Investing in Education for Better Public Programmes

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Overview of The Australian Museum

The Australian Museum was established in 1827 and has operated continuously at the College Street, Sydney site since 1845. As a museum of natural history, it has collections, research and public programmes in the areas of cultural heritage and the natural environment. The Museum provides services throughout New South Wales and extends its reach nationally and internationally via its scientific research, web programme and travelling exhibitions.

In the College Street buildings, there are nine semi-permanent exhibitions, two major temporary exhibition spaces, an Education Centre for school groups and a centre for public inquiries and research. The exhibitions and other public spaces in the Museum create environments where visitors of all ages and backgrounds can follow their interests by investigating, exploring, enjoying, questioning, discussing, sharing and learning.

We aim to create a variety of experiences for our visitors. Some experiences will be open-ended; others are structured. Some will be self-directed and others staff-assisted. Do we get it right? Not always! But we can avoid potential pitfalls by investing up front in our research and development processes.

Public Programme Development – Investing in Education

An investment of educational input in public programme development will bring rewards. Consideration of the needs and interests of potential visitors should start early.

At the Australian Museum, the vital process of public programme development starts with the selection and testing of ideas for future exhibitions. A team of managers assesses the exhibition proposals. They can initiate proposals as well as receive them from staff or other museums. Importantly, the team is closely involved in market research to gauge the likely public interest of proposals. This 'front end' evaluation informs our decisions but does not enslave us to 'market forces'.

Once a proposal is commissioned for development, a project team is assembled. Team members are selected for their expertise, experience and ability to

contribute great ideas. Our teams are guided to value the expertise of every member. Typically a team has a chairperson and representatives with expertise in design, education, science and marketing. Each contributes in their way to creating successful outcomes for the future visitor.

The concept phase

This is the first and most important phase of the project team's creative work because it is when the ideas are formed. The team translates the project objectives into a conceptual structure, which has a central idea or 'key message'. This early phase is the time to explore all the suggested ideas – from bold to boring – before focusing on how it could be best communicated. What are the most attractive themes, storylines and media for communicating the key message to the target audience? What are the possible interpretive strategies for getting the message across?

The proposal is now ready for another stage of audience testing, formative evaluation. Feedback from potential visitors at this early stage – before a single element is built – will help you know if you are on the right track. Or you may discover that you need to develop a much more exciting presentation!

The value of educational expertise at the early stages of programme development should not be underestimated. The educator can assist in clarifying the communication objectives and synthesising a concise 'key message' for the target audiences. These early decisions will help to focus the team throughout the development process.

The development phase

This is the second major phase of the project, and the longest. Approved concepts are now considered in fine detail. Plans, prototypes, models, sketches, copyright, label text, visitor facilities. In fact, all aspects of the project are now developed and documented ready for production.

Earlier front-end and formative evaluation has informed the team of the interests of the target audience. This helps the team to develop the 'hooks' needed to engage the visitors and keep them interested in exploring further. The educator assists the team at this stage by considering the levels of prior knowledge that visitors may have in the topic. By developing a variety of interpretive strategies, the educator helps to create the overall exhibition experience in which visitors will build their new understandings of the topic. How can you make it work for your visitors? Will you try staff-mediated experiences, live theatre or additional research resources for visitors?

Some of the more specialised forms of educational expertise are called on at this stage of a project's development, e.g. evaluation, storyline development, instructional design and interpretive planning. The Australian Museum has been able to direct some of its resources towards employing specialist evaluators, editors and multimedia developers. Other museums can benefit from our investment. We have published a handbook of language guidelines for museum exhibitions (Ferguson, MacLulich and Ravelli, 1995) and many articles on audience research and learning can be found on our websites:
www.austmus.gov.au/educ/learning.htm;
www.austmus.gov.au/biodiversity/6_3.htm.

The production phase

This is the third major phase of the project, where good planning in the earlier phases is rewarded. In this phase, the components are made, tested and installed. Education materials are produced and visitor programmes are refined.

The later stages of exhibition development are perhaps the 'traditional' time for educational input. Even after the content and presentation is locked-in, an educator can attempt some palliative measures or supplementary programmes to make the exhibition partly effective for people's preferred learning styles, or visitors with specific learning needs. However, an investment in educational expertise 'up front' is more effective and makes for a better outcome for all visitors.

Evaluation in this phase is used to measure the effectiveness of the project and to fix any problems identified by observing visitors using (or misusing) your exhibition or its prototype components.

A School of Thought

A discussion of education in museums would not be complete without addressing the special needs of school audiences. An exhibition has to serve many markets. Frequently, school audiences are not considered as the major market for an exhibition. An educator must find ways to make an exhibition relevant, interesting and accessible for the students and teachers who will visit. Often this is achieved with teachers' notes and student worksheets. Also, a range of workshops, hands-on sessions and teaching activities has proved successful.

Educators can help here too, by advising on the needs and motivations of this audience. We should remember that students are motivated in similar ways to our adult and family audiences. All need time (and help) to orient themselves

to the venue and exhibition content. All will use the exhibition according to their interests, abilities and prior knowledge. So what can you do?

- You can help the teachers to prepare their students for the visit. If you provide teachers with specific instructions, they can prepare their students beforehand for what they will be doing. This reduces anxiety and facilitates learning.
- You can allow for the variety of preferred learning styles when designing the exhibition and its educational materials. Build in a range of interpretive strategies and present the 'key message' several times, in different ways.

Student worksheets are more popular with teachers than students, but we do not have to design the worksheet for the teacher. Kids need to explore an exhibition before they focus on the specific content. Most kids will want to socialise as much as they want to attend to their allocated task. It is unwise to ignore the social interactions inherent in a school group. So what can you do?

- You can allow them to explore before each group starts a different task. Groups can focus on a key question or object and study it in some depth. The information gathered in the museum should not be repetition of label text.
- You can ask the children to express and record their feelings, preferences and interests. Ask them to think and choose between options; anything but filling in the missing word on the worksheet.
- You can suggest that synthesising and analysing the gathered information should be done back in the classroom, where the social interactions are more controllable.

Summary

An investment of educational input at the early stages of programme development will reap rewards later. Together with other team members, the educator can formulate the tight definition of key messages and multiple interpretive strategies. The key messages from a reference point for the team – a buoy in the turbulent sea of the development process! Get this bit right. Do your evaluation and market testing early and often. Use visitor feedback to steer away from boring options – try to see from their point of view what is relevant, interesting and enjoyable. Utilise educational expertise to find the right medium for communicating the messages, perhaps doing it in many different ways, to maximise the learning outcomes. Research the interesting things that have already been tried and tested in museum education. Finally, think about how the exhibition will work for visitors once it is open.

Reference

Ferguson, L., MacLulich, C. & Ravelli, L. (1995). *Meanings and messages: language guidelines for museum exhibitions*. Australian Museum, Sydney. Available from the Australian Museum Shop.
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