their identities. Visitors' interactions with museum staff also contributed to feelings of belonging. We discuss how these real-life examples of belonging at Griffin MSI reveal what it truly means to feel welcome and included and safe and comfortable at the Museum for adults across a variety of racial, ethnic, and gender identities.

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Hills to Die On: The Visitor Studies Showdown

Michelle Lentzner, J. Sickler Consulting

Marie Edland, Barnes Foundation

Facilitated Discussion

Purpose and Importance

As evaluators and researchers, we often work in isolation or in small teams within our institutions. Best practices and adopted methodologies are, in many cases, informed by academic training, interactions with colleagues, scholarly articles, validated instruments, and personal experience. But are we all really doing our work in the same or similar ways? And if not, how do our own personal values, perceptions, and contexts filter into our practices as researchers and evaluators?

In this facilitated discussion session, we encourage participants to reflect on their own practices and values surrounding a range of contentious topics, while getting a broader sense of the range of norms within the visitor studies field.

Participants will learn more about the methods and practices valued by colleagues, reflect on their own practices and norms, and connect with one another through engaging dialogue to identify commonalities and discrepancies in day-to-day research and evaluation work.

Abstract

The session will kick off with the co-facilitators framing the goal of these discussions: to reflect on our own practices, especially those practices which we might take for granted as the norm or default, and to better understand the range of practices and values of others in the field. We will encourage all discussions to be lively, critical, and respectful.

The bulk of the session's discussion time will be framed around a handful of key practices, topics, and perspectives within the visitor studies field. Each topic will be centered around a table or set space in the room, with a pre-selected moderator to lead the discussion on a given topic and play devil's advocate, if needed. These table leaders may have a "hot take" or unpopular opinion, or they may be more moderate and interested in exploring all sides of a given topic. There will be an extra table/space set aside, so that participants that feel they have their own "hill to die on" can choose their own topic and start a new discussion if desired.

During the discussion portion, participants will be free to roam the room from table to table as their interest dictates, participating in or listening in to discussions around these

topics as they evolve. Co-facilitators will give participants a time check every 6-7 minutes to provide an opportunity to step away from a discussion and explore multiple topics.

The session will culminate in a group reflection, in which the co-facilitators invite participants to share whether any of their views changed or were challenged, what parts of their practice they consider non-negotiable or “hills to die on,” and any consensus that was reached through discussions or common ground that was identified among individuals with differing opinions.

Concurrent Session 7: 2:30 pm-3:30 pm

Evaluation Emergencies! Responding to Last-Minute Evaluation Requests

Beth Katz, Natural History Museums of Los Angeles County
Megan Harwell, Space Center Houston

Projects and Methods

Purpose and Importance

Museums rely on their Evaluation teams for data and insights that can be used to improve programs and exhibits, make the case for funding, meet reporting requirements, and enhance the overall visitor experience. However, internal stakeholders may not be familiar with processes for requesting support or with Evaluators’ workloads. Internal Evaluators are often departments with just a few staff members - sometimes only one. Last-minute requests from colleagues can be stressful, and sometimes impossible. In this session, presenters will share strategies and tools for responding to these “evaluation emergencies,” and facilitate discussion around addressing and preventing future emergencies.

During this session, participants will...

- 1) Gain strategies for responding to urgent requests from colleagues.
- 2) Take away tools and techniques they can use in evaluation projects with tight deadlines.
- 3) Reflect on how they can be more proactive in assessing institutional evaluation needs to prevent future emergencies

Abstract

“I need a survey! How soon can you get the results?” “Our funder needs data on our visitors. It’s due tomorrow!” Sound familiar? While evaluators encourage advanced planning, we are also familiar with last-minute requests from colleagues. We refer to the most urgent of these as “evaluation emergencies.” They require a quick turnaround and

either address emergent needs or anticipated project needs that had not been previously communicated to the evaluator. It may even be the first time the evaluator is learning about a specific program, initiative, or project. These requests can be particularly challenging when they are out of the evaluation department's usual scope of work, or when the requested deliverable requires data the evaluator does not have on hand. Also, as museum evaluation departments tend to be small - often with one dedicated staff member - they might simply lack the capacity to add to their workloads. These are stressful situations! Still, evaluators want to be team-players and support their colleagues. So what's a busy evaluator to do?

In this interactive session, presenters will share examples of "evaluation emergencies" at their own institutions and how they responded - either by fulfilling requests, proposing alternatives, referring colleagues to other sources, or even by saying "no." Examples will cover a range of relevant contexts, such as exhibitions, public programs, wayfinding, marketing, and grants. Participants will work together to come up with responses to hypothetical emergency requests, drawing from strategies shared by the presenters and their own experiences. Presenters will facilitate discussion around how evaluators can be proactive in assessing institutional evaluation needs to prevent future emergencies. In keeping with the conference theme, participants will take away tools and techniques they can use to address evaluation emergencies at their own institutions

Let's try something different: Explore playful approaches in museum evaluations

Lok-Wah Li, Boston Children's Museum

Kaylan Petrie, New England Aquarium

Julia Wareham, Museum of Science, Boston

Emmett Fung, Museum of Science, Boston

Panel Presentation

Purpose and Importance

Many museums and aquariums foster children and adults' curiosity and learning through interactive and light-hearted experiences. As we conduct research and evaluation studies directly with the visitors "on the floor," how can we gather information in ways that align with the social and playful mood that the visitors already experience? In this panel presentation, we (internal evaluators from three Boston institutions: a children's museum, a science museum, and an aquarium) will discuss our experiences designing and implementing playful data collection methods, as well as how we established an informal peer network to consult each other, brainstorm, and problem-solve some of our evaluation

ideas. The key learning outcomes of this session include (a) take-home ideas or approaches related to designing and implementing evaluation methods that are attuned to institutions' needs, contexts, resources, and audiences; and (b) insights into how evaluators from different organizations in the same city work together to share ideas, support each other's work, and collaborate on city-wide initiatives. We hope that attendees will walk away from the session with some readily adaptable ideas about leaning on their peers in making the playful evaluation idea another feasible option in their "evaluation toolkit."

Abstract

Many museums and aquariums offer light-hearted, interactive experiences for visitors – something that evaluators always seek to capture and understand. Yet, traditional data collection methods might sometimes feel out of place with visitors' existing social and playful mood. In this panel presentation, evaluators from three Boston institutions will share data collection strategies that are a bit "out of the box." Additionally, we will highlight our use of an informal, supportive peer network to exchange ideas and strengthen our practices.

Boston Children's Museum will share how they conducted "Naptime Interviews" with nannies at the Museum. Although nannies frequently return to the Museum, their voices remain underrepresented in the visitor experience database. As such, Spanish-English bilingual interviews were conducted at exhibits where nannies naturally gather when their children are napping. Findings illuminated how nannies decide where to go with their children and what they value in their Museum experiences.

The Museum of Science, Boston will share how they transformed a vacant gallery into a pop-up exhibit testing space. The goal was to create a welcoming environment where visitors can peek into the exhibit development process, play with prototypes, and share feedback. In doing so, the team was able to provide visitors with a more authentic and playful exhibit testing experience, revitalize existing resources, and collect data simultaneously on multiple prototypes.

The New England Aquarium will share how they playfully empowered 3-5 year olds to decide the topic of an exhibit designed for young learners. Past prototyping efforts showed that the exhibit was fun for visitors but not focused on a particular theme or topic. As such, a playful evaluation was implemented and resulted in a clear theme the exhibit and animal care teams are currently developing. This experience also increased staff curiosity and participation in visitor data collection.

References

Rodley, E. (2025). *Designing for playful engagement in museums: Immersion, emotion, narrative, and gameplay*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781032638690>

Surprise as a Tool for Attention and Learning

Vishakha Ramakrishnan, Peridot Projects

Paula Lynn, National Gallery of Art

Projects and Methods

Purpose and Importance

This session describes how moments of surprise or novelty can disrupt museum fatigue and create opportunities for deep engagement. Drawing on the psychology of novelty and a summative evaluation of the National Gallery of Art's Back and Forth installation, this session demonstrates how strategic moments of surprise can serve as cognitive pivot points that shift visitors from passive to active engagement.

Attendees will learn about the psychological principles of novelty within an institutional context, understand how to leverage disrupted attention as a window for meaningful learning, and how to make the case internally for surprise as a design strategy. This session is relevant to experience designers, visitor-facing practitioners, and small teams seeking practical, evidence-backed frameworks for deepening visitor engagement

Abstract

Background

How do museums recapture visitor attention after extended periods of viewing similar works? This session addresses museum fatigue through the lens of surprise, presenting a two-part framework: (1) using psychological principles to design moments of novelty that disrupt passive viewing, and (2) leveraging that renewed attention to create durable learning moments.

Case Study

Back and Forth The National Gallery of Art's installation Back and Forth disrupts the traditional museum flow by placing a contemporary work within the sightline of classical Italian Renaissance paintings. Summative evaluation showed this element of surprise to be highly effective - while visitors often moved quickly through familiar interpretive content, 47% explicitly cited the contemporary piece as the first thing that captured their attention. The juxtaposition re-engaged visitors, creating a perceptual break in an otherwise continuous gallery experience.

Session Structure

Presenters will share the psychological mechanisms underlying surprise, present evaluation data from Back and Forth, and facilitate a hands-on activity in which attendees design their own moments of surprise. The session will close with an open discussion about practical lessons learned, institutional barriers, and strategies for sustaining visitor attention

Additional Links

<https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/back-and-forth>