Assessment of Informal Education in Holocaust Museums

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Introduction*

Museums of all kinds are increasingly asking what appears to be a simple question, "Can we assess the educational impact of our museum on visitors?" The simple answer is "yes." But it comes along with a not-so-simple proviso: "provided that we can agree upon what we mean by 'educational impact.'"

In this paper we approach the assessment of educational impact from our experience researching the background, behavior and opinions of visitors to the Smithsonian Institution. We generally approach our studies from a sociological perspective, emphasizing the common elements that allow us to identify sub-groups. We have studied visitors to art museums, history museums, natural history museums, zoos, and cultural museums.[1] We have not conducted any studies in Holocaust museums. However, we believe that the key issues addressed here and in other types of cultural institutions are comparable and applicable to each other.

Context: learning in museums

Ever since museums first took root in America they have been linked to the goal of public education. Since the early days of the republic and the founding of the first museum by Charles Wilson Peale, there has been a continuous effort to make museums into resources for self-education that complement the formal education system of the schools.[2] The emphasis on museums as means of public improvement has coexisted with the traditional European ideal of museums as storehouses of treasures to be enjoyed and contemplated by a qualified few.

Initially, in art museums this education primarily meant the development of taste; in particular, an appreciation for the facts and artifacts of European high culture. Although a few art museums today might still define their educational role primarily in terms of the exercise and refinement of aesthetic sensitivities, most have broadened their educational mandates to include interpretations of history, philosophy, and social change as reflected in art.[3]

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1 Reports cited in this paper, as well as a bibliography of our studies, are available from the Smithsonian Institution, Institutional Studies Office (MRC 405), 900 Jefferson Drive, S.W., Washington, DC, 20560.

2 See Hein and Doering (1992).

3 For example, "Converging Cultures: Art & Identity in Spanish America" shown at the Brooklyn Museum from March through August 1996, explores the influences of the Native American and Spanish cultures upon each other through artwork.

Natural history museums, another early form of American museums, were dedicated to the comprehensive classification of natural phenomena. Here, too, education was a primary expressed purpose, focusing on the accumulation and categorization of factual data and the skills needed to make typological distinctions. In recent years these museums have also embraced an ecological approach to the world that implies a sense of universal responsibility for the health of our environment.[4]

In taking this larger view of the world, natural history museums have had to face the gray area between "education" and "advocacy." This distinction, of course, also has to be considered and addressed by all institutions. This point will be discussed again later.

The historically strong link between education and museums in this country is a product both of American pragmatism as well as the sense that democracy required an approach to culture that stressed accessibility over the preservation of elitist values. In fact, in recent decades the issue of accessibility has taken a variety of forms. Museums or sections of museums that address special audiences have proliferated. Children's museums, junior museums, and school and university-related museums are defined in terms of the age group and educational level they address, rather than the more traditional way, that is, in terms of their content -- art, science, history, natural history, etc. "Hands on," or participatory museums represent a comparatively new style of exhibit presentation that interactively engages the audience.[5]

The museum community has also made efforts to include in its programs and programming a broader socioeconomic range of the population -- racial, ethnic, and cultural minorities, women, the working class, and others whose interests have been previously underrepresented by museums. Most recently, sensitized by, and supportive of, the passage of the American for Disabilities Act of 1990, museums are developing exhibitions that promote an understanding of people with disabilities.

The development of Holocaust museums and memorials represents another stage in the evolution of museum education. Not all Holocaust education has exactly the same goals. As William Parsons, Director of Education at the U.S. Holocaust Memorial Museum (USHMM), has pointed out, Holocaust education programs lie on a continuum between two extremes. At the one end are those which emphasize the unique, particular character of the Holocaust and at the other are those education programs which emphasize human behavior outside of a specific histori-

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[4] For example, while the Smithsonian's "Ocean Planet," an exhibition that alerted visitors to dangers facing the health of the oceans, closed in April 1996 at the National Museum of Natural History, an on-line version is indefinitely available on the world-wide-web. Another example is the travelling exhibition "Witness," sponsored by the California Academy of Sciences and at the American Museum of Natural History in New York City until October 1996. This exhibition contains large-format black-and-white and color photographs documenting 100 endangered North American plants and animals.

[5] The Boston Children's Museum and the San Francisco Exploratorium are pioneer examples of this exhibit form.

cal context. Most programs contain some combination of these two tendencies. To the degree that they embrace both of these directions, Holocaust museums are more than single-subject history museums. Most of us, probably, would agree that Holocaust museums are more than a call to memory -- *they are a call to conscience.* They extend beyond facts and artifacts to embrace directly the principle of moral growth.

This moral dimension puts Holocaust museums in a potential leadership position, as trends in all museums today are pointing towards an increasing level of social responsibility. Assuming a leadership position, however, directly leads us into making a distinction between "leading" and "preaching." This is not unlike the gray area noted earlier between "education" and "advocacy." It applies to the classroom and other instructional settings no less than to the museum. How can we recognize when the teacher has become a missionary? Intuitively we sense that there is an element of "balance" that needs to be maintained in any act of interpretation. Balance can mean that inherently subjective judgments are clearly expressed as such, and that the possibility of alternative, valid interpretations is explicitly allowed. In an exhibition on global warming, for example, a balanced exhibition would have to make clear the high level of uncertainty that arises from the dependence on computer models to predict natural phenomena. Visitors should be encouraged to leave such an exhibition concerned and committed to a fuller understanding of the controversy, not angry at some segment of society, such as industry, or committed to the political agenda of an environmental movement.

Involving the moral dimension, as Holocaust museums inevitably must do, also makes the task of "education" or "learning" much more difficult to assess. We know that education in this context must mean much more than the communication of factual information. It has to encompass the feelings, motivations and ethical behavior of individuals. Can such things be evaluated? Can the workings of the museum on the hearts and consciences of visitors (as well as on their minds) be identified and measured? From a sociological viewpoint they can, within limits discussed below, and the attempt to identify and measure these elusive responses is completely in keeping with the special character of museum encounters.

Context: visitor responses to objects in museums

Three broad patterns of response can be identified in visitor responses to the objects encountered in museum spaces: cognitive, emotional, and behavioral.[6] Arranging these responses along a continuum points out the shades of overlap and interaction among them.[7]

- Cognitive
  - acquisition of factual information
  - awareness of connections (pattern-finding)
  - curiosity about additional information or connections
- Emotional
  - interest based on personal preferences, unexplained pleasure
  - attraction based on professional involvement
  - aesthetic awareness
  - attraction to an object itself as important
    - a) because it is old, unique, rare
    - b) because it revives a memory
    - c) because it makes either learned or personal history feel "real"
  - feelings inspired by these other responses
- Behavioral
  - desire to...
    - learn more or to engage more deeply with the subject
    - return to re-experience this encounter
    - tell others and to share the experience or feelings
    - make some changes in one's life
    - make some changes in others' lives

As one proceeds along this continuum one might say that an individual is informed, then moved, then inspired. Of course this ordering is artificial A visitor might be moved first, then informed, or moved and informed simultaneously, etc. In addition, we should not assume that all exhibitions aim to accomplish all of these responses in all individuals. The specific aims of an exhibition or a museum are in the hands of its organizers.

In the case of Holocaust museums, as pointed out above, there is usually an implicit movement, however, from the cognitive to the emotional and then to the behavioral. Most organizers of Holocaust museums and exhibitions would probably agree that their visitors should know what the Holocaust was, be moved by it, and be engaged to the degree that they want to take some action.

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6 For a discussion of these dimensions as they apply to both exhibition organizers and visitors, see Doering and Pekarik (1993).

7 Our thanks to Neil G. Kotler, Office of the Provost, Smithsonian Institution, for suggesting some of the elements in this approach.

The Cognitive Dimension

Schools and museums. Schools are more effective than museums in providing cognitive learning. Museum visits have long been recognized as a unique class of learning experiences, distinctly separate from formal education. It is commonplace to call them "*informal* education," because voluntary museum visits do not produce the same kinds of systematic, defined outcomes as classroom instruction. There are clearly some structural differences between students in schools and visitors in museums. For example, students in schools are formally enrolled in classes, segregated by age and often by ability. They have regular teachers and a prescribed curriculum, and the physical facilities, though not always comfortable, are designed to support prolonged concentration and attention to the teacher. Regular attendance and performance of assigned work is obligatory. The successful completion of this work is clearly rewarded through grades, awards, certification and status in society.

Perhaps most fundamentally, the elaborate feedback system in the schools, in the form of tests, dialogue with teachers, work reviews, etc., makes students self-consciously aware of what they think and know, requires them to learn more, and encourages them to adopt alternative viewpoints.

On the other hand, museum visitors come voluntarily, their visit and "curriculum" is unstructured, the physical facilities are not designed for concentrated attention, the rewards are intrinsic, and no one is available to point out their misunderstandings, or to suggest how they might expand their thinking into areas that may seem uncomfortable to them at first.

An important result of these differences, and one critical here, is that museum visitors rarely leave the museum with a fresh accumulation of specific, detailed information. We have found out through our research on Smithsonian visitors that little new factual knowledge is acquired by most museum visitors.[8]

Unfortunately this issue, i.e., acquisition of factual information, has not yet been systematically studied in Holocaust museums, to the best of our knowledge. But, we suspect that if we did investigate what new information visitors acquired as a result

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8 For example, in a study we conducted at three zoos across the country (Washington, DC, Dallas and Atlanta), we wanted to find out how visitors' involvement with newly installed low-tech interactives in the reptile houses affected their experience. We learned that the interactives were popular with visitors of all ages, that they encouraged visitors to stop more often and to stay longer and that they improved visitors' attitudes toward reptiles. As part of our study we asked visitors a very basic question, "How would you describe a reptile to someone who did not know what it was?" On average, across all three zoos the percentage of visitors who gave accurate descriptions of a reptile was virtually the same between entrance and exit. Although there were a few other indications in this study that visitors were finding some new information in the exhibition, we cannot help but wonder whether or not they received it accurately. While the museum literature certainly contains illustrations of cognitive "learning" in different kinds of museums, there is quiet agreement that these places may not be the optimum settings for this type of education. See Doering, Smith, Pekarik, Bickford and Manning (1994).

of their visit to these institutions, most of us could not help but feel disappointed by the results (and perhaps an intuitive realization of this possibility may have discouraged the undertaking of such studies). When this issue is objectively researched, we are likely to find out that visitors are coming away with surprisingly little new information about specific events, and that many of those who do learn something recall it with some degree of inaccuracy.

Museums and facts. There are a number of good reasons why museums are not particularly effective in accurately conveying detailed, factual knowledge.

First, adult visitors tend to visit museums and exhibitions in which they already have some level of interest and with whose point of view they expect to agree.[9]

Such informed individuals may already be more knowledgeable, or at least more favorably disposed to the subject, than those who decide not to visit or who deliberately avoid a visit. Since they already have some background, it may be harder to tell them something important that they don't already know.

Children on school trips may not have chosen to make the visit, but are still strongly influenced by any relevant courses or pre-visit instruction. Like adults, they, too, have expectations, whether explicit or implicit, although they usually have less invested in their expectations than adult visitors do. In theory we might conclude that children are likely to be more open than adults to new learning in the museum environment.

The second reason that most people don't learn much new information in museums is that museum visiting is often a social activity with numerous distractions and a rather fast pace -- more like watching satellite television with a remote control than like reading a book.[10]

They move so quickly that even if visitors consult a convenient label describing the item, they're not likely to read more than the first few sentences of the text. After all, there is room after room of more interesting and unexpected things to see and friends eager to share their own discoveries. The pull of the next object, the next

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9 When the exhibition *Degenerate Art*, an art and history exhibition documenting the Nazi suppression of modern art, was shown on the National Mall, we found that involvement with World War II significantly enhanced the probability that an individual already on the Mall would come to the exhibition. In particular, personal study of World War II, an emotional relationship to it, and a general interest in it, were all significantly associated with a decision to visit. See Doering, Pekarik and Kindlon (1995a).

10 For example, we carefully and unobtrusively tracked a representative sample of visitors through *Science in American Life*, a large exhibition at the National Museum of American History. The exhibition includes objects, photographs, dioramas, videos and computer interactives of many different kinds. The median length of a stop was 27 seconds, that is, half of the visitors spent less than 27 seconds wherever they stopped and half spent more than 27 seconds. The average length of a stop was one minute. On average, visitors stopped at only about 10 percent of the exhibit components. See Pekarik, Doering and Bickford (1995).

exhibit, and the next room can be irresistible. Under these circumstances it is very difficult to deliver a message that would significantly add to visitors' knowledge.

Third, and perhaps most importantly, museum visitors don't acquire much detailed, factual information in exhibitions because they don't particularly want to. Museum visiting is a leisure time activity without sharply defined learning goals. Most visitors recognize that there are better, more comfortable ways to gather factual information, specifically by reading newspapers, books or magazines and, more recently, through the increasingly available electronic media.

Solo visitors. Museum visitors tend to differ in their aims. We can roughly divide museum audiences into three subsets: (i) those who come to experience something themselves, (ii) those who come to share time with friends or peers, and (iii) those who come to socialize (teach) children. Obviously these three types of visitors will have very different approaches to factual information.

Those who come alone are most likely to read labels in depth, to ponder subtleties, and to gain new information. These lone visitors are most prominent in art museums, especially those with specialized subject matter.[11] Visitors clearly see a visit to these museums as a serious, adult experience.

At the other end of this spectrum are zoo audiences.[12] A zoo visit is primarily a social, family affair in which parents aim to instruct their children in a relaxed environment. History museums lie between these two extremes, closer to art museums than to zoos.[13]

Because of the unique subject matter, it is likely that Holocaust museums will resemble specialized art museums, in this respect, more than either the history museums or zoos, and that we will find high percentages of visitors coming alone or as part of a couple. Parents might hesitate to bring children to a Holocaust museum, at least until they had already visited it themselves and determined whether or not it would be appropriate.[14]

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[11] At the Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Galleries, the Smithsonian's national museums for Asian Art, for example, two out of five visitors come alone and another two out of five visitors come as part of a couple. Fewer than one in ten visitors comes with a child under the age of 12. See Bielick, Pekarik and Doering (1996).

[12] In one of our zoo studies, for example, three out of five visitors came in a group that included adults and children, fewer than two out of five came as part of a couple, and a mere one in 40 visitors came alone. See [however you say previously cited.]

[13] At the National Museum of American History, the institution most comparable to a Holocaust museum in subject matter, approximately one in four visitors comes in a group that includes adults and children, about the same number come as part of a couple, and one in 8 come alone. See Kindlon, Pekarik, and Doering (1996).

[14] In the case of USHMM, this is slightly different; partly due to the inclusion of the museum on a "visit to Washington." The most recent data we've seen suggests that -- exclusive of school groups - less than one-fifth are families with children.

So, if our suspicions are correct and the predominant visit pattern is that of single individuals and couples, Holocaust museums may be in a slightly better position to communicate facts than most museums. But even lone visitors cannot be expected to learn much new information in a single visit.

Parents with children. Although parents with children in a museum do not have much time to read labels and study objects thoroughly, they often use the museum as a teaching resource to deliver lessons of their own. These didactic interchanges may contain inaccuracies, unless the information delivery system, such as labels and wall panels, delivers messages so clearly and so succinctly that parents are encouraged to read and talk at the same time. But these shared interactions can be especially compelling for the child because of the affection implicit in such exchanges, because of the natural authority invested in the parent and because the ideas being passed on are likely to be seen as relevant to the child's life. Recently, in Kansas City, at the Smithsonian's 150th anniversary traveling exhibition, we witnessed a moving example of such an interchange. Next to a well-known photograph of Marian Anderson singing *America the Beautiful* in front of the Lincoln Memorial in 1939, a mother, seemingly oblivious of by-standers, was passionately explaining the significance of the occasion to her young son. Her voice rose as she said, "Can you see, can you see what it must have meant to her!" She did notice us and, without apology, emphatically stated that, "He just has to understand the civil rights movement of the '60's."

To summarize so far: If we talk specifically about the acquisition of information, we can expect that little new factual knowledge will be gained in the museum by most visitors. Those who come alone will probably acquire more than other visitors. In addition, if the public perceives the museum as a serious, adult experience, it will not be used extensively by parents as a place in which to instruct their children.

The Behavioral Dimension

Now what about the other end of the spectrum? Can we expect that a visit to a Holocaust museum will alter an individual's moral behavior?

Unfortunately, for the same reasons that work against the acquisition of new, detailed information, museum visitors are not likely to revise their way of thinking about a subject in any fundamental way as a result of visiting a museum. The power of prior ideas and the casual, fleeting nature of the museum experience work against radical revisions of viewpoint.[15]

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15 We studied an exhibition, *The Power of Maps*, that aimed to induce visitors to see maps as expressions of viewpoints in support of specific interests rather than as objective representations of the world. As part of our study, we measured the opinions of entering visitors, exiting visitors and a comparable control group that had never heard of the exhibition. Although we found that this exhibition moved people somewhat closer to the curator's view on average, the change was surprisingly small and, in fact, the effect of seeing the exhibition was equal in magnitude to the effect of reading about the exhibition in the media. See Doering, Kindlon, and Bickford (1993).

In some cases the fundamental changes of attitude or understanding brought about by an exhibition visit are no greater than the effect brought about by reading the reviews of the exhibition in the newspaper. This might suggest that museums are a disappointing medium from a pedagogical viewpoint. In fact, museum exhibitions are an inefficient and ineffective method for communicating new information or changing attitudes. But they are powerful tools for confirming, reinforcing and extending existing beliefs.

Although the visitors who attend an exhibition may already have some level of interest in the subject and favor the viewpoint of the museum, they are not necessarily secure in their opinions. The internal storyline that visitors enter with, which we can call their "entrance narrative," has three distinct components:

(a) a basic framework, i.e., the fundamental way that individuals construe and contemplate the world;
(b) information about the given topic, organized according to that basic framework; and
(c) personal experiences, emotions and memories that verify and support this understanding.

This model suggests that the most satisfying exhibition for visitors are those that resonate with their experience and provide new information in ways that confirm and enrich their view of the world.

Although we have not attempted in our research to identify differences in the ways that museum visitors think about the world, we have indirect evidence of its importance. Museums do not draw all segments of the population equally. The essential factor in determining whether or not an individual is likely to visit a museum of any kind is that person's formal education.[16]

We do not fully understand the basis for this relationship between formal education and museum-going, but we hypothesize that it reflects the influence of formal education on the way that individuals encounter and think about the world and their place in it.

Whatever the precise mechanism that links the experience of formal education and museum visiting, the close relationship suggests the value of museum experiences in supporting the viewpoints acquired in school.

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16 In a nationwide study conducted by the Smithsonian as part of planning for the 150th anniversary activities, we found that, on average, a high school graduate is 50 percent more likely to attend a cultural institution in a given year than someone without a high school diploma. The college graduate, in turn, is about 30 percent more likely to attend a museum, historical site, zoo or aquarium than the high school graduate. Half (46%) of adults over 18 who have not graduated from high school attend at least one cultural institution in a given year, compared to about two-thirds (68%) of those who have graduated. For those with college degrees, 87 percent visit a cultural institution at least once a year. See Doering (1995).

The effect of the second component of the "entrance narrative," the specific knowledge and opinions visitors bring to the subject, is more easily measured.[17] The priority that these opinions hold in the minds of visitors depends upon their own experiences, including their awareness of current events and the climate of public thinking on related issues, particularly as discussed in the media.[18]

When visitors encounter the contents of an exhibition, they necessarily place these items within the narrative that they have previously constructed to explain objects and ideas of this type. They may not want to learn much more specific detail than they already know, and they certainly do not intend to have their narrative radically revised. Instead, they want their narrative be confirmed. In fact, visitors want validation so strongly, that if the exhibition story departs in only minor ways from their expectations, they are likely to simply "not notice" the areas of difference. If the museum's narrative unexpectedly differs in major ways from their own views, adult visitors are likely to be rather upset and may even act upon their anger by writing long, angry comments in the visitor's book, letters to the local press, or petitioning their congressmen to reduce funding to the "misguided" institution. If the museum's narrative supports and encourages their views, however, they leave the museum delighted and confident, with a renewed sense of empowerment and a heightened respect for the importance of the subject and their appreciation of it.[19]

The experience of most museum visitors thus tends to be subtle, incremental, and supportive. Museums, as perceived and used by their current audiences, are instruments of stability, not revolution. In this way, perhaps, they parallel the implicit goals of the formal education system. To draw an analogy, if movement of culture through time can be viewed as a sailboat gliding across sometime choppy

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17 We studied an exhibition, *Mechanical Brides*, at the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York, that highlighted how attitudes towards women affected the design of objects used in the home and office. We found that the same objects were interpreted differently by individuals who had heard about the exhibition in comparison to those who came upon it unexpectedly. Those who had heard about the exhibition in advance were 50 percent more likely to leave it with a gender-related idea in mind. Those who came upon it unexpectedly were twice as likely to come away from the exhibition with an idea relating to technology, history, or design in general. This difference, we believe, reflects the role played by pre-existing opinions. See Doering, Pekarik, and Kindlon (1995b).

18 For example, we studied *Degenerate Art* in Berlin as well as in Washington, DC. The exhibition and its presentation were nearly identical in both locations. The two audiences had similar demographic characteristics, and they agreed that the main intentions of the exhibition were "to show the dangers of dictatorships" and "to express concern over government censorship." But they disagreed over the relevance of the exhibition to their lives. Four out of five Washington visitors found the exhibition to be relevant to their lives, while Berlin visitors were nearly evenly divided on whether or not they saw a personal connection to their lives.

Nearly half of the visitors in Germany who felt a personal connection (23% of all Berlin visitors) related to the art, while over one-third of the visitors in Washington who found the exhibition personally relevant (29% of all D.C. visitors) cited a concern over censorship. Because Americans were seeing the exhibition at the same time as the 1991 controversy over funding the National Endowment for the Arts, the attention and interest of Washington visitors were sharply focused on the issue of censorship. This was not the case in Germany, where censorship was not an issue at the time of the exhibition. See Doering, Pekarik and Kindlon (1995a).

19 We do not have a clear idea of how this dynamic works for children. When the things that children see in the museum conflict with what they already know or expect, how do they respond?

waters, museums serve not as rudders, but as keels, helping to keep the boat on a steady course by resisting the shifting forces that pull erratically to one side or the other. Whether they intend to or not, successful museums will both reflect and subtly influence the viewpoints of the culture, by reinforcing and supporting the views of those both sympathetic to and relatively knowledgeable about a particular subject.

People want to leave museums satisfied with themselves and their beliefs. In this regard, museum visiting, one among many leisure-time options, is seen as a respite from normal life, a time to "re-charge" one's perspective on the world. At the same time, audiences also want museum visits to be inspirational and uplifting, emotionally developmental in some way.

Museums have traditionally identified this inspirational aim as a key component of their educational mission. One of the founding fathers of museum education, John Cotton Dana, who established the Newark Museum, wrote in 1925 that "A good museum attracts, entertains, arouses curiosity, leads to questionings. -- and thus promotes learning..." [emphasis added].

We need to look carefully at this sequence: "attracts, entertains, arouses curiosity, leads to questionings" because it is indeed the essence of the museum's educational function. We can also identify it closely with the emotional component of the visit experience.[20]

The Emotional Dimension

We have come to believe that emotional response plays a central role in the museum experience and are now starting to study it in greater detail. The effort is leading us to develop new methods in order to try to overcome some of the problems in this type of research, most notably the difficulty some visitors have in recognizing or articulating their emotional responses, the susceptibility of these responses to influence from the interviewer or other data-collecting instrument, and the differences between emotion experienced and emotion remembered.

The emotional response is especially critical in Holocaust museums. A colleague who is currently conducting a study at the USHMM of a temporary exhibition on the Liberation of the camps shared some responses from visitors with us.[21] Here are a few of them:

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[20] In the zoo reptile houses we found that the greatest impact of the low-tech interactives was that they led visitors to leave with a significantly more positive feeling towards reptiles. From an educational standpoint this is obviously a good thing, since an attraction to reptiles is much more likely to lead to entertainment, curiosity and questioning than an aversion, but it is only the first step. How much further along the path did those visitors progress? Over what time period? Did it take more than one visit? What other activities played a role in sustaining or blocking this movement from motivational interest to investigation? Such questions were beyond the scope of that study, but we must consider them when addressing the issue of the educational impact of Holocaust museums.

[21] We would like to thank Lynn Dierking, Science Learning, Inc, for providing these quotes.

When asked "What do you think about this exhibit?" a middle-aged man replied: "I guess I knew pretty much what it was all about, I knew what to expect. But seeing those pictures, really hit hard."

A woman under 20 said: "I wouldn't know how to deal with it if I had lived back then. It was so powerful..."

A middle-aged man said: "Draining and emotional."

Holocaust museums also *differ* from all other museums in the intensity of the emotions aroused by their contents. These emotions, moreover, are almost exclusively negative, ranging from depression to horror. This in itself is not a problem. The popularity of the USHMM, in particular, confirms that the positive or negative dimension of these emotional experiences in museums is not a particular issue for visitors. In fact, in recent years some exhibitions in other types of museums have also moved to more somber (and perhaps negative) subject matters, including large-scale presentations on death, AIDS, disease, and environmental damage. The widespread success of these programs, too, demonstrates that, as in theater, the power of the emotional experience may matter more to visitors than its positive or negative valence. In fact, negative emotions might generally be considered more powerful. People come to museums expecting to be moved to a deeper appreciation of the subject matter represented in that institution. This is the visitors' main educational intention.

Emotional responses, however, are notoriously complex and difficult to observe, measure and understand. In the first place, it is hard for any of us to put into words just how we feel. Feelings and words don't mix easily. In the second place, emotions shift subtly even as they are being observed. How do we pinpoint the moment of change from horror to determination to take action? From shock to response? What influences that shift? What keeps it alive long enough to see that the intention is followed through and that it results in some realized activity or some true change?[22]

In Edward Linenthal's book on the formation of the USHMM there is a quote from Tom L. Freudenheim, former assistant secretary at the Smithsonian Institution, that sums up the problem for Holocaust museums in negotiating the terrain from emotional response to action: "Will it enable people," he says, "to feel engaged without being engaged...encouraging us to live with the illusions we seek: namely that thoughtful observation is a substitute for active engagement?"[23]

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[22] When we studied *Ocean Planet*, the exhibition that alerted visitors to dangers facing the health of the oceans mentioned earlier, we found that people left the exhibition more pessimistic about the future of the oceans than when they entered, but a number of them also left resolved to take personal action, especially by changing their consumption patterns, to help the oceans. At least that's what they told us. Did they actually do anything about it? Was it just another good intention quickly forgotten?

[23] Linenthal (1995) p. 269.

This is a very serious question. He is likely to be right, not only of Holocaust museums, but of all museums. Their position as formal institutions, the expectation of validation that audiences bring to them, the emotional responses that they engender, all encourage "thoughtful observation" over "active engagement." Would we be content to accept this thoughtful observation alone as educational impact? Is it enough to be moved? How can we know when and whether or not it leads to questioning or action?

Long-term Effects

For practical reasons, we cannot expect to assess the impact of a museum visit on what takes place outside the museum months or years later. Too many other factors, random and uncontrolled, also become potential motivators. Measuring the impact of a particular visit on later behavior is not unlike gauging the effect of one particular advertisement on buying habits. Merchandisers have learned that one ad by itself generally is not enough to interest a potential purchaser in a product. It takes an accumulation of contacts, often in a range of media and situations, to make a difference. Then it becomes nearly impossible to estimate the effect of any one of these elements alone. Similarly, the museum visit is one experience among scores or hundreds or thousands that ultimately lead to some action or response that, in turn, reflects the kind of movement we associate with educational impact.

Very often the museum experience plays a supportive role in this dynamic whereby innumerable experiences coalesce into a desire for action or change. As it was pointed out earlier, the museum visitor seeks confirmation and validation. This means that a detail in an exhibition, when it resonates in the mind or heart of a visitor, often does so because of some prior connection with that idea, image or object. It, or something like it, was already part of the visitor's entrance narrative. To see it now, perhaps for the first time in person, highlights and underscores that part of the story and the things which it represented in the visitor's mind.[24]

Although, as Dana said, the attraction of the object may lead to questioning, the goal of that questioning is usually to place that thing even more firmly within the visitor's established entrance narrative. This shouldn't surprise us. The mind naturally seeks resolution, consistency and wholeness in its internal construction of the world. What stands out is investigated primarily so that it can be absorbed into a new, perhaps modestly revised understanding. Things that don't fit, that can't be resolved, are usually deeply disturbing and are generally avoided and forgotten or distorted until they do fit.

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[24] Recently we have been interviewing visitors to the traveling exhibition, *America's Smithsonian*. Among other questions, we've been asking visitors what they find most interesting in the exhibition and why. The "why" answers are more illuminating than the "what" answers. Usually people say that something is interesting because it relates to a special interest they have, sometimes a work-related interest. Most often they say that it's something they heard about, or knew about before and they were thrilled to see it. In other words, we might say that they were most pleased to encounter the objects that loomed large in their entrance narratives.

We must be somewhat cautious in linking this process of validated understanding that is characteristic of the museum experience to the idea of educational impact, especially in the context of Holocaust museums. If we decide that we are content to define educational impact as an emotionally powerful confirmation of our entrance narratives, we will find most of our museums to be very effective. Administrators and boards, eager to demonstrate the success of their enterprise, might be tempted to accept this definition as a justification to continue doing whatever they're doing. More serious institutions, those committed to playing a truly vital role in society, will select instead to grapple with the implications of Dana's call to questioning and will seek to adapt and change themselves as their understanding of the audience and its experiences expands through research.

The issue of how to define educational impact is particularly important for Holocaust museums. More than in any other museum type, the ideas and events portrayed in Holocaust museums are fundamentally incomprehensible. In the end no narrative can fully account for them- neither the entrance narrative of the visitor nor the storyline of the museum. Each, though, inevitably gropes for a version that will make sense, that seems reasonable, clear, graspable. The places where those narratives fail are easily ignored, both by the visitor and the museum, because they seem to deny the act of understanding itself.

What exactly happens when the visitor encounters some object in the museum that can be placed within that individual's entrance narrative? One possibility is that in the process of encountering the object, now underlined in the mind, the object may come to stand so strongly for the part of the story in which it figured that the storyline itself is not so much enriched as fossilized. James Young in The Texture of Memory writes that

> Remnants of our historical past have long come to stand for the whole of events....Too often, however, these remnants are mistaken for the events from which they have been torn: in coming to stand for the whole, a fragment is confused for it. Authentic historical artifacts are used not only to gesture toward the past, to move us toward its examination, but also to naturalize particular versions of the past.... At such moments, we are invited to forget that memory itself is, after all, only a figurative reconstruction of the past, not its literal replication. [25]

In other words, instead of leading us towards questioning that will, in turn, bring about an adjustment and engagement with what we know, the interesting object can just as easily move us towards a rigid, simplified understanding that may ultimately be more satisfying precisely because it requires less of us.

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25 Young (1993) p.127.

As Young goes on to say:

> ...museums, archives, and ruins may not house our memory-work so much as displace it with claims of material evidence and proof. Memory-work becomes unnecessary as long as the material fragment of events continues to function as witness-memorial. Are we delegating to the archivist the memory-work that is ours alone? Do we allow memorials to relieve us of the memory-burden we should be carrying? The archivists' traditional veneration of the trace is tied directly to their need for proof and evidence of a particular past. But in this they too often confuse proof that something existed with proof that it existed in a particular way, for seemingly self-evident reasons.[26]

When Young uses terms like "memory-work" and "memory-burden" he emphasizes the difficult, unresolved character of all attempts to understand the Holocaust. Museums are not especially well-suited to this kind of effort. By the voluntary nature of the visit, the pull towards the validation and confirmation of the entrance narrative, and the implicit desire for an established, authoritative, static resolution, the museum experience tends to move away from the dynamic, tense confrontation of irreconcilables. The museum is generally conceived as a place of settled understanding, not as a place of active conflict.

For that matter, the same desire for a clear, simple answer to even the most difficult question is characteristic of the formal education system as well. Bill Parsons, in talking to us and a colleague about his experience teaching the Holocaust in the classroom, pointed out that he always worked to maintain the tension between the particular and the universal, to deliberately keep understanding from reaching stability. But most teachers find this path extremely difficult and want to arrive instead at an agreed truth.

In the minds of many visitors, museums seem to stand for the embodiment of this agreed truth. They seem to be temples of knowledge, erected and maintained by true experts who embody the state-of-the-art understanding of their subject matter. We don't generally expect museums to be debating the significance or meaning of their contents or to embody a wide range of viewpoints. In fact, most people are inclined to go to the other extreme and to accept the presumed importance of any object acquired by the museum, even if they themselves can't see why it matters.

Some museum staff may be tempted to see their educational mission as the communication of this agreed truth to visitors. Would you accept this as educational impact? If visitors enter your museum, alter their entrance narrative to align it with the museum's storyline and leave it at that, would you be satisfied? Under those circumstances, would you be willing to accept the absence of questioning?

How are we to account for the fact that, as Young points out, "the historical meanings we find in museums may not be proven by artifacts, so much as generated

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26 Young (1993) p. 127.

by their organization?"[27] Visitors give very little attention to who set up an exhibition. They generally tend to receive museum presentations as objective truth, rather than as the informed speech of an individual or group of individuals with particular perspectives and intentions. The museum visitor, an educated individual who is normally alert to the special interests of advertisers, the intentions of authors, and the sources of all kinds of speech, typically sets all such cautions aside when entering the museum. Only when the museum's storyline deviates in radical ways from his own entrance narrative is the visitor likely to become conscious of the fact that exhibitions, too, have authors, and those authors, in turn, have interests to serve.

Today, most of us consider it an important part of the task of education to teach individuals to question the sources of their understanding. Only in museum education do we still encourage visitors to accept the authority of the institution. No one has yet devised a way for museums to systematically lead their visitors to question their own authority, for even in doing so they seem to propose only a still more authoritative, more up-to-date position. How could museums foster the kind of tension that Parsons found so educationally effective in the classroom?

For example, Linenthal recounts how political pressure affected the discussion of Armenian genocide in the National Holocaust Museum. He concluded, "In the past decade, official memory was receptive to the Holocaust and not to the memory of Armenian genocide, thereby weakening one of the stated virtues of remembering the Holocaust."[28]

Consider this: which would be a better indication of the educational impact of the USHMM, the visitor who accepts the museum's presentation of Armenian genocide or the visitor who rejects it as wholly inadequate? Would you prefer education to mean that the visitor accepts everything that your museum says and gives it the same weight and emphasis that the museum does? Or would you prefer that visitors become engaged with the presentation, question it and struggle with it intellectually and emotionally?

Now, it may seem at this point that we will never be able to agree on what educational impact is in museums, so we won't have anything to assess. And it's true that this presentation would like to avoid an agreed truth in this matter. We are not helpless and attempts to assess educational impact are not useless. It is precisely through such efforts that we come to better comprehend the complexity, the possibilities, the limitations, and the dangers of museum education.

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27 Young (1993) p. 128.

28 Linenthal (1995) p. 240.

Some Questions to Ask

Preceding sections of this paper have been more philosophical and general; this final section is more pragmatic and descriptive. Who should we question and what are the kinds of things we should ask?

If you want an accurate picture of what is happening in your museum, it is essential that your questions be addressed to a representative sample of the audience. Many museums these days make comment cards or books available to visitors in exhibitions. You should always keep in mind the fact that the preponderance of favorable or unfavorable comments in these books does not mean that the audience as a whole is equally enthusiastic or critical of your work.

Only individuals who feel very strongly about an exhibition, either strongly positive or strongly negative, are likely to take the trouble to write what they think. In addition, these voluntary, self-selecting methods give greater weight to the opinions of those who have the time to spend on them, and to those who feel comfortable writing. A small, vocal minority of either enthusiasts or critics can easily distort your impressions of the audience's responses to your work.

Comment books are important, but they are not reliable sources for understanding what visitors as a whole think. They can play a greater role in affecting other visitors, and the experience of your audience in general, than in informing museum staff about the success of their efforts. When subject matter is controversial, the tendency of the voluntary comment system to draw out those with extreme positions can create an intense, emotional dialogue among visitors as they rebut one anothers' remarks. And just by asking visitors what they think, perhaps in specific terms, you create the opportunity for them to think about the exhibition and its impact on them in a reflective way, and thereby alter their experience.

If you want to know what's really going on you need to go beyond anecdotal evidence. You need to choose a representative sample in which there is no selection bias, in other words, absolutely no favoritism towards the opinion of any particular type of visitor. This can only be achieved by intercepting visitors according to some type of scientific sampling strategy. The way you question them, whether by interview, for example, or by written questionnaire is not as important as this requirement that you select them in a pre-determined, unbiased way.

The question of <u>what</u> to ask your visitors can be divided into several distinct dimensions or aspects. The first is the <u>attraction</u> to the institution itself. A museum influences people first by simply calling to it those who feel an interest in the subject or its artifacts. Even if no one actually visited, the museum would already be serving an informational purpose in the mind of every person who realized what it was and why it was there. Just to say that there is a museum of the Holocaust is to assert that the Holocaust is real, is important, and must be remembered. We can start to measure this first level of influence by assessing the impact of the museum's public image -- whether spread through advertising or through word of mouth -- on its surrounding community. Who knows about it? What do they know about it?

How accurate is their concept of the contents and viewpoint of the museum? How do they feel about that? Do they agree with the image as they know it? Can we find any differences in attitude or understanding between those who have read or heard something about the museum and comparable individuals who have never read or heard anything about it?

A subset of the public, due to the influence of their formal education, can be identified as museum visitors. Some subset of this group, in turn, is likely to consider visiting a Holocaust museum because of some level of interest in the Holocaust. What kinds of entrance narratives do these people bring with them? How do they differ from the entrance narratives of museum-goers who attend history museums but have never been to a Holocaust museum, although it was available to them? Understanding what visitors arrive with is important for gaining an accurate perspective on how they are affected by a visit.

We can further determine their expectations by learning who comes to the museum and who they come with. How old are they? How many are alone? How many are pairs of adults? How many are with children or in groups of adults? Are genders equally represented? What about racial and ethnic backgrounds? Where do they live? What kind of work do they do?

The second dimension applies to the experience of a Holocaust museum. How do new visitors use the museum? What do they do? Where do they go? How much time do they spend? How do they interact with others in their party, if they are not alone?

In the third aspect we want to consider what is happening to visitors as a result of this experience. How does it affect them? Do they agree with its viewpoint? Are they influenced by it? Do their attitudes change by the end of a visit? Are they more thoughtful about the subject? Have their feelings been reinforced or upset by their visit? What aspects of their viewpoints have been strengthened by the visit? At this stage we are likely to encounter some of the most interesting cases -- those whose expectations were not met. In what ways did they respond?

The data that will enable us to answer these kinds of questions are best obtained from open-ended discussions with visitors.[29]

Intercepted visitors are also amazingly sensitive to what they think the interviewer wants to hear. In every question, in every look and response of the interviewer, they are looking for confirmation that they are "on the right track." Even when you

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[29] Ideally, these should be recorded and transcribed for later analysis. The specific questions asked here must be very carefully phrased to avoid any subtle influences on the response. In particular, beware of using multiple-choice answers to opinion questions. Most people will look for the easy way out of answering these potentially difficult questions and will gladly make a default selection from your list, even if the option they choose really doesn't matter to them and would never have been mentioned had they not been prompted with it.

have avoided all suggestion of testing, of right and wrong, visitors still seek approval unconsciously in the interchange with the interviewer.[30]

All visitors are not equally able to articulate their own feelings, thoughts and responses. Inevitably any of our investigation methods will favor those who feel more comfortable with the particular medium of communication.[31]

We can also look more selectively and intensively at the experience of individuals in the museum by interacting with them as they look at displays for the first time.[32] What do they see? Where do they see it? What else? Where else? Do any thoughts or feelings come to mind? In this kind of qualitative research we can get a more textured understanding of the visitor's encounter with the museum.[33]

In analyzing all the results, special attention should be given to studying those individuals who have identified themselves with the museum to the extent that they visit repeatedly, attend programs, become members or donors and otherwise involve themselves on a regular basis in the life of the institution. How are these individuals affected by a visit to the museum? What dimensions of their experience or thinking are confirmed and reinforced? To what degree has the purpose of the mission become an important factor in their lives?

One could make an argument that only those who attend a museum repeatedly, its dedicated audience, are likely to show significant effects from their visit habit. At the same time identifying the shared characteristics of this repeat-visit population helps us to understand which subset of museum-goers finds the experience of the museum especially engaging and satisfying. We could then look more closely to see what it is that this sub-group is learning in the museum or how it is affecting their behavior.

In the fourth dimension of this type of research we could consider the ways that the idea or experience of the museum influences later behavior. As pointed out earlier, this is the most difficult aspect of the educational impact of the museum to measure, primarily because the effect of a visit or other contact would be obscured and compounded by the effects of so many other life experiences between the time of the visit and the time of the research. For those who visit more than once, it would be nearly impossible to isolate the impact of this single factor in the complexity of a life. But we might be able to gather some suggestions of long-term effects by interviewing people who had gone to the museum some time before and asking

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30 Inexperienced interviewers, thinking that their responses are encouraging the visitor to say more, can easily lead the visitor to distort their replies Interviewing should be conducted by experienced professionals, whenever possible.

31 Written questionnaires, provided that they are gathered from a representative sample of visitors, may be preferable in some cases.

32 In this method, the investigator stands in front of a particular object with a visitor who has agreed to participate in advance, and asks the visitor to express their thought process.

33 Because such investigation is so labor-intensive and so dependent on the expressive and self-reflective skills of the visitor, it is usually impractical across a representative sample and can only be used to clarify other results.

them what they remembered about their visit or when they thought about it. Any link between such responses and actual behavior would be tenuous. [It is especially tenuous when individuals are told upon leaving a museum that they might be called later, since this automatically alters the significance of the visit in the mind of the visitor.]

Even if we were able to construct the elaborate experimental conditions necessary to test this influence over a relatively short period of time, we probably would not like the results. We believe it is extremely unlikely that the influence of museum visiting on later behavior will be significant in comparison to the influences of formal education, family attitudes and the opinions of peers. If we define educational impact as clear influences on later behavior we are setting ourselves up for certain failure, just as surely as we set ourselves up for certain success if we define educational impact as the emotional validation of entrance narratives.

In each stage of these outcomes we can better measure the effect of the museum by comparing our target group with a comparable control group. In the first phase, for example, we can compare a representative sample of those who have heard about the museum and know something about its mission with a comparable group of those who haven't, and we can investigate how these two groups differ with respect to their views about the Holocaust. All of these comparisons can be based on samples extracted from a larger population or they can be created within controlled experiments. The precise methods chosen for evaluation studies depend on funding, access to appropriate individuals to study, and the imagination and experience of the researchers.

All this may sound rather daunting. Only a handful of museums, mostly science museums, have professional evaluators on staff or regularly conduct thorough studies of their audiences. You may not have access to the funds or expertise needed for sophisticated studies conducted by outsiders. Nonetheless, you can at least make a beginning in the direction of serious research into the experience of your visitors by asking some of them, especially children, the following sample questions that are especially provocative in a Holocaust museum:[34]

1. Is there anyone in the world you'd like to bring to this museum? If so, who? Why?
2. Do you think this visit will influence the way you think about something? If so, what? Why?
3. What did you find most interesting? Why?
4. What did you find most surprising about your visit? Why?
5. What kinds of behaviors that contributed to the Holocaust do you see still around today? Give an example.
6. What do you think you can personally do to make the world better?

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[34] You can ask these questions on paper, either by distributing them to classes as they leave or by having them available in the galleries themselves. Some of them could also be asked of classes before they enter, to get a sense of how they might differ from the answers given by those leaving the museum.

Unless these questions were answered by a representative sample of visitors, they would still only be anecdotal, but they might generate enough interest among your museum's management or funders to inspire a reliable, professional investigation[35] and a level of analysis that would provide useful information for future planning. It's one thing to gather information, and quite another to understand what it means.

These might seem to be boring technical questions. Yet, it is dismaying and discouraging to see what passes for assessment these days. Holocaust museums have made every effort to confront difficult issues of presentation and interpretation honestly and professionally. The assessment of the visitor experience deserves no less. Realizing the importance of this subject matter, it would be wise to make sure that Holocaust museums are as effective educators as they can possibly be. Without reliable research, efforts to improve will inevitably be more difficult and more uncertain.

It would be wonderful if Holocaust museums and memorials, which are already setting standards for innovation and new directions for the development of museums generally, could also become leaders in the assessment of museum experiences.

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35 It would ensure a scientific sample, the appropriate demographic information (such as age, gender, education level, residence, race or ethnicity, previous visits) and related questions.

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