

How Can Science Centre and Museum Education Programmes be Improved?

Teachers' Responses to Pre-visit and Visit Questionnaires

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Pre-visit and visit questionnaires as important communication tools

The Science Centre, Manawatu Museum and Art Gallery prides itself in tailoring education programmes to the requirements of visiting classes. Pre-visit and visit questionnaires are key tools that we use to communicate with teachers.

The institution has five educators on staff who run education programmes for approximately 20,000 students a year. Although we offer teachers the choice of running programmes themselves or paying more and having programmes run by museum educators, teachers almost always choose the second option. These programmes may be science, technology, heritage, Maori or art programmes. They may be based in exhibitions or they may be independent of exhibitions. All are designed to meet teachers' curriculum needs.

When teachers book programmes for their classes they are sent information about the programmes as well as pre-visit questionnaires to fax back to educators. We find that the pre-visit questionnaires are very important in enabling educators to gear programmes to fit teachers' requirements. in the pre-visit questionnaire. Teachers were asked the purpose of the visit, including expected outcomes, as well as how the visit will fit in with current work being done by the class.

We know that teachers bring students to museums for all kinds of different reasons. For example, a teacher may bring a class to study the technology of interactive exhibits, to compare the effectiveness of different media of instruction, to introduce a new topic or for a treat at the end of term. Educators need to be aware of teachers' reasons for coming in order to maximise the benefit for the visiting students. A mismatch between teachers' and museum educators' expectations can lead to disappointments on both sides so we place a lot of importance on establishing a common understanding before a class arrives.

During their visit, all teachers fill in visit questionnaires that give museum educators feedback about the programme. We ask teachers to hand these questionnaires to our Reception staff before they leave, while the programme is fresh in their minds and before they are buried in other paperwork at school. The questions asked cover the appropriateness of the educational material available and the usefulness of the visit overall in meeting expectations.

What teachers tell us about our education programmes

An analysis of responses from teachers between February and May 2000 showed that 98% were satisfied or very satisfied with the education programme they received. The 2% of teachers who were not satisfied all expressed concerns that the particular exhibition they visited was pitched at too high a level (particularly too high a reading level) for their class.

When asked what they particularly liked about a programme, they wrote the following comments:

Teacher's comment	Number of teacher comments
Programme was interactive and activity-based	162
Good links with school programmes	87
Praise relating to specifics of one programme	87
Good presenters	54
Good information and resources	36
Programme was fun/exciting	21
Good programme organisation	17
Programme was easy to understand	16
Good group work	15
TOTAL	495

The features of education programmes that teachers say that they like are all features that our museum educators consciously aim to provide. It is encouraging and affirming for them to find that their efforts are recognised and appreciated. The interactive, activity-based nature of programmes receives much the greatest number of positive comments from teachers.

The same teachers were also asked how the programme could be improved. Not all teachers answered the question but those that did gave the following comments:

Teacher's comment	Number of teachers comments
No improvements needed	153
Changes suggested to specific programmes	55
More time	13
Change programme structure	6
More information beforehand	6
Advertise more/ differently	3
More information after visit	2
Cheaper price	2
More information on website	1
Provide coffee for teachers	1
TOTAL	242

The majority of teachers did not make suggestions for improving the programmes. Most of those that did make suggestions related them to specific programmes, for example, 'Give children the names of the planets in Maori as well as English' or 'Include information about the history of the discovery of sound'. These comments from teachers reached educators the day they led the programme and enabled them, if appropriate, to make immediate changes to their delivery.

Overall the experience of educators at The Science Centre, Manawatu Museum and Art Gallery is that pre-visit and visit questionnaires from teachers provide invaluable communication tools that allow educators to align their programmes with teachers' needs and to continually improve their delivery.

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