



EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY THROUGH VISITOR STUDIES

**37th Annual
Visitor Studies Association
Conference**

Virtual 15-17 July 2025

CONFERENCE ABSTRACTS

VSA

Visitor Studies Association

Introduction

Welcome to the 2025 Visitor Studies Association Annual Conference Abstracts!

These abstracts serve as a preview of the vibrant conversations that will take place this year as we explore redefining our field of visitor studies. The Abstracts also serve an important role in recording conversations for the future.

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

The 2025 VSA Conference Abstracts were compiled by Kari Ross Nelson with the help of Garrett Stone and Samantha Tonumaipea.

Contents

Introduction	2
Tuesday, July 15	6
1:30 –2:30 PM Concurrent Sessions	6
Amplifying Educator Voice in the Design of Culturally Responsive Equitable Evaluation Systems	6
Culturally Responsive Needs Assessments & Using a Logic Model to Plan Yours	8
Curating Scholarship: Resource Sharing Through Museum and University Partnerships	8
The Ups and Downs of Journey Mapping: A Practical Guide	10
Visitor Perception, Institutional Messaging, and Reality: Zoos as Conservation Organizations	11
Using a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to Build Community STEM Literacy: Culturally Relevant Community Outreach	13
2:45-3:45 PM Concurrent Sessions	16
Listening matters: Embedding the 4 Rs of cultural storytelling into evaluation frameworks	16
Introducing VX: Fusing UX and Visitor Studies within Exhibition Development	17
Behind the Clipboard: Building Safe, Resilient, and Supported Evaluators	19
Let’s Data Party! Collaboratively Crafting Evaluation Insights and Inspiring Action	20
Abundance Framing in Evaluation	22
Words that Matter: Linking Label Research and Writing in Museum Practice	24
Understanding Our Audiences: Conducting a Children’s Museum Visitor Needs Assessment	25
Evaluation Supporting Equitable Changes to Summer Camp	27
Wednesday, July 16	29
12:45-1:34 PM Concurrent Sessions	29
An Evaluation Department’s Journey of Audience Advocacy	29
Automating Data Analysis & Reporting with R	30
Co-leading and Fostering a Collective Identity with Latine Partners	32
Lessons Learned From a Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Audience Research Project	33

Collaborating with Educators to Evaluate Museum-based STEM After School Programming.....	34
Stickers and Storytelling: An Analog Approach to Mapping Museum Visitor Experiences	36
Visitor Counting Model: Data-Driven Strategy for Decision-Making in Cultural Heritage	38
4:00-5:00 PM Concurrent Sessions	40
Using Culturally Responsive Practices to Improve Your Data Collection and Better Advocate for Your Study Participants	40
Value Judgment: A Toolkit for Assessing and Aligning IDEA Principles	42
Financial Inclusion in Museums: Which Metrics Matter Most?.....	44
Adapting the Walk-Along Methodology: Experiences as External Consultants	46
Creating STEM Equity Models to Rethink Impact Measurement	48
Effecting Change by Exploring impact: Insights and Implications from the Recent Literature	50
Making the Map: Cross-Institutional Wayfinding Research	52
Thursday, July 17	55
1:00-2:00 PM Concurrent Sessions	55
Visitor Experiences, Making Sense, and Contemporary Art Interventions at the Ringling	55
Leveraging National Research Studies for Museum Advocacy	56
Shifting Practices by Applying Intersectional Methods in Visitor Studies	58
Confronting Sticky Situations: Implementing Ethically Sound Timing and Tracking in Museums Today.....	60
Attempting to Improve Operational Exhibits: Small Experiments and Incremental Change	63
From Orangutans to Turtles: The Power of Storytelling in Conservation	64
Sharing Power Through Co-meaning Making of Data Across Researchers, Evaluators, and Practitioners	69
2:15-3:15 PM Concurrent Sessions	71
Applying Visitor Experience Data through a Lens of Equity	71
Reframing Evaluator Roles: Breaking Down Silos Between Internal and External Teams	72

Mapping our Impact: Strategic Community Engagement through Critical Cartography	74
Pathways to Change: Journey Mapping and Experience Statement at the Met.....	75
Accessibility and inclusion of visitors with disabilities through Visitor Studies' papers	77
Reconstructing Visitor Studies: The PSD Model's Theoretical Framework and Its Application in Chinese Museum Contexts	79
4:00-5:00 PM Concurrent Sessions	80
Expanding our Notions of "Expert" to Include Floor Staff Perspectives in Exhibit Development	80
Dabbling in the Data: Hands-On Data Analysis for Teams	81
Fresh Insights on Doctoral Programs: Rethinking Fields of Study and Methodologies .	82
Foregrounding the Visitor: Front-End Strategies for Permanent Collection Reinstallations at The Met	84
Disrupted methods: Rethinking visitor studies in an AI-mediated museum landscape	85
"Questions I Didn't Know I Had": Entry Narratives about Indigeneity at NMAI	86

Tuesday, July 15

1:30 –2:30 PM Concurrent Sessions

Amplifying Educator Voice in the Design of Culturally Responsive Equitable Evaluation Systems

Karyl Askew, Karyl Askew LLC

Monifa Beverly, Beverly Consulting Group LLC

Bethany Wilson, Detroit Zoo

Melanie Henry, Detroit Zoo

Adrian Trayer, Detroit Zoo

Zahraa Aljebori, Detroit Zoo

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance

This session will focus on ways to cultivate a culture of evaluation through staff inclusion and capacity building in the design of evaluation systems. It spotlights Collaborative and Culturally Responsive Equitable Evaluation (CCREE) approaches as a powerful means to advance culture and design by intentionally elevating the voices of informal science educators in the design process.

Drawing on 20 years of experience working alongside partners, contracted evaluators will share a multistep process for evaluation capacity-building of a large team of zoo professionals to ensure formative evaluation systems are useful, realistic, and relevant. Key discussion points will include navigating power dynamics; convening and implementing collaboration strategies for a large team with members of varying roles, employment status, and level of experience with evaluation; fostering educator buy-in and shared decision-making; managing time commitments and constraints; and sustaining efforts (beyond the contracted evaluator engagement).

Participants will gain practical strategies and tools for engaging their staff in program evaluation. The session aims to equip attendees, regardless of their CCREE experience, with actionable insights to build organizational evaluation capacity and design impactful culturally responsive formative evaluation systems that have staff buy-in.

Abstract

Evaluation approaches that are equitable and innovative deliver a high return of investment and achieve measurable change. These impactful evaluations, grounded in a collaborative and culturally responsive equitable evaluation (CCREE) approach, are powered by creativity and relationship-building between and among multiple individuals (Askew, Beverly & Jay, 2012). The aim of CCREE is to elevate the voices of all contributors to promote rigorous and socially just processes and outcomes by intentional design.

In this 60-minute presentation, contracted evaluators and zoo professionals will discuss their experiences with a CCREE approach for evaluation capacity-building and redesign of formative evaluation systems. Drawing on over 20 years of experience working alongside educational partners, the contracted evaluators will share the multistep process used to collaborate with zoo professionals on logic model development, audits of existing instruments, and templates for evaluation design.

Discussions will explore real-world realities, tensions, and successes encountered in engaging a team of individuals who hold a wide variety of roles, perspectives, and organizational commitments. Topics will include navigating power dynamics, working towards buy-in, sharing in decision-making, setting realistic expectations for the investment of time for the process, managing time constraints, honoring various experiences with evaluation, and sustaining efforts beyond contracted evaluator engagement. Participants will be invited to reflect on their own practices through opportunities to share and learn from each other.

Attendees will gain practical strategies for building staff evaluation capacity by centering collaborative, responsive, and equitable processes. Whether new or experienced in evaluation, participants will leave with tools and insights they can apply in their efforts at organizational evaluation capacity building to design and conduct culturally responsive evaluations.

Additional Links

<https://detroitzoologicalsociety.org/>

Culturally Responsive Needs Assessments & Using a Logic Model to Plan Yours

Vishakha Ramakrishnan, Peridot Projects

Andrea Girón Mathern PhD, Centrality Research

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance

Museums are dedicated to creating inclusive spaces that welcome and serve diverse communities. But how can you ensure that your programs, marketing, and outreach truly reflect your community's interests? This session explores how you can use culturally responsive needs assessments to reveal hidden barriers and opportunities for more equitable and impactful programming. We will also teach practical tips on how to use a logic model to plan your needs assessment.

Abstract

Museums are increasingly dedicated to creating inclusive spaces that welcome and serve diverse communities. But how can you ensure that your programs, marketing, and outreach truly reflect and address the nuanced interests of underrepresented populations? This session will explore the essential components of a culturally responsive needs assessment, which is a tool designed to reveal hidden barriers and opportunities for more equitable and impactful programming. We will also walk through a step-by-step process for designing a logic model to plan and execute your museum's needs assessment. Logic models are commonly used in nonprofits and public health settings to ensure that programs are driven by clear goals, measurable outputs, and meaningful outcomes. By planning your needs assessment using a logic model, you will be better equipped to capture community needs and set the stage for long-term, positive change.

Curating Scholarship: Resource Sharing Through Museum and University Partnerships

Dr. Miranda L. Denham, University of North Carolina at Greensboro

Kari Ross Nelson, Thanksgiving Point Institute

Nancy Penrod, Creative Discovery Museum

Dr. Nicole Rivera, North Central College

Facilitated Discussion

Purpose and Importance

- a. Understand new ways to initiate and foster partnerships between museums and universities; apply strategies for these relationships to each unique institution represented by attendees.
- b. Discover creative ways for researchers to give back to museums through unique findings, methods, and measurement development.
- c. Learn ways that museums and universities can play to each other's strengths and use each other's resources for a longevous, symbiotic relationship.
- d. Brainstorm how resource sharing between institutions might help to lessen project disruption given the rapidly changing landscape of federal institutions and grant mechanisms.

Museums are dedicated to creating inclusive spaces that welcome and serve diverse communities. But how can you ensure that your programs, marketing, and outreach truly reflect your community's interests? This session explores how you can use culturally responsive needs assessments to reveal hidden barriers and opportunities for more equitable and impactful programming. We will also teach practical tips on how to use a logic model to plan your needs assessment.

Abstract

As interest in partnerships between museums and universities continues to grow, it is important to examine the strengths and unique contributions of each institution, as well as elements of respectful collaboration. The panelists in this session are all jointly affiliated with a museum and a university. Importantly, the four presenters have experiences that span three different museums across the country: Creative Discovery Museum in Chattanooga, TN; DuPage Children's Museum in Naperville, IL; and Thanksgiving Point in Lehi, Utah. Each will share firsthand experiences alongside insights from scholarly conversations on research in museums.

Panel topics include the value of the relationship for each party. Universities contribute resources to joint projects, such as access to grant mechanisms, technology, Institutional Review Boards for ethics review, and labor for data collection. Institutions of higher education value opportunities for students to engage in high-impact community service and scholarship opportunities for faculty. Alternatively, museums have pertinent questions based on their practices and previous visitor data that can inform recruitment and sampling efforts, and the practitioner's expertise to guide inquiry development and interpretation of findings.

The panel will also address challenges that arise in these partnerships, such as navigating differing institutional priorities, managing expectations for timelines, ethical considerations, and sustaining collaborations over time. We will discuss how to establish

respectful expectations via an open dialogue and how universities can give back to museums in a meaningful and useful way. The second half of the session will include an interactive discussion among the participants about what challenges exist in forming these partnerships and maintaining them over time. Attendees will engage in structured small group discussions where they will identify anticipated obstacles and successful practices. These insights will then be shared with the larger group through a facilitated discussion, allowing for deeper reflection and collective problem-solving.

The Ups and Downs of Journey Mapping: A Practical Guide

Rachel Wolff, National Gallery of Art
Allyson Arnone, National Gallery of Art
Carolyn Bevans, National Gallery of Art
Paula Lynn, National Gallery of Art

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance

This session offers a transparent look at creating a journey map and how a journey map impacts future work, with a focus on actionable takeaways for those in research and evaluation as well as those in visitor experience, communications, programming, and digital. Presenters will share what we did, what we wish we had done, what was not helpful, and what continues one year later, providing clear examples, templates and practical resources for practitioners at any level. Presentation attendees will gain knowledge of social science research and evaluation methods and analysis, examples of project planning and resource management needed for cross-functional stakeholder engagement and collaboration, and familiarity with current publications, activities, and approaches to better understanding visitor experience. Each section of our presentation connects to this year's conference theme, as the foundation of the project was recognizing that our audiences had some very real pain points, but that we hadn't yet taken the time to pull together disparate data sets to see the full picture in order to advocate for their experiences. Journey mapping requires a relentless focus on visitors, and this advocacy created shared ownership of the visitor experience as well as continued research, evaluation, and action.

Abstract

This presentation offers a transparent look at what it takes to create a journey map and how a journey map can impact future work, with a focus on actionable takeaways for those in research and evaluation roles as well as those in visitor experience, communications,

programming, and digital, among others. National Gallery presenters will share what we did, what we wish we had done, what was not helpful, and what continues one year later.

Part (1): Journey mapping has become a standard practice across many fields to understand customer experiences. Museums have entered this conversation as well, including TATE, Smithsonian, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with varying levels of impact on experiences and operations. We'll share examples from a variety of industries and cover the why of journey mapping, including what journey mapping is not.

Part (2): Just like a journey map, our project had ups and downs. Through nine months of work, there were rewarding moments of collaborative discovery and learning as well as meetings that fell flat, disagreements about the final product, and even periods of boredom. We'll condense these experiences into recommendations as well as things to watch out for, no matter the institutional scale or project scope.

Part (3): Alongside pain points, our map revealed sections of the visitor experience that we knew almost nothing about. We often discussed how to deliver a map that showed what wasn't going well without creating an environment where our colleagues felt called out or on the defensive. We'll give examples of how to build trust throughout the process and share areas of new research, including work focused on family audiences and onsite amenities. We will distribute related resources and end with reflection on the process and continued use of our journey map, a year after the project's formal completion.

References

Kalbach, Jim (2020). Mapping Experiences: A Complete Guide to Creating Value through Journeys, Blueprints, and Diagrams. O'Reilly Media.

Kalbach, Jim (2020). The Jobs To Be Done Playbook: Align Your Markets, Organization, and Strategy Around Customer Needs. Two Waves Books.

Visitor Perception, Institutional Messaging, and Reality: Zoos as Conservation Organizations

Tom Beatman PhD, Omaha's Henry Doorly Zoo & Aquarium
Sarah Brenkert, Seattle Aquarium
Lindsay Maldonado PhD, Northeastern Illinois University

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance

The major goal of this presentation is to highlight the contrasts between visitor learning outcomes in zoos and aquariums (zoos), institutional missions, and meaningful conservation outcomes. In the context of evaluation, alignment between institutional mission, role, and visitor expectations are pivotal to successfully pursuing institutional messaging. This becomes crucial as museum missions' complexity extends beyond learning outcomes. This session focuses on zoos and aquariums, as their wildlife conservation missions become blurred as their education, tourism, animal management, and research roles are conflated both by their staff and visitors. Through examining this in the zoo lens, we hope to frame further discussion on gaps in informal learning environments' mission success.

Abstract

Zoos emphasize their role as wildlife conservation organizations in their mission statements, to bolster their recreational role with a distinctive societal benefit. One of the major forms of their conservation efforts is conservation education, aiming to produce an educated public that will actively engage in pro-environmental behaviors, the other being a combination of in- and ex-situ conservation efforts and research. Zoos present both activities, often holistically, in onsite and external messaging.

However, what is often underexamined is the relationship between organization messaging, the organizations' own understanding and perception of their role(s) in conservation, and the understanding and perception of zoos by visitors of these roles. Are zoos ambassadors and advocates for wildlife conservation with a finger on the scale of environmental protection and species preservation, or is their aim to influence their surrounding communities to, in their stead, advocate for positive change? Just as important as their actual role, how are they perceived by their own internal and external stakeholders, visitors, donors, and staff?

This session explores the results of a conservation perception tool sent to visitors at multiple institutions, examining visitor understanding of wildlife conservation, the role of zoos in conservation, and the fiscal contributions zoos make to in situ conservation efforts. Results show visitors have varied understandings of the nature of conservation, frequently have a vague, general understanding of how zoos interface with wildlife conservation, and broadly overestimate the amount of funds being channeled to these efforts. These results emphasize the need to cross-examine how visitors perceive the role of cultural institutions with those of the institutions. Performing visitor censuses of this sort may prove pivotal in ensuring visit outcomes are aligned with organizational purpose.

Using a Culturally Relevant Pedagogy to Build Community STEM Literacy: Culturally Relevant Community Outreach

Lawanda Cummings, Georgia State University
Resa Berkeley, University of the Virgin Islands

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance

Using a modified Culturally Relevant Pedagogy's (CRP) three foci: social relations, conceptions of self and others, and conceptions of knowledge; we developed the Culturally Relevant Community Outreach (CRCO) model for informal learning spaces (Ladson-Billings, 1995). This study explores how CRCO shifted the outreach team's purpose, perspective of the community, measures of success, and changed the role of the community.

Abstract

The need for science literacy for the public is more apparent after the last couple of years.

“Scientific literacy refers to: an individual's understanding of scientific concepts, phenomena and processes, and their ability to apply this knowledge to new and, at times, non-scientific situations (PISA, 2018).” Science literacy has implications for legislation, the general health of a society, and the funding climate for research. Increasing science literacy requires the deliberate bridging of STEM content to the lives and experiences of community members beyond the classroom.

In Serpa, Ferreira, Sa, and Santos (2020) article, the researchers explored the overwhelming existence of fake news directly related to COVID-19. Anwar, Malik, Raees, and Anwar (2020), posit that we are experiencing a global pandemic coupled with the ‘COVID-19 infodemic’. They coined this term as a mixture of ‘information’ and ‘epidemic’ to refer to “a rapid and far-reaching spread of both accurate and inaccurate information about a disease.” Serpa et.al (2020), posit that amidst all the noise, it became difficult for citizens to decipher the number of deaths and the gravity of the COVID-19 impacts due to over-saturation and desensitization from constant exposure. Citizens were bombarded with data, scientific explanations, and information which assumed capacity for data interpretation, familiarity with the scientific method, and language. Scientific literacy implies that a person can identify scientific issues underlying national and local decisions and express positions that are scientifically and technologically informed.

On average, we spend only 9% of our lives in formal learning spaces making informal learning a more viable strategy to bolster the skills for effective consumption of scientific information. Boosting science literacy requires deliberate efforts to build (rebuild) trust and create opportunities for community voice and agency. This begins with effective science

communication, acknowledging that people make sense of science using different narratives based on culturally relevant prior knowledge, which may or may not include science (Feinstein, 2012; Laslo, Baram-Tsabari, & Lewenstein, 2011).

Buy-in within these communities focus on who can be trusted versus the validity of the information (Broome & Goldman, 2014). For the targeted community (Afro-Caribbean), in which our HBCU is situated, we acknowledge that any educational outreach approach must also consider the legacy of ethical violations bound to race and class in the U.S. These experiences of community trauma persist across generations prompting distrust in STEM knowledge, as this bases of 'knowing' and 'expert status' have been historically used to justify racial inequities.

Using the lessons already learned in Education, we propose a modified Culturally Relevant Pedagogy (CRP) approach for effective community-level outreach. The Culturally Relevant Community Outreach (CRCO) model modifies Ladson-Billings' (1995) three foci: social relations, conceptions of self and others, and conceptions of knowledge to practical strategies for informal learning. Our core research question is: What steps are optimal for integrating CRCO within a STEM-focused research initiative? To understand this process, we explored how CRCO bridged from formal to informal learning spaces, how it shifted the team purpose and perspective of the community, how success was reframed, and the revised role of the community. This study employs a qualitative methodology that integrates interviews and archival analysis of documentation generated throughout the team process for integrating the CRCO approach into community educational efforts. A phenomenological methodology was employed to give voice to the shared experience of the team in adjusting and employing this approach for community outreach. The phenomenological research methodology seeks to describe the lived experiences of people who are part of a particular phenomenon or event (Creswell, 2018).

Analysis of Interview data yielded 3 overarching domains of impact: a Team domain, a Community domain, and Linkages between. There were 8 emergent themes that fit into these domains; 1) shift in professional purpose, 2) understanding purpose, 3) proof of ineffectiveness, 4) rethinking success, 5) one-sided outreach, 6) culturally relevant approach, 7) community engagement and empowerment, and 8) implementation of CRCO. Analysis of the coded interviews, activity forms, and meeting notes revealed a pattern of interaction in these domains that creates a system of feedback and revision to stay true to a culturally relevant or responsive approach.

As an informal learning version of the CRP model, CRCO helps align outreach efforts to the needs and interest of the USVI community. Three major recommendations emerged. A Strengths-focused Approach reframed community participants as partners in STEM outreach and shifted the focus to empowering citizens with STEM knowledge to manage their own context. Education Theory in Community Settings acknowledges the value of

vetted theory to informal learning spaces beyond the classroom to reach abroad spectrum of community members. Reflective Practice and Flexibility requires that teams embrace community feedback and pivot if needed to improve STEM content engagement.

References

- American Association for the Advancement of Science. (1993). Benchmarks for science literacy. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Jackson, P.W. (1968). Life in classrooms. In A. Pollard and J. Bourne (Eds.), Teaching and learning in primary school. New York; Cambridge University Press.
- National Research Council (1996). National science education standards. National Committee on Science Education Standards and Assessment. Washington D.C.;National Academy Press.
- Sosniak, I. (2001). The 9% challenge: Education in school and society. Teachers College Record, 103, 15.
- Scharff, D. P., Mathews, K. J., Jackson, P., Hoffsuemmer, J., Martin, E., & Edwards, D. (2010). More than Tuskegee: understanding mistrust about research participation. *Journal of health care for the poor and underserved*, 21(3), 879–897. <https://doi.org/10.1353/hpu.0.0323>
- White, A. M., & Dotson, W. (2010). It Takes a Village to Raise a Researcher: Narrative Interviewing as Intervention, Reconciliation, and Growth. *Journal of Black Psychology*, 36(1), 75–97. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0095798408329945>
- Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative Inquiry & Research Design: Choosing among Five Approaches* (3rd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.
- Lindsay-Dennis, L. (2015). Black Feminist-Womanist Research Paradigm: Toward a Culturally Relevant Research Model Focused on African American Girls. *Journal of Black Studies*, 46(5), 506-520. Retrieved June 15, 2021, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24572888>
- Pollard D. and Welch, O. M. (2006). From center to margins: the importance of self-definition in research. Albany State University: New York Press. Accessed 15 June 2021. <https://exhibitions.lib.udel.edu/two-steps-forward/exhibition-item/from-center-to-margins-the-importance-of-self-definition-in-research/>

Dillard C.B. (2000). The substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen: Examining an endarkened feminist epistemology in educational research and leadership, *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 13:6, 661-681, DOI: 10.1080/09518390050211565

2:45-3:45 PM Concurrent Sessions

Listening matters: Embedding the 4 Rs of cultural storytelling into evaluation frameworks

Rachel Chaffee, American Museum of Natural History
Gladys Rowe, Indigenous Insights Collective; University of Victoria
Albeliza Perez, American Museum of Natural History
Sakira Hermawan, American Museum of Natural History

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance

We will explore the four Rs of storytelling as a decolonial framework for evaluation that invites a collective reimagining of a reinterpreted cultural hall at a natural history museum. An interactive component invites participants to use an embodied method to uncover the stories within their own environments. As a result of this session, participants will gain an introductory understanding of a critically reflexive and relational approach to study design, including the development of artifact-based participant engagement materials that can support visitor participation and engagement in embodied ways.

Abstract

We will explore the four Rs of storytelling as a decolonial framework for evaluation that invites a collective reimagining of a reinterpreted cultural hall at a natural history museum. We aim to engage participants in a conversation of the critical methodologies that guide evaluation, including a professional commitment to reflect on our identities in relation to the work we lead and to not only include, but center the voices, experiences, and perspectives of youth and Indigenous peoples that are historically structurally excluded from our institutions. Participants will come to understand that our ability to enact these commitments requires careful consideration about whose voices and priorities are centered and in what ways these priorities can be included from the outset - beginning with how our studies are conceptualized and conducted.

An interactive component invites participants to use an embodied method to uncover the stories within their own environments. We will present our methodological approach to engaging in a critically reflexive and relational evaluation of visitors' experiences of a contemporary Indigenous artists exhibition and that exhibit's relationships to the rich visual arts traditions and cultures of the Pacific Northwest Coast Hall at the American Museum of Natural History. We will invite the participants to engage in a collaborative sense-making experience. Modeled on one aspect of the evaluation presented above, we will invite participants to engage in a mapping activity that provides opportunities to identify and re/consider their positionality and how the principles of reflexivity, respect, reciprocity, and relationality support or challenge how they build relationship with the stories held within their own environments. Participants will gain an introductory understanding of a critically reflexive and relational approach to study design, including the development of artifact-based participant engagement materials that can support visitor participation and engagement in embodied ways.

References

- Rowe, G. (2025, January 22). *Stewarding Stories for Change: The Four Rs of Cultural Storytelling*. [Invited Talk]. American Museum of Natural History, New York, New York, United States.
- Smith, T. L. (1999). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Dunedin, NZ: University of Otago Press.
- Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. Halifax and Winnipeg, CA: Fernwood Publishing.

Additional Links

<https://www.amnh.org/exhibitions/permanent/northwest-coast>

Introducing VX: Fusing UX and Visitor Studies within Exhibition Development

Victoria Eudy, Missouri Historical Society
Yue Ma, Missouri Historical Society

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance

This session introduces Visitor Experience (VX), a fusion of User Experience (UX) and Visitor Studies, as a transformative model for exhibition development. VX places the needs, behaviors, and feedback of visitors at the center of all stages of exhibition planning and implementation. The session will demonstrate how the Missouri Historical Society has

formally adopted VX, turning evaluation into a strategic design tool that strengthens collaboration across departments and fosters meaningful visitor engagement.

The primary goal is to show how applying UX methods (such as user stories and journeys, continuous feedback, and a user-focused mindset) within the practice of visitor studies can enhance both visitor outcomes and institutional alignment. Attendees will gain tools and messaging they can use to advocate for similar changes in their own organizations.

This session is especially relevant for professionals who want to increase the visibility, relevance, and strategic impact of visitor studies in today's evolving museum and cultural landscapes. It offers a path forward by presenting VX as a compelling approach that makes evaluation central to both internal planning and the visitor experience.

Abstract

This session explores how combining User Experience (UX) principles with Visitor Studies creates a unified model known as Visitor Experience (VX). This integrated approach brings the visitor into focus throughout the exhibition development process. Drawing from the Missouri Historical Society's exploration of VX, the session presents a roadmap for how institutions can adopt and apply this model.

References

- Babuska, J. (n.d.). Laws of UX: A collection of the maxims and principles that designers can consider when building user interfaces. <https://lawsofux.com/>
- King, E., Smith, M. P., Wilson, P. F., Stott, J., & Williams, M. A. (2023). Creating meaningful museums: A model for museum exhibition user experience. *Visitor Studies*, 26(1), 59-81.
- King, E., Smith, M. P., Wilson, P. F., Stott, J. F., & Williams, M. A. (2025). Evaluating museum exhibits: Quantifying visitor experience and museum impact with user experience methodologies. *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 68(2), 163–200. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12637>

Behind the Clipboard: Building Safe, Resilient, and Supported Evaluators

Rachel Fyler, Museum of Science

Sonya Harvey-Justiniano, Museum of Science

Emmett Fung, Museum of Science

Facilitated Discussion

Purpose and Importance

As evaluators, our role often requires thoughtful navigation of complex and sometimes vulnerable contexts, whether for participants or ourselves. Our foundational preparedness to successfully conduct evaluations with others is closely intertwined with how we first attend to our own wellbeing. To feel safe and resilient when conducting data collection with others, evaluators require different skills and supports that meet their cognitive, emotional, and cultural needs. This session will unpack case studies that leveraged systematic strategies to support evaluators' wellbeing in participant-facing evaluation work, and will open a discussion on resources and supports that might further enhance evaluator preparedness for data collection.

We hope that session participants will:

- Reflect on the cognitive, emotional, and cultural demands of engaging in data collection, and the range of support systems that allow evaluators to be effectively responsive to those demands
- Discuss the systems used in their own organization to prepare evaluators for data collection work, and how they might enhance or build capacity for cognitively, emotionally, and culturally safe practices

Abstract

In this session, evaluators from the Museum of Science will share a range of strategies and support systems to prepare data collectors to feel safe and resilient when engaging in public-facing work. Attendees will engage in reflective discussion around ways their own organizations can leverage training, personnel, and other support systems to create data collection environments that are cognitively, emotionally, and culturally safe for their evaluators.

We will first present exemplar case studies for attendees to reflect on, demonstrating a range of practices employed by the Museum's evaluation team to support the cognitive, emotional, and cultural needs of their data collection team. Case studies include: 1) the development of a training curriculum rooted in psychological safety practices for novice data collectors, 2) reflective evaluation processes used in a study focused on culturally sensitive content, and 3) an experience restructuring the demands of data collection to

better meet individual job accommodations. Participants will discuss the skills and supports required to prepare both novice and veteran evaluators for data collection, as well as the resources needed to effectively develop those supports. In small groups, participants will engage in a “back-casting” activity to explore strategies to increase or build capacity for systems in their own organization that support the cognitive, emotional, and cultural needs of their evaluators, reflecting on current practices and envisioning desired futures.

Let’s Data Party! Collaboratively Crafting Evaluation Insights and Inspiring Action

Hannah Ridenour LaFrance, Cleveland Museum of Art
Beth Katz, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County
Michelle Lentzner, J. Sickler Consulting
Victoria Threadgill, Space Center Houston

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance

Fostering and expanding “Effective Advocacy through Visitor Studies” includes finding ways to sustain impactful use of evaluation data in decision-making and connect evaluation to strategy. A well-written and visualized report is rarely enough to encourage actionable outcomes; visitor studies professionals and users of evaluation data have a shared responsibility to discuss, uncover, and document relevant meanings of data.

As an event where data are strategically placed directly in the hands of stakeholders for collective analysis and meaning-making, a data party crafts the actionable story behind evaluation results. Bringing more voices to the table can create buy-in for evaluation activities and strengthen an institution’s commitment to data-informed decision-making.

This session aims to provide attendees with an increased understanding of the role a data party can play in data analysis, reporting, and deliverables. Data parties can also act as a testing ground for data visualizations, increase data-informed decisions and advocacy among staff, and ensure that evaluator and stakeholder takeaways align. This session will provide resources to incorporate collective meaning-making strategically into workflows, whether hosting or attending as an active participant at a future data party, ready to generate insights and actionable next steps.

Abstract

Let's Data Party! will explore tips, tricks, and options for using data parties, whether the attendee is an internal evaluator, external evaluator, or a non-evaluator who seeks more active ways to engage with their organization's data analysis and meaning making. Through the experiences of the presenters and in conversation with attendees, this session will address advocating for data parties, preparing to host a data party, designing or selecting activities, facilitating or participating in a data party, and more. It will recommend how to embrace opportunities and navigate challenges, using concrete examples from internal and external evaluators. Whether dealing with quantitative or qualitative data, staff data or visitor data, formative or summative data, this session will provide attendees with a roadmap and options for data party success at their own institutions or with their own clients or project partners.

Data parties, like any party, need thoughtful planning to pull off. Presenters will share their collective tips, tricks, and insights on being a good data party host, from deciding on an invite list to making sure the data looks just right. Join us to hear case studies of data party challenges and wins and see what data parties look like in a variety of settings, for different audiences, and with unique sets of data. Attendees will also be invited to share their questions and experiences to broaden the conversation and generate actionable takeaways from the session.

References

- The Anne E. Casey Foundation. (2016, October 3). "Data Walk" is a key tool in results-based leadership. Retrieved January 31, 2024, from <https://www.aecf.org/blog/data-walk-is-a-key-tool-in-results-based-leadership>
- Bird, M. & Lewis, K. (2021, March 10). Data parties engage 4-H volunteers in data interpretation, strengthening camp programs and evaluation process. California Agriculture. <https://californiaagriculture.org/article/108651>
- Khan, B., Gaillard, J., McColloch, C., & Juma, S. (2023, October 9-14). Making your evaluation count! Leveraging approaches, tools, and techniques to engage users and promote use [Conference presentation]. Evaluation 2023, American Evaluation Association Annual Conference, Indianapolis, IN, United States.
- J. Sickler Consulting. (2024, May 14). Evaluation data is what you make of it. Retrieved January 31, 2024, from <https://www.jsickler.net/updates/evaluation-data-is-what-you-make-of-it>
- Rogers, P. & Newhouse, C. (n.d.). Data party. Better evaluation. Retrieved January 31, 2024, from <https://www.betterevaluation.org/methods-approaches/methods/data-party>

Abundance Framing in Evaluation

Julia Nee, Exploratorium

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance

Explore the utility of abundance framing in evaluation through a case study of the Exhiblets project. Abundance framing pushes back against scarcity perspectives by positing that there are many ways to get to the same goal. The abundance perspective builds on other asset-based work, where care is taken to emphasize the strengths of all parties rather than focusing on perceived shortcomings (Ladson-Billings, 1995; López, 2024; Paris & Alim, 2017; Peter, 2003). It explicitly pushes back against traits of white supremacy including perfectionism (or “one right way”), binary thinking, and scarcity (Okun, 2025), instead embracing multiplicity.

As a concrete example of abundance framing in action, I present a case study of a collaboration between a large science center and a network of science workshops. These organizations co-created approachable, easy-to-build exhibits – Exhiblets. Using abundance framing throughout the evaluation helped team members understand that the evaluation was not intended to determine whether Exhiblets were “better” in one context or another, but rather to highlight strengths and areas for improvement in both contexts. I share the evaluation results derived from ethnographic observations of Exhiblet use in context and visitor interviews, and discuss how the abundance framing approach could be used in future projects.

Abstract

Overview

We present findings from an evaluation of the Exhiblets project in which the Exploratorium and the Global Alliance of Community Science Workshops (CSW) collaborated to co-create low-cost, easy-to-build exhibits (called Exhiblets). This evaluation (1) unearthed findings around which design strategies work well for creating Exhiblets in different informal learning spaces, and (2) utilized an abundance framing lens that may be relevant for other evaluation work.

Data & Analysis

We review findings from interviews and ethnographic observations of Exhiblet use, comparing learners’ interactions at three sites across San Francisco. We explore how context and audience affected learning and engagement at Exhiblets, with a focus on how audiences perceived the six design features co-created by the Exploratorium and CSWs to guide Exhiblet development. We also describe how an abundance framing lens allowed us to discover multiple “best” ways to build Exhiblets rather than focus on resource scarcity or pressures to find “one right way” (Okun, 2025).

Key Findings & Implications

Contextual differences observed across sites were associated with differences in visitor engagement patterns. As one example, at CSWs, visitors tended to be on unplanned visits and were more open to interacting with visitors outside of their group. In this context, the fact that Exhiblets often lacked explanatory labels worked well, as visitors asked others for help and collaborated in figuring out how Exhiblets worked. At the Exploratorium, however, visitors had often planned their visit and spent less time troubleshooting Exhiblets before moving on. There, additional labels allowing visitors to achieve quick success were beneficial. Under an abundance framing, these two “right” ways of building Exhiblets are complementary, both serving the joint goal – shared by the Exploratorium and CSWs alike – of promoting informal science learning. In this talk, we present additional examples of contextual differences and how they can be interpreted through abundance framing.

References

- Ladson-Billings, G. J. “Toward a Theory of Culturally Relevant Pedagogy.” *American Educational Research Journal* 47 (1995): 159–65.
- López, F. “Asset-Based Pedagogy.” In *Handbook of Educational Psychology*, edited by Paul A. Schutz and Krista R. Muis, Fourth edition., 433–57. New York, NY: Routledge, 2024. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429433726-23>.
- Paris, D., and H. S. Alim, eds. *Culturally Sustaining Pedagogies: Teaching and Learning for Justice in a Changing World*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press, 2017.
- Peter, L. “Assessing the Impact of Total Immersion on Cherokee Language Revitalization.” In *Nurturing Native Languages*, edited by J. Reyner, O. V. Trujillo, R. L. Carrasco, and L. Lockard. Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University, 2003.
- Okun, T. “White Supremacy Culture - Still Here,” 2021. <https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/characteristics.html>.

Additional Links

Full evaluation report: What do visitors learn from interacting with Exhibits? A comparative look at use of affordable, flexible science exhibits at the Exploratorium and Community Science Workshops. https://www.exploratorium.edu/sites/default/files/2025-03/Exploratorium_2024_WhatdovisitorslearnfrominteractingwithExhiblets.pdf

DIY Exhibits website: Learn how to make your own Exhiblets!

<https://www.exploratorium.edu/diy-exhibits>

Practitioner guide: EXHIBLETS - A Guide For Creating Museum-Style Exhibits in Community Spaces. https://www.exploratorium.edu/sites/default/files/2025-01/Exhiblets_Creating_Museum-Style_Exhibits.pdf

Words that Matter: Linking Label Research and Writing in Museum Practice

Luise Reitstätter, Universität für angewandte Kunst Wien (Vienna, Austria)

Kerstin Krenn, Belvedere Museum (Vienna, Austria)

Individual Paper Presentation

Abstract

What exactly do all the words bring to the experience of looking? was the question Jennifer Blunden posed in a paper on the linkage between labels and objects in exhibitions in 2020. While linguistic studies deduce structural insights and assumed viewing patterns based on text analysis, guidelines on exhibit label writing often rely on an informed understanding from practical experience. Earlier visitor research studied reading behavior based on in-person observation as well as audio and video recordings. Nonetheless their valuable contributions, these studies are visually limited since visitors' reading activities can only be assessed (or sometimes just assumed) through the observation of positions, body postures, head movements and comments. It has only been since the late 2010s that mobile eye tracking technology has become advanced enough to record eye movements with adequate precision in the museum. To empirically grasp the relationship between artworks, labels and visitors, we conducted the study "True to Life" at the Belvedere in Vienna, applying a mixed methods approach of mobile eye tracking, ethnomethodological conversation analysis, survey, and stimulus-driven interview. While in condition 1, the exhibition was investigated as perceived by the curators, we altered the amount, length, focus, and style of the artwork's interpretative labels for condition 2. The paper will first present key findings on general reading patterns depicting visitors' different reading affinities and drop-out rates based on text lengths. In a second step, the paper discusses specific viewing patterns from selected case studies showcasing the effects of different textual addendums on art perception. But what exactly do all these findings mean for museum practice? Linking label research with label writing, the presentation contrasts the empirical findings with existing label guidelines and invites to a collective exploration of their practical application.

References

- Blunden, J. (2020). Adding “something more” to looking: The interaction of artefact, verbiage and visitor in museum exhibitions. *Visual Communication*, 19(1), 45–71.
<https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1470357217741938>
- Reitstätter, L., Galter, K., & Bakondi, F. (2022). Looking to Read: How Visitors Use Exhibit Labels in the Art Museum. *Visitor Studies*, 25(2), 127–150.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10645578.2021.2018251>
- Reitstätter, L., Pesen, S., & vom Lehn, D. (2025). Sehen und soziale Interaktion im Kunstmuseum: MET x EMKA als neuer Ansatz der Videoanalyse. In R. Wilke & H. Knoblauch (Eds.), *Audio-visuelle Daten in der empirischen qualitativen Sozialforschung: Erhebung – Analyse – Nutzung – Transkription* (pp. 372–391). Beltz Juventa.
<https://content-select.com/de/portal/media/view/6717abf9-1c4c-446a-adc4-4d0eac1b0018>

Additional Links

<https://www.belvedere.at/en/discover/projects/museum-gaze>

Understanding Our Audiences: Conducting a Children’s Museum Visitor Needs Assessment

Alaina Dooley, University of Missouri, Columbia

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance

Using needs assessments can help museums make informed decisions, engage in problem solving, improve offerings, justify funding needs, and meet visitors where they are. This session will provide attendees with a model for conducting a needs assessment that is collaborative, iterative, and meets the needs of a range of stakeholders. Using this method can empower teams to work collaboratively and have shared authority over evaluation work and provides an avenue for evaluators to advocate for visitors in data-driven ways. While the focus of this presentation is primarily on the method, some results will be summarized from a recent needs assessment to demonstrate the types of results that can be generated. These results will include practical, actionable implications for children’s museums and other early informal learning spaces.

Abstract

Using needs assessments can help museums make informed decisions, engage in problem solving, improve offerings, justify funding needs, and meet visitors where they are. This presentation will explain the methods and results from a caregiver needs assessment that was conducted at a children's museum. The presenter will describe the iterative, collaborative, bottom-up process that led to a successful survey with rich and practical results. There will also be time for audiences to consider and discuss how they could employ this method in their settings.

Importantly, this process involved the evaluator coming alongside museum stakeholders to understand their perspectives, craft strong evaluation questions through iteration, and advocate for visitors. The iterative process included individual interviews with team members at various organizational levels, a systematic review of visitor studies literature, and group discussions. Through knowledge gathering and iteration, the purpose and design of the needs assessment shifted until they met the goals of all involved. Finally, a survey was built to address these evaluation questions in quantitative and qualitative ways by drawing on existing literature to build items that were practical, likely to provide rich data, and could advance the visitor studies field.

The presenter will talk through her approach to conducting stakeholder interviews, summarizing literature in digestible ways, facilitating productive group discussions, and advocating for visitor needs. The presenter will highlight the necessity of finding balance between three key pillars: upholding institutional goals, advancing visitor studies as a field, and meeting visitors where they are. She will also summarize some results from the survey to demonstrate how this more intentional design process produced valuable data. There will be specific, tangible takeaways from these results, especially for children's museums or other informal learning spaces that serve families.

References

- Carpenter, K. (2018). The Rules in Children's Museums. *The International Journal of the Inclusive Museum*, 11(1), 13–25. <https://doi.org/10.18848/1835-2014/CGP/v11i01/13-25>
- Coborn, R. (2017). Exploratory Study to Determine Possibilities of Parent Education Within a Children's Museum Environment [Master's Thesis, St. Cloud State University]. https://repository.stcloudstate.edu/cfs_etds/14
- Kupiec, K., Malmberg, L.-E., & Mathers, S. (2023). The Effectiveness of Museum Intervention on Parent–Child Conversations: A Meta-Analysis. *Visitor Studies*, 26(1), 82–101. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10645578.2022.2142926>
- Letourneau, S., Connolly, T., & Hoke, K. (2024). Bringing Research into Practice to Reimagine Caregiver Engagement. *Association of Children's Museums InterActivity*

Conference. Association of Children's Museums InterActivity Conference, Madison, WI.

Song, L., Golinkoff, R. M., Stuehling, A., Resnick, I., Mahajan, N., Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Thompson, N. (2017). Parents' and experts' awareness of learning opportunities in children's museum exhibits. *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology*, 49, 39–45. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.appdev.2017.01.006>

Evaluation Supporting Equitable Changes to Summer Camp

Claire Thomas Emmons, Children's Museum of Indianapolis
Kumari Corder, Children's Museum of Indianapolis

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance

This session will reflect on a graduate-led visitor study that aimed to determine how visitors made sense of a contemporary art exhibition in a historic gallery space. Our five main research questions were: How are visitors making sense of this curatorial/artistic intervention? Does the juxtaposition of historical and contemporary artworks shape visitors' experience? How are visitors experiencing the exhibition? What are visitors taking away from the Shinique Smith exhibition? What elements of the installation contributed most to their experience? This study underscores the importance of integrating contemporary art into historic spaces to engage new audiences and reinvigorate existing ones, and highlights how museums can incorporate diverse perspectives and innovative interpretations into visitor experiences.

Abstract

Designed as an intervention in the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art's historic galleries, Shinique Smith: Parade (December 16, 2023-January 5, 2025) was an art exhibition that brought the work of a contemporary artist into direct conversation with European artistic traditions. We used a mixed methods approach to explore how visitors made sense of the exhibition.

Data collection methods included gallery observations and interviews with members of the study team. The team also generated and analyzed a dataset from randomly selected visitor comment cards left in the exhibition space, a self-report questionnaire used by the museum, and social media posts, all of which predated the visitor study. Analysis methods included thematic analysis, sentiment analysis, and frequency analysis. In analyzing interview data, we found Parsons' (1987) Levels of Aesthetic Development was a powerful tool for framing our data.

While some visitors maintained a more passive, preference-based engagement with the work, others demonstrated deeper reflection on the exhibition's themes, materials, and cultural implications. These findings suggest that contemporary art in a historic context can evoke diverse reactions, ranging from discomfort and confusion to intellectual curiosity and emotional engagement.

Based on these findings, we recommended The Ringling consider providing shorter, simpler interpretive labels with open-ended questions to help visitors connect with the artwork and placing orientation materials, such as introductory texts or videos, at the exhibition entrance and in the lobby to guide visitors through the galleries. To further study visitor reactions to contemporary art in historic spaces, we suggested the museum introduce a range of artworks from less to more abstract and incorporate curatorial statements to align with visitors' expectations.

References

- Esperon, R., & Norman, T. (2024). Evaluating the impact of placing contemporary artwork into the Renaissance and Baroque galleries. *The Journal of the Walters Art Museum*, 77. <https://journal.thewalters.org/volume/77/note/impact-contemporary-artwork/>
- Foreman-Wernet, L., & Dervin, B. (2011). Cultural experience in context: Sense-making the arts. *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*, 41(1), 1–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632921.2011.545725>
- Larceneux, F., Caro, F., & Krebs, A. (2016). The reaction of visitors to contemporary art in a classical art institution: A Louvre Museum case study. *International Journal of Arts Management*, 18(2), 4–13.
- Parsons, M. J. (1987). Talk about a painting: A cognitive developmental analysis. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 21(1), 37. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3332812>
- Schmitt, D., & Labour, M. (2022). Making sense of visitors' sense-making experiences: The REMIND method. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 37(3), 218–234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2021.1897953>

Wednesday, July 16

12:45-1:34 PM Concurrent Sessions

An Evaluation Department's Journey of Audience Advocacy

Amy Niedbalski, St. Louis Zoo

Jennifer Gauble, St. Louis Zoo

Erin Tate, St. Louis Zoo

Facilitated Discussion

Purpose and Importance

Given the 2025 conference theme of “Effective Advocacy through Visitor Studies,” members of the Conservation Audience Research and Evaluation (CARE) department at the Saint Louis Zoo will lead a discussion about their journey of audience advocacy. When the CARE department was formed, “serving as advocates to advance guest and community interests through rigorous analytics, along with collaborative conversations” was intentionally written into their department mission statement. Advocacy was also selected as one of the team’s core values (We are advocates for Zoo visitors, employees, volunteers, our community members, and our planet), along with integrity, collaboration, rigor and engagement.

Culminating in a facilitated discussion with audience members, panelists and stakeholder perspectives will be shared through examples and strategies regarding successful audience advocacy. The panelists will also include the reality of the setbacks that may occur when lifting audience voices. CARE team members are hopeful that attendees will share their own stories and experiences to inspire others and to empower visitor studies roles that not only collect and report data, but use these tools to effect thoughtful, representative change at institutions.

Abstract

The Conservation Audience Research and Evaluation (CARE) department at the Saint Louis Zoo was formed in 2017 and has three full-time employees tasked with providing data-driven evidence for informed decision-making throughout the organization. To improve employee engagement (based on research conducted by CARE), an effort to develop new institutional mission and values statements proved successful. Zoo leadership then encouraged individual departments to develop their own such statements, and the CARE team used the opportunity to formally ingrain audience advocacy into their role.

Through their work on numerous research and evaluation projects, the team has had the opportunity and autonomy to advocate for audience interests through years of staffing,

budgetary, priority and values changes within the organization. Stakeholder and collaborator testimonies will be shared to highlight the impact of audience advocacy institutionally at the Saint Louis Zoo over the last decade. Examples to be discussed include:

1. a multi-year study with community members, focused on recruitment of diverse families to represent often excluded voices, to provide feedback on the design of a new children's exhibit,
2. the entrenchment of research and evaluation in support of DEAI efforts, including participation in and evaluation of a 15-month anti-racism program attended by the Zoo's executive team, and
3. a large-scale participatory research study in which 1,000 individuals provided input of community-based assets and needs, leading to the co-development of educational programs with area teens.

Staff members will share experiences and lessons learned through their journey as audience advocates as part of a facilitated panel for approximately 25 minutes of the 45-minute session. The remaining 20 minutes will be a collaborative discussion with audience members to share their experiences and brainstorm strategies to empower audience advocacy in a research and evaluation capacity institutionally.

Additional Links

https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1zxxjsdYGlRm-ui_j3VYkpNH4zv63KICg?usp=drive_lin

Automating Data Analysis & Reporting with R

Brian Slattery, Lincoln Park Zoo
David Keyes, R For the Rest of Us

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance

The programming language R is a powerful but sometimes intimidating tool for data analysis. This session on automating data analysis & reporting with R is intended to provide concrete information and starting points for learning how to apply this tool. Within the visitor studies community, there is a strong desire to learn new skills and expand existing abilities of data organization, analysis, and reporting, especially for newer or novice members of our community.

Software like Excel or Google Sheets are commonly available and familiar tools but are limited in functionality. R– a statistical programming language with extremely varied and powerful data analytic capabilities– is one way to continue to progress the visitor studies community’s technical skills.

The audience of this session will learn how R presents new opportunities for making repeated data organization, analysis, and interpretation tasks simpler to complete. They will also learn how R can quickly create and re-create reports that would be time-prohibitive with other software. More broadly, by introducing audience members to these capabilities, we aim to help attendees become more effective data communicators. The additional capacities enabled by R will help visitor studies professionals to better share findings with stakeholders, leaders, and the communities we serve.

Abstract

In this talk, we will highlight the benefits of some of the simpler things one can do with R. There is a perception that R is only useful for statisticians. In reality, R has a general usefulness for many audiences, especially for survey data as commonly used in visitor studies. These benefits include:

- Reproducible data cleaning: If you have data that you need to clean every week/month/year, you can write code once and reuse it as many times as you need to.
- Exploratory data analysis: R excels in enabling people to quickly and easily explore data.
- High-quality data visualization: R is used by the New York Times, the BBC, and others who make high-quality charts, maps, and more.
- Automated reporting: A tool called Quarto combines narrative text alongside code to make graphs, maps, tables, and more. Using Quarto makes it possible to generate reports in seconds.

The session will be split into three sections:

Presentation

The presenters will share slides that provide an overview of R and core concepts that illustrate R’s strengths and use cases. We will also discuss strategies for overcoming common barriers faced by beginners to R.

Demo

The presenters will show sections of code for performing common data organization & analysis tasks. They will also show more advanced results, such as automated reports and dashboards that can be re-run with updated data, different parameters, or combinations of filters, allowing reporting work to be easily reproduced with minimal effort.

Q&A

The presenters will answer questions on getting started with R. The assumption is that many attendees will not have used R previously, so the goal of this section is to direct them to resources that can help them learn. The presenters will also share materials that attendees can continue to learn from after the presentation.

Additional Links

Core tools:

<https://posit.co/download/rstudio-desktop/>

<https://www.tidyverse.org/packages/>

<https://rstudio.github.io/cheatsheets/>

Books:

<https://book.rfortherestofus.com/>

<https://r4ds.hadley.nz/>

<https://www.bigbookofr.com/>

Co-leading and Fostering a Collective Identity with Latine Partners

Carla Herran, OMSI
Smirla Ramos Montanez, TERC

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance

This session focuses on shared leadership and collaboration with Latine communities to co-guide and influence practices, evaluation approaches and deliverables in informal STEM education projects and programs. Two Latine professionals will draw from their experiences to share models, practices and strategies that foster inclusive, supportive, and empowering environments

Abstract

This session describes the processes and practices used in two projects that involved members of the Latine community as co-leaders and peers with the ability to influence, lead, and inform outputs as well as project outcomes and deliverables. Panelists will draw from two NSF-funded projects, Diálogos: Harnessing Latinx Community Cultural Wealth to

Support Executive Function in Early Childhood through Family Engineering Experiences (DRL-2115463) and Voces de esperanza/ Voices of Hope (DRL-2314307) projects to provide examples of what co-leading with Latine partners looks like, including tools for sharing leadership and decision-making. These projects target Spanish-speaking and/or bilingual youth and or kids and their families. The session will briefly begin by sharing the project's goals, deliverables, and configurations of team members. Inspired by Juana Bordas' approaches, the session presenters will briefly share and describe the project's goals, processes, ways of being responsive, challenges, and lessons.

Lessons Learned From a Culturally Responsive and Inclusive Audience Research Project

Lok-Wah Li, Boston Children's Museum

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance

As cultural institutions, museums are valuable resources for children, caregivers, educators, and many more individuals in the community. But what are the determining factors that help community members decide to use or not use museums? In this session, Boston Children's Museum will share lessons learned from a culturally responsive and inclusive audience research project. We will share examples of how we deepen our understanding of the needs and interests of our current visitors and non-visitors, and the steps we took to gradually shift our evaluative practices to be more collaborative and mindful of our own lived experiences and assumptions. From the project, we learned that doing mindful and careful audience research work takes time, and we cannot do this work alone (as individuals or as an institution). By sharing our experience, we would like to connect with other evaluators and museums who are already doing this work or are interested in beginning this work.

Abstract

Inclusive, culturally responsive, and ongoing audience research is critical to developing educational resources that effectively meet the needs of the children, caregivers, and educators that community institutions (like a children's museum) aim to serve. To do this, Boston Children's Museum (BCM) partnered with the Education Development Center to explore methods that enabled us to critically reflect on our processes, and to explore ways to assess and map our audiences' needs and interests. Through the project "Getting to Know You: Conducting Inclusive and Culturally Responsive Audience Research," we worked closely with our programmatic staff to explore ways that could increase staff's capacity to engage in audience research, and to deepen our understanding of the different

segments of our audience.

In this session, we will share two examples that illustrate some shifts in our practices. In order to understand why individuals visit BCM or not, we formed a team of colleagues to interview community members. We found that by engaging programmatic staff in the process of audience research, we were able to leverage our colleagues' existing relationships and knowledge of our target audiences, and also pique their interests in incorporating findings into their own work.

Following the interviews, we also conducted “data parties” with caregivers and educators, community organization staff, and BCM staff. The goal was to ensure that our audiences' voices were not misrepresented by our methods or interpretation of findings. During these sessions, we shared preliminary findings and interview excerpts to gauge participants' reactions, ideas, and further questions for us to consider exploring. These sessions helped us to revisit our assumptions and reflect upon our own positionalities, and helped motivate more staff to invest in learning with and from our audiences about what they actually value when choosing places to go and things to do with their children.

Collaborating with Educators to Evaluate Museum-based STEM After School Programming

Franklin Aucapina, New York Hall of Science
Changchia J. Liu, New York Hall of Science
Don Luistro, New York Hall of Science
Georgette Williams, New York Hall of Science

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance

Effective afterschool program evaluations are most successful when the goals of researchers and practitioners align prior to program delivery. Tools such as logic models are especially useful for mapping programmatic activities and relevant outcomes (Little, 2014). Ongoing program evaluations can also support researchers and practitioners in establishing communities of practice that inform both groups' practices and professional development (Afterschool Alliance, 2014). In this session, the team from New York Hall of Science will share their collaboration in establishing and evaluating student outcomes in a biannual science museum-based afterschool program for 3rd and 4th-grade students. The evaluation required extensive planning and collaboration between educators and researchers to develop and implement evaluation activities. By working alongside

educators, evaluators were able to determine whether existing measurement tools, such as validated surveys and observation tools, were effective in assessing student outcomes. Evaluators also received ongoing feedback on how students felt about various instruments and pivoted to measurement tools the educators felt were less time-consuming and more aligned with the programs' themes. This process allowed educators to advocate their students' needs during the evaluation and allowed researchers to better align measurement tools with program outcomes.

Abstract

Background

The Science Innovators Club is a free afterschool program created to engage local third and fourth-grade students with science-themed activities across ten weeks. The biannual program is designed to supplement student's science learning in school and help cultivate familiarity with tools (e.g., hot glue guns, cardboard cutters) to build their 21st-century skills and a stronger interest in science. Researchers from the New York Hall of Science were tasked with piloting an evaluation process to assess these outcomes using validated tools such as the Common Instrument Suite-Student (CIS-S) survey and the Dimensions of Success (DoS) observation tool (PEAR Institute, 2017). While the tools were considered appropriate to assess these outcomes, both groups recognized early on that there was a lack of synergy between program goals and evaluation instruments based on students' willingness to engage with the survey.

Session Details

In this session, session presenters will share best practices for establishing a collaborative evaluation process such as co-creating a logic model, providing regular feedback on evaluation instruments, and interpreting findings as a collective. Researchers will share how they received continuous feedback on evaluation activities from the education team and adjusted the evaluation process in each evaluation cycle. Educators will share the value of advocating for students' needs as they navigate evaluation activities. Lastly, educators and researchers will jointly share how evaluation activities can be co-developed to ensure they align with the program's themes and intended outcomes. Discussions will review the benefits and challenges of establishing a collaborative evaluation process for afterschool programs, including general OST programs for students of all grade levels.

References

Afterschool Alliance (2014). Taking a deeper dive into afterschool: Positive outcomes and promising practices. ERIC Clearinghouse.

Little P. M. (2014). Evaluating afterschool programs. *New directions for youth development*, 2014(144), 119–132. <https://doi.org/10.1002/yd.20117>

PEAR Institute. 2017. A guide to PEAR's STEM tools: Common Instrument Suite and dimensions of success. Boston, MA: Program in Education, Afterschool, and Resiliency; Harvard University; and McLean Hospital.
https://stelar.edc.org/sites/default/files/PEAR%20CIS-DoS%20Overview_2019.pdf

Stickers and Storytelling: An Analog Approach to Mapping Museum Visitor Experiences

Audrey Jacobs, Florida State University
Diana Bradley, Florida State University

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance

Our research asked: Where are visitors engaging with our museum and how do they make meaning of their experiences during a one-day visit?

In order to answer this question, we developed a low-tech tool that combines tried and true interviews with lighthearted materials. Practitioners in this field have never had more technological innovations than now to assist their research. Why should we consider low-tech research methods? This presentation provides insights into classic methodologies and core visitor studies skills that remain relevant in contemporary research, particularly in settings with logistical or technological constraints. Additionally, with rising pressures to better understand visitors, university collaborations, when effectively built, can lead to actionable improvements. Attendees can expect to take away ideas on: 1) the role of analog methods in today's visitor studies, 2) evaluating university collaborations, and 3) managing team members' varying experience levels in research and decision-making.

We will discuss the practical applications of this interactive tool, lessons learned in the pilot study, and benefits of looking to analog data collection methods to understand audience experiences.

Abstract

How do we study visitor experiences in large venues? The Ringling in Sarasota, FL, spans 66 acres and includes five major buildings housing collections. In a graduate visitor studies course, we explored common visitor paths and experiences across a full-day visit, along with their motivations to visit. Although the literature suggested high-tech tracking, limited budget, and on-site cell reception required an analog approach. Museum staff and university faculty developed the course to enhance the museum's decision-making through visitor research, leveraging team members' varied experience levels. The project expands the collective knowledge of novice, emergent, and experienced professionals

through fostering institutional collaboration and extending the range of voices contributing advocacy and decision-making for visitor experience improvements.

Discuss with us:

- What questions should the field ask about large venue experiences?
- How can practitioners develop research protocols with limited time?
- How do digital and analog methods compare?
- How can robust and efficient university class collaborations adapt to student skills that vary year to year?
- What role do fun materials like emoji stickers play in serious research?

We modified an existing instrument, integrating map creation with visitors' narratives. Guided by the contextual model of learning and image of the city, we piloted a tool that merged classic post-visit interviews with route drawing, colored dots, and emoji stickers.

Our analysis suggests that this instrument effectively captured emotional responses, wayfinding challenges, and visitor routes that differed from staff assumptions. Findings support the continued use of low-tech methods to inform decision-making in contemporary museum practice. We aim to cultivate conversation with attendees about large-venue and all-day studies, collaboration with universities, and the role of analog material in our digital world.

References

- Christidou, D. (2015). Social meaning mapping as a means of exploring visitors' practices in the museum. *Visitor Studies*, 23(2), 162-181.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10645578.2020.1773708>
- De Angeli, D., Kelly, R. M., & O'Neill E. (2020). Beyond happy-or-not: Using emoji to capture visitors' emotional experience. *Curator: The Museum Journal* 63(2), 167-191. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cura.12352>.
- Falk, J. H., & Dierking, L. D. (2013). *The museum experience revisited*. Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315417851>
- He, I., Song, H., Seibold, Z., Ibrahim, I., Sayegh, A. (2022). *Mental breadcrumbs: Developing biometric methods to understand how emotions and sensory cues affect wayfinding*. Lynch, K. (1960). *The image of the city*. Technology Press.
<https://doi.org/10.2307/427643>

Visitor Counting Model: Data-Driven Strategy for Decision-Making in Cultural Heritage

Xavier Ullé, Institut Català de Recerca en Patrimoni Cultural (ICRPC-CERCA)(Barcelona, Catalonia, Spain)

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance

This session presents the “Visitor Counting Model” developed by the Observatory of Audiences of Cultural Heritage of Catalonia (OPPCC), an innovative system adopted since 2016 by over 300 museums and heritage institutions across Catalonia. The model addresses a long-standing challenge in the field: collecting consistent, comparable, and meaningful visitor data across institutions of different types, sizes, and governance structures.

By introducing a shared glossary and standardized methodology, the model ensures data homogeneity while being adaptable to a wide range of operational contexts. The session will demonstrate how this model has enabled heritage institutions to move from fragmented practices toward a shared, data-informed culture of evaluation and planning. The model’s indicators—including daily visitor flows, use-per-visitor ratios, or school visitor rates—have supported evidence-based decision-making at institutional and regional levels.

Drawing on longitudinal data (2016–2023), this session will highlight trends in public access and how disaggregated indicators (by region, size, theme, ownership) guide strategic actions. The model illustrates how structured data collection can become a lever for transformation, accountability, and resilience in the cultural heritage sector. This session is relevant for institutions seeking scalable and transferable tools for visitor analytics.

Abstract

The cultural heritage sector has historically faced challenges in consistently gathering and interpreting data on public attendance. Without a standardized framework, institutions have struggled to generate reliable information that supports evaluation, planning, and accountability. In response to this gap, the Observatory of Audiences of Cultural Heritage of Catalonia (OPPCC) developed the Visitor Counting Model in 2015. This model was designed to be inclusive of the diversity of heritage institutions—museums, collections, monuments, and interpretation centers—regardless of their size, ownership, or access model.

At its core, the model introduces a shared glossary and a set of standardized indicators that allow for comparable data collection across institutions. It is based on self-reported data from more than 300 participating institutions, who apply the model to track key quantitative metrics: total number of visits, frequency of free access, school group attendance, and the number of uses per visitor, among others. These metrics are disaggregated by variables such as institutional type, territorial scope, dimension, and governance. Each year, the OPPCC verifies, processes, and publishes the aggregated data, supporting strategic reflection at both institutional and sector-wide levels.

This session will present how the model has enabled institutions to make informed decisions about programming, admission policies, and audience development. It will also explore how data gathered through this system supports public policy, strengthens cultural infrastructure, and creates conditions for institutional benchmarking and peer learning. In addition, the session will examine how the model's design—grounded in flexibility, clarity, and inclusiveness—makes it transferable to other regions or countries. Attendees will come away with a deeper understanding of how robust visitor data systems can empower cultural institutions to grow sustainably, align with social goals, and better serve their communities.

References

- DEPS – Département des études, de la prospective, des statistiques et de la documentation. (2024). Patrimostat 2024: Fréquentation des patrimoines. Ministère de la Culture. <https://www.culture.gouv.fr/espace-documentation/statistiques-ministerielles-de-la-culture2/publications/collections-de-synthese/patrimostat/patrimostat-2024>
- EGMUS – European Group on Museum Statistics. (2012). Guidelines for museum statistics: Methodology and questionnaire. <http://www.egmus.eu/en/questionnaire/> Institut Català de Recerca en Patrimoni Cultural – Observatori dels Públics del Patrimoni Cultural de Catalunya. (2020). Model i glossari de recompte de visitants. <https://icrpc.cat/en/catalog/c/231-visitor-count-model-for-the-museums-and-herit.html>
- Institut Català de Recerca en Patrimoni Cultural – Observatori dels Públics del Patrimoni Cultural de Catalunya. (2024). Recompte de visitants. Evolució 2016–2023. <https://icrpc.cat/en/catalog/c/421-count-of-visitors-to-catalonias-heritage-faci.html>
- Observatoire de la culture et des communications du Québec – Institut de la statistique du Québec. (2020). La fréquentation des institutions muséales. <https://statistique.quebec.ca/fr/document/la-frequentation-des-institutions-museales>

Additional Links

<https://icrpc.cat/en/catalog/c/421-count-of-visitors-to-catalonias-heritage-faci.html>

4:00-5:00 PM Concurrent Sessions

Using Culturally Responsive Practices to Improve Your Data Collection and Better Advocate for Your Study Participants

Sonya Harvey-Justiniano, Museum of Science

Elizabeth Kunz Kollmann, Museum of Science

Regina Ayala Chavez, North Carolina State University

Panel Presentation

Purpose and Importance

As researchers and evaluators, we all have data collection methods that we use that we feel comfortable with and that work well for us. When collecting data directly from study subjects, these tend to be traditional methods like surveys, interviews, and focus groups among others. However, how often do we take a step back and ask ourselves whether these methods are working for our study subjects and generate data that best reflect subjects' understandings and feedback. During this session, you will hear from three researchers and evaluators who have interrogated their data collection methods and made changes to them using culturally responsive evaluation practices so that their methods better work for their varied and diverse audiences.

Our goals for the session are that participants will:

- Think about how the ways we collect data impacts our understanding of audience needs.
- Learn about examples of how data collection methods can be modified through culturally responsive practices to better support understandings of diverse audiences.
- Reflect on how study data can be used to advocate for audience needs.
- Consider ways they can change their research and evaluation practices to better advocate for study subjects.

Abstract

Presenters will share culturally responsive modifications that they made to data collection methods to increase welcome and comfort for study participants and the impacts of these changes.

Project Backgrounds:

The Sparking Interest project employed *pláticas*—a culturally relevant method rooted in informal, reciprocal dialogue—to collect data from Hispanic and Latine audiences. This approach was intentionally chosen over traditional methods like structured interviews to better align with the community's communication norms and foster a more responsive, non-intrusive exchange. Insights gained from these conversations informed the development of hands-on activities designed to engage these audiences effectively.

For the Co-Creating with Communities project, evaluators modified methods used in team check-in meetings to make them more reflective. By making small changes to the ways that evaluators asked for information about the progress of the work, teams provided more thoughtful information about their practice providing deeper understandings about not just what was happening but also how well these actions were working.

The Exhibit appraisal and diverse populations: Pilot research about intersectional and science identities in science exhibits (APPRAISE) project created a protocol to collect data from youth about their appraisals of museum exhibitions. Researchers found that youth were hesitant to talk openly with adult researchers about their perspectives. However, when researchers pivoted to a method where youth interviewed each other, they found that the youth spoke more openly and honestly about their opinions.

Points to consider:

We found that by reflecting on the needs of audiences and changing methods to ensure subjects' comfort that we were able to collect data that better reflected participant perspectives allowing us to be better advocates for our study participants.

The audience will be asked to reflect on the methods and modifications shared to think about how these changes could help their own work and any barriers that they may anticipate.

References

Adedoyin, A. C., Amutah-Onukagha, N. N., & Jones, C. D. (Eds.). (2023). Culturally responsive and equitable evaluation: Voices and visions of emerging scholars. San Diego: Cognella.

Bledsoe, K., Gonzales, F., & Guilen-Woods, B. (2022). The Eval Matrix. Strategy Learning Partners for Innovation . Strategy Learning Partners for Innovation. Retrieved June 11, 2024, from <https://slp4i.com/the-eval-matrix>.

Fierros, C.O., & Bernal, D.D. (2016). VAMOS A PLATICAR: The contours of pláticas as Chicana/Latina feminist methodology. *Chicana/Latina Studies*, 15(2), 98–121. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/43941617>

Frierson, H. T., Hood, S., Hughes, G. B., & Thomas, V. G. (2010). A guide to conducting culturally responsive evaluation. In J. Frechtling (Ed.), *The 2010 User-Friendly Handbook for Project Evaluations* (pp. 75-96). Arlington, VA: National Science Foundation.

Hood, S., Hopson, R. K., & Kirkhart, K. E. (2015). Culturally responsive evaluation: Theory, practice, and implications. In K. E. Newcomer, H. P. Hatry, & J. S. Wholey, *Handbook of Practical Program Evaluation*, Fourth Edition (pp. 281-317). Jossey-Bass.

Additional Links

<https://www.nisenet.org/cocreatingcommunities>

<https://informalscience.org/project/exhibit-appraisal-and-diverse-populations-pilot-research-about-intersectional-and-science/>

Value Judgment: A Toolkit for Assessing and Aligning IDEA Principles

Fanny Blauer, Independent Consultant

Tamara Grybko, Independent Consultant

Mollie Parsons, Cerise Educational Consulting

Hannah Weiss, Exploratorium

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance

Assessing and aligning personal and institutional readiness to engage in IDEA (inclusion, diversity, equity, and access) work can be an important step in determining where to begin or what to do next. As one approach to addressing this, we developed a values alignment toolkit and process that we use to map our personal values with an IDEA lens. This practice

helps surface an awareness of how our personal values interact with those of the institutions we work with and for. We desire to participate in science and cultural engagement work that embraces IDEA principles and acknowledge the need to balance our values with those of the institutions we work with and the communities this work seeks to be of relevance to.

In this interactive session, we will introduce our co-developed process and toolkit. Participants should expect to come away with: an awareness of the values-alignment toolkit and resources; an understanding of how to use the toolkit to surface their values through an IDEA lens; and ideas for ways to use the toolkit and process to guide decision making and plan for IDEA engagement work.

Abstract

Background. Built on the ethos of iPAGE 2.0 (NSF award #2011859) - the Science Museum of Minnesota's inclusion, diversity, equity, and access through leadership program for Informal Science Institution (ISI) professionals - this session shares some of the ways our learning has informed our practice. Over the last two years, our group of six iPAGE veterans has come together to explore the opportunities, challenges, and approaches to incorporating IDEA principles in our work.

Our team represents backgrounds in marketing, education, visitor services, living and object collections, exhibits, and evaluation, and roles as internal employees and external consultants. Our diverse personal identities — across lenses that include gender, race, ethnicity/culture, neurodiversity, language, and sexual orientation — echo the range of perspectives that define our initiative. We share a purpose of surfacing and aligning values to achieve greater equity in our work with informal learning institutions.

We regularly ask ourselves how a project aligns with our ideals and find there are nuances in deciding how to proceed across all phases of a project. To begin to find ways to navigate this space, we developed a values alignment toolkit and process.

Session Overview. We will begin with an overview of the toolkit and panelists' experiences using it. Participants will practice articulating their own values and then explore in small groups how these values intersect with institutional culture and community engagement. These group discussions will be modeled on iPAGE norms and structures that are designed to promote inclusion and equity in dialogue. The session will close with reflection and exploration of how a values toolkit might be useful as the informal learning, funding, and social landscapes continue to shift. We will share the toolkit, process, and resources so participants might further explore them when they return home.

References

Bequette, M., Goeke, M., Haupt, G., & Her, C. (2021, July). Systemic DEAI change in the informal science education field. Informalscience.org.
<https://informalscience.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/07/Organizational->

[Approaches-to-Systemic-DEAI-Change-in-the-Informal-Science-Education-Field.pdf](#)

Brown, B. (2022). Living into our values. Brené Brown.

<https://brenebrown.com/resources/living-into-our-values/>

iPAGE Leadership Program | Science Museum of Minnesota. (2023).

Smm.org.<https://new.smm.org/ideal-center/ipage>

National Council of Nonprofits. (2024). Codes of Ethics/Values Statements for Nonprofits |

National Council of Nonprofits. www.councilofnonprofits.org.

<https://www.councilofnonprofits.org/running-nonprofit/ethics-accountability/codes-ethics-values-statements-nonprofits>

Stanfield, B., & Canadian Institute of Cultural Affairs (2005). *The art of focused conversation: 100 ways to access group wisdom in the workplace*. New Society Publishers.

Financial Inclusion in Museums: Which Metrics Matter Most?

Mar Diaz Claudio, Whitney Museum of American Art

Andrew Cone, Whitney Museum of American Art

Facilitated Discussion

Purpose and Importance

This session focuses on how museums can more accurately measure and interpret visitor income to better understand the financial inclusivity of free admission programs. While many institutions aim to reach more economically diverse and lower-income audiences through free access, evaluating who attends—and how wealth is represented—remains a challenge.

Drawing from a recent Whitney Museum case study, we examine common methods for measuring household income (HHI), including self-reported survey data and census-based zip code data. Key questions addressed include how these data sources compare, whether combining them provides clearer insights, and how income diversity among visitors can inform program evaluation and future planning.

Attendees will engage in a facilitated discussion to share strategies, challenges, and insights on evaluating financial inclusion beyond attendance numbers. They will gain practical knowledge about research design, data collection, analysis, and effective communication of findings to inform institutional decisions.

This session is designed for both novice and experienced evaluators, researchers, and museum administrators. It supports the broader goal of developing rigorous, equitable evaluation methods that help museums assess the true impact of their financial access initiatives and better serve diverse communities.

Abstract

This session explores how museums can more effectively measure and interpret visitor income data to evaluate the financial inclusivity of free admission programs. Drawing from a recent case study at the Whitney Museum, we will share how we tested and compared different methods for measuring household income (HHI)—from self-reported survey responses to census-based zip code data.

Background and Methodology

Current sector norms rely heavily on self-reported income data, but this approach often faces challenges such as low response rates and data inaccuracies. We examined the strengths and limitations of both self-reported and census-derived data, recognizing that each offers unique insights. Our hybrid methodology—combining survey responses with zip code census benchmarks—provides a more nuanced and reliable picture of visitor wealth. We also discuss how to validate and refine these research methods to better contextualize findings and improve communication with stakeholders.

Key Insights

Our analysis shows that free admission days successfully attract a more diverse audience, including greater representation of BIPOC visitors, lower-income households, and first-time attendees. At the same time, these programs also engage higher-income visitors who often indicate a willingness to return during paid hours, highlighting the dual role of inclusion and sustainability.

Takeaways for Practitioners

Designed for evaluators, researchers, and museum leaders, this session offers practical strategies for designing effective research tools, managing methodological trade-offs, and communicating findings to influence institutional decisions. Attendees will leave equipped to refine their audience research practices, improve measurement of financial inclusion, and better demonstrate the impact of access programs aligned with their museum's mission.

References

COVES. (2018). COVES aggregate report FY18. Understanding Visitors.
https://understandingvisitors.org/images/downloads/Reports/coves_aggregate_report_fy18.pdf Missouri Census Data Center. (n.d.). Measures of income. University of

Missouri. <https://mcdc.missouri.edu/help/measures-of-income/> Pew Research Center. (2021, June 4). Improving the way we categorize family income.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/decoded/2021/06/04/improving-the-way-we-categorize-family-income/>

Social Security Administration. (n.d.). Cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) summary.

<https://www.ssa.gov/oact/cola/colasummary.html#:~:text=Since%201975%2C%20Social%20Security's%20general,next%20COLA%20in%20October%202025> U.S.

Census Bureau. (2023). QuickFacts: New York city, New York.

<https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/newyorkcitynewyork/HSG010223>

Economic Policy Institute. (n.d.). Family budget calculator documentation.

<https://www.epi.org/publication/family-budget-calculator-documentation/>

Investopedia. (n.d.). How cost of living index is calculated.

<https://www.investopedia.com/ask/answers/100214/how-cost-living-index-calculated.asp>

New York City Department of Education. (n.d.). Diversity in New York City public schools.

<https://www.schools.nyc.gov/docs/default-source/default-document-library/diversity-in-new-york-city-public-schools-english.pdf>

Congressional Budget Office. (n.d.). Income distribution.

<https://www.cbo.gov/topics/income-distribution>

Adapting the Walk-Along Methodology: Experiences as External Consultants

Maria Sotomayor de la Cruz, HG&Co

Amanda Krantz, Kera Collective

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance

This session introduces evaluators to the novel and iterative walk-along methodology and the ways to adapt it to their own projects. Walk-alongs produce rich qualitative results and apply to a variety of circumstances, but its use often makes for a complex and project-specific process. Two presenters will reflect on past experiences with this methodology, draw upon their unique experiences as external evaluators, and give guidance to future practitioners.

Abstract

Walk-alongs are a relatively new method to visitor studies that call on the researcher to reference their lived experiences, challenging the ideas of “objectivity” as a researcher, as established by Breece et al (2024) and Skov et al (2018). Walk-alongs produce rich qualitative results that capture visitor reactions to the museum’s offerings more authentically. Further, walk-alongs allow visitors to exert more agency in the evaluation process. Their flexible nature can be adapted to evaluate entire museums, specific exhibitions, as well as short or long-term outcomes. However, their open-ended nature can be hard to analyze, gather data, and share with different stakeholders.

Following up on a 2024 Visitor Studies Association conference session (Breece et al 2024), colleagues at HG&Co and Kera Collective will reflect together on their experiences completing walk-alongs. As external evaluators, María Sotomayor de la Cruz and Amanda Krantz will talk about how their experiences with walk-alongs compare to those of internal evaluators. While external evaluators carry out roles similar to internal evaluators, their experience with walk-alongs raises unique issues in proposing, carrying out, and reporting walk-along studies to clients.

María and Amanda will describe in detail their processes for instrument development, data collection preparation, managing and communicating stakeholder (client and visitor) expectations, and analyzing and reporting on the data on two different projects. María will draw on her experiences conducting a summative evaluation with walk-alongs at the National Building Museum, and Amanda will describe her experience using walk-alongs for remedial evaluation for art museum interpretation, most recently at the Dallas Museum of Art. This conversation will guide other visitor studies professionals, particularly external evaluators and their clients, as they consider adopting walk-alongs in their practice and what new strategies can be applied in the future.

References

- Breece, K., Higgins, J., Foutz, S., & Chamberlin, A. (2024). “Exhibit Summatives: Going Beyond the Obvious with Walk-Alongs: Visitor Studies Association Conference Presentation.
- Krantz, A. (2023). The Benefits of Walk-and-Talk Interviews with Museum Visitors. <https://keracollective.com/blog/evaluation-research-interviews-museums-visitors-interpretation>
- Skov, M., Lykke, M., & Jantzen, C. (2018). Introducing walk-alongs in visitor studies: A mobile method approach to studying user experience. *Visitor Studies*, 21(2), 189-210. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10645578.2018.1549396>

Sotomayor de la Cruz, M., Haley Goldman, K. (2025). Building Stories: Summative Exhibition Evaluation. HG&Co and National Building Museum. Internal Evaluation Report.

Additional Links

<https://keracollective.com/blog/evaluation-research-interviews-museums-visitors-interpretation> , <https://www.hgandco.com/> , <https://keracollective.com/>

Creating STEM Equity Models to Rethink Impact Measurement

Suzy Letourneau, New York Hall of Science

Dr. Julia Lalande, Ontario Science Centre

Kristin Chong

Tim Walker

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance

Museum visitors are multifaceted and dynamic in their identities, roles, and interests. However, studies often treat aspects of identity as isolated, static, or additive characteristics in data collection and analysis. This session will provide a brief overview of intersectionality theory and how it can be applied to the methods used in visitor studies. Using recommendations from across fields and practical examples from recent museum-based studies, presentations will illustrate how intersectionality theory can guide decisions made throughout each part of the research process, including study design, recruitment, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings. Time will be allocated for individual reflection and small group discussion to explore how attendees might integrate intersectional methods into their own work, and resources will be shared for continued learning.

Abstract

This session will provide an overview of intersectionality theory and the ways that it can guide methodologies in visitor studies. The term intersectionality was based on the work of Black feminist and queer scholars, who described the multifaceted nature of people's identities, and the interconnected systems of privilege and discrimination that shape people's lived experiences (Collins, 2015; Combahee River Collective, 1977; Crenshaw, 1989). Although intersectionality theory has guided research across many disciplines (including law, public health, social welfare, and family studies), research and evaluation in museum settings has only recently begun to grapple with the complexity of visitors' identities.

Drawing on existing guidelines from across fields (Cole, 2009; Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016; McCall, 2005; Winker & Degele, 2011), presenters will offer recommendations for integrating intersectional methods into various phases of the research process, including study design, recruitment, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings. Presenters will share examples from two recent studies to illustrate what intersectional methods looked like in action, and the considerations and challenges involved in shifting away from more traditional approaches. Examples include an interview study with 120 family groups about their shared learning experiences at STEM exhibits, and a co-design project that brought together caregivers, teachers, and museum staff to collaboratively analyze and describe family engagement in early STEM learning.

These examples will set the stage for discussions with conference attendees about how they might adopt and further develop intersectional methods within their own institutions and across the wider field. Participants will brainstorm how their studies might expand or shift to include intersectional approaches, and how these shifts might create new opportunities to understand and dismantle inequitable systems that continue to exclude many audiences. Session attendees will walk away with practical strategies for honoring the complexity of visitors' identities in order to work toward equity in museum spaces.

References

- Collins, P.H. (2015). Intersectionality's definitional dilemmas. *The Annual Review of Sociology*, 41, 1-20. 10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112142
- Combahee River Collective. (1977). *The Combahee River Collective Statement*. United States. [Web Archive] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/lcwaN0028151/>
- Crenshaw, K. W. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 139, 139-167. <http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>
- Else-Quest, N. M., & Hyde, J. S. (2016). Intersectionality in Quantitative Psychological Research: II. Methods and Techniques. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 40(3), 319-336. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684316647953>
- Letourneau, S.M., Aucapina, F., Ballesteros, D., & McMillan Culp, K. (in press). Building methodological capacity to consider visitors' intersectional identities in informal learning research. *Visitor Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10645578.2025.2483610>
- McCall, L. (2005). The complexity of intersectionality. *Signs*, 30(3), 1771-1800. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203890882>

Winker, G., & Degele, N. (2011). Intersectionality as multi-level analysis: Dealing with social inequality. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 18(1), 51–66.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506810386084>

Effecting Change by Exploring impact: Insights and Implications from the Recent Literature

Lee Davidson, Victoria University of Wellington

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance

Questions of impact and its measurement have become ever more pressing for museums and heritage sites in a climate of scarce public funding. At the same time, heritage spaces increasingly position themselves as indispensable for effecting social change relating to issues such as decolonization, human rights, social cohesion, climate change, and well-being. Gathering evidence of impact is a key way in which Visitor Studies can advocate for change and support effective decision-making. However, busy professionals do not always have the time to keep abreast of the latest thinking on impact. In this presentation, I discuss the recent research and theory around museum impact and consider its implications for the field of Visitor Studies. I also introduce a case study of the Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa's Audience Impact Model as a practical example of a systematic and integrated framework for embedding research and reporting on impact into a feedback loop across an organization. In breakout groups, participants will have the opportunity to discuss the theory and practical insights and think about the ways they could inform their own practice.

Abstract

This presentation explores the recent research around museum impact and considers its implications for Visitor Studies. It discusses different types of impacts and the value they represent. Visitor researchers routinely collect data that provides evidence of short-term outcomes, and recently there has been more interest in longer-term social and individual impacts. However, much past research focuses on instrumental and institutional values — these being aligned with the interests of government and heritage organizations — at the expense of intrinsic values, which relate to the subjective dimensions of visitor experience. This has led to calls to move beyond a focus on measuring institutions' intended outcomes and instead pay more attention to the ways in which people engage with and experience arts and culture on their own terms. Further to this, individual impacts can be usefully framed in terms of their temporal proximity to the visit – leading to a distinction between concurrent, experienced, and extended or cumulative impacts. Also identified in the

literature is the need for institutions to ask questions about unintended and/or negative impacts. The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa's Audience Impact Model is briefly introduced as a practical example of a systematic and integrated framework for embedding research and reporting on impact into a feedback loop across an organization. It shows the power of visitor research as a strategic tool for fostering a continuous culture of improvement and accountability. Since adopting the Audience Impact Model Te Papa's audience research activities have shifted to a more nuanced and holistic approach to capturing, analysing, and reporting visitor feedback.

References

- Carnwath, J. D., & Brown, A. S. (2014). Understanding the value and impacts of cultural experiences: A literature review. Arts Council England.
https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Understanding_the_Value_and_Impacts_of_Cultural_Experiences.pdf
- Crossick, G., & Kaszynska, P. (2016). Understanding the value of arts & culture: The AHRC Cultural Value Project. Arts & Humanities Research Council.
<https://www.ukri.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/11/AHRC-291121-UnderstandingTheValueOfArts-CulturalValueProjectReport.pdf>
- Davidson, L. (2025). The Visitor Studies Guide: Theory and Practice for Heritage Contexts. Routledge.
- Kaszynska, P. (2018). Cultural Value Scoping Project. King's College London.
<https://ualresearchonline.arts.ac.uk/id/eprint/15974/1/Cultural%20Value%20Scoping%20Project.pdf>
- Kaszynska, P. (2021). Cultural Value as Practice: Seeing Future Directions, Looking Back at the AHRC Cultural Value Project. In K. Lehman, I. Fillis, & M. Wickham (Eds.), Exploring Cultural Value (pp. 69–85). Emerald Publishing Limited.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/978-1-78973-515-420211009>
- Scott, C., Dodd, J., & Sandell, R. (2014). Cultural value: User value of museums and galleries: A critical view of the literature. Arts & Humanities Council.
<https://le.ac.uk/-/media/uol/docs/research-centres/rcmg/publications/cultural-value-of-museums-8-7-2014.pdf>

Additional Links

<https://www.routledge.com/The-Visitor-Studies-Guide-Theory-and-Practice-for-Heritage-Contexts/Davidson/p/book/9781032265285?srsId=AfmBOoqOV5HZyQ4cuc12iSousiRmSRcoo7D5eDdvSq8YCSFvamFw7ZFf>

Making the Map: Cross-Institutional Wayfinding Research

Teresa Norman, The Walters Art Museum

Kerry DiGiacomo

Lauren Holley, Illuminated ideas

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance

The purpose of this session is to help museum evaluators conceptualize and evaluate wayfinding in their institutions, and use this research to generate institutional buy-in and drive decision making processes that considers the visitor's perspective. Additionally, session attendees will learn how evaluators at three different institutions connected through VSA to share resources about establishing long-range, iterative wayfinding research projects that focus on improving the museum map.

Through attending this session, audience members will:

- Think about how wayfinding research generates data driven change in museum maps, and how this iterative and ongoing research can impact the visitor experience.
- Learn about the tools, timelines, and insights generated at three institutions, and understand the project planning element of wayfinding research design.
- Consider the value of peer collaboration in evaluation practices and think about how they can use their connections through VSA as a resource.

Attendees will leave this session considering various wayfinding research protocols that can be tailored to their needs. The presenters will share how these projects have been tools of change and have been used to build trust and buy-in at their institutions.

Abstract

Background

Maps have to balance elements of locational orientation (finding places within the facility), conceptual orientation (the subject matter and thematic organization of a facility), and circulation (what path one might take). Additionally, maps must consider being user friendly and accessible. The burden of the map is unique to each institution, impacted by architecture, exhibition design and graphic design, and elements of wayfinding that exist on the ground, but cross-institutionally informed, iterative visitor research reveals some methods that have been useful in building a better map.

This session will explore how evaluators at three different sites have informed each other's work, shared tools, and collaborated to generate change at these institutions.

Buy-In

The three panelists will share how they navigated challenges and opportunities related to institutional buy-in.

- Kerry DiGiacomo will share how using evaluation identified visitor needs and focused action steps on key improvements to maps at the Philadelphia Museum of Art.
- Lauren Holley will discuss how new leadership at Space Center Houston wanted to make improvements to the guest experience, and evaluating wayfinding provided an opportunity to fulfill this desire.
- Teresa Norman will discuss how internal research at The Walters Art Museum generated buy-in with staff, and how she used the projects shared by panelists as templates to build buy-in from the design team and leadership.

Techniques

Each institution will walk attendees through an example project, explaining how the research was performed and discuss broad learnings. The audience will be able to think about how they might address issues in their institutions.

Discussion

Attendees will be prompted to think about pain points on their own map or a map they are familiar with, and how they might use these techniques to help solve the problem. Additionally, there will be time for a Q&A.

References

- Bernstein, S. (2016, August 16). Wayfinding our future. Medium. May 12, 2025, <https://medium.com/barnes-foundation/wayfinding-our-future-908bc158640d>
- Bitgood, S.C. (1988). Chapter 17: Problems in Visitor Orientation and Circulation. *Visitor Studies*, 1, 155-170.
- McIlwraith, A. (2019). Better Museum Maps: An empirical study comparing the appeal and effectiveness of graphic design approaches (thesis). Better museum maps: an empirical study comparing the appeal and effectiveness of graphic design approaches. University of Reading, Great Britain. https://centaur.reading.ac.uk/85343/18/20027074_McIlwraith_thesis_redacted2.pdf
- Parrish, S., & Beaubien, R. (2024, October 14). The Map is not the Territory. FS. May 12, 2025, <https://fs.blog/map-and-territory/>

Osterwalder, A., Pigneur, Y., Bernarda, G., Smith, A., & Papadakos, T. (2014). Value Proposition Design. John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Ulwick, A. W. (n.d.). Jobs-to-be-Done (A Comprehensive Guide). Strategyn. Retrieved May 12, 2025, from <https://strategyn.com/jobs-to-be-done/>

Thursday, July 17

1:00-2:00 PM Concurrent Sessions

Visitor Experiences, Making Sense, and Contemporary Art Interventions at the Ringling

Zoe Hume, Florida State University

Danielle Vaknin, Florida State University

Fatma Zaid

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance

This session will reflect on a graduate-led visitor study that aimed to determine how visitors made sense of a contemporary art exhibition in a historic gallery space. Our five main research questions were: How are visitors making sense of this curatorial/artistic intervention? Does the juxtaposition of historical and contemporary artworks shape visitors' experience? How are visitors experiencing the exhibition? What are visitors taking away from the Shinique Smith exhibition? What elements of the installation contributed most to their experience? This study underscores the importance of integrating contemporary art into historic spaces to engage new audiences and reinvigorate existing ones, and highlights how museums can incorporate diverse perspectives and innovative interpretations into visitor experiences.

Abstract

Designed as an intervention in the John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art's historic galleries, Shinique Smith: Parade (December 16, 2023-January 5, 2025) was an art exhibition that brought the work of a contemporary artist into direct conversation with European artistic traditions. We used a mixed methods approach to explore how visitors made sense of the exhibition.

Data collection methods included gallery observations and interviews with members of the study team. The team also generated and analyzed a dataset from randomly selected visitor comment cards left in the exhibition space, a self-report questionnaire used by the museum, and social media posts, all of which predated the visitor study. Analysis methods included thematic analysis, sentiment analysis, and frequency analysis. In analyzing interview data in particular, we found Parsons' (1987) Levels of Aesthetic Development as a powerful tool for framing our data.

While some visitors maintained a more passive, preference-based engagement with the work, others demonstrated deeper reflection on the exhibition's themes, materials, and cultural implications. These findings suggest that contemporary art in a historic context can evoke diverse reactions, ranging from discomfort and confusion to intellectual curiosity and emotional engagement.

Based on these findings, we recommended The Ringling consider providing shorter, simpler interpretive labels with open-ended questions to help visitors connect with the artwork and placing orientation materials, such as introductory texts or videos, at the exhibition entrance and in the lobby to guide visitors through the galleries. To further study visitor reactions to contemporary art in historic spaces, we suggested the museum introduce a range of artworks from less to more abstract and incorporate curatorial statements to align with visitors' expectations.

References

- Esperon, R., & Norman, T. (2024). Evaluating the impact of placing contemporary artwork into the Renaissance and Baroque galleries. *The Journal of the Walters Art Museum*, 77 <https://journal.thewalters.org/volume/77/note/impact-contemporary-artwork/>
- Foreman-Wernet, L., & Dervin, B. (2011). Cultural experience in context: Sense-making the arts. *The Journal of Arts Management, Law, and Society*, 41(1), 1–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10632921.2011.545725>
- Larceneux, F., Caro, F., & Krebs, A. (2016). The reaction of visitors to contemporary art in a classical art institution: A Louvre Museum case study. *International Journal of Arts Management*, 18(2), 4–13.
- Parsons, M. J. (1987). Talk about a painting: A cognitive developmental analysis. *Journal of Aesthetic Education*, 21(1), 37. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3332812>
- Schmitt, D., & Labour, M. (2022). Making sense of visitors' sense-making experiences: The REMIND method. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 37(3), 218–234. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2021.1897953>

Leveraging National Research Studies for Museum Advocacy

Kari Ross Nelson, Thanksgiving Point Institute
Megan Lantz, American Alliance of Museums
Lynda Kennedy, Intrepid Museum
Amy Niedbalski, St. Louis Zoo

Panel Presentation

Purpose and Importance

In an era where museums strive to deepen community engagement and demonstrate societal value, understanding visitor experiences is critical. This session brings together two studies conducted on a nationwide scale with the intent to understand the visitor experience in ways that provide actionable insights and tools to enhance operations, programming, and advocacy. The session presents overviews of the Museum Social Impact in Progress and the Museums for All Impact research projects – including the impetus, goals, high level methods, and findings to date for each study. The session additionally presents discussion with museums that have contributed to the projects to explore their experience participating in the studies and using the findings. These studies represent current developments in and contributions to the field, applying social science research and evaluation methods and analysis. The studies provide tools and resources available to visitor studies professionals for conducting their own research as well as aggregated findings to help advocate for museums.

Abstract

This session presents findings from two nationwide studies that examine the museum visitor experience with the goal of producing actionable insights to strengthen operations, programming, and advocacy efforts.

Museum Social Impact in Practice (MSIIP), an initiative led by the American Alliance of Museums (AAM) and funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS), builds upon the prior MOMSI project. MSIIP focuses on developing standardized tools to help museums assess and articulate their social impact. By equipping museum professionals with research-based strategies, MSIIP enhances institutional capacity to advocate for the vital social roles museums play in their communities.

The Museums for All Visitor Study is a national research project – also funded by IMLS – investigating the experiences of visitors who participate in subsidized admission programs. By comparing the experience of these visitors to those of general admission attendees, the study provides insights into how such programs influence access, engagement, and perceptions of value across diverse demographic groups.

The session features perspectives from both researchers and museum participants to explore the practical applications of these findings. While the researchers will present methods of organizing the studies, participating museums will discuss how they have used study data to inform decision-making, support advocacy, and improve equity in visitor experiences.

The insights from these studies are instrumental in advocating for museums in multiple ways:

- Demonstrating community relevance: Data from the studies reveals patterns in visitor demographics and motivations, enabling museums to curate experiences that resonate with their communities. This alignment strengthens the case for museums as relevant and responsive institutions.
- Quantifying impact: standardized tools created in each project allow museums to measure their contributions as well as provide a framework for effectively communicating them. By presenting this kind of evidence of impact, museums can engage stakeholders and policymakers in meaningful discussions about their roles in their community and in the learning landscape.
- Promoting Inclusivity: demonstrating service to diverse audiences supports arguments for funding and policy decisions favoring inclusive practices.

Additional Links

<https://museumsocialimpact.org/>

<https://www.aam-us.org/programs/about-aam/museum-social-impact/>

Shifting Practices by Applying Intersectional Methods in Visitor Studies

Suzy Letourneau, New York Hall of Science
 Franklin Aucapina, New York Hall of Science
 Diana Ballesteros, New York Hall of Science

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance

Museum visitors are multifaceted and dynamic in their identities, roles, and interests. However, studies often treat aspects of identity as isolated, static, or additive characteristics in data collection and analysis. This session will provide a brief overview of intersectionality theory and how it can be applied to the methods used in visitor studies. Using recommendations from across fields and practical examples from recent museum-based studies, presentations will illustrate how intersectionality theory can guide decisions made throughout each part of the research process, including study design, recruitment, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings. Time will be allocated for individual reflection and small group discussion to explore how attendees might integrate intersectional methods into their own work, and resources will be shared for continued learning.

Abstract

This session will provide an overview of intersectionality theory and the ways that it can guide methodologies in visitor studies. The term intersectionality was based on the work of Black feminist and queer scholars, who described the multifaceted nature of people's identities, and the interconnected systems of privilege and discrimination that shape people's lived experiences (Collins, 2015; Combahee River Collective, 1977; Crenshaw, 1989). Although intersectionality theory has guided research across many disciplines (including law, public health, social welfare, and family studies), research and evaluation in museum settings has only recently begun to grapple with the complexity of visitors' identities.

Drawing on existing guidelines from across fields (Cole, 2009; Else-Quest & Hyde, 2016; McCall, 2005; Winker & Degele, 2011), presenters will offer recommendations for integrating intersectional methods into various phases of the research process, including study design, recruitment, data collection, analysis, and interpretation of findings.

Presenters will share examples from two recent studies to illustrate what intersectional methods looked like in action, and the considerations and challenges involved in shifting away from more traditional approaches. Examples include an interview study with 120 family groups about their shared learning experiences at STEM exhibits, and a co-design project that brought together caregivers, teachers, and museum staff to collaboratively analyze and describe family engagement in early STEM learning.

These examples will set the stage for discussions with conference attendees about how they might adopt and further develop intersectional methods within their own institutions and across the wider field. Participants will brainstorm how their studies might expand or shift to include intersectional approaches, and how these shifts might create new opportunities to understand and dismantle inequitable systems that continue to exclude many audiences. Session attendees will walk away with practical strategies for honoring the complexity of visitors' identities in order to work toward equity in museum spaces.

References

- Collins, P.H. (2015). Intersectionality's definitional dilemmas. *The Annual Review of Sociology*, 41, 1-20. 10.1146/annurev-soc-073014-112142
- Combahee River Collective. (1977). *The Combahee River Collective Statement*. United States. [Web Archive] Retrieved from the Library of Congress, <https://www.loc.gov/item/lcwaN0028151/>
- Crenshaw, K. W. (1989). Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A Black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics. *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 139, 139-167. <http://chicagounbound.uchicago.edu/uclf/vol1989/iss1/8>

- Else-Quest, N. M., & Hyde, J. S. (2016). Intersectionality in Quantitative Psychological Research: II. Methods and Techniques. *Psychology of Women Quarterly*, 40(3), 319–336. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0361684316647953>
- Letourneau, S.M., Aucapina, F., Ballesteros, D., & McMillan Culp, K. (in press). Building methodological capacity to consider visitors' intersectional identities in informal learning research. *Visitor Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10645578.2025.2483610>
- McCall, L. (2005). The complexity of intersectionality. *Signs*, 30(3), 1771–1800. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203890882>
- Winker, G., & Degele, N. (2011). Intersectionality as multi-level analysis: Dealing with social inequality. *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 18(1), 51–66. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1350506810386084>

Confronting Sticky Situations: Implementing Ethically Sound Timing and Tracking in Museums Today

Cathy Sigmond, Kera Collective
 Tara Miller, TM Visitor Studies
 Emily Berg, Smithsonian American Art Museum
 Teresa Norman, The Walters Museum

Panel Presentation

Purpose and Importance

Timing and tracking (T&T) observations have long been a cornerstone of museum evaluation, valued for their unobtrusive approach to capturing visitor behaviors. Yet today, increasing awareness around surveillance, consent, and bias demands a critical rethinking of this method. In this session, four experienced evaluators will lead attendees in conversation about the ethical dimensions of timing and tracking observations in museums.

Attendees will:

- Consider the ethics of timing and tracking observations, especially their non-consensual nature
- Think critically about the best practices for and the necessity of timing and tracking observations
- Consider how positionality and transparency, or lack thereof, impacts their own research practice

Ultimately, this session aims to spark a broader conversation about the ethical dimensions of timing and tracking observations in museums and develop practical strategies to enhance their relevance and effectiveness. Our goal is to imagine a future where these observations not only minimize harm, but also actively improve the visitor experience and museum practice in ways that are ethically sound and mutually beneficial. By reimagining how we approach this method, we can foster more thoughtful, transparent, and ethical evaluation practices that align with the needs and expectations of today's museum visitors and staff alike.

Abstract

This panel will explore the evolving ethics of timing and tracking (T&T) observations in museum evaluation—a long-standing data collection method that, while once considered harmless, now raises pressing questions about surveillance and bias.

Background

Timing and tracking observations involve recording visitor movement, dwell time, and engagement to inform museum design and programming. But this practice often occurs without visitors' consent, prompting concern about transparency, fairness, and how evaluators' positionalities influence data collection.

Opening

We will open with short personal “sticky stories” from panelists—moments where we faced ethically challenging timing and tracking observation scenarios. These stories will highlight key issues and set the stage for group reflection.

Next, we'll define and give a brief history of timing and tracking observations in museums and share why reexamining them is important. Attendees will share initial reactions via poll or breakout rooms, sparking a dialogue around how the method has impacted visitors and evaluators alike.

Panelist Discussion

The heart of the session addresses four core questions:

1. How does the evaluator's positionality affect how they conduct timing and tracking observations?
2. How can we ensure that visitor consent is meaningfully obtained in timing and tracking studies, and is this even possible?
3. What changes can be made to timing and tracking evaluations so that they are more fair, just, and transparent?
4. Given the potential risks and ethical concerns, is timing and tracking still a necessary and relevant method in museum evaluation, or should we explore alternatives?

Imagining Futures

Finally, panelists and attendees will share their visions for the future of timing and tracking observations—highlighting ways to adapt or replace this method to better align with ethical museum practice.

References

- Heimlich, J. E. (2015). The Ethics of Evaluation in Museums. *Journal of Museum Education*, 40(1), 20–26. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10598650.2015.11510829>
- Miller, T. (2025). The power of observation: Using timing and tracking in visitor studies. *TM Visitor Studies*. <https://tmvisitorstudies.com/2025/02/20/the-power-of-observation-using-timing-and-tracking-in-visitor-studies/>
- Serrell, B. (2016). Paying More Attention to Paying Attention. *InformalScience.org*. <https://informalscience.org/paying-more-attention-paying-attention/InformalScience>
- Serrell, B. (2020). The Aggregation of Tracking-and-Timing Visitor-Use Data of Museum Exhibitions for Benchmarks of “Thorough Use.” *Visitor Studies*, 23(1), 1–17. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10645578.2020.1750830>
- Sigmond, C. (2022). Going Undercover: 3 Ways We Unobtrusively Observe Visitors in Museum Exhibitions. *Kera Collective Learning Hub*. <https://keracollective.com/blog/3-ways-we-unobtrusively-observe-visitors-in-museum-exhibitions>
- Snow, S. S. (2024). Confessions of a Museum Data Collector. *Museum Studies at Tufts University Blog*. <https://sites.tufts.edu/museumstudents/2024/09/16/confessions-of-a-museum-data-collector/>
- Yalowitz, S. S., & Bronnenkant, K. (2009). Timing and Tracking: Unlocking Visitor Behavior. *Visitor Studies*, 12(1), 47–64. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10645570902769134>

Additional Links

- <https://keracollective.com/>
- <https://tmvisitorstudies.com/>
- <https://thewalters.org/>
- <https://americanart.si.edu/>

Attempting to Improve Operational Exhibits: Small Experiments and Incremental Change

Katherine Ziff, New York Hall of Science

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance

New research on museums and science centers is published every month, yet exhibitions can stay open for years or even decades. Being able to change exhibitions that are operational would multiply the potential impact of research, but the prospect of juggling financial, political, institutional, cultural, and material factors involved, can be too much to tackle alongside the demands of newer and more visible projects.

This session reports on the results of two studies of the exhibitions team at the New York Hall of Science. Both use ethnography, interviews, and collaborative research methods to document and analyze staff members' attempts to improve exhibits; one undergoing remediation and others during on-going operations. Studying the context and habitus of working exhibit developers, designers, maintainers, and facilitators, as well as their peers in other departments, reveals a landscape of competing and potentially reinforcing forces that are analyzed using conceptual tools from organizational studies, systems thinking, and actor-network theory to map the influences that enable or hinder staff and exhibits' capacity to evolve.

Abstract

How can museum and science center staff change an exhibition after it has opened, while keeping it operational?

Despite the practice of labelling some exhibitions as "permanent," museums need their public offerings, including exhibitions, to respond to scientific knowledge and societal norms. Sometimes it is possible to replace an old exhibition entirely, but given exhibitions' potential longevity and how quickly the world can change, it is increasingly essential for museums and science centers to be able to answer the question of how to adapt exhibitions without starting from scratch.

This session will use the results of two studies conducted at the New York Hall of Science, plus insights from experiences working in museums across the United States and in Canada, to identify factors that goad exhibitions to change (such as advances in research into free choice learning, recognizing museums' ethical commitment to people historically who have been historically excluded, extinctions and changes to species' range, and technological and material breakthroughs) as well as factors that push them to remain the same (such as entrenched funding processes, tight schedules for projects and for staff, enmeshed systems for collaboration across work teams, and lack of the required expertise

within the organization). It will discuss strategies that science center staff have developed to navigate setting priorities, understanding how their work intersects with stakeholders and colleagues inside and outside the museum, troubleshooting changes as they are making them, and using small change projects to achieve larger goals.

From Orangutans to Turtles: The Power of Storytelling in Conservation

Dr. Jill Bueddefeld, University of Manitoba

Presentation Type

Purpose and Importance

This session examines how conservation messaging in zoos can more effectively inspire public engagement and action through research-based storytelling techniques. In collaboration with the Toronto Zoo, we investigated whether messages centered on charismatic flagship species (e.g., orangutans) are more effective than those featuring less charismatic, local endangered species (e.g., Blanding's turtles). Utilizing outreach videos designed with a dialogic narrative structure we compared species-specific versus broader biodiversity-focused messaging.

Findings from a peer-reviewed study (Bueddefeld & Kerr, 2024; 2025) demonstrate that species charisma and message focus do not significantly alter effectiveness when dialogic storytelling is employed. This insight challenges long-standing assumptions in conservation communication and empowers zoos to broaden their messaging focus without losing audience impact.

This session offers a concrete example of how rigorous research can inform practice and aligns with VSA's learning competency in Knowledge of Learning Theory and Visitor Experience. Participants will gain a deeper understanding of how to evaluate, design, and apply dialogic storytelling strategies in conservation interpretation. A short animated research video will be shared to visually demonstrate key findings and their application across informal education settings.

Abstract:

Background and Focus:

Zoos serve as vital platforms for conservation education, yet a gap persists between public awareness and meaningful conservation action. This session presents findings from a study conducted with the Toronto Zoo, exploring how different conservation messaging strategies—focused either on charismatic species like orangutans or lesser-known endangered species like Blanding's turtles—affect public engagement and behavioral intentions.

Methods and Analysis:

The research employed outreach videos incorporating dialogic narrative techniques to simulate conversational learning experiences. Participants viewed videos that either featured a single species or highlighted general biodiversity themes. Metrics such as visitor learning and behavioral intentions were analyzed across audiences (Bueddefeld & Kerr, 2024; 2025).

Findings and Implications:

Results reveal that dialogic storytelling is similarly effective across species charisma and message type. This challenges traditional reliance on flagship species and empowers institutions to diversify their interpretation focus. Importantly, the findings offer a roadmap for integrating research-based storytelling into zoo education programs to drive deeper engagement and conservation behavior.

References

- Ardoyn, N. M., Wheaton, M., Bowers, A. W., Hunt, C. A., & Durham, W. H. (2015). Nature-based tourism's impact on environmental knowledge, attitudes, and behavior: A review and analysis of the literature and potential future research. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 23(6), 838–858. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2015.1024258>
- Ardoyn, N. (2009). Behavior change theories and free-choice environmental learning. In J. H. Falk, J. E. Heimlich & S. Foutz (Eds.), *Free-choice environmental learning* (pp. 57-73). Lanham, MD: Altamira Press.
- Ballantyne, R., & Packer, J. (2005). Promoting environmentally sustainable attitudes and behaviour through free-choice learning experiences: What is the state of the game? *Environmental Education Research*, 11(3), 281–295. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504620500081145>
- Ballantyne, R., & Packer, J. (2011). Using Tourism Free-Choice Learning Experiences to Promote Environmentally Sustainable Behaviour: The Role of Post-Visit “Action Resources.” *Environmental Education Research*, 17(2). <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2010.530645>
- Ballantyne, R., Packer, J., Hughes, K., & Dierking, L. (2007). Conservation learning in wildlife tourism settings: Lessons from research in zoos and aquariums. *Environmental Education Research*, 13(3), 367–383. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13504620701430604>
- Ballantyne, R., Packer, J., Hughes, K., Gill, C. (2018). Post-Visit Reinforcement of Zoo Conservation Messages: The Design and Testing of an Action Resource Website. *Visitor Studies*, 21(1), 98–120. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10645578.2018.1503871>

- Brereton, S. R., & Brereton, J. E. (2020). Sixty years of collection planning: What species do zoos and aquariums keep? *International Zoo Yearbook*, 54(1), 131–145.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/izy.12264>
- Bueddefeld, J., & Kerr, K. C. (2024). Comparing the effectiveness of flagship species in zoo interpretation videos involving dialogic-based narrative approaches. *Zoo Biology*, 43(5), 435- 446.
- Bueddefeld, J. N., & Kerr, K. C. (2025). Comparing in-person and online video interpretation in zoo conservation messaging. *Applied Environmental Education & Communication*, 1-19.
- Bueddefeld, J., & Van Winkle, C. M. (2017). Exploring the effect of zoo post-visit action resources on sustainable behavior change. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 25(9), 1205-1221. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2016.1257629>
- Bueddefeld, J., & Van Winkle, C. M. (2018). The role of post-visit action resources in facilitating meaningful free-choice learning after a zoo visit. *Environmental Education Research*, 24(1), 97-110.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13504622.2016.1198952>
- Carr, N. (2016a). Ideal animals and animal traits for zoos: General public perspectives. *Tourism Management*, 57, 37-44.
- Carr, N. (2016b). Star attractions and damp squibs at the zoo: a study of visitor attention and animal attractiveness. *Tourism Recreation Research*, 41(3), 326-338.
- Carr, N. (2019). Highlighting the conservation of the little brown job: Zoos as sites of mundane conservation and exotic leisure. Paper presented at the Canadian Association of Leisure Research in Vancouver, BC.
- Clayton, S., Fraser, J., & Saunders, C. D. (2009). Zoo experiences: conversations, connections, and concern for animals. *Zoo Biology*, 28(5), 377–397.
[doi:10.1002/zoo.20186](https://doi.org/10.1002/zoo.20186)
- Colléony, A., Clayton, S., Couvet, D., Saint Jalme, M. & Prévot A. C. (2017). Human preferences for species conservation: Animal charisma trumps endangered status. *Biological Conservation*, 206, 263-269.
- Falk, J. H. (2005). Free-choice environmental learning: Framing the discussion. *Environmental Education Research*, 11(3).
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13504620500081129>
- Falk, J. H., & Dierking, L. D. (2000). *Learning from museums: Visitor experiences and the making of meaning*. Lanham, MD, USA: Altamira Press.

- Falk, J. H., Reinhard, E. M., Vernon, C. L., Bronnenkant, K., Heimlich, J. E., & Deans, N. L. (2007). Why zoos and aquariums matter: Assessing the impact of a visit to a zoo or aquarium. Association of Zoos and Aquariums. Silver Spring, MD.
- Fraser, J., Taylor, A., Johnson, E., & Sickler, J. (2008). The Relative Credibility of Zoo-Affiliated Spokespeople for Delivering Conservation Messages. *Curator* 51(4): 407-418. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.2151-6952.2008.tb00326.x>
- Heimlich, J., & Ardoin, N. (2008). Understanding behavior to understand behavior change: a literature review. *Environmental Education Research*, 14(3), 215–237. <http://doi.org/10.1080/13504620802148881>
- Hoffmann, M., Hilton-Taylor, C., Angulo, A., et al. (2010). The impact of conservation on the status of the world's vertebrates. *Science*, 330(6010), 1503-1509. <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.1194442>
- Hughes, K., Packer, J., & Ballantyne, R. (2011). Using post-visit action resources to support family conservation learning following a wildlife tourism experience. *Environmental Education Research*, 17(3), 307-328.
- Hughes, K. (2013). Measuring the impact of viewing wildlife: Do positive intentions equate to long-term changes in conservation behaviour? *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 21(1), 42–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2012.681788>
- Kerr, K. C. R. (2021). Zoo animals as “proxy species” for threatened sister taxa: Defining a novel form of species surrogacy. *Zoo Biology*, 40(1), 65–75. <https://doi.org/10.1002/zoo.21573>
- Knight, A. J. (2008). “Bats, snakes and spiders, Oh my!” How aesthetic and negativistic attitudes, and other concepts predict support for species protection. *Journal of Environmental Psychology*, 28(1), 94–103. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jenvp.2007.10.001>
- Patrick, P.G. & Caplow, S. (2018). Identifying the foci of mission statements of the zoo and aquarium community. *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 33(2), 120-135. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2018.1438205>
- Mezirow, J. D. (1991). *Transformative Dimensions of Adult Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Mezirow, J. (2008). An Overview of Transformative Learning. In P. Sutherland & J. Crowther (Eds.), *Lifelong Learning: Concepts and Contexts*. London, UK: Routledge, 25-37.

- Moss, A., & Esson, M. (2010). Visitor interest in zoo animals and the implications for collection planning and zoo education programmes. *Zoo Biology*, 29(6), 715–731. <https://doi.org/10.1002/zoo.20316>
- Moss, A., & Esson, M. (2013). The Educational Claims of Zoos: Where Do We Go from Here? *Zoo Biology*, 32(1), 13–18. <https://doi.org/10.1002/zoo.21025>
- Moss, A., Esson, M., & Bazley, S. (2010). Applied Research and Zoo Education: The Evolution and Evaluation of a Public Talks Program using Unobtrusive Video Recording of Visitor Behavior. *Visitor Studies*, 13(1), 23–40. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10645571003618733>
- Powell, R.B., & Ham, S.H. (2013). Can ecotourism interpretation really lead to pro-conservation knowledge, attitudes and behavior? Evidence from the Galapagos Islands. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 16(4): 467-489.
- Richardson, L., & Loomis, J. (2009). The total economic value of threatened, endangered and rare species: an updated meta-analysis. *Ecological economics*, 68(5), 1535-1548.
- Shreedhar, G., & Mourato, S. (2019). Experimental evidence on the impact of biodiversity conservation videos on charitable donations. *Ecological Economics*, 158, 180-193.
- Skibins, J. C., & Powell, R. B. (2013). Conservation caring: Measuring the influence of zoo visitors' connection to wildlife on pro-conservation behaviors. *Zoo Biology*, 32(5), 528–540. <https://doi.org/10.1002/zoo.21086>
- Skibins, J. C., Powell, R. B., & Hallo, J. C. (2013). Charisma and conservation: Charismatic megafauna's influence on safari and zoo tourists' pro-conservation behaviors. *Biodiversity and Conservation*, 22(4), 959–982. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10531-013-0462-z>
- Smith, A. M., & Sutton, S. G. (2008). The role of a flagship species in the formation of conservation intentions. *Human Dimensions of Wildlife*, 13(2), 127-140.
- Spooner, S. L. & Stride, J. R. (2020). Animal-human two-shot images: Their out-of-context interpretation and the implications for zoo and conservation settings. *Zoo Biology*, 40, 563-574.
- Tisdell, C., Nantha, H. S., & Wilson, C. (2007). Endangerment and likeability of wildlife species: How important are they for payments proposed for conservation? *Ecological Economics*, 60(3), 627-633.

Tofield, S., Coll, R. K., Vyle, B., & Bolstad, R. (2003). Zoos as a Source of Free Choice Learning. *Research in Science & Technological Education*, 21(1), 67–99. doi:10.1080/02635140308342

Wheaton, M., Ardoin, N. M., Hunt, C., Schuh, J. S., Kresse, M., Menke, C., & Durham, W. (2016). Using web and mobile technology to motivate pro-environmental action after a nature-based tourism experience. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 24(4), 594–615. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669582.2015.1081600>

Williams, P. S., Darville, R., & McBroom, M. (2018). A comparison of traditional and facilitated dialogue programs in Grand Teton National Park: An evaluation for the future of interpretive programs. *Journal of Interpretation Research*, 23(2), 67-81.

Additional Links

Research Video: https://youtu.be/RMEip3SK-Cw?si=mo3LS3pWGUjFU8_S

Website: <https://www.jillbueddefeld.com>

Articles: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/zoo.21847>

<https://www.tandfonline.com/eprint/7EKQBJ8BFNADDPWGJCC7/full?target=10.1080/1533015X.2025.2487654>

Sharing Power Through Co-meaning Making of Data Across Researchers, Evaluators, and Practitioners

Debbie Siegel, Institute for Learning Innovation
Christina Cid, University of Missouri-Saint Louis
Victoria Bonebrake, Reimagine Research Group
Leanne Favreau, Bimose Tribal Council

Panel Presentation

Purpose and Importance

In this session a collaborative team representing research, evaluation, and practice will share their co-meaning-making process around research data (Aucapina et al. 2024) from a research-to-practice partnership supporting place-based STEAM learning with families in rural areas. We'll discuss our analysis process and the strengths of bringing in multiple perspectives, the conditions supporting these changes, and emerging challenges. This session ties to the conference theme by sharing how we are including voices from roles across organizations, identifying specific practices for shifting power, and showing how our collaborative work is supporting our partners in advocating for the sustainability of their

programs. Attendees will have the opportunity to participate in an example of our process and will leave with (1) increased awareness and understanding of how to shift power and build equitable research-practice partnerships that make space for different worldviews and (2) increased understanding of specific processes, including successes and challenges, in implementing co-meaning making in data analysis across researchers, evaluators, and practitioners. They will have the opportunity to reflect on ways to improve their own practice in supporting co-meaning making processes and breaking down silos of research, evaluation, and practice.

Abstract

PROJECT BACKGROUND

Culturally Sustaining STEAM (NSF DRL # 2115488) is a collaborative design-based research project, involving members from research, evaluation, and programs, which explores promising practices for supporting culturally sustaining, community-centered, asset-based STEAM family programming in rural communities (Paris, 2012). This approach centers communities and aims to acknowledge and shift power from researchers to practitioners. As part of our research-practice partnership (RPP), we have been reflecting on how to apply this programming approach internally to our project team to break down silos between researchers and practitioners, deepen the collaboration, and leverage each of our assets by bringing in multiple perspectives to strengthen the data analysis process through co-meaning making.

To measure the impact of the program on participating families, we have been conducting interviews with families at multiple points during and after their participation in the program. To strengthen our partnership and effectively move our larger goals forward, we have been exploring the process of co-meaning making by collaboratively analyzing family interviews, which has been inspired by the work being conducted at the New York Hall of Science (Aucapina et al. 2024).

SESSION GOAL & FORMAT

In this interactive session a collaborative team representing research, evaluation, and practice will share their co-meaning-making process around research data. We'll discuss our process, each team member's experience in participating in the process, the strengths of bringing in multiple perspectives, the conditions supporting this change, and emerging challenges. Attendees will work in small groups and engage in a hands-on experience of co-meaning making using actual interview data. This will be followed by a large group reflection on the process, strengths, challenges, and how they do or might apply this approach in their own work.

References

Aucapina, F., Ballesteros, D., Meza, D., Maldonado, J., Ketani, S., & Letourneau, S. (2024, April). Museum staff, caregivers, and preschool teachers collaborating to reimagine

family engagement in early STEAM learning. American Educational Research Association, Philadelphia, PA. <https://doi.org/10.1159/000345322>

Paris, D. (2012). Culturally Sustaining Pedagogy: A Needed Change in Stance, Terminology, and Practice. *Educational Researcher*, 41(3), 93–97.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X12441244>

2:15-3:15 PM Concurrent Sessions

Applying Visitor Experience Data through a Lens of Equity

Ryan Auster, Museum of Science

Beth Katz, Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County

Gretchen Haupt, Science Museum of Minnesota

Julia Lalande, Ontario Science Center

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance

This session will reiterate the importance of systematically studying our audiences and using demographic data to investigate visitors' experiences through a lens of equity, not only to better understand visitors, but also to push conversations of equity forward at each organization. This aligns directly with the theme of advocacy, as we will present examples of: using data to advocate for change, participating in collaborations that take a rigorous approach with the goal of enhancing trust in both the data and their inferences, and supporting practices that are designed to shed light on shortcomings and provide evidence of the need for change. We further argue that "effective" advocacy through visitor studies hinges on the validity of the data provided, and that a collaborative approach to study can strengthen pillars of trust and foster dialogue across organizations that empowers professionals to enact change. Our hope is to highlight relevant data and interpretation strategies that promote conversations around equity, while recognizing that there is room for improvement in our work.

Abstract

Background:

"The State of DEAI Practices in Museums," a report published in 2020 by the Cultural Competence Learning Institute, found that only 53% of participating institutions (survey

respondents) regularly collected visitor data, and only roughly half of those (25%) collected visitor demographic data. Among the recommendations made in that landscape report: “Using demographic dimensions to assess visitor experience can reveal persistent inequities that might otherwise be missed.”

Session plan:

This session aims to bring an equity lens to the forefront of visitor experience data collection and interpretation, by firmly reminding us that disaggregating and comparing data by relevant audience-level factors is essential to enhancing conversations around who we (as museums or visitor-serving attractions) are reaching; if we are providing comparable experiences for all types of audiences; and most importantly, how we can create opportunities for improvement – for our individual organizations, and for the field as a whole. Our panel represents individuals from four geographically diverse organizations who will speak to the importance of collecting visitor experience data systematically across sites for the mutual benefit of interpretation and comparison. Leveraging findings from the Collaboration for Ongoing Visitor Experience Studies (COVES), multiple use cases will be presented, sharing institutional findings that both compare to census data for the purpose of discussing representation and compare over time for the purpose of illuminating longitudinal audience trends, while our moderator promises to offer a critical interrogation of our findings. What can we do to better support field-wide understandings of equity (in who we serve, how they view their experiences, and how we channel this information within our organizations to make improvements)? What collective recommendations can our session make for other visitor studies professionals hoping to further their own conversations of equity?

References

Garibay, C., & Olson, J.M. (2020). CCLI National Landscape Study: The State of DEAL Practices in Museums. Cultural Competence Learning Institute.
<https://ccliexperience.org/national-landscape-study/>.

Collaboration for Ongoing Visitor Experience Studies (2024). Understanding Our Visitors: Multi-institutional museum study July 2023-June 2024.
https://understandingvisitors.org/articles/aggregate_FY24.

Additional Links

www.understandingvisitors.org

Reframing Evaluator Roles: Breaking Down Silos Between Internal and External Teams

Jill Stein, Reimagine Research
Tamara Grybko, Independent Consultant
Megan Littrell, Cooperative Institute for Research in Environmental Science
Christine Okochi, University of Colorado at Boulder

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance

In this session, we examine the challenges of navigating multiple research and evaluation efforts, particularly in contexts that seek to center community-based and culturally-responsive approaches. We will have representatives from research, internal evaluation, and external evaluation from the We are Water project, a traveling exhibit and community engagement project focused on rural and tribal library audiences. We will share our perspectives on how we shifted our practice to be more inclusive and collaborative across these teams, worked to break down barriers, and reframed conventional western structures that can lead to over-evaluating, extractive or transactional approaches, and burdening community partners. The team will also reflect on strengths of our different roles, positionalities, perspectives, and worldviews; and how we worked to weave our “data stories” together to tell a collective story of how the project unfolded at each of the partner sites, and how we connected these stories together in sharing back findings with library partners. We will also reflect the time it took for our different teams to build shared understanding and shift our own paradigms around culturally-responsive research and evaluation, and how we worked through our own assumptions to work more collaboratively across internal and external teams.

Abstract

Project Background

We are Water (NSF DRL #1907024) is a traveling exhibition and community engagement project focused on building partnerships with the host library staff and community partners and building capacity to create informal STEM learning opportunities centered on place, community, and local water topics in rural and tribal communities across the U.S. Southwest. The exhibition centered around the big idea that water, critical and scarce in the desert Southwest, connects diverse communities through shared place and unique stories. The project was designed to generate knowledge around building community-centered, culturally responsive exhibits and programs in rural and tribal libraries, and to document the impact of these experiences using culturally relevant approaches. The project included an internal research and evaluation team from CIRES, and external evaluation consultants from Reimagine Research Group and Native Pathways – a collaborative evaluation team that weaves together Indigenous and western approaches. Over time, the teams shifted their practices to better align with a community-centered

process and to minimize challenges such as over-evaluating or inundating partners with multiple team members seeking to collect data for the project.

Session Goal & Format

The session presenters will share their perspectives, personal learning, and stories around research roles and breaking down silos. They will facilitate dialogue around questions such as: How do you navigate multiple research and evaluation teams on complex projects in your own work? What are the benefits and challenges of internal versus external evaluation and what are some wise practices around collaborating across these roles? What are the assumptions around roles and positionalities between internal and external evaluation and research? In what ways are multi-team research and evaluation processes challenging, particularly when supporting culturally-responsive practices and wanting to ensure that community partners are not over-evaluated? How can internal or external evaluation roles support community-centered or culturally responsive practices?

Additional Links

<https://wearewater.colorado.edu/>

Mapping our Impact: Strategic Community Engagement through Critical Cartography

Wilson Sherman, University of California, Los Angeles

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance

This session highlights how geographic analysis and critical mapping practices can help cultural institutions better serve historically excluded communities. Museums, zoos, and similar institutions are increasingly expected to address structural inequities in access and representation—but many lack tools for understanding how these dynamics play out spatially. This session introduces visitor researchers and evaluators to critical cartography and GIS as methods for uncovering disparities and informing more equitable engagement strategies.

Drawing on a case study from Oakland Zoo, we demonstrate how address-based visitor data, census demographics, and historical redlining maps were analyzed together to assess equity in institutional reach. This analysis revealed racial and socioeconomic disparities in attendance that helped spark internal conversations, influence leadership, and secure external funding for equity-focused initiatives.

Participants will leave with a grounded understanding of how mapping can be used in culturally responsive evaluation, and how critical geography concepts can deepen institutional analysis.

Abstract

This session explores how critical cartography and Geographic Information Systems (GIS) can serve as powerful tools for cultural institutions seeking to engage communities more equitably. Many museums and zoos serve audiences that are disproportionately white and affluent compared to their surrounding populations—a dynamic shaped by the spatial legacies of redlining and other structural inequalities. Drawing on theories from critical cartography, critical GIS, and feminist GIS, this session introduces mapping as both a methodological tool and a way to interrogate how knowledge and power operate in visitor studies. We will present a case study from the Conservation Society of California, Oakland Zoo, where GIS analysis of visitor address data—combined with U.S. Census demographics and historical redlining maps—revealed racial and socioeconomic disparities in attendance. These findings sparked internal conversations about equity and helped secure funding to support community-centered environmental justice programming. Attendees will come away with an understanding of how spatial analysis can deepen institutional self-awareness, support advocacy, and influence leadership. The session will conclude with a facilitated discussion on how evaluators and museum professionals can incorporate geographic thinking into their own work, using maps not just to illustrate findings, but to advance equity-focused action in the field.

Pathways to Change: Journey Mapping and Experience Statement at the Met

Kareem Eid, Metropolitan Museum of Art
Sara DeYoung, Metropolitan Museum of Art

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance

This session explores how The Metropolitan Museum of Art created a Visitor Experience Statement and conducted a comprehensive Journey Mapping study to inform and drive institutional change during a period of major transformation. Through collaborative workshops, visitor engagement, and external research, The Met defined our guiding principles for visitor experience, and then evaluated our current journey to help diagnose area of improvement, focus, and refinement.

The core goal of this presentation is to showcase how visitor studies can evolve from research artifacts into advocacy tools, guiding both internal alignment and identifying projects for improvements. Attendees will gain practical insights into creating a vision

statement that resonates across organizational levels, then working with an external partner to design and implement a visitor journey mapping project to help drive relevant and sustainable change.

Learning outcomes include how to:

- Employ journey mapping and visitor personas as diagnostic and change management tools
- Develop a meaningful visitor experience statement that galvanizes cross-departmental focus
- Leverage qualitative visitor data to advocate for improvements

This session demonstrates how visitor research can push cultural change, offering replicable strategies for institutions aiming to build more visitor-centered experiences grounded in firsthand insights.

Abstract

During a period of significant institutional transformation, The Metropolitan Museum of Art undertook two major initiatives in support of the institution's Strategic Plan (2022-2027): a comprehensive Visitor Journey Mapping study and the creation of a Visitor Experience Vision Statement. This session shares how these tools are being used to advocate for a more visitor-centered mindset across the museum and to set the stage for initiatives aimed at improving the visitor experience.

Background and Methods

The Met's Strategic Plan (2022-2027) calls for an enhanced, welcoming, and accessible visitor experience. Foundational to this work are two major initiatives led by a collaborative, cross-departmental working group – the Visitor Experience Group (VXG): the creation of a vision statement for the Visitor Experience and a Visitor Journey Mapping study. The Visitor Experience Vision Statement was co-created with input from staff at every level, from frontline ticketing to senior leadership, ensuring the final statement was both visionary and realistic. Soon after, a visitor journey mapping study was conducted using five representative visitor personas and relying on interviews with visitors at multiple points in their experience to determine pain points and moments of joy.

Findings and Discussion

Each tool—vision statement and journey maps--enhances and relies upon a culture of evaluation to ensure maximum impact for improving the visitor experience. The Visitor Experience Vision Statement serves as a guiding framework to align priorities, while the journey maps provide visual, narrative-driven, humanized evidence of where and how to improve the visitor experience. Together, they have driven updates to navigation within the building, inspired customer service training, guided the creation of more responsive amenities, and more—all with associated KPIs.

Takeaways and Broader Application

This session will offer attendees concrete strategies for building a culture of visitor-centered thinking through a collaborative approach anchored in measurable results. Presenters will reflect on lessons learned, including how to navigate institutional resistance and maintain momentum. Attendees will leave with actionable insights for using visitor research to advocate for change and create more meaningful, visitor-centric experiences.

Accessibility and inclusion of visitors with disabilities through Visitor Studies' papers

Letícia Marinho, Affiliation

Jessica Norberto Rocha

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance

This session draws upon an exploratory study on the accessibility and inclusion of people with disabilities, a historically excluded audience, through visitor research. We gathered and analyzed publications on the Visitor Studies Journal's issues, discussing methods, outcomes, and research gaps. Despite the growing emphasis on diversity and equitable inclusion in museums, centering the agency of visitors with disabilities in research design is crucial and yet to be further explored. Participants may benefit from this session in which we will present key trends in disability-focused visitor research, methodological aspects to collaborate with visitors with disabilities, and actionable gaps to support future development of inclusive research. This critical review provides tools to advance equity in evaluation practices, aiming to make research a vehicle for inclusion and belonging for people with disabilities.

Abstract

Background. The research field on visitor experience continuously expands to understand and include more diverse museum audiences. People with disabilities have been historically excluded from museums and cultural activities due to a lack of accessibility combined with the emotional aspects of exclusion, which may lead to a sense of "not fitting in." This fact highlights the importance not only of promoting accessibility but also of developing and improving visitor research to collaborate with, rather than just serving visitors with disabilities.

Methodology. We based this review on Visitor Studies Journal volumes from 2007 to 2024, totaling 17 with two issues each, focusing on investigations regarding accessibility, inclusion, equity, and the experience of visitors with disabilities. We pre-selected five articles by identifying the topics in the title, abstract, and keywords, further refined through in-depth reading. The three that focused on visitors with disabilities were assessed regarding the main theme, methodology, design, visitor engagement, and study outcomes.

Outcomes. The analyzed articles covered themes such as people with disabilities advocacy, strategies and barriers for visitors with visual disabilities, and applied participatory research through visits and semi-structured interviews. We consider these examples positive for future research design, considering there is a set of investigation gaps yet to be further explored, such as: visitation experience with other disability groups; impact assessment; qualitative analysis centering attitudinal and emotional accessibility; experience of people with disabilities at online museum settings; and others. By identifying trends and research gaps in one of the main journals of the research topic, we intend to present important aspects that could enhance evaluation studies and visitor experience by promoting visitor engagement and advocacy in the research process. This can help build a sense of belonging, deepening the relationship between museums and their audience with disabilities while implementing more affirmative and inclusive practices.

References

- Fortuna, J., Harrison, C., Eekhoff, A., Marthaler, C., Seromik, M., Ogren, S., & VanderMolen, J. (2023). Identifying barriers to accessibility for museum visitors who are blind and visually impaired. *Visitor Studies*, 26(2), 103–124.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10645578.2023.2168421>
- Millett, R. A. (2015). Evaluation and social equity functioning in museums. *Visitor Studies*, 18(1), 3–16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10645578.2015.1016331>
- Moussouri, T. (2007). Implications of the Social Model of Disability for Visitor research. *Visitor Studies*, 10(1), 90–106. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10645570701263479>
- Werner, B. L., Hayward, J., & Larouche, C. (2014). Measuring and understanding diversity is not so simple: How characteristics of personal identity can improve museum audience studies. *Visitor Studies*, 17(2), 191–206.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10645578.2014.945352>
- Wilson, P. F., Griffiths, S., Williams, E., Smith, M. P., & Williams, M. A. (2020). Designing 3-D prints for blind and partially sighted audiences in museums: Exploring the needs of those living with sight loss. *Visitor Studies*, 23(2), 120–140.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10645578.2020.1776562>

Reconstructing Visitor Studies: The PSD Model's Theoretical Framework and Its Application in Chinese Museum Contexts

Xingyu Zhao

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance

What is the value of visitor studies for museums? While everyone may have their own answer to this question, the PSD model offers a structured way to understand and organize these diverse perspectives. Rather than adding one more theory to the field, the PSD model re-frames visitor studies as a purpose-orientated practice—clarifying what we are really talking about when we discuss visitor research and evaluation. It provides a conceptual framework that helps museums align their methods with specific institutional purposes, whether educational, experiential, or strategic. In doing so, it sheds light on the underlying assumptions that shape visitor-centered practices and invites more intentional use of visitor insights in museum planning and design.

Abstract

This presentation introduces the PSD model and its role in guiding visitor evaluation practices in Chinese museums. First, the model's conceptual foundation and origin are outlined, emphasizing that visitor research and visitor evaluation constitute two core orientations within visitor studies. PSD clarifies the boundaries between these two directions and, drawing on a century of scholarly contributions, identifies the distinct yet interrelated questions that each addresses. Second, the presentation focuses on the application of PSD in visitor evaluation. Drawing on a series of empirical projects conducted in Chinese museums, I will demonstrate how PSD has enhanced the clarity, focus, and practical value of evaluation efforts. Through these cases, the PSD model is shown to support more targeted data collection, and sharpen the alignment between institutional goals and evaluation design.

4:00-5:00 PM Concurrent Sessions

Expanding our Notions of "Expert" to Include Floor Staff Perspectives in Exhibit Development

Abby Chamberlin, Children's Museum of Indianapolis

Claire Thoma-Emmons, Children's Museum of Indianapolis

Mikayla Tirrell, Children's Museum of Indianapolis

Zack Neiditch, Zack Neiditch

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance

Presenters of this session will discuss their efforts to include floor staff feedback into the exhibit development and design process at The Children's Museum of Indianapolis as an example of advocating for the inclusion of previously unrepresented voices in an informal learning institution. This cross departmental process started with members of the Research and Evaluation department reflecting on current practices through reading the Equitable Evaluation Framework together and realizing that the expertise of floor staff was not being fully utilized in some decision making processes. Presenters from both R&E and Interpretation departments will use real examples from their work to show how to advocate for this type of change, including how to navigate challenges and push back that was received. Hearing these concrete examples, we hope to encourage participants to reflect on how evaluation can interrupt power imbalances and increase communication across your institution to improve decision making processes.

Abstract

The role of evaluation in informal learning institutions is often to collect data from and about visitors, and then analyze and present relevant data to select staff in order to inform decision making and planning for the future of the institution. Thus, evaluators hold a lot of power in their institutions, as they are often advocating for visitors. One of the responsibilities of having this power is to reflect on the question "are there any voices missing?" When reflecting on this question, the Research and Evaluation team at The Children's Museum of Indianapolis (TCMI) came to the conclusion that the floor staff department was being left out of these discussions. TCMI has a large department of visitor-facing employees called interpreters who work on the floor within each of our exhibits to deliver scripted programming to our visitors and to connect our visitors with the main ideas and content of our exhibits, and this expertise in visitor behavior was not being incorporated into the exhibit design process. Asking questions related to interactive

designs, usability for different ages, and general visitor behavior allows floor staff to contribute their own expertise in order to make the exhibit better for visitors. By hosting meetings and having open discussions across departments, TCMI has tried to expand the institution's notion of what makes someone an expert in visitor studies.

Presenters will use real examples from their work across several recent exhibits at TCMI to engage participants and show how these efforts can be replicated in other institutions. We encourage participants to reflect on their own experience with the notion of "expertise" and to reflect on how evaluation can bridge power imbalances.

References

Dean-Coffey, J. (2017). Equitable Evaluation Framework™ Framing Paper. Equitable Evaluation Initiative.
http://www.equitableeval.org/_files/ugd/21786c_04631f8cfdd44cb4a10a4097bf85acd5.pdf
<https://www.equitableeval.org/framework>

Dabbling in the Data: Hands-On Data Analysis for Teams

Corey Newhouse, Public Profit

Ava Elliott

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance

Data is great! But data can be scary. Making meaning of data can seem like a daunting task for many museum professionals, requiring specialized knowledge and years of training. Public Profit wrote *Dabbling in the Data: A Hands-On Guide to Participatory Data Analysis* to give evaluators, and the folks they work with, a jumpstart in interpreting data collaboratively.

Abstract

Science center and museum professionals collect information in order to engage teams with the data and to make better decisions. Collaborative meaning making with data is a powerful way to achieve this goal.

However, data analysis can seem like a daunting task for many, requiring specialized knowledge and years of training. It can be challenging to engage teams in this situation, limiting their ability to meaningfully engage with available information. Public Profit wrote

Dabbling in the Data: A Hands-On Guide to Participatory Data Analysis to give teams a jumpstart in interpreting data collaboratively.

In this session, the Public Profit team will facilitate multiple hands-on, practical approaches to explore and analyze common types of data. Participants will have time to draft a plan for their own Dabbling activity.

Dabbling in the Data provides practical ways to engage groups in data analysis and to build evaluation capacity, centering collaborative and participatory approaches. These people-centered activities engage interest holders—particularly those who may not be as comfortable with data—in the analysis process. In turn, they have greater insight into data and are more likely to act on the findings. The session will provide attendees with hands-on experience engaging in the activities, along with a behind-the-scenes view on how to facilitate them.

Participatory meaning making is a culturally responsive practice that promotes more inclusive, equitable interpretation of information, which in turn supports more robust, accurate conclusions. This session will allow participants to engage in innovative ways to evolve their practice together.

References

Public Profit. Dabbling in the Data: A Hand's-On Guide to Participatory Data Analysis.
Publicprofit.net

Additional Links

<https://www.publicprofit.net/dabbling-in-data/>

Fresh Insights on Doctoral Programs: Rethinking Fields of Study and Methodologies

Alice Anderson, The Forum for Youth Investment
Tarah Connolly, University of Wisconsin, Madison
Lok-Wah Li, Boston Children's Museum
Michelle Grohe, Hailey Group

Panel Presentation

Purpose and Importance

Visitor Studies professionals join the field from a variety of academic and personal backgrounds which shape how the field sets standards. Our field has no firm requirements for academic completion although there are conventions and desired qualifications listed

in job descriptions, including degrees of higher education. Additionally, the field attracts highly curious people who seek out learning opportunities throughout their career. However, many aspects about attaining a graduate degree as a necessity for visitor studies leadership are changing. As the field reexamines what knowledge is valued in our profession, the necessity of obtaining a higher education degree for leadership has been called into question. What constitutes expertise today? What programs, degrees or certificates best support the demands of our work? What knowledge, skills and networks will support continued advocacy for visitor research across the informal learning ecosystem?

For those who do pursue a degree, fields of study have also expanded. Students today now have many more options to choose from in terms of discipline, methodological approach, in-person or virtual attendance, and length of program. There are tradeoffs among these choices.

Abstract

In this session, four current or recently graduated doctoral students discuss why they chose to pursue their degree and why their field of study prepares them to become advocates for visitor studies.

Alice Anderson will share about the Out-of-School Learning EdD, which is a 3-year doctoral program for students who already have a master's degree. The program trains students to use improvement science methodology to address problems of practice in their educational system. The program is designed for working professionals to conduct their research in their place of employment.

Dr. Lok-Wah Li will reflect upon the twists and turns in her professional journey: first as an early childhood educator, then as a grad student studying mixed method research, and now as an internal evaluator in a children's museum. She will share how her work and academic experiences helped her identify and define her current role conducting research and evaluation work in a museum setting.

Tarah Connolly will discuss her experiences having been on both sides of researcher-practitioner partnerships in museums, first as a curriculum developer and now as a graduate student in a Department of Curriculum & Instruction. She will speak to how networking and happenstance played into her program choice and how the doctoral experience has broadened her approach to studying visitors, programs, and institutions.

Dr. Michelle Grohe will reflect on the choice to pursue an EdD degree after 20+ years of working as an art museum educator and researcher. She will address why she chose a degree outside of the museum sector and how her lifelong learning has informed her approaches to leadership and transformational change.

This session is ideal for early to mid-career professionals who may be interested but uncertain about options for continued education. The presenters will share their own experiences as well as other programs they considered.

References

- Bryk, A. S., Gomez, L. M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P. G. (2015). *Learning to Improve: How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better*. Harvard Education Press.
- Heifetz, R. A., Linsky, M., & Grashow, A. (2009). *The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World*. Harvard Business Review.
- Hinnant-Crawford, B. N. (2020). *Improvement Science in Education: A Primer*. Myers Education Press.

Foregrounding the Visitor: Front-End Strategies for Permanent Collection Reinstallations at The Met

Martina Lentino, The Metropolitan Museum of Art
Clara Maria Apostolatos, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

Hosted Presentation

Purpose and Importance

This session examines how front-end visitor research is shaping permanent collection reinstallations at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, highlighting its proximity to interpretive planning practices. We will share case studies that exemplify our broader visitor research strategy, which aims to embed visitor advocacy throughout The Museum for years to come.

Abstract

Over the past decade, and continuing throughout the next several years, The Metropolitan Museum of Art has undertaken an expansive renovation and reinstallation program, updating key aspects of its edifice's infrastructure, gallery design, and collection narratives. This session will share the frameworks and methods developed by The Met's Interpretive Planning and Evaluation team to support visitor-centered planning for permanent collection reinstallations. These projects constitute an opportunity to proactively restructure how visitor perspectives are integrated into different stages of long-term exhibition planning. We will discuss our approach to building a standardized, yet adaptable, evaluation framework that can address the unique stakes of different curatorial departments working on large-scale projects. Drawing on case studies from the American Wing (2024) and Medieval Sculpture Hall (2029) reinstallations, we will share our methods

for early-stage visitor evaluation and how they have informed data-driven decisions, informed interpretive planning, and fostered collaborations with colleagues who join us in advocating for audience-centered exhibition planning. Attendees will gain insight into how these strategies bridge audience perspectives with curatorial goals within an encyclopedic museum context. The session will conclude with a guided discussion and Q&A on these topics.

Disrupted methods: Rethinking visitor studies in an AI-mediated museum landscape

Indigo Holcombe-James, ACMI

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance

This session addresses a critical inflection point for visitor studies: as artificial intelligence fundamentally transforms how audiences discover, navigate, and engage with cultural content, our field must urgently reconsider whether traditional evaluation frameworks remain viable. The "big idea" centers on disrupting comfortable assumptions about visitor research practice to prepare our field for an AI-mediated future.

Our research questions probe essential tensions: How do we assess engagement when AI systems increasingly mediate visitor journeys? What happens to meaning-making when algorithms shape expectations? How might audience segmentation evolve with hyper-personalization capabilities? These questions are vital as museums rapidly adopt AI without corresponding evolution in evaluation practice.

Participants will gain critical competencies by identifying how AI challenges established visitor studies terminology and frameworks, and by reflecting on where their own practice requires adaptation. This session deliberately avoids prescriptive solutions, instead fostering essential dialogue about methodological disruption.

The broader implications extend beyond individual practice to the future of our profession. As cultural institutions increasingly rely on data-driven decision-making, visitor studies must evolve to remain relevant and effective. This session offers a starting point for this vital collaborative thinking.

Abstract

As artificial intelligence reshapes how audiences discover and engage with cultural content, the fundamental assumptions underpinning visitor studies practice face unprecedented challenges. Drawing on emerging developments in AI-mediated museum experiences, this paper critically examines how traditional approaches to understanding

and evaluating visitor engagement may no longer serve us in an automated cultural landscape.

The presentation surfaces critical tensions in current evaluation frameworks: How do we meaningfully assess engagement when AI systems increasingly mediate and personalize visitor journeys before they reach our physical or digital spaces? What happens to our understanding of meaning-making when machine learning algorithms shape visitor expectations and learning patterns? And how might we need to reimagine audience segmentation when automation enables hyper-personalization at scale?

Rather than offering solutions, this provocative paper aims to spark crucial dialogue about the future of visitor studies practice. By examining ACMI's early explorations of these challenges, we will surface key questions and considerations for evaluators grappling with AI's impact on cultural engagement. As our field seeks to advocate for effective decision-making in cultural institutions, we must first critically examine whether our current evaluation approaches remain fit for purpose in an AI-mediated landscape. This critical reflection invites our field to collectively imagine new frameworks for advocacy and evaluation that respond to an increasingly automated museum landscape.

“Questions I Didn’t Know I Had”: Entry Narratives about Indigeneity at NMAI

Madeleine Pope, HG&Co

Dan Davis, NMAI

Individual Paper Presentation

Purpose and Importance

Visitors come to museums to learn, but what about when they come to museums to unlearn? Cultural museums—and institutions who interpret histories and experiences of marginalized peoples—will benefit from understanding the present-day entry narratives of visitors to the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI). While holding multiple stereotypes about Indigenous people, visitors were nonetheless motivated to replace their misconceptions with NMAI-gained knowledge. This process of unlearning while learning anew included (1) self-recognition of holding contradictory beliefs, (2) interest in the Museum’s relationship to living tribes and individuals, and (3) a sense of responsibility to do the unlearning-learning work. Museums and cultural institutions can incorporate the findings of this study into their own exhibition, education, and marketing designs to encourage visits from those who similarly want to replace misconceptions with responsible and real information about those under-represented in history and today’s culture.

Abstract

Occasionally, people visit museums not only to learn, but to unlearn. Join the external evaluator and the Museum to explore surprising findings from entry narratives at the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), where visitors come with a sense of duty to unlearn misinformation about indigeneity. Through 53 semi-structured, qualitative entry interviews at Museum locations in New York and D.C., HG&Co found that many visitors (67% national; 27% international) believe that school, news, and other media teaches inaccuracies. These visitors seek out the Museum to replace this misinformation with accurate narratives and objects.

The findings of this front-end research supports the creation of NMAI's updated Welcome Media. The film, which is currently in formative testing informed by the front-end phase, intends to meet visitor learning needs while offering additional insights about the Museum, opening the possibility of a deeper learning experience.

In addition to the sense of responsibility to do the unlearning-learning work, findings included a self-recognition of holding contradictory (and often stereotypical) beliefs, such as the belief that Indigenous people no longer exist in North America but also that most Native Americans are poor. There was also interest in the Museum's relationships to living tribes and individuals, with more common visitor interest in repatriation than expected. Some even voiced a goal to learn about NMAI's collection practices in order to determine their ethics as a government agency.

This research into NMAI visitors' entry purposes and beliefs can apply to other museums and cultural organizations which explore past and present lives of marginalized peoples. HG&Co's Madeleine Pope and NMAI's Dan Davis will discuss the project's goals, methodology, outcomes, and impacts. Discussion will be held after the presentation to brainstorm ways that similar informal learning institutions can support visitors' desires to correct their inaccurate ideas.

References

- Lubar, S. (2018, December 2). Exhibiting Absence. Medium.
<https://lubar.medium.com/exhibiting-absence-36c5552613ba>
- Reclaiming Native Truth. (2018, June). Research Findings: Compilation of All Research. First Nations Development Institute.
<https://www.firstnations.org/publications/compilation-of-all-research-from-the-reclaiming-native-truth-project/>