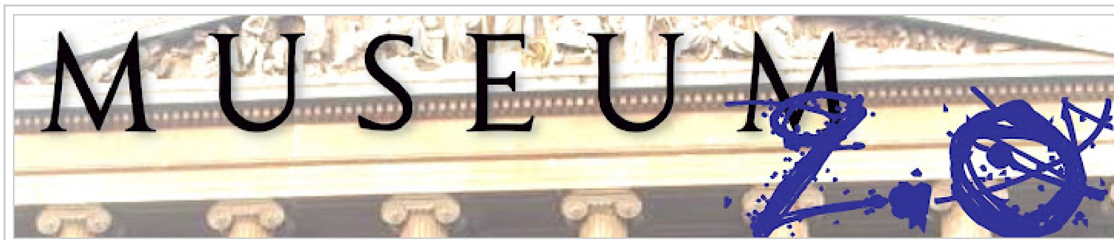


Showing posts with label **Core Museum 2.0 Ideas**. Show all posts

MONDAY, APRIL 25, 2011

Answers to the Ten Questions I am Most Often Asked

Note: the title of this post pays homage to Elaine Heumann Gurian's excellent and quite different 1981 essay of the same title.

I've spent much of the past three years on the road giving workshops and talks about audience participation in museums. This post shares some of the most interesting questions I've heard throughout these experiences. I like to use half of any allotted time slot to talk and half for Q&A, so we usually have time to get into meaty discussions. Feel free to add your own questions and answers in the comments!

BROAD QUESTIONS ABOUT AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION

1. Have you seen attitudes in our field about visitor participation shifting over time?

Yes. Granted, I live in an increasingly narrow world of people who are exploring these topics and want me to work with them, but I still learn a lot from the questions and struggles I hear from colleagues and people who comment on the blog.

The Museum 2.0 blog has been going for almost five years now, and I've seen people's concerns and questions evolve over that time in the following way:

- For the first couple of years--2006-2007--most of the questions were about the "why" of participation. Why should institutions engage with people in this way? How could staff members justify these approaches to their managers? I've seen this line of questioning almost completely disappear in the past two years due to many research studies and reports on the value and rise of participation, but in 2006-7, social media and participatory culture was still seen as nascent (and possibly a passing fad).
- In 2008, the conversation started shifting to "how" and "what." In 2008 and 2009, there were many conference sessions and and documents presenting participatory case studies, most notably Wendy Pollock and Kathy McLean's book *Visitor Voices in Museum Exhibitions*. I wrote *The Participatory Museum* in response to this energy--to put together case studies in the context of a design framework so we could talk as a field about what works and why.
- In the past year, I've seen the conversation shift to talking about impact and sustainability of these projects--how we evaluate audience participation and how we can shift from experimental pilots to more day-to-day implementation.

2. Are there certain kinds of institutions that are more well-suited for participatory techniques than others?

Yes and no. I honestly think the only kind of cultural institution that cannot support audience participation is one in which staff members don't respect visitors or what they have to contribute. I've never heard people say they don't care about visitors, but I've seen it in how they pay attention to visitors' needs and contributions. This anti-participatory behavior is also sometimes manifest within staffs where only certain employees' ideas are recognized and solicited, floor staff are ignored, etc.

H I , I ' M N

I design and research participatory museum experiences. I'm the Executive Director of the Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History and author of *The Participatory Museum*. You can contact me, check out my work, read the book, and find me on Twitter.

W H A T I S M

Museum 2.0 explores ways that web 2.0 philosophies can be applied in museum design. For more information, click here.

This blog features weekly posts, which you can also access via RSS Feed or by email below.

R E C E I V E M

Enter your email address:

Subscribe

S E A R C H T H

Search

R E C E N T C C

R E C E N T C C

SarahAhh graduate school. At the large museum I began my career at, I wouldn't have been able to advance past the coordinator level – and the commensurate salary – without additional years of training....
Open Thread: Is the Gender Imbalance in the Arts a Problem? · 2 days ago

Nina Simon Thanks, Paul. You're right. We're all lucky to work in such an awesome business... and it is TOTALLY worth it.
Open Thread: Is the Gender Imbalance in the Arts a Problem? · 3 days ago

orselliI do not not in any want to negate the serious comments being made here, but please allow me to let a little

Web2PDF converted by Web2PDFConvert.com

But for institutions with a genuine interest and respect for visitors, participation is always possible. It looks different in different types of institutions. Small organizations are often best at forming long-term relationships with community members, whereas large organizations can rally lots of participants for a contributory project. Art museums are the least likely to empower their own staff to initiate participatory projects but the most likely to work with artists whose approach to participation might be quite extreme. For more on the differences among different types of museums (with examples), check out this post.

3. A lot of these projects are about getting people to be more social and active in museums. What about traditional visitors and supporters who may not want to participate?

In my experience, staff members are more sensitive to this issue than visitors and members are. I've met beautifully-coiffed ladies in their 70's who are hungry for conversation, and I've met pierced teenagers who prefer a contemplative experience. Most people who really love and support a museum want it to be loved and well-used by the larger community, and many of these folks are thrilled by techniques that engage new people with the organization.

That said, I think it's really important for all these engagement strategies to be "opt-in." It's common in many museums to offer cart-based activities that invite visitors (mostly families) to play a game, try an experiment, or make art. Just as those kinds of activities offer opt-in deeper engagement for some visitors, participatory techniques can offer opt-in social or active techniques for those who want them.

Sometimes, staff will claim that certain engagement techniques are so distracting for non-participants that they should not be offered even on an opt-in basis. I frankly think this is ridiculous. We know from research that people like to engage with content in different ways, and many museums tout the fact that they offer multi-faceted learning experiences. If we accept that sometimes people want to read the long label, sometimes people want to discuss things, sometimes people want to touch, and so on, then we have to offer a diversity of options. If we prescriptively decide you can only talk over here and you can only read the long label over there, we limit the quality and impact of the visitor experience.

4. Do you see any cultural differences in whether and how people like to participate around the world?

This is a really interesting question, and if I had any friends who were international social psychologists I would probably spend all my free time pestering them about this. My *limited* experience and research has led me to believe that people in every culture want to express themselves and connect with each other--the differences are how they prefer to do so.

Sometimes the difference comes down to preferred tools. In Taiwan, I noted that many more visitors and staff members were enthusiastic about taking and sharing photos than they were writing on a talkback board. In Denmark and Amsterdam, I experienced radical dialogue programs like Human Library, but also a strict formalism as to what happens in galleries.

Other times, the differences come down to social conventions. Some cultures value individual expression, whereas others prioritize the group. At the Vietnam Museum of Ethnology (search "Vietnam" here), staff have told me that participatory projects work best when a community of participants is engaged in a group process where they can come to consensus and defer to the group. In contrast, processes that engage individual participants as creators might work in a more individualistic culture like Australia or the US.

I'd love to hear more peoples' reflections on this. In every country I've visited, I've heard a version of this question that starts, "Maybe this works for Americans, but here in X..." After seeing so many varied and inspiring participatory projects from around the world, I can firmly state that this is not an American phenomenon, nor is participatory work even necessarily best-suited to U.S. culture. There are long histories of highly-engaged participatory governance and cultural work around the world, and in many ways, America's obsession with the individual may be more of a hindrance than a help to projects here.

QUESTIONS ABOUT RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

5. Where do you see the biggest resistance to incorporating participatory techniques? What's the biggest obstacle to more of these projects happening?

The first thing you have to tackle is fear of change. This isn't unique to audience participation; it's a reality that any new project or course of action stirs up all kinds of anxieties about organizational change.

Once you get past the fear of change to the specifics of audience participation, you have to separate people's expressed resistance from the actual obstacles. Resistance to audience participation is often expressed as fear of losing control. There's a worry, mostly on the part of content experts and brand managers, that their voices won't be as dominant as they once were when visitors are invited to participate. These fears are well-justified, but they're often predicated on the false conflation of control with expertise. You can be an expert and have a strong voice--a voice visitors want to hear--without being the only voice in the room. That's what it means to live in a democracy, and it's something we're comfortable with in news, politics, and other venues... why not museums?

sun poke through the dark clouds! For any aspiring (or struggling) male museum workers...
Open Thread: Is the Gender Imbalance in the Arts a Problem? · 3 days ago

Nina Simon Thanks for joining the conversation, Joaquin. I've always admired your talent and thoughtfulness. The stability thing is a huge part of why I was able to pursue the risk of no/low-paid work--and...
Open Thread: Is the Gender Imbalance in the Arts a Problem? · 3 days ago

Joaquin Ortiz This is a great post about a topic that is always bubbling beneath the surface of where I work. I've always felt like a minority of a minority working in the museums as a Mexican-American male...
Open Thread: Is the Gender Imbalance in the Arts a Problem? · 3 days ago

Powered by Disqus

M O S T P O P

The Future of Authority: Platform Power
Better Constraints Make Better Participatory Experiences
Social Participation via "Me-to-We" Design
How I Got Here (my career thus far)
Design Techniques for Developing Questions for Visitor Participation
Deliberately Unsustainable Business Models

M O S T C O M

What Could Kill an Elegant, High-Value Participatory Project?
Avoiding the Participatory Ghetto: Are Museums Evolving with their Innovative Web Strategies?
Museum Photo Policies Should Be as Open as Possible
An Open Letter to Museums on Twitter
The Magic Vest Phenomenon and Other Wearable Tools for Talking to Strangers
Warning: Museum Graduate Programs Spawn Legions of Zombies!

Book Discussion: Blueprint Book Discussion: Civilizing the Museum Book Discussion: Groundswell Book Discussion: Sustaining Innovation Book Discussion: The Great Good Place Book Discussion: Visitor Voices Book: The Participatory Museum business models children's museums comfort Core Museum 2.0 Ideas design evaluation exhibition fundraising game guest post inclusion informatics institutional change interactives interview marketing membership mobile Museum of Art and History Museums Engaging in 2.0 Projects open thread participatory

Web2PDF
converted by Web2PDFConvert.com

And ultimately, loss of control is not the biggest obstacle to implementing participatory projects. I would suggest that the biggest challenge is the fact that they require fundamentally different ways of operating. If a traditional exhibition project is one in which a team "puts on a show," a participatory project is one in which a team "plants a garden" and then must tend and cultivate it over time. Participatory projects require sustained engagement between staff and community members, and that is not baked into our traditional job descriptions, staffing plans, and project budgets.

6. How do you evaluate participatory engagement strategies?

My simple answer is: evaluate these projects as you would evaluate any new technique or program. If your institution cares about numbers, count participants and impacted visitors. If your institution cares about deep engagement, measure dwell time and survey people about their experiences. If your institution cares about delivering on mission, measure indicators that reflect your core values. This sounds flip, but the reality as I've seen it is that every institution has its own criteria for what makes a project a success. If you evaluate your project by something other than those criteria, you won't be able to make a convincing argument about whether to continue with these efforts or not.

Many evaluations of participatory projects focus solely on the experience for participants. I have yet to see a participatory project in which the direct participants who co-designed an exhibition or contributed their own stories to a program did not have an incredible, often transformative, experience. The problem is that these participants are often tiny in number compared to your organization's overall audience. To effectively and completely evaluate the impact of a participatory project, you have to look at how it affects not only participants but also the broader audience... and staff.

This question of evaluation is still very open. I wrote a chapter in *The Participatory Museum* about it, but I continue to seek out really good examples of participatory project evaluation. I strongly believe it is through shared evaluations and documentation that we will advance as a field overall in these efforts.

7. What kind of changes do you think have to happen for museums to really be able to embrace and support audience participation, not just in one-off experiments, but for the long term?

This comes back to the idea that participation happens fundamentally in operating, not in designing or developing programs. After a phase of experimentation and pilot projects, I think any organization that is serious about audience participation has to examine how it recruits staff and what their tasks and roles are.

We also have to become more flexible about how we engage visitors as partners on an ongoing basis. For example, I recently learned about the Science Gallery's approach to involving community members. They have a pretty explicit engagement ladder in which someone starts as a visitor, becomes a member, then an "ambassador" who is empowered to put on some programs in collaboration with the institution, and finally a member of the "Leonardo Group" -- an advisory group that meets a few times a year to tackle upcoming creative challenges the organization faces. Rather than having standing advisory committees representing various constituencies, the Leonardo Group is a nimble, diverse crowd of engaged participants who contribute significantly to the Science Gallery's programming and resources through one-off events. This kind of engagement ladder provides a structured framework for participation without overly constraining how people get involved.

QUESTIONS ABOUT WORKING WITH COMMUNITIES

8. When you are creating programming explicitly to engage new communities, how do you still satisfy your base?

I wrote a blog post on this topic last year, but it's one that still comes up frequently in discussions with colleagues. I've come to feel that the "parallel to pipeline" strategy is a solid approach. You start by offering a custom, distinct program for new audiences and then find ways to integrate what works for them into your core offerings. The important part of making this work is acknowledging that you do have to make some real changes to the pipeline when you ask that new audience to transition into it. The parallel programs are not a "bait and switch" used to hook new audiences into your traditional offerings. They are a starting point, and a testing ground, from which you should be learning new ways of working that can be applied more broadly and fundamentally to how the organization operates.

9. If so much of this work is about creating personal relationships with visitors, how do we sustain it beyond individual staff members?

This question comes up most frequently when talking about social media. There's a fear that if an individual staff member becomes the voice of the organization on the Web, and then that person leaves, the relationships she built will disappear. Interestingly, I never hear colleagues express the same fear when it comes to individuals who run specific key programs for an organization (even though those membership managers, educators, volunteer coordinators, and others have very personal relationships with many important constituencies).

When it comes to online community engagement, I always turn to Shelley Bernstein and Beck Tench as my luminary teachers. Both of them are very clear about the need to be personal AND to distribute the relationships

museum personalization professional development programs Quick Hits relationships risk social bridging storytelling Talking to Strangers Tech Virtual Technology Tools Worth Checking Out Unusual Projects and Influences usercontent virtual worlds visitors web2.0 youth

P A S T P O S T

- ► 2012 (39)
- ▼ 2011 (64)
  - ► December (4)
  - ► November (5)
  - ► October (4)
  - ► September (4)
  - ► August (5)
  - ► July (5)
  - ► June (4)
  - ► May (5)
  - ▼ April (7)
    - Answers to the Ten Questions I am Most Often Asked...
    - Quick Hit: Online Dialogue about Business Models f...
    - Guest Post: The Convivial Museum Photo Essay
    - Goodbye Consulting, Hello Museum of Art & History!...
    - Quick Hit: Upcoming Workshops and Webcast Talks
    - Making Participatory Processes Visible to Visitors...
    - One-Pager: A Simple Alternative to Messy Websites
  - ► March (8)
  - ► February (6)
  - ► January (7)
- ► 2010 (80)
- ► 2009 (83)
- ► 2008 (106)
- ► 2007 (166)
- ► 2006 (21)

R I G H T N O V

@andrewmueller shoots the curl @santacruzmah #artthatmoves http://t.co/8SddxxDG 1 day ago

follow me on Twitter

D O W N L O A D

Web2PDF
converted by Web2PDFConvert.com

throughout staff as much as possible. Beck in particular has done an amazing job of working as a partner to other staff members at the Museum of Life and Science to help them develop social media projects that they can manage on their own with only light involvement from Beck. The animal keepers run their blog. The Butterfly House manager shares photos on Flickr. And so on. In this way, engaging with visitors through social media becomes something that many staff members are involved with based on their content and programmatic skills. This leads to diverse projects and relationships--and a better safety net for the institution overall.

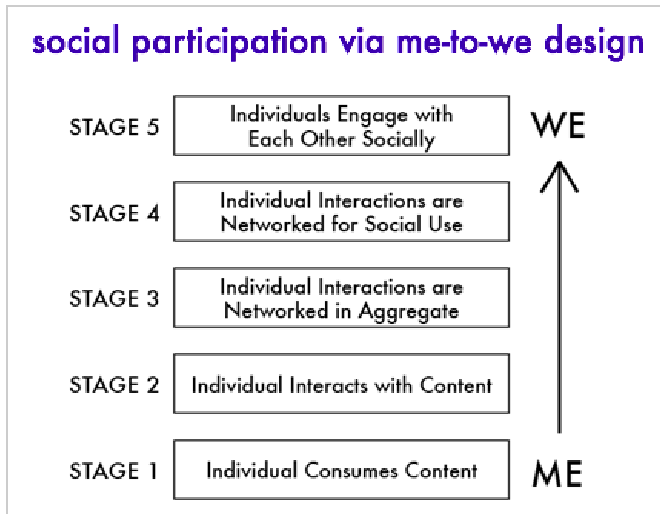
10. When you build a relationship with a community for a project and then that project ends, how do you keep those people involved?

This is one of the toughest questions I've been grappling with lately, and I'd love to hear your reflections on it. It's a question that tends to come up only for organizations that have committed to audience participation over the long term. You invite a group of people to co-design an exhibit or co-produce a program, it happens, it's fabulous... and then what? In most cases, those partners were solicited for specific skills or attributes related to those specific projects, and it's not easy to naturally translate those same people to another participatory opportunity. In my experience, many of these people become a special class of members or volunteers, but that doesn't mean they're satisfied with a standard membership arrangement. These folks have had a taste of higher engagement and many of them want more. I'm not sure what the most sustainable way is to keep them actively involved as the organization shifts over time.

What are your answers to these questions? What are your questions that should be on this list?

MONDAY, JANUARY 25, 201

A Revised Theory of Social Participation via "Me-to-We" Design



For three years, I've been using a "hierarchy of participation" diagram to talk about the ways that cultural institutions and platforms can scaffold social experiences among users. It's been problematic for several reasons - a bit confusing, hideous colors, and most of all, a pyramid shape that suggested that some kinds of social participation were better than others.

I've finally completed a redesign of the five stages of social participation, as shown above. The basic concept remains the same: if you want to support social engagement among people, especially in an unfacilitated setting (i.e. no tour guides or game masters), you need to start by designing personal services for users, then linking up users through shared interests or objects to promote interpersonal connections. You don't start by designing "for the crowd." Instead, you design ways for each person to feel acknowledged and valued as an individual. You make them comfortable interacting on their own, and then start providing opportunities to connect with others.

This new diagram is meant to imply progression while treating the stages more democratically. No stage is better than another, and each has something to offer visitors in the context of a cultural institution. *Stage one* provides people with access to the content that they seek. *Stage two* provides an opportunity for inquiry and for visitors to take action and ask questions. *Stage three* lets people see where their interests and actions fit in the wider community of visitors to the institution. *Stage four* helps visitors connect with particular people—staff members and other visitors—who share their content and activity interests. *Stage five* makes the entire institution feel like a social place, full of potentially interesting, challenging, enriching encounters with other people.

A simple example: the cocktail party

The best place to start conceptualizing structures for social participation is via familiar social experiences.

MUSEUM/C ME
Asking Audiences (mostly by Peter Linett)
Createquity (mostly by Ian David Moss)
Engaging Matters (Doug Borwick)
Useum (Beck Tench)
ExhibiTricks (Paul Orselli)
Museum of the Future (Jasper Visser)
Museum Audience Insight (Reach Advisors)
Center for the Future of Museums (AAM)
Jumper (Diane Ragsdale)
Museums Now (Gyroscope)
Poesy-Praxis (Jaime Kopke)
The Uncataloged Museum (Linda Norris)
Thinking about Exhibits (Ed Rodley)

0 readers
BY FEEDBURNER
Web2PDF
converted by Web2PDFConvert.com

Consider a cocktail party. There are some parties where hosts go out of their way to welcome guests individually and to introduce them to others via shared interests - making sure Susie the winemaker meets George the restauranteur and so on. At the best parties, each guest feels like his contributions to the conversation are desired, and everyone feels complicit in creating a wonderful social experience. People meet strangers comfortably and confidently, based on their sense of personal worth and welcome.

And then there are the less pleasant parties, the ones where guests arrive to be welcomed by someone with a vacant stare who waves them in and doesn't ask (or know) their names. Guests may feel isolated or unacknowledged, lonely in the crowd.

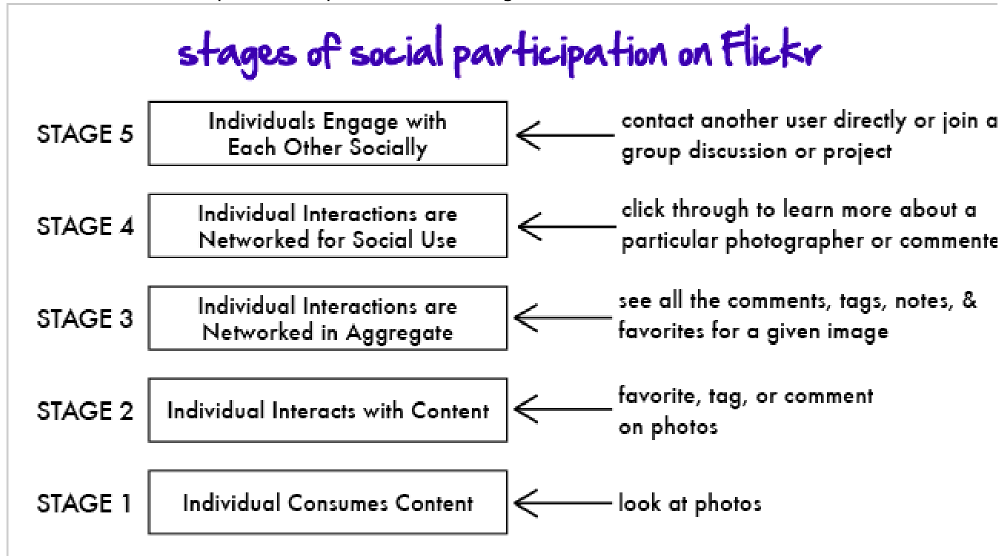
The difference between the first and second party is the extent to which guests can move from "me to we" instead of being expected to plunge headfirst into interpersonal engagement. In cultural institutions, this can be applied to motivate dialogue around the core focus of the organization. By introducing individuals through the content they love, hate, or have a personal connection to, you motivate relationship-building around the objects and stories on display.

What do unfacilitated me-to-we experiences look like?

Not every cultural experience requires a party host (though they are always useful). The me-to-we design stages become even more important when facilitation is not possible. Designing stage three and four experiences can lay the groundwork to support and encourage unfacilitated social experiences. These frameworks enable visitors to do it for themselves whenever they like.

The social Web provides some of the most powerful examples of unfacilitated me-to-we participation. Consider Flickr, the photo-sharing community site. Many people engage directly with strangers on stage five to discuss images, the stories behind photos, and photographic technique. But most of them start with a stage one experience: looking at photographs.

Here's how the Flickr experience maps to me-to-we design:



For a museum example, consider the Walters Art Museum's *Heroes* exhibition. Visitors were invited to wear tags indicating their personal connection to one of eight characters in Greek mythology and to use those tags to navigate the exhibition (see longer explanation here). The tags were incredibly low-tech, but they successfully set the stage for some surprising and powerful social dialogue among friends and strangers alike who compared their tags and discussed related exhibits. The tags allowed some visitors to go from a typical stage one experience--looking at artworks singly--to stage five experiences--discussing the artworks with strangers.

Here's how the *Heroes* experience maps to me-to-we design:

Web2PDF
converted by Web2PDFConvert.com

STAGE 1 | Individual Consumes Content | ← look at exhibits without tags

In both these examples, the institution provided tools at stages three and four to encourage people to make the leap from their own personal experience to a collective one without staff intervention. Whether applied in a low-tech or high-tech platform, me-to-we design can help people feel welcome, confident, and eager to participate socially.

What do you think? Does this new diagram work for you? It's a big part of my forthcoming book, and I'd love your thoughts about its use, what it communicates visually, and how it helps you think about designing for social participation.

POSTNEIDN AB1YS8I MC OD NM MENTS, ADD YOURS!

LINKS TO THIS POST

LABCEOLRSE MUS,PEAURMT I2C.I0P AITDOERAYS MUSEUM

MONDAY, DECEMBER 14, 2(

Six Steps to Making Risky Projects Possible

Last month, I gave the closing keynote at the National Digital Forum in New Zealand. The end of a conference is often a time of great enthusiasm quickly followed by a gaping maw of inability to act on that enthusiasm back at work. For this reason, I spoke specifically about how to make dream projects possible at real institutions. You can see or download my slides and you can watch the video of the talk. Or you can read this condensed version of the talk.

***

Elaine Gurian once told me there are two ways for institutions to innovate: they can be so small that no one notices them, or they can have a director who is willing to put his/her neck on the line for the innovation. It's nice to have both. Unsurprisingly, some of my favorite museums are small, funky places run by iconoclasts—but that's not useful to most professionals who work for organizations in which they have little control over size or leadership matters.

So if you're not at one of those weird little institutions, how do you make innovation happen? How do you overcome institutional resistance to change and uncertainty to do something wild and hopeful?

It takes six steps.

First, you have to connect your idea to the institutional mission. I've written about this before, and it's particularly relevant if your idea falls outside the traditional products or services of your organization. Pick apart your mission statement, and look for the words and phrases you can connect your project to. Ask leaders to be accountable to the mission. I used the example of the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, which has a mission statement that includes unusual words like "bold" and "fearless." If your institution says it is bold and fearless, how do your programs support that? What new projects might allow you to better reflect those aspirations? When you speak in the language of the institutional mission, executives will understand you better and be attentive to the new connections you draw from the mission to proposed projects.

Second, you need to find the right tool to implement your idea. Especially when working with technology, leading with tools instead of mission-driven projects is a mistake. If you say, "we need a blog," others in your organization won't know how to contextualize that within the programs and mission of the institution. If you say, "being transparent is part of our mission, so we need a way to share more of the behind-

Web2PDF
converted by Web2PDFConvert.com

the-scenes everyday work we do here, and since people here are comfortable writing and taking pictures, the best way to do that is via a blog," then people will come onboard.

Third, you need to align your idea with institutional culture. There are some ideas that will never fly where you work. Maybe the director is obsessed with "company secrets" and you'll never be able to share behind-the-scenes work. Or maybe education staff are not willing to engage real-time visitors in dialogue around controversial issues. That's fine. If your idea is mission-relevant, you will be able to find a way to make it palatable within the context of your institution. I used the example of two very different exhibitions that solicited visitor-contributed content: Playing with Science at the London Science Museum, and MN150 at the Minnesota History Center. The London Science Museum team designed an entire exhibition and then left a few open vitrines at the end for visitors to contribute their own toys during the run of the exhibition. The Minnesota History Center team solicited visitor nominations for exhibition topics and then built an exhibition out of those contributions. Both resulting exhibitions featured visitor-submitted content, but each institution did so in a way that felt comfortable to their work processes and abilities.

This may sound obvious and natural, but it's easy to underestimate the power of institutional culture. Sometimes staff are unaware of their own cultural biases and requirements even as they manage new projects. I worked on one project in which the client institution thought they wanted unfettered teen expression. When they saw the results of that expression, they struggled with the content and eventually integrated it into their project in a way that diminished the teens' involvement and hard work. In the end, this generated a substandard product for the client, and disappointment for the teens.

Fourth, you need to find a way to evaluate what visitors do – and more importantly, to evaluate using criteria that are understood and appreciated by everyone in your institution. It's not helpful to just measure outputs (number of visitor comments, length of stay) if those don't translate to something that staff understand as useful outcomes. There are several good resources on evaluating participation. There is a preponderance of reports about the value of new media literacies towards educating productive citizens of the 21st century. Assessment tools like the Museums, Libraries, and 21st Century Skills report can help you couch both your goals and evaluation in contexts that are well-understood by funders and executives alike. Another source of resources comes from the growing body of social media evaluation tools. I'm particularly enamored of this simple diagnostic used at the Museum of Life and Science in North Carolina to articulate the types of institutional goals they are trying to achieve with forays into participation. They use these explicit goals as measuring sticks for the projects and experiments they pursue.

Fifth and most challengingly, you need to reserve resources (dollars and staff) for project operation. Unlike most traditional cultural products, projects that encourage visitor participation require staff to "tend the garden" of contributions long after the launch date. I consider this the greatest obstacle to the inclusion of participatory practice in cultural institutions because it fundamentally changes the way organizations staff and fund projects. Many museums are making this shift as they hire "community managers" who communicate with users on an ongoing basis. But institutions that incorporate dynamic content and participatory engagement throughout struggle to prove every day that they need to continue providing consumable materials and floor staff to sustain engagement.

Sixth, you need other people to help you. Pushing forward new projects in your own institution can be a tiring and thankless task. If you have friends and colleagues—whether internal or external—who can help you get to the next step or just commiserate and cheer with you, you'll feel less lonely in your endeavor. I believe you need to find specific people—not just social networks—who can help you in this effort. When you meet someone who can help you, ask her. When you meet someone you can help, make an offer. These transactions will make change possible.

***

To help jumpstart these relationships, we did one of my favorite activities. People took out two business cards. On the back of one, they wrote something they need. On the back of the other, they wrote something they could offer someone else professionally. We unveiled a giant gong in the front of the room. If you found a "match" - someone you could help or could help you - you got to come up and hit the gong. People bonded over all kinds of skills, from helping digitize collections to performing outcome assessments to strategizing about new programs. And despite the exhaustion of the end of a long conference, everyone got up and moving in their quest to hit the gong (as evidenced by photos like this one).

As a brief design digression, I'd like to suggest that the gong is essential to this activity working. It's a motivator that has no intrinsic value - certainly less value than the outcome of the activity of finding a helpmeet in your work. But it helps focus WHY people will participate in something a bit silly by coupling it with a silly win condition. It invites people to play. It's another example of how scaffolding participation with design objects can make interpersonal exchange more desirable.

POSTED BY NINA SIMON AT [illegible] 3 COMMENTS, ADD YOURS!

LINKS TO THIS POST

LABELS: [illegible] MUSEUM 2.0, [illegible] ENGAGING, [illegible]

TUESDAY, APRIL 07, 2009

Participatory Design Vs. Design for Participation: Exploring the Difference

converted by Web2PDFConvert.com

Pop quiz! Which of these descriptions exemplifies participatory museum practice?

1. Museum invites community members to participate in the development and creation of an exhibit. The exhibit opens. It looks like a traditional exhibit.
2. Museum staff create an exhibit by a traditional internal design process, but the exhibit, once open, invites visitors to contribute their own stories and participation. The exhibit is dynamic and changes somewhat in response to visitors' actions.

The answer (for me) is both. But the difference between the two examples teases out a problem in differentiating "participatory design" from "design for participation." In the first case, you are making the design process participatory. In the second, you make the product participatory. My burning question is whether these should remain exclusive from each other. Is an exhibit participatory if no visitor sees a place for her own contribution? Is it participatory if the contributory experience was designed without her input?

Participatory Design means Innovating the Process

There are museums pursuing participatory design for a variety of reasons: to increase the diversity of voices represented in exhibits, to cast wider nets for great ideas on program topics, to engage particular partners in the exhibit design process. I once worked on a project where the main goal behind our community-based participatory model was to make our exhibit process faster and cheaper. Some projects engage a very small, well-defined segment of the community as partners in the process (such as the Wing Luke Asian Museum's well-documented community process), whereas others invite open participation (such as MN150, Tech Virtual, and Click! A Crowd-Curated Exhibition) from across the world.

But the visitor experience of these exhibits isn't necessarily altered by the innovative process that created it. For some museum professionals and projects, this is a good thing--it "proves" that participatory design can yield products that meet institutional standards. But if the goal is to change as many peoples' perception of the institutional relationship to community members as possible, then limiting yourself to a hidden participatory process is problematic.

The simplest way to demonstrate the participatory process is to expose it, to transparently show off the people and process involved. But that might not make for a better exhibit. Do people really care to learn the intricacies of how the exhibit was made? Does knowing that individuals from their neighborhoods were involved change their perspective of the institution?

Design for Participation means Innovating the Product

Transparency may tell the story, but it won't make drop-in visitors feel that the institution invites their participation. The less simple but more effective way is to create participatory experiences on the floor, to offer every drop-in visitor a legitimate way to contribute to the museum and see their contribution respected and responded to. This is incredibly hard, and very different than changing your exhibit design process. The Ontario Science Centre is doing some of this in their Weston Family Innovation Centre, where visitors every day make and augment physical and virtual objects that are displayed in the museum. The Innovation Centre is an entirely responsive space, designed for people to use each other's work as inspiration and generally to see themselves as co-creators of the space.

But the Innovation Centre is a struggle to manage. It's messy and it always changes. It consumes stuff. There are some people who'd prefer to just stop the action, put the participation-to-date on display, and call it "done." But it's never done. And that's a major monkey wrench in the standard models for how museums operate, staff, and fund their work.

Do you Need Participatory Design for Participatory Experiences?

One of the other unusual--and challenging--aspects of the Weston Family Innovation Centre is that it was designed by a lengthy, expensive participatory process that involved hundreds of prototypes and exploratory activities. It was co-designed by staff across the Ontario Science Centre, teen co-conspirators, and visitors via a series of ingenious brainstorming and making exercises developed by Julie Bowen and her brilliant team. Julie has commented that without this intense, exhaustive participatory process, they could not have designed such a

Web2PDF
converted by Web2PDFConvert.com

successful, authentic-feeling participatory public space. Engaging in the participatory process also helped the staff transition to imagining their new roles in the eventual visitor experience.

But do you really need a participatory process to produce a platform for participation? Not always. There are fabulous participatory platforms--from community murals to StoryCorps to PostSecret--that are designed without a lick of user involvement. I've written often about the art of designing platforms for participation, and the extent to which designers need to constrain and control the experience to structure comfortable, successful venues for participation.

But an interesting problem arises when a participatory platform feels unresponsive, and users don't feel that their contributions are being respected or valued. Consider the user reactions (ranging from enthusiasm to uproar) to the evolving design of Facebook over time. Users, who see themselves as co-creators (if not owners) of the Facebook experience, reacted negatively and protested when they felt that their interests were not taken into account. From Facebook's perspective, the company was in control of the designed experience and had the right to roll out changes without consulting users. Users disagreed. Facebook is learning how to negotiate this relationship. They need to treat respect users as design collaborators (to some extent) if they want to keep them as contributors.

But how far does that go? Do true participatory platforms need participatory design processes behind them? Or do designers just need to be transparent about how the platform works and how users' contributions feed into the experience?

This question isn't rhetorical; it's something I'm really grappling with as I work with museums that are trying to be more "participatory" overall. To me, a participatory museum is one in which visitors perceive the institution as actively inviting and incorporating contributions from non-professionals. Does that require participatory design, design for participation, or both?

POS TNEIDN AB5YS ICMOOMNMENTS, ADD YOURS!
LINKS TO THIS POST
LABCEOLRSE: MUS,DEEUSMPI AG2RN.T0I CIIDPEAATSORY MUSEUM

WEDNESDAY, APRIL 01, 20

Becoming Generous Thieves: Notes from the Museums in Conversation Keynote

On Monday, I gave the keynote at the Museums in Conversation conference in Tarrytown, NY. It happened at 7:45 in the morning, and I know that many of you were not there, let alone awake, at that time. So I want to share the thoughts that I offered to that intrepid early crew on Monday. You can also see the images I used, which were constructed with an extremely cool presentation software called Prezi, here. (For those who start drooling, Prezi will be launched publicly on April 5 and is pretty easy to use.)

I focused on two attributes that I think we should all be cultivating: **greed and generosity.** Greed, because creative greediness motivates us to hunt down and steal the best design techniques the world has to offer, and generosity, because giving those great ideas and applications away is the only way to change the larger cultural landscape.

I learned to cultivate creative greed while working on Operation Spy at the International Spy Museum, where I was lucky to be working on a project that was so new to us that we didn't have any pre-established models or structures for doing it. I spent a lot of research time learning how designers in related fields solve the problems we had developing Operation Spy: how screenwriters craft plot twists, how game designers build instructions into the game, how theme park designers deliver consistent, high-impact multi-sensory experiences. I approached all of these fields with one question in mind: **"What can I steal?"** What amazing thing is this designer or author or game creator doing that I can take a slice of and stick into my museum?

The question stuck with me, after Operation Spy, after leaving the Spy Museum. I started to apply it more broadly, to look around at my lived experience, find the great stuff and ask myself, **"how can I steal that to make museums more amazing?"** This is not to say that I don't have confidence in museums' core value or services. But I also recognize where we're falling short. We aren't reaching all the audiences we'd like to. We're not essential parts of every community. We're not even getting the finanacial and politicial support we'd like.

So my response is to be greedy, to look for the models I can steal from to try to tackle some of the challenges museums face. In 2006, I honed in on a particular cookie jar I love to steal from: the social Web. In the beginning, the Web was a lot like a museum. It had a lot of interesting, sometimes esoteric information. You

Web2PDF
converted by Web2PDFConvert.com

could poke around and read things and click things. But then, just in this last decade, the Web 2.0 revolution came along, and the Web became a social environment where people could share their own content with others, discuss it, and redistribute it.

Whether you think this was a good development or not, the fact is that it changed the Web from a nice to have to a must have for a lot of people. There are college students who cannot make it through the day without checking Facebook multiple times. There are people using the social Web to organize protests, discuss deep issues, and build lasting relationships. There was a study published earlier this month by Neilson Research about the astronomical growth of social networks from Dec 2007 to Dec 2008. The fastest growing demographics are over 35. One third of Facebook users are 35-49 and one quarter are 50 plus. This isn't just a change in youth culture. It's a change that affects everyone.

I see this change and I want it for museums, so I study the models of how the social Web works and apply them as greedily as possible to my own work as an exhibit designer. I want museums to be like the Web. I want a college student to feel like her week is not complete if she didn't make it to the museum. I want guys like my dad, boomers who are seeking meaningful connections online, to see museums as the physical place that support their needs.

Why are museums the right place to become the physical substantiation of the social Web? Because we're all about niche content! We've got that wrapped up! There's a technology thinker named Cory Doctorow who once said: "Content is just something to have a conversation about." This is a pretty threatening quote on one level. I think when lots of museum people express concern about Web 2.0, their fear is this—that the museum's carefully created and protected content and expertise will be drowned out by the conversation. But I see this quote in a different way. Sure, content is something to have a conversation about… but it's the ONLY thing to have a conversation about!

And museums have really good content--content related to the core interests of niche groups who aggregate online. And they don't just meet virtually. One of the interesting things about the social Web is that it has increased the ability for people to affiliate with strangers and meet up in person. This is what online dating is all about, but it's also what sites like Meetup are for. There are groups of knitters and genealogists and airplane nuts meeting in coffee shops and bars to talk about the niche content they love. This drives me crazy. Bars and coffeeshops are taking our market share! Museums should be the place for that (more on this here)--for people to meet and share their love of culture, science, and history.

And this is where the generosity comes in. In the same breath with which we need to greedily steal all the ways that social conversation around content works on the web, we need to generously provide the real-world platforms for those conversations.

What does this kind of generosity look like? It could be offering a space in your museum for local meetups. It could be instituting a community process like the one the Wing Luke Museum in Seattle uses to invite community groups to propose and co-design exhibits on topics of extreme relevance to them in the museum. It could be doing something as simple as providing a blog about topics of value to your audience. That's how I got here today. In 2006 I started to chronicle my adventures in greediness. In a small act of generosity, I made my learning a public act via a blog called Museum 2.0. And in about a million ways, that generosity has been paid back to me in spades. It was easy for me to be generous – I was already doing that learning anyway! In the same way, there are some easy ways for you and your institution to be generous. Think about what you have that your target community needs, and I'm sure you can find a match.

Two of my favorite examples of museums that found strategic ways to be generous are COSI in Columbus, OH, and the Wild Center in the Adirondacks of New York.

I've written about COSI before, but on Monday I focused on their strategic partnership with WOSU, the local public broadcasting station. By 2005, a bond measure had failed and COSI was struggling financially. COSI has a big building, and they had closed some galleries to reduce their operating costs. So partly as a financial measure and partly as a community development measure, they started leasing space to simpatico organizations. One of the most important of these is WOSU, the local public radio station. I don't have to tell you how much news organizations are struggling to remain relevant—and solvent—in today's economy. So COSI rents 12,000 sq ft of space to WOSU, which then has a digital studio and some public space to hold events and stage exhibits. WOSU programs happen at the museum, and they collaborate as partners to host other events for the growing Columbus non-profit and media fields.

You may not think of Columbus as the next Silicon Valley, but there are a lot of energetic tech startups and entrepreneurs there who are ready to convince you. COSI has become a literal, physical hub for the growth of these new businesses, and their partnership with WOSU makes them a powerhouse on the airwaves, with the mayor, and with the future engineers of Columbus.

Looking at it now, it may seem obvious. But this is a museum that just a few years ago was seen by voters as irrelevant to life in Columbus. COSI had a desperate need to raise money. The team saw that the only way to get that money was to be relevant to the community. So they were generous with something they already had, something that was plaguing them—extra space—and used that as the basis of a new fruitful collaboration. Now, they are relevant not only to their core family and school audiences but to a much wider audience of young professionals as well.

I don't think of Columbus as a huge cosmopolitan place. But I understand that the majority of museums are nowhere near as big as COSI and do not have 12,000 sq ft of space just lying around. So the other example I

Web2PDF
converted by Web2PDFConvert.com

want to share is from a small institution in the Adirondacks called The Wild Center.

The Wild Center has a small indoor exhibit and 31 acres of trails with interpretative material. They are open seasonally and have small visitation. But the Wild Center staff feel pretty strongly about the fact that the Adirondacks are a rare place in our country where there is a history of serious action to protect and preserve the natural environment. And they noticed that not enough people in the Adirondacks were concerned about climate change and its effect on both the natural environment and local businesses.

So they started a climate conference that focused on economic models for local businesses and governments not just to survive but to succeed in a world of climate change. Sure, they talked about the gloom and doom, but they focused it very locally on the Adirondacks and worked with local builders, politicians, and business owners to help them understand how reducing their carbon footprints could improve their towns and businesses. It was a generous action that was seen as neighborly. A local blogger celebrated:

> Two years ago I was lamenting that no local public leaders were stepping up to the plate on trying to understand what global climate change would mean for the Adirondacks (and its ski-tourism industry) - thankfully, that has changed. The Wild Center in Tupper Lake has taken on the lead role of informing their neighbors about the potential impacts of global warming (such as the impact on amphibians), showing local builders what they can do to mitigate those affects, and organizing scientific meetings to discuss and assess the progress of climate change in the Adirondacks.

What's greedy and generous in both of these examples? In both cases, the museums had a need—for COSI, to avoid bankruptcy, for the Wild Center, to be relevant to their neighbors. They looked around and found something to steal—a business model here, a free advertising channel there—and coupled it with something they could give—space and information. The things they gave were things that were needed by the communities they serve—really needed, not just nice-to-haves. And by providing a community service that was seen as highly valuable, both museums positioned themselves more securely in their local environments.

I encourage you to take these two ideas--greed and generosity--and use them throughout your work and life. When you listen to someone share their experience, think to yourself, "What can I steal from this story?" When you hear someone express a need, think to yourself, "What can I offer that would support this person?"

And if you find yourself sitting at a conference eating breakfast next to someone you don't know, maybe you don't want to go through the small talk and find out what their job title is and where they're from. That's ok. Cut to the chase. Ask them, "what's the most amazing thing you've seen recently that we could steal to improve museums?"

My dream is that this starts right now, this morning, with all of us. Form a crime ring with the people sitting next to you. It's like Robin Hood. Start planning heists on the best thing the world has to offer, and start giving away everything you're hanging onto for no good reason.

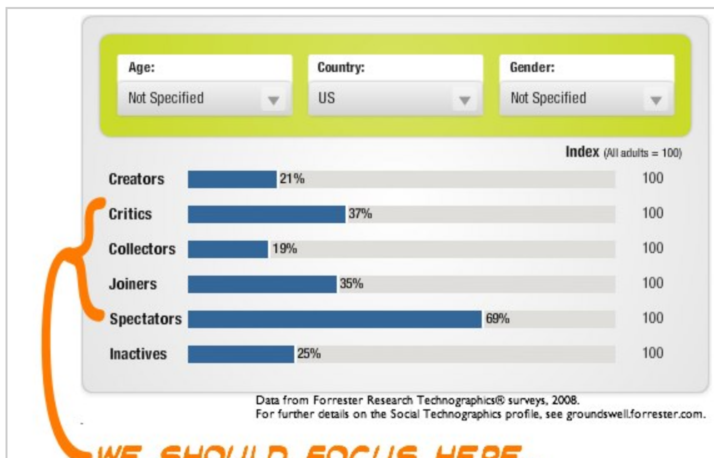
Make a list. Become a generous, greedy thief. Find the good stuff, use it like crazy, and tell everyone about it. I live a life governed by these two questions. I love being a creativity thief and giving my best ideas away. And I hope somebody will use them.

I sometimes think of museums as a kind of thrift store, preserving cast-off bits of material culture for new audiences to fall in love with. I buy my clothes from the thrift store. I like the idea that something that became extraneous for someone else can become the jacket or pants that I depend on. I want that for museums. That's why they call it goodwill.

POS TNEIDN AB5YS ICMOOMNMENT S, ADD YOURS!
LINKS TO THIS POST
LABCEOLRSE: MUS,DEEUSMIG2N. 0 IDEAS

MONDAY, MARCH 16, 2009

Self-Expression is Overrated: Better Constraints Make Better Participatory Experiences



Web2PDF
converted by Web2PDFConvert.com

I've had it with museums' obsession with open-ended self-expression. I know this sounds strange coming from someone writing an admittedly self-expressive blog post, but hear me out.

When I talk about designing participatory experiences, I often show the above graphic from Forrester Research. Forrester created the "social technographics" profile tool to help businesses understand the way different audiences engage with social media (and you can read more of my thoughts on it here). The point, in the context of this conversation, is that a minority of social media users are creators—people who write blog posts, upload photos onto Flickr, or share homemade videos on YouTube. There are so many more people who join social networks, who collect and aggregate favored content, and critique and rate books and movies. These are all active social endeavors that contribute positive value to the social Web.

And yet many museums are fixated on creators. I show the tool and then they say, "yeah, but we really want people to share their own stories about fly-swatters," or, "we think our visitors can make amazing videos about justice." Museums see open-ended self-expression as the be-all of participatory experiences. Allowing visitors to select their favorite exhibits in a gallery or comment on the content of the labels isn't seen as valuable a participatory learning experience as producing their own content.

This is a problem for two reasons. First, exhibits that invite self-expression appeal to a tiny percentage of museum audiences. Less than 1% of the users of most social Web platform create original content. Would you design an interactive exhibit that only 1% of visitors would want to use? Maybe—but only if it was complemented by other exhibits with wider appeal.

Second, open-ended self-expression requires self-directed creativity. You have to have an idea of what you'd like to say, and then you have to say it in a way that satisfies your expectations of quality. In other words, it's hard, and it's especially hard on the spot in the context of a casual museum visit. What if I assigned you to make a video of your ideas about justice? Does that sound like a fun and rewarding casual activity to you?

If your goal is to invite visitors to share their own experience in a way that celebrates and respects their unique contribution to the institution, you need to design more constraints, not fewer, on visitor self-expression.

Consider a mural. If given the chance, only a very small percentage of people would opt to paint a mural on their own. The materials are not the barrier—the ideas and the confidence are. You have to have an idea of what you want to paint and how to do it. But imagine being invited to participate in the creation of a mural. You are handed a pre-mixed color and a brush and a set of instructions. It's easy. You get to contribute to a collaborative project that produces something beautiful. You see the overall value of the project. You can point to your part in its making with pride. You have been elevated by the opportunity to contribute to the project.

This experience is shared by folks who contribute data to Citizen Science projects, nominate concepts for MN150, or perform research on the children of the Lodz ghetto. Visitors are not building exhibits from scratch or designing their own science experiments. Instead, they are participating in larger projects, joining the team, doing their part. There are often opportunities for partial self-expression—a flourishing brush stroke here, a witty Facebook status update there—but the overall expressive element is tightly constrained by the participatory platform at hand.

Why aren't more museums designing highly constrained participatory platforms in which visitors contribute to collaborative projects? The misguided answer is that we think it's more respectful to allow visitors to do their own thing, that their ultimate learning experience will come from unfettered self-expression. But that's mostly born from laziness and a misunderstanding of what motivates participation. It's easy for museums to assign a corner and a kiosk to visitors and say, "we'll put their stories over there." It's harder to design an experience that leverages many visitors' expression and puts their contributions to meaningful use. It's like cooking. If you have a bunch of novice friends, it can be maddening to find appropriate "sous chef" roles for them to fill. Many cooks prefer just to get those clumsy hands out of the kitchen. It takes a special kind of cook, artist, or scientist to want to support the contributions of novices. It takes people who want to be educators, not just executors.

Museum staff should be those special kind of people. We should respect visitors enough to engage them in work that we actually value, to find in-roads that support their participation. We should care enough about their potential usefulness to find the right job for them to do. When I worked with teens on media pieces for an exhibit on black holes, they always wanted to know where their media projects would be featured in the exhibition and what the specific criteria were for success. The client kept saying, "do whatever you want," which they thought meant, "we support your unique self-expression." But the teens heard, "Do whatever you want—we don't really care what it is." The teens wanted the constraints, both so they could be good contributors and to put some limits on the vast openness of "whatever."

We should support the rare visitors who have something unique to share. But we should also consider the vastly greater number of people who are waiting for us to give them a brush and tell them where to paint.

POSTNEIDN AB2YS5I MCOMMENTS, ADD YOURS!

LINKS TO THIS POST

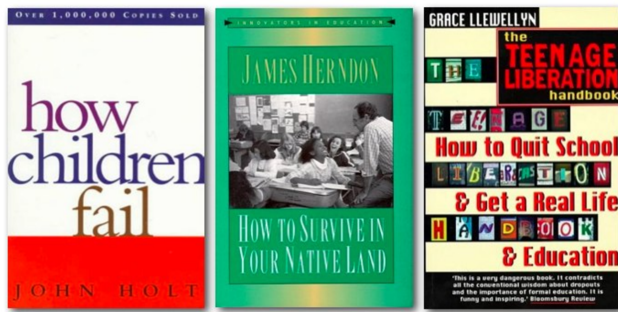
LABCEOLRSE MUS,DEEUS,MPIAG2RN.T0I CIIDP,EAATSSEDRRYCOMNUTSEENUTM

TUESDAY, NOVEMBER 25, 2

Where I'm Coming From

Web2PDF
converted by Web2PDFConvert.com

The basis for my interest in museums?



Hippie radicalism. Seriously.

Why do you care about and or work in museums? This post tells my (weird) story. I hope you'll share yours in the comments below (or on your own blog). And check out the comments. They are active and awesome.

My story is about radical educational philosophy. I don't work in museums because I love them. I didn't grow up staring open-mouthed at natural history dioramas or wandering through art galleries. When I visit a new city, I don't clamor to visit museums. I go on hikes. I go to farmer's markets. I walk around and get a sense for people and place. And while I'll visit museums out of professional (and occasionally personal) interest, I don't do it because of a deep emotional connection. Yes, there are some extraordinary museum experiences that have changed my life, but they are the exception, not the norm.

I don't work in museums because I love them. I love the promise of what they can be. I work in museums because I hate schools and see museums as a viable alternative. I'm a strong believer in free-choice learning, and I see museums as places to circumvent the hazards of compulsory education and support a democratic, engaged society of learners.

What is free-choice learning? I first encountered the term as a teenager through the writings of John Holt and the unschooling movement. "Unschooling" is an an educational theory that argues that people of all ages (including children) learn best when their work is self-directed--and that children are better at determining what and how they should learn than any accredited school or instructor. As John Holt wrote, "Learning is not the product of teaching. Learning is the product of the activity of learners." Unschoolers generally believe that schools perpetuate undemocratic processes that hinder rather than help learning happen.

I agreed. I was great at school, and I hated it. I didn't want to care what was going to be on the test. I didn't feel supported pursuing intrinsically motivated projects. Much to my mom's relief, I stayed in school but remained deeply suspicious of the artificial structure of grades and gold stars. I went to a project-based engineering college where I could set my own curriculum and graduated early. Professors always encouraged me to go to graduate school, but I wanted to get into "real life"--and real learning--as soon as possible.

I started working in museums because I idealized them as places that support user-directed learning (I still do). In college, I stumbled onto the Institute for Learning Innovation and John Falk and Lynn Dierking's work on free-choice learning in museums, dropped my plan to design pinball machines for a living (probably not that lucrative) and started investigating hands-on museums. I took the two things I was most passionate about--math and non-compulsory learning experiences--and smooshed them together into a string of internships and part-time jobs in science museum education departments. Eventually, I slid into exhibits, and meandered my way to the present.

When I started working in museums, I didn't realize that free-choice learning was a radical proposition. When I first explored the ILI website, I assumed that free-choice learning was the backbone of all museums. I thought I'd found the place for unschooling to thrive. I didn't have a clue about the other rationales for museums--places of stored knowledge, places to keep stuff, places to colonize minds. It wasn't until I started working in museums that I discovered that the museum as a place where you make your own meaning is more a promise than a reality.

There are many parallels between free-choice learning and participatory design. Both are based on the premise that given the opportunity, regular people (learners) will create extraordinary stories and experiences that serve their own purposes better than anything experts can design for them. They don't need to be cajoled or threatened into learning. As museum professionals, or educators, or librarians, or humans who want to support learning, it's not our job to teach people everything. What we can do is design conditions and tools for access to those opportunities and a supportive infrastructure to encourage learning.

Unlike John Holt, who ultimately argued that schools were ineffective in any form, I believe that museums can live up to the promise of free-choice learning. Museum professionals repeat Frank Oppenheimer's words, "no one ever failed museum" with pride. And yet we are increasingly caving to the purse strings and demands of the traditional K-12 and higher education sectors, becoming more like school add-ons than school alternatives. Even the training of museum professionals has gotten more academic with the explosion of university-based graduate programs. Why are we training future leaders of alternative learning using traditional academic techniques and facilities? Instead of trying to align ourselves more closely with K-12 and universities, why aren't museums charting new territory in free-choice learning? Why are we in bed with institutions that fail to acknowledge people as learners rather than vessels to be filled?

Web2PDF
converted by Web2PDFConvert.com

I know the practical answers. There is money in traditional education, lots more than what MacArthur and other foundations are starting to offer for alternative learning environments. The contemporary culture of user-generated content is bringing self-directed learning to the forefront, but that doesn't mean there's money or traditional rewards to be found there. No teacher is going to book a field trip to a place that is not tightly tied to school curriculum. A graduate degree looks good on a resume. University people also care about learning, even if they execute it in traditional ways.

But the practicalities are only one part of the story. It took me a long time to realize that supporting free-choice learning isn't the primary goal for most museum professionals. We *like* designing the experience. We *like* telling visitors what's important. Whenever someone points out that "visitors make their own experiences," it's usually followed by a **but**. BUT we will try to force them to do what we want them to anyway. BUT we will make sure the only stuff they encounter in the galleries is vetted. BUT we won't acknowledge their voices and their meaning.

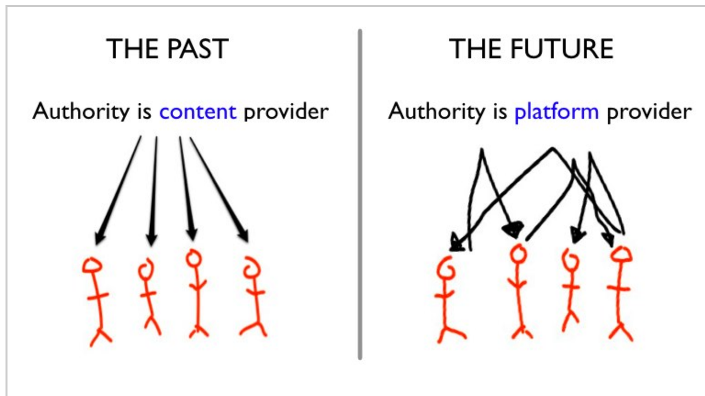
My goal is to break down those BUTs. That goal isn't based on technology or social media. It's based on liberation, idealism, and activism. It's based on inviting visitors to participate in museums as active learners so the institutions become as meaningful and relevant as possible.

What's your goal? Where are you coming from?

POSTED BY NINA SIMON AT 25 COMMENTS, ADD YOURS!
LINKS TO THIS POST
LABELS: MUSEUM 2.0 IDEAS

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 08,

The Future of Authority: Platform Power



I have a lot of conversations with people that go like this:

> Other person: "So, you think that museums should let visitors control the museum experience?"
> Me: "Sort of."
> Other person: "But doesn't that erode museums' authority?"
> Me: "No."

One of the primary fears museum professionals (and all professionals) have about entering new relationships with audiences is the fear of losing control. For hundreds of years, we've owned the content and the message. While we may grudgingly acknowledge the fact that visitors create their own versions of the message around subsets of the content, we don't consciously empower visitors to redistribute their own substandard, non-authoritative messages. So when people like me start advocating for the creation of tools and opportunities by which visitors can share their stories, reaggregate the artifacts, even rate and review each others' creations, museum professionals of all stripes get concerned. If the museum isn't in control, how can it thrive?

We have to change the framing of this conversation. **There is a difference between control and expertise.** In these conversations, people often say, "don't expert voices matter?" and my emphatic response is YES. Content expertise matters. Content control shouldn't.

Museums should feel protective of the expertise reflected in their staff, exhibits, programs, and collections. In most museums, the professional experience of the staff--to preserve objects, to design exhibits, to deliver programs--is not based on content control. It's based on creation and delivery of experiences. And in a world where visitors want to create, remix, and interpret content messages on their own, museums can assume a new role of authority as "platforms" for those creations and recombinations.

The problem arises when expertise creates a feeling of entitlement to control the entire visitor experience. Power is attractive. Being in control is pleasant. It lets you be the only expert with a voice. But if our expertise is real, then we don't need to rule content messages with an iron fist. As Ian Rogers has said, "losers wish for scarcity. Winners leverage scale."

Single voices represented on single labels is not scalable. I believe we need to develop museum "platforms" that allow us to harness, prioritize, and present the diversity of voices around a given object, exhibit, or idea. This does not mean we are giving all the power to visitors. We will grant them a few opportunities--to create their

Web2PDF
converted by Web2PDFConvert.com

own messages, to prioritize the messages that resonate best for them personally--in the context of a larger overall platform. The platform is what's important. It's a framework that museums can (and should) control, and there's power in platform management.

When you think of a platform for user-generated content, you may not think of that platform as having power. But the companies that run YouTube, Flickr, and other major Web 2.0 sites have lots of power. There are four main powers that platforms have:

1. the power to set the rules of behavior
2. the power to preserve and exploit user-generated content
3. the power to promote and feature preferred content
4. the power to define the types of interaction available to users

These powers constitute a set of controls which constitutes a real and valuable authority. Let's take a look at each one and how it might be applied in museums.

1. The power to set the rules of behavior.

User-generated content sites control user and community behavior, both implicitly through the tools that are and aren't offered, and explicitly through community management. Every Web 2.0 site has rules about acceptable content and ways that users can engage with each other--consider this article about the complicated and often highly subjective (read: powerful) Flickr community guidelines. These rules are not uniform, and their differences often influence the makeup of users who feel welcome and choose to engage.

When it comes to museums, comparable rules can guarantee that the museum remains a safe, welcoming place for visitors of all kinds. There are some "rules" already in place--like the rule that you have to pay to enter--that may have great effect on the types of users who engage in museums and the behavior they display within. Museums should consider, as Web 2.0 community managers do, what behaviors and visitors they want to support and which rules will make those people feel most at home in the institution.

2. The power to use and exploit user-generated content.

Platforms also have the power to set rules related to preservation and ownership of the content on them--often with quite strict IP statutes that favor the platform over users. Every time you post a photo on Flickr, you give its owner, Yahoo!, the right to use that photo however they see fit. The same is true on YouTube, and on sites like Facebook, which are "walled gardens," you can't even easily export your user-generated content (friends, events, updates) outside of Facebook itself.

Again, these rules reflect platform control, and when the control is too heavy-handed, users get annoyed and stay away. Museums will always need to retain some powers to manage the preservation of objects, to wield IP controls properly, and to manage the digital reproduction and dissemination of content. There are many models as well for what we do with user-generated content in the museum. There are some emerging case studies for this. The Smithsonian American Art Museum's current Ghosts of a Chance game is accessioning player-generated objects into a temporary part of their collection database, with clear rules about what happens to the objects at the end of the game (they are the responsibility of a sub-contractor). In the same way that Web 2.0 sites display a range of respect for user-retained intellectual property, museums can navigate and create their own rules--and related powers--for content developed by visitors on site.

3. The power to promote and feature preferred content.

When you go onto a user-generated content site like YouTube, you don't just see a jumble of videos. One of the greatest powers retained by these platforms is the power to feature content that reflects the values of the platform. These values may skew towards promoting content with the most popularity/views, the newest content, or content that is unique in some way. The choice of what to display on the front page is not just about design. There have been huge user-protests of both YouTube and Digg for perceived bias in the "featured content" algorithms that vault some content to the top. And while some sites strive for transparency, most find ways to feature the kind of content and behavior that they want to see modeled for other users.

This may be the most important platform power when it comes to museums because it is the one that allows the platform to present its values and model preferred behavior. And many museums are far from assuming this power. Most museum projects that allow visitors to create content only allow for the most basic of prioritization. Consider video kiosks where visitors can create their own short clips (a pet peeve of mine). Many museum video kiosks will feature clips from famous people but do nothing to prioritize and prominently display high-quality visitor submissions. The kiosks are organized by recency, not content value--and so new visitors walking up are not given a model for the kind of content the museum would most like to receive.

When museums do assume this power, it is often in a zero-transparency way that doesn't model behavior for users. When I spoke with Kate Roberts about MN150, the Minnesota History Center exhibition based on visitor-generated nominations, she explained that after the nomination period was over, they entirely shut down visitor engagement in the selection process. It just felt too messy to do anything but lock the staff in a room and sort through the nominations. When the exhibition opened a year later, visitors could see which nominations were valued and featured, but they couldn't get this information in an early feedback loop that would have allowed

Web2PDF
converted by Web2PDFConvert.com

them to improve their nominations during the submission process.

4. The power to define available interactions.

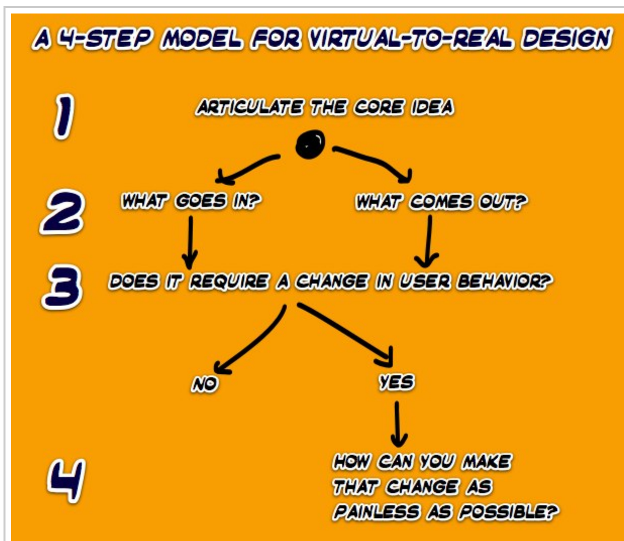
This power is so basic that it is often forgotten. On YouTube, you can share videos. On Craigslist, you can buy and sell stuff. On LibraryThing, you can tag and talk about books. Each Web 2.0 platform has a limited feature set and focuses on one or two basic actions that users can take. Museums don't need to offer every kind of interaction under the sun--we just have to pick the few interactions that most support the kind of behavior and content creation that we value. Again, there's a lot of power in the decision of whether visitors will be allowed to contact each other, rate artifacts, or make their own exhibits. As long as you create a platform that is consistent in its values and the interactions provided, you will be able to control the experience as you open up content authority.

There are real opportunities here for museums to retain authority related to values, experiences, and community behavior. The power of the platform may not let you dictate every message that floats through your doors. But with good, thoughtful design, it can ensure that those messages enhance the overall museum experience.

POSTNEIDNAB1YS2I MCOMMENTS, ADD YOURS!
LINKS TO THIS POST
LABCEOLSE MUS,PEAURMT I2C.I0P,AISTDERA,CSWO ANBT2EJN0T M

TUESDAY, SEPTEMBER 16,

How to Design from Virtual Metaphor to Real Experience, and an Example



I often talk about the idea of taking social technology out of the Web and putting it into physical museums as part of our exhibitions and programs. Recently, I learned about an innovative, super-low tech tagging project in a library that does this beautifully. This post explains that project and suggests a process by which you could approach this kind of "virtual-to-real" design. As you read the story in the next few paragraphs, consider the four-step approach in the image above. I'll come back to it at the end to demonstrate how it maps to the example.

First, some background on tagging. Tagging is a term that refers to people assigning keywords ("tags") to things. These things could be websites (as in the case of delicious), videos, objects—whatever. In the world of museums, tagging is of great interest to people in the collections world. If visitors can assign their own tags to artifacts, then we can create visitor-generated folksonomies alongside traditional taxonomies—and people who are searching for content can find artifacts of interest via either path. Why are folksonomies useful? Traditional taxonomies may only cover a certain set of metadata about an object. You may want to see "fossils" but the museum may separate those by species or time periods without a general category for fossils. Tags can allow people to search for artifacts via the real words they'd use to describe those things.

As a tangible example, consider the Powerhouse Museum's collections database. When you go to the database, you can search for objects by tags, and when you get to an individual artifact, you can add new tags or delete previously assigned ones that you don't think are appropriate.

But there's a problem (for me) with this kind of tagging: it only affects the Web. Tagging could be very useful for people who visit museums if there was a way to access the tags when you arrive and use them to discover artifacts you'd like to see on your visit. Ideally, there would be a complete feedback loop where you would then be able to assign tags to objects as you view them in the galleries, thus creating more data for new visitors walking in the door.

Sounds complicated? The library at Haarlem Oost in the Netherlands wanted to do this same thing—to allow

Web2PDF
converted by Web2PDFConvert.com

patrons to tag the books they'd finished so they could be displayed on shelves and in the database for others to find books they might enjoy. And so they did something very, very clever. They installed more book drops.

The library created a book drop for every tag. To see pictures of their setup, go here. But for simplicity's sake, imagine a library that does this for just one tag, say, amazing books. When you return books to the library, you'd have a choice: drop it in the regular book drop or the book drop for amazing books. Then, the library staff would take the books in the "amazing" book drop and put them on the shelf called "Books other patrons recommend." The librarians could also scan those books and add the "amazing" tag to them so that it is captured in the collection database.

This is brilliant on so many levels. Most importantly, the library found a way to embed tagging into the normal use of the library. Patrons don't have to opt in to some complicated system, log on to the Web after returning books, or add anything to their standard library use. They just have to sort their books when returning them. And the new patrons walking in the door can access the books based on the different tags, which could range from "highly recommended" to "great family books" to "just returned"--a finger on the pulse of what people in the community are reading right now.

No patron would call the activity of putting their books in book drops "tagging," and that's a good thing. There's no concern here about barriers to use, educating the visitor on how to participate, or even significant infrastructure or support costs. The feedback loop is there, and it works because it's a clever, simple distillation of the core idea of tagging.

And so I would challenge you to take the same approach as that library in trying to make exhibits, programs, and services that emulate social technology. Let's look at how the four-step approach maps to the library book drop story:

1. Define the core usefulness of the concept. In this example, the core usefulness of tagging is to help people search through the collection and find stuff of interest more easily.
2. Define the input and output points of the concept—where do people engage with the concept? In this case, the input point happens when you are looking for a book on the shelves or online. The output (tagging) happens once you've finished reading a book.
3. For both the input and the output, determine if the concept requires a change in behavior. In this example, the input stays the same (except perhaps for familiarizing people with the new shelves and search terms) but the output requires assigning a tag to a book.
4. Anytime a behavioral change is required, find the simplest, most familiar way possible to enact it. In this case, book drops were the key.

Of course, it's in number 4 where the real ingenuity comes in. You have to be tremendously clever to distill something to its simplest possible manifestation. But we know what assets we have, and we know what our visitors do. All we have to do is find the right match for the goal at hand.

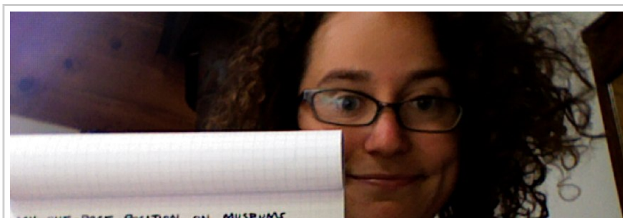
Is this a useful process for you? What's missing? How could you imagine applying it?

NOTE: This post was later developed into a peer-reviewed paper and workshop for Museums and the Web 2009.

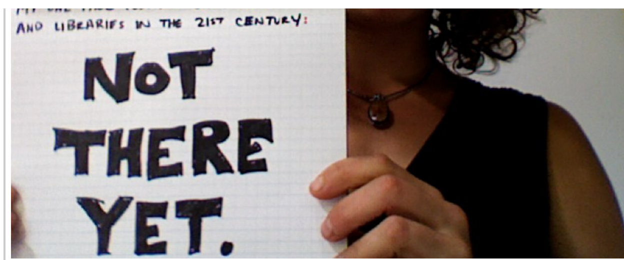
POSTED BY NINA SIMON AT 4... COMMENTS, ADD YOURS!
LINKS TO THIS POST
LABELS: ... MUSEUM 2.0, ... ENGAGING IN 2.0

TUESDAY, JULY 01, 2008

Museums and Libraries in the 21st Century in 714 Words (or less)



Web2PDF
converted by Web2PDFConvert.com



Dear Museum 2.0-ers,

Next week, I'll be going to DC for a meeting convened by the National Academy of Sciences and the Institute of Museum and Library Services on "Museums and Libraries in the 21st Century." They've asked each of the participants to prepare a one-page position paper (today = highly alliterative) on the topic and to provide one paper that "you think would be important for everyone interested in the subject to read."

The paper is the easy part. I am recommending the transcript of Clay Shirky's speech about Gin, Television, and Social Surplus, in which he argues that the next twenty years will be marked by people's slow, incremental, and astoundingly impactful awakening from being passive consumers (of TV) to partly active content creators.

But one page! It's a good writing exercise to see if you can write anything of substance in 720 words or so (I encourage you to try it). I'm not sure I succeeded. I wanted to share it with you to get your thoughts on this topic. What did I state poorly? What did I gloss over? What could I cut out? **What would you put in your one-page epistle to the future?**

Here are my 714 words. I'm sending it off tomorrow, but your opinions are appreciated anytime.

Note: I highly recommend that you check out (and add to!) the comments on this one, including a response manifesto by educational technologist Ira Socol.

***

Over the last 50 years, public-facing museums and libraries in the U.S. have established viability in two ways—via designed experiences (exhibits, programs, courses) and access to assets (artifacts, books). Today, both of these models are threatened, and within 50 years they will no longer be sustainable. To be successful (and hopefully essential), museums and libraries need to pursue new models in which we provide platforms for social engagement, transitioning from providing designed, controlled experiences to comfortable venues for people and discourse.

Why are our current models failing? On the experience side, we're being out-competed by retail. Our offerings are perceived as less varied, flexible, and sophisticated than those presented by bookstores, bars, and cafes. We rarely offer alcoholic beverages, comfortable seating, background music, or free admission to go with the art, lectures, and interactive experiences now available in many hybrid retail spaces. And on the assets side, we're being rendered obsolete by digitization and the Web. While museums and libraries may be trusted sources of information, people increasingly prefer sources that are immediately and widely accessible for use and reuse. Regardless of how museums and libraries portray themselves, it's clear to users: Wikipedia belongs to them. The artifacts in museums, which they increasingly cannot even photograph for IP reasons, do not.

The popular option at this time is to try to beat the experiential competition and ignore the Web-based cultural shift. This translates to higher ticket prices, more blockbuster exhibitions, and less community engagement. I contend that we will be more successful, and tremendously more interesting, if we take another path.

First, there are some things we have to learn from the competition. From our experiential neighbors, we have to learn to put our customers first. We have to privilege our visitor/users over our governing stakeholders. One of the most interesting examples of this is the recent evangelical megachurch trend. To the distress of some purists, megachurches don't serve God or priests; they serve people. They offer daycare and Starbucks and late night services. They make church convenient. We need to stop worrying about the respective gods of our institutions and start making our experiences comfortable, accessible, and convenient.

From the Web 2.0 revolution, we have to learn to be generous with our assets. The good news is that there are hundreds of thousands of people debating the content of every book, scientific principle, and artistic movement on the Web right now. The bad news is that museums and libraries are rarely part of those conversations and in many cases are willfully preventing the inclusion of their assets in that discussion. We are entering a cultural era of explosive content production by non-anointed regular people. Real artifacts are not suffering with the rise of digitization; they are gaining new lives in personal memory sites, blogs, and collection-based social networks. We should be helping enable these conversations in the real world. We need to stop focusing on protecting our stuff and start creating new physical analogs to these virtual tools—platforms for people to engage with our content on their own terms.

Web2PDF
converted by Web2PDFConvert.com

Together, these lessons paint the picture of a future museum or library: a safe, comfortable live venue for discourse about content. We are uniquely situated to be these venues. Most "community spaces" are replete with advertising, and none can provide the access to collections—precious conversation pieces—that libraries and museums offer. The people who congregate on the Web to talk about books and artifacts are looking for places to meet in person, and we should welcome them. They want expert support, and we can provide it. They want to sit on couches and make noise at 9pm, and we should offer that. They want to make and share videos and stories and exhibits about our assets, and we should assist and reward them. We can consciously create platforms that enable broad, meaningful engagement—excellence and equity—and transform our visitors into ardent, active users. As the digital divide increases, we can also be sources of training and access for those locked out of new communities and assets (libraries are already moving in this direction). The Web has given people the opportunity to dream up their own community spaces. If we can listen and remake ourselves into those dreams, we will finally become places for our audiences.

POS TNEIDN AB1YS1 I MCOM MENTS, ADD YOURS!

LINKS TO THIS POST

LABCEOLRSE MUS,IENUCML,PU2AS.R0TO INCDIEP,AASTR ORYES MSUOCNIAM DEV

TUESDAY, APRIL 22, 2008

Participation through Gifting: Pass It On

Last week, a coworker came in with a big smile on his face. When I asked what had happened, he explained that he had been the recipient of an act of tollbooth goodwill; the person in front of him in line had paid his toll.

This simple act, a $2.50 donation to the universe, is a gift. We've all received (and hopefully given) gifts from strangers before--the woman who lets you go to the bathroom first, the family that hands you some carnival tickets on their way out and your way in. We're suspicious of gifts given by corporations and organizations, casting a wary eye on the cheerful Red Bull guy or anyone handing out religious leaflets. But a gift given from one person to another, however small, feels magical.

Why discuss gifting on Museum 2.0? No, I'm not angling for a present. One of my greatest interests is the "participatory museum," in which there is substantive, unfacilitated visitor-to-visitor interaction. When I heard the tollbooth story, I started thinking about gifting as a model for participatory experiences in museums.

This post discusses participatory gifting in three parts: the why, the what, and finally, the how.

Why is gifting a model worth exploring?

1. **Gifting is a powerful game mechanic.** In her fabulous presentation on game mechanics in functional environments, Amy Jo Kim lists "social exchange" as one of five key elements that make experiences sticky. These exchanges can be explicit (trades) or implicit (gifts). Why does Ebay email you a certificate to celebrate "your first positive feedback" on their site? Why do people pay a dollar to send each other virtual hot dogs and pinatas via Facebook? Giving and receiving gifts is a strong reason to come back to a site (whether virtual or real). Collect the e-card. Spend the certificate. And when the gifts are public, as on Facebook, the perception of the site as a "place of giving" serves both the individuals using the service and the site's image.
2. **Gifting makes you feel good.** The University of British Columbia recently published a study in the journal *Science* demonstrating that people who give away a small amount of money in the form of a gift are happier than those who spend the same amount on themselves. One of the authors of the study commented, "This suggests that even making really small changes in how one spends money can make a difference for happiness." Often, when we think of stranger-to-stranger participatory experiences, we think of stressful events like elevator outages. It's hard to convince a museum or other institution that they should intentionally create stressful environments to encourage visitors to talk with each other. It's much more palatable to use something that makes you feel warm and fuzzy, like gifting, to get there.
3. **Gifting extends your message.** If your kid gets his photo taken at the museum and can instantly "send that photo to grandma," two things happen. 1: kid gives gift to grandma (and both are happy). 2: museum brand leaves the walls and goes to grandma's house. When you give someone a

Web2PDF
converted by Web2PDFConvert.com

brochure or take-home element in an exhibition, it ends up in the trash. But if you give them something to give to someone ELSE, then your content spreads, packaged in a bundle of goodwill.

OK, so gifting sounds good. **What are its forms, and which are most effective?**

Most gifting is **personal**, both in real life and on the web. I give my friend a cookie. My dad sends me a NYTimes article. Personal gifting makes for powerful participation because you are directly interacting with another individual. But it's small-scale and typically occurs between people with a pre-existing relationship. We aren't culturally comfortable giving gifts directly to perfect strangers.

Web 2.0 encourages a lot of **semi-anonymous gifting**. Whenever you review a restaurant on Yelp, post a video on YouTube, or heck, write a blog post, you are giving content to an unknown audience of other user/recipients. You're not recommending something to a specific stranger, so it lessens the ick factor. There's a lot of argument about whether the Web 2.0 gift economy exploits users, but the benefit for the content creators is a kind of fame and recognition. There's some participation among givers and receivers, but that participation most commonly takes the form of "in kind" actions. You gift the community a book review, I gift an overlapping community a music review.

Then there's **anonymous gifting**. My Hebrew school teachers told me this is the best kind because it's truly selfless, yada yada. That may be true. But when it comes to encouraging participation among givers and receivers, this kind of gift is low on the list. Whether you are writing checks to charities or sticking quarters in expired parking meters, you have only an abstract relationship with the other people involved in the transaction.

How can we improve on these models to becomes sites for participatory giving?

The real participatory power comes when we create a kind of hybrid model of facilitated or site-enabled giving. By serving as a safe barrier, websites, museums, and other venues can **triangulate and match-make** personal gifting, packing the punch of one-to-one giving without the ick factor of dealing with strangers.

This is where the tollbooth fits in. It would be extremely strange to walk up to someone's car window and offer them $2.50 for the toll. They might be offended. They might be suspicious. But by giving this gift through the toll booth operator, you shuttle the unsafe personal transaction through a safe transaction venue. It's semi-anonymous: the receiver can perceive the giver and his little blue Honda, but neither party is threatened by the requirement to actually engage with the other. And rather than impacting two people (giver and receiver), it impacts three (tollbooth operator).

The tollbooth enables personal giving between strangers and brings a third person into the experience. Arguably, three people who would never have met now get to share a nice experience and memory of generosity.

But we can take it even further. In the tollbooth case, it's up to the giver to take the initiative to pay for the person behind him or her. It's not a ready option that the tollbooth operator provides; in fact, in some cases it may take a bit of convincing to make this gift happen.

Sites that are serious about participatory giving don't leave all the work to the inspiration of the giver.

Here are some key actions that encourage gifting:

- provide "gift kits" that are easy and rewarding to assemble (e-cards, lanyards).
- make it easy to send or share the gift.
- make the gifts public so that others who are neither the giver nor recipient can bask in the glow of the giving experience and be encouraged to participate themselves. This is what Facebook does. I've also been to ice cream shops and bars that feature a "gift wall" of statements like "Ben buys Susie a pint" so you can pick up your free beer next time you visit. An interesting public version of the formerly private gift certificate.
- find a way for givers and receivers to track the gift if it passes from hand to hand. This can be Web-enabled, like sites that track messages written on dollar bills via serial number. Or, it can be charmingly low-tech, like books with previous owners' names written in them.
- thank the giver for giving, suggest to both giver and receiver that they give again.

How can you integrate facilitated gifting into your institution? Where have you seen it succeed (or fail)? Give us the semi-anonymous gift of your comment, and we'll respond with affection and interest!

POSTED BY NINA SIMON AT 12:10 PM
2 COMMENTS, ADD YOURS!
LINKS TO THIS POST
LABELS: CLOSE MUSEUM, PARTICIPATORY MUSEUM

Home | Older Posts

Subscribe to: Posts (Atom)

Web2PDF
converted by Web2PDFConvert.com

Web2PDF
converted by Web2PDFConvert.com