

Great! Thank you K.

Talking Back

FINAL

Janet Kamien, August 18, 2003

The Boston Children's Museum was probably not the first museum to engage in organized methods of direct visitor feedback, but we were surely in the game early.

It was an obvious step. We believed in being 'client centered,' so finding out what the client needed, wanted, or thought about ~~what was already on offer~~ was important to us. This was in the late 1960's and early '70's. Visitor research, as we now understand it, barely existed.

In our beginning use of ^{we} talk-backs ^{them,} as ~~they were~~ called, we simply cut to the chase and asked people what they thought about our museum. We posted many of these comments, both good and bad, and the suggestions for improvements or new exhibits and programs for other visitors to see.

We eventually began to incorporate talk-backs into specific exhibits ^{ions}. One of the first of these was for a project called *Lito the Shoeshine Boy*. This 1974 exhibit was based on a photo-documentary style children's book about a day in the life of a poor, abandoned street boy in Guatemala. Moving through a maze-like space, stage-set style rooms and large black and white photos and text from the book suggested the environments and activities of Lito's everyday life, making it more or less on his own with little adult help and no schooling.

Visitors were asked to consider this story and write to us about it on notepaper that could be tacked up on a bulletin board. And write they did, about their sorrow for this boy, with thanks for telling his story, or appalled that we were telling such a sad story in a ^{fun} place. There were also political opinions about how the Litos of the world had been created – one writer blamed the United Fruit Company and included a snide suggestion about our possible connection to those scoundrels!

(I'm trying to standardize all articles -
"exhibition" is themed w/ many elements,
"exhibit" is one element.)

Our motives may have been a bit disingenuous. We knew that this exhibit^{ion} would raise a few eyebrows and we wanted feedback about this risk from our visitors. We suspected that visitors who opposed our installation for whatever reason, would feel a bit more forgiving of us if offered the chance to tell us so in public. We also thought that visitors who were emotionally touched by the exhibit^{ion} would be grateful for a place to reveal their feelings.

Thus was born the notion of the talk-back as a Boston Children's Museum device that might do three things:

- Inform us, the producers, if our products were found to be useful and enjoyable for the people^{for which} we had produced it^{for them};
- Provide a place for people to vent strongly felt emotions or opinions that the exhibit^{ion} may have evoked;
- Mitigate controversy evoked by some of our possibly risky undertakings by providing a public forum for naysayers to^{ion} tell us off.^{ion}

Subsequent experiments would bear out the utility of all three of these suppositions and eventually add two others:

- ^{Provide a} The visitor's ability through this medium^{for visitors} to talk to each other;
- ^{ENCOURAGE} The possibility^{to} of visitors^{to} becoming part of the exhibit^{ion} by continually adding to its content.

If ever an exhibit^{ion} cried out for the use of talk-backs for all these purposes, it was the 1986 exhibit^{ion} *Endings: An Exhibit about Death and Loss*. We designed three^{talk-back components} within the 5,000^{square foot} exhibit^{ion} space. (As developer of this exhibit^{ion}, I should have known to have made it four^{but} more about that later.)⁽¹⁶⁾

The first^{component} asked visitors if they had been named for anyone. We expected a light response, mostly citing grandparents, aunts^{ion} and uncles. The response was light, but surprisingly featured many examples of children named for soldiers – kin and friends – lost in the Vietnam War. This was fascinating both to us and our visitors.

The second ^{component} asked for opinions about the afterlife. After describing a variety of beliefs (unattached to a specific religion) including the notion that there is none, visitors were asked, "What do you and your family believe?" Two of my personal favorites were, "My family believes in heaven, but I'm not so sure," and "Our souls (sic) fly up to heaven," complete with an illustration thereof.

The third ^{component} should have been two: it asked visitors to tell us what they thought of the exhibit or to share an experience they had had with death. ^{elaborate on why two (one sentence)} Visitors answering the first question were all over the map, often responding to other people's postings. Some thought it brilliant, others that it was inappropriate for a children's museum, or that we should read our New Testaments. ^{long dash} Then we'd know that there was no such thing as death! Some younger visitors wanted to tell us that they thought the material was okay for them (9 or 10 years old) but they feared it was inappropriate for "younger" visitors.

Answers to the second question were sometimes poignant, sometimes funny, and sometimes so personal they weren't posted, but placed in the box we provided. Many of these were written by adults. Many were very long and heartfelt. One often had the sense that some of these visitors had been looking for a way to tell someone about their feelings for a very long time. In many ways, the content provided by our visitors was just as engaging as the exhibit ⁱⁿ itself.

Talk-back boards were used with equal effect and poignancy in an exhibit called *Families*, about the love and commitment of members of non-traditional families to each other. Here again, we heard how grateful kids felt that their own particular type of family had been recognized, although some adults took issue with the appropriateness of the presentation of a homosexual couple in a children's museum.

^(year)
In ——— Michael Spock and I took our love of this device with us to the Field Museum of Natural History. One of its first uses there was to help us and our visitors focus on an old, miniature diorama in the Native American Hall called "Morning Star." In it, a young

^{in Chicago.}

was
woman ~~is~~ being sacrificed by a group of men. Label copy explained that this was an annual event meant to please the gods. Though the diorama had sat, un-remarked upon for thirty years or more, a white feminist visitor was so outraged by it that she wrote a scathing letter to us. We consulted a Pawnee eldress, and she too wrote a letter explaining that this really did happen ~~that~~ they weren't proud of it, but that there was no reason not to talk about it. These two letters were posted in a talk-back, in which other visitors could state their opinions. Should we get rid of this exhibit, we asked, or keep it?

In the meantime, staff research revealed many flaws in both the presentation and the label copy. Based on visitor commentary over a long period, ~~it was~~ we decided to keep the diorama and correct it. It became a less lurid presentation and more accurate – for instance, the whole village had participated, not just a group of over-excited looking men.

~~Other talk-backs were used, especially in Life Over Time, our large exhibit about evolution and the history of life on Earth. These talk-backs addressed some sticky issues that would be seen by some to have religious implications. One asked (in the context of the Urey-Miller experiment¹ of the 1950s and a book of creation stories from all over the world) what visitors thought about how life began on Earth. Responses to this ranged from “kill all abortion doctors” to “Darwin is God” to “evolution is a glove on the hand of God.” None of these, of course, addressed the question we asked, but all made it clear that visitors of every persuasion were eager to state their opinions and show what side they were on, or like the last, that they could see both sides.~~

One important lesson learned at the Field Museum was in the ~~Animal Kingdom exhibit~~ ^{exhibition,} An early talk-back in that conservation-minded exhibit ~~asked~~ ^{ion} “What can you do to help the environment?” and provided some prompts, such as recycling, or saving gas or electricity. To this, visitors replied with observations like “Charlie loves Sally” and a variety of four-letter words. Why? Because they knew they were being set up. We weren't really asking them what they thought, we just wanted them to parrot something back to us, and they refused. We took it out.

needs segway - something like "Taking these experiences with me into my consulting practice..." or "Reflecting on these... I collaborated w..."

seek - not a good example - but you will come up w/ one

The newly opened National Constitution Center is writing another chapter in the life of the talk-back. Here, it is seen as an expression of the democratic processes of discussion, debate, compromise and dissent, and it takes three forms:

- A series of questions, each with their own photo-montage background that say things like, "Tell us, do you think that America has justice for all?" or, "Tell us, when is it appropriate to send American troops to war?" Visitors write their remarks on Post-its and stick them up.
- A section at the end of a long chronology of the history of the U.S. Constitution has room to ask three questions that can be changed as new issues arise. These present pro and con arguments, articles from the newspaper, etc., and ask visitors where they stand. The opening issues were about gun control, the fight over posting the Ten Commandments in an American courthouse and the Patriot Act. This presentation implies three things:

etc.,

- + collectively, we are in charge of the next steps in our nation's future,
 - + ~~you~~ ^{we} need to know something in order to answer intelligently,
 - + and most issues have at least two sides and aren't easy to resolve.
- The third example might not be seen as a talk-back, but in many ways it is. At the end of the experience, visitors enter a room featuring life-size statues of all the men present at the signing of the Constitution, including three who refused to sign. Visitors are invited to sign bound copies of the Constitution or sign in a 'dissenters' book and state their reason for not committing to the document. These books will be archived in cases within Signer's Hall. Here we hope the act of writing commits the visitor more firmly to the importance and seriousness of the Constitution. It's an example of the talk-back as a visceral experience.

~~One~~ a few

A final word about technique. Readers will have noticed that every single example, including the most recent, uses paper and pencil and not computers. The biggest

¹ In this stunning experiment, the combination of water, hydrogen, methane, ammonia and an electrical spark yielded the creation of three, life-essential amino acids in a week's time, suggesting that life on Earth

innovation seems to be that of the Post-it. (And how glad I am of it – no more worrying about little ones and thumb tacks or push pins!) Though computers were considered, especially at the National Constitution Center, we eventually decided in each case to stick to the old technique. ^{for general} There are a couple of reasons. One is that it is much easier (and easier for more people at one time) to scan the comments of others or to add their own. Another reason is that people can place their comments in relationship to others or to graphics that are supporting an idea. A third reason, is that during visitor testing in an “I signed the Constitution” program, visitors said they preferred to actually sign with a pen rather than electronically sign, which was our original idea. We think that the tactile quality of paper and pen makes the experience more real for them.

~~There have been a variety of uses of computers and video kiosks for feedback in many institutions and these work fine. They also offer the institution a simple way to keep all the comments, instead of having shoeboxes of ‘stickies’ floating around. But it is also important to remember that talk-backs are no replacement for actual visitor research, and that collecting talk-backs will not yield a reliable data base for analysis. Rather, they are a temperature-taking device, a venting mechanism, and in some cases, an integral part of the exhibition content.~~

All in all, talk-backs, by their very participatory nature, ^{And then} help to turn every exhibit they are in to one of dynamic daily change, ^{then} and thereby, change the tenor of each installation for the better.

Janet A. Kamien is an independent museum consultant. She is a member of The Museum Group and serves on the Board of the Visitor Studies Association.
j.kamien@worldnet.att.net

Thanks to Elaine Heumann Gurian and Michael Spock for their reviews.

could have begun through a happy, but accidental combination of common materials.

2081 words