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Tony Preston	: National Gallery of Victoria
Rosemary Taylor	: National Museum of Victoria
Ian Watts	: National Gallery of Victoria

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The 10 Most Often Asked Questions: A Pretentious Self-interview

by Elaine Heumann Gurian,
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I have titled my speech "The 10 Most Often Asked Questions: A Pretentious Self-interview". The reasons these questions are often asked is they have no one correct answer. Reasonable people have answered them all, but each answer has varied from person to person. Thoughtful, well presented answers have been incompatible with equally well reasoned questions which allow one to take a position anywhere along a

continuum. It is the personal or "pretentious" stand on these questions that shapes one's career and its daily decisions.

I have titled my speech unashamedly "A Pretentious Self-interview" because it is pretentious for anyone to stand in front of one's peers and sound definitive about anything. Furthermore I don't know you or your problems and while I can pretend that they are universal ones, I have done nothing to check that out. You also don't know me and have spent a great deal of money to get me here and may have a number of fantasies about who I might be that are, I am sure, brighter, funnier and more insightful than who I really am.

Finally, I like being pretentious. When the Russians denounced the "cult of personality" I knew it was all over for me. I grew up in the 40's and my father owned a movie house. Stardom was what I wanted and now "Look, Ma! Here I am! A star!"

So let us begin with my answers to these questions, and with the full understanding that you have answers to the same dilemma. We will meet for the rest of the week in the restaurants and bars of your city to sort out, debate, and change each other's thinking because process is what friendships are made of, and I hope to leave here, not as the keynote speaker, but as your friend.

Question: The first question, of course, is "What is a Museum?"

Answer: The simplest definition is that a museum houses "stuff" three-dimensional objects. All other sub-definitions are linked to that. It is important for each museum to define the nature of that "stuff" and the manner in which it will present it.

It is necessary for a museum to have a mission and be forthright about it. A museum, in defining its mission, will make decisions about its "stuff" and its collecting policy. For example, a fine arts museum that wants to have only the highest quality works may make a different statement from a fine arts museum that wants to be a comprehensive teaching collection, and each will perform a needed function in the community. A museum that wants a visitor to understand scientific phenomenon may use reproductions and non-accessioned three-dimensional materials more readily than a science museum which has a greater interest in an authentic presentation of the History of Science. A Living History museum may use ordinary objects of the period while a Historic House may only be interested in the single object that resided there originally.

It is important for each institution, without bowing to the pressures of fashion and social relevance, to define its mission and, therefore, define its relationship to "stuff" and ultimately to its audience.

I believe that there is a place for some institutions to house and preserve huge collections of unique, rare, artefacts but, there are also museums that correctly house ordinary, commonplace and, therefore, non-accessioned things.

Good use can be made of reproductions as well. It does not matter if the institution houses permanent or temporary materials, although temporary homes of collections in some countries are called galleries and those technology museums, for example, without collections, are referred to often as science centres. For me, so long as the institution has defined its direction, the use of any kind of "stuff" is legitimate.

Question: What are the differences between schools and museums?

Answer: It is easier to start with the definition of a school and then look at the differences in museums.

a) A school generally has many bonded groups (e.g. grade 3). Each group usually has some amount of homogeneity, that is, they have the same reading level or are the same age. Furthermore, they know a lot about each other and spend a great deal of school time on the bonding process. The class members know who they like, who they trust and who is gifted or slow in the variety of subject areas. The museums general audience is generally individuals or small family units.

b) The school experience is usually coercive. A student is obligated to go and a great deal of social pressures is exerted to cause the student to remain. Even in adult school where the initial decision to enter is volitional there is social pressure to complete the course. The museum experience is generally a volitional one.

c) Schools deal with incremental learning. They build up knowledge over time. A teacher has a chance to reinforce and reteach areas that have been misunderstood. Good teachers can adjust the information to particular members of the class because the teacher knows the individual strengths and weaknesses of the class members. Museums generally meet their audience once and must deal with "instantaneous" learning.

d) School is ordinarily an autocratic system. The teacher knows more than the student and determines the order and method of the instruction. In a museum, the visitor determines the order of the experience.

e) Schools generally use a start-stop method of interpretation. "We will all do maths for the next 30 minutes." Even in individualised instruction, generally all members of a sub-group are learning the same subject for the same period of time. In a museum, the visitors enter continuously and leave when it is convenient for them.

f) Schools use primarily words and pictures, two-dimensional materials, for their instructional materials. As stated, the purpose of the museum is focused on three-dimensional objects.

If these attributes of schools are correct, then museums are siblings or cousins, rather than similar locations of instruction. It is the differences that museums should capitalise on because, it is the differences that offer museum education its unique opportunity. We, as learners, have many different styles of learning. Schools with their incremental teaching are excellent for certain kinds of subjects (e.g. how to read, computational skills) which could not be done well in another mode. Museums, however, specialise in a different learning experience.

Question: What is the Nature of Museum Learning?

Answer: Exhibits generate two primary forms of learning. One of these, "Landmark" experiences are those times in which there is a synthesis of previously misunderstood, unconscious or unfocused information into a conscious, articulative understanding. It is the "aha!" phenomenon. It can be about great or small issues. "I didn't know an elephant was so big", or, "I understand the pressures Martin Luther was under." It is generally an emotional as well as intellectual synthesis. Landmark experiences, when they happen, occur once about a particular piece of information. It is like a hat rack, all other pieces of information relating to it, like the hats, get hung on it, but the rack remains. As a museum person, one cannot orchestrate individual landmark experiences, one can only provide a great deal of raw data so that the opportunity exists for each of the audience's members to synthesise for himself. Museums are not the only occasions where landmark learning occurs, all places that deal with "realia" are also locations. Indeed, our first trip to the circus or the zoo often provides that sort of understanding as well. But if one interviews people about their recollections of visiting museums, one often hears a tale of a particular day with all the attendant sounds and smells and the piece of learning that took place. Since museums have collections of things not ordinarily seen, they are a remarkable resource for this synthesis.

Museums deal, as well, in providing "unexpurgated mush", the raw data that is stored for synthesis later. This is the second form of learning: unconscious storage.

I have travelled with my children and heard them tell me about pieces seen years ago in other museums now brought to mind when presented with similar or analogous material. It is like carrying around many single puzzle pieces until they are needed, one day, to complete an unknown puzzle.

Both these learning forms make evaluation difficult in museums and easier in schools. If schools are about incremental learning, then pre and post testing make a great deal of sense. If museums are about landmark learnings and the banking of raw data for later use, then the learning is synthesised over such a long period of time and is so individualised, that pre and post testing, as an evaluation technique, is measuring the wrong data. There are evaluation techniques that inform you if anyone is understanding anything (i.e. anecdotal or observational evaluation) but I do not know of a way to evaluate the unique educational opportunity that landmark learning presents. I accept that it happens, on faith, and content myself with countless stories where adults recall important moments in museums, from their childhood, with all the details and sensations still fresh in their minds.

Question: Can there be fun and learning at the same time or what is the difference between an amusement centre and an amusing exhibit?

Answer: My response to the question is always annoyance because it springs, I believe from a Calvinist notion, that fun and pleasure are evil. Real learning is itself a pleasurable activity and most of our independent learning has a pleasurable goal in mind. Learning to drive a car, learning to do the latest dance, learning to whistle, are all examples of real learnings as much as the learning of computational skills. The difference is the former examples are all volitional learning. If the museums general audience is a volitional audience, then in order for the audience to come, the museum must be seen as a place of pleasure. I am hopeful that everyone is learning something but I am equally hopeful that it is being done with as much joy and humor as possible. On a simplistic level it gives me pleasure to hear laughter and excitement and I design with that in mind.

But if I am content with learning as an amusing activity, will I forsake accuracy for pap in order to make it more palatable or to put the question another way ...

Question: What is the difference between simple and superficial? What is accuracy for the beginning learner and distorted generality for the more experienced?

Answer: This is a very troublesome question for truly deciding what to include and what to eliminate is the hardest part of any exhibition or program. I have found recently that it is the most experienced curators who have the easiest time with this question. They seem to come full circle from their own beginning learning, through their interest in the complicating nuance, and back to a synthesis based on fact: the more they know and have researched the more they feel confident to leave out. It is important that exhibits be accurately well researched, and to have most of the information left out of the text.

Yet what shall the curator do with the rest of the material she so passionately knows and wants to share. There is an audience for this more complicated and sophisticated information as well. This audience may know something about the material prior to visiting the museum or they may become interested in the information as a result of the exhibition. They want to learn more. They may even want to teach it to others. We will refer to them as "Second Level" learners.

If most visitors stay in the museum exhibits for an average of one and one half hours then the exhibit setting may not be the best place to deal with "Second Level".

It is natural therefore to have other resources available - a resource centre. It is a place, however defined in your museum, which offers more: classes, bibliographies, loan materials, training, access to collections, are all examples of Second Level functions. It is as important that this level of material is available to your audience as are the exhibits themselves, yet this Second Level is often left out of museum definitions.

"Bridging" the process of allowing a beginning learner to go the next step and find out more information, will be the area that the Boston Children's Museum will attempt to experiment with in the next few years.

We have mentioned the audience several times but have never defined them.

Question: Who is the museum audience and what is our responsibility to them?

Answer: Our audience comes in two parts: they are our group audience (which I sometimes refer to as our coerced audience, for they do not decide to come to the museum on their own, their leaders decide it would be good for them) and the volitional or general audience who decide that, out of all the possibilities, a trip to the museum is what they choose to do.

The majority of the group audiences are children. They generally view their visit as a holiday, a break from school. The group adult/child ratio is often less than the family visitors, which puts pressure on museum staffing. The leader exerts pressure on the group to behave in order to prove to the museum that he runs a tidy class. The purpose of the trip, and the nature of the visit, is generally negotiated between the museum and the group leader. We have, in my opinion, spent too much time in pleasing the group leader and too much attention on the group audience. Taking a pre-formed group, doing pre-visit training, keeping the group together, having a knowledgeable decent lecture to it and returning the class to the bus may be the easiest thing to do, and satisfy the teacher and the department of education, but it makes the museum into a school rather than emphasising its characteristics that make it a difficult but unique environment.

It is the general museum audience that can give us a clue to the special nature of museum behaviour and learning. From the museum's staff point of view this general audience has no discernible previous history. We do not know their individual interests, reading ability or educational level. They are of various ages and backgrounds. They come when they like and they leave when they want to. They make an implied contract with the museum in which most of the power is on their side. When they will come, if they will come, why they came, whether they got, or did not get, what they came for, how long they will stay, and when they will leave. They (the audience) also don't articulate the nature of the contract to you, the service provider. Feedback and reinforcement for museum staff is therefore difficult.

We tend to know something about our audience on a statistical basis but not on an individual basis. The museum audience in the United States tends to visit

for approximately 1 and 1/2 hours and is a population of relatively well educated, professional and middle class people.

Museums can be an occasion for cross-generational learning. Whole families or parts of families can learn together. Strangers can be temporarily bonded together. I have seen parents from one family help a child from another (when the help needed was apparent). It is often an opportunity for parents to teach their children but also for children to demonstrate knowledge that their parents didn't know they had.

Museums are or should be on "neutral turf", that is, on a site that seems "safe" for all to enter. Again institutional definition is important because if the museum defines its audience as, for example, a special Indian population in the United States, then it should be situated in a place that is safe for all members of the tribe to enter. However, if the museum is intended for American Indians and non-Indians alike, then its definition of "neutral turf" may force it to be adjacent to but not on tribal land. In either case being available and perceived as safe and welcoming to all its intended audience is important.

Now to recapitulate if a definition of a museum might be a place that houses real materials, is on neutral turf, that people of all ages and descriptions volitionally go or don't go to, that deals with the individual rather than group contracts, and that the visitor's individual prehistory is unknown then what opportunities does that open up to us as educators or

Question: What kind of interpretive programs are available for the general audience?

Answer: There are three basic sub-categories of interpretive programs.

First the interpreter can observe the visitor and the exhibit. Allowing the visitor to use the exhibit any way he chooses, the interpreter is trained to interact with the visitor on an individual basis and then only when he feels that the visitor is in need of some help or some additional explanation. The interpreter has to be trained to be observant and patient. She has to be trained to watch all the participants in her space and to feel that she is doing her job even when she is doing nothing. This form of staff interaction we call Level One programming. It is important to include a name and to train for this non-intrusive interaction because it allows the visitor to concentrate on the exhibit itself. The effectiveness of an exhibit can be interfered with by an over zealous interpreter.

Yet there is often a moment when the visitor is confused and in need of assistance. He may want more information, or permission to do something. Often he looks puzzled or hesitant. The interpreters need to be seen as available. At the Boston Children's Museum we train interpreters in such skills as position on the space, and body language that looks inviting rather than excluding. We role-play ways to enter into conversations and ways to wait until appropriate moments. We call this program Level One because it is the most basic, it is also the most sophisticated to do correctly.

Level Two programs are ways of changing the traffic flow of an exhibit by calling attention to one element of it. When an interpreter gives tours, reads selections aloud or demonstrates an interactive element, the visitor generally focuses on that section. A small group forms and that further distorts the normal traffic pattern. This level of program often allows parts of an exhibit to work that are generally overlooked. It also identifies the interpreter as a helper and can open other avenues of conversations about the exhibit.

Level Three is the introduction of some additional program into the space by using materials that do not remain on the space without an interpreter.

This program comes in many forms, of which demonstrations, make and take activities, boxes of handleable artefacts, costumed role-play are examples. This form of activity is the easiest to train interpreters and the easiest for them to do, for it puts something into their hands and allows them to be the focus of the visitors attention. The interpreter in a Level Three program has a clear assignment. This is usually the way our youngest and newest interpreters work. The audience likes these programs because it makes them feel special. They have come upon something that is in addition to the exhibition. Furthermore, add-on activities allow the museum to change the visitors experience without having to change the exhibition space itself. The disadvantage of add-on activities is that they tend to be the focus of the visit.

The exhibition becomes the backdrop for the program; the audience often does the project and then leaves the space without ever having looked at the walls and objects.

It is important to have a balanced program for the visitor; where in some locations the person is free to look around and have help when needed (Level One); some locations, where he will have attention focused on specific exhibit elements (Level Two); and where he will occasionally come across a special add-on project (Level Three). In order to insure such a balanced visit for the audience, the educator must train interpreters in the importance of all three levels, for left on their own, many interpreters will concentrate on "add-on" programs. The programs that they will do easiest will be product oriented ones (e.g. crafts or making food). Additional training is needed for what we call "orchestration" which allows interpreters and supervisors to know how and when to change from one level to another and how to achieve program balance in the whole museum at any one time. This issue of "orchestration" is currently a new focus of our training at the Boston Children's Museum.

But if interpretive programs can augment the visitors learning, it is the exhibit itself which is the focus of our attention, and so the next question logically is ...

Question: How do we determine what exhibit technique to use?

Answer: We have the opportunity to define our institutional relationship to materials as being the preserver, the researcher and explainer.

If we focus on our role as explainer of materials we must then make a closer definition. Are we the explainer for all people regardless of their previous life history or do we choose to present our explanations for one particular segment, for example, the scholar? Should we try to be the explainer for all ages, for all ethnic groups, for people who speak our language and those who don't? And, furthermore, can we design for multiple entry; that is, for people who know nothing, know a little and those who know a lot about our subject?

What techniques shall we use? The answer is simple - all exhibit techniques have their place. While I come from a "hands-on" museum, I am not an advocate of "hands-on" only. Rather, in designing an exhibit, I like to concentrate on the following issues:

Subject matter

a) Can subject be effectively dealt with in exhibit format? If the answer is that the subject will be better understood as a book or a movie then I try not to force it into an exhibit. This is a particularly difficult decision when one is doing a comprehensive exhibit on a subject and doesn't have examples of certain elements.

I try, not always successfully, to leave out sections of the subject rather than having a section which only works as an enlarged, upright book.

Technique

b) Do I have at my disposal an encyclopedic knowledge of exhibit material and technique? I am forever looking at installation strategies for later use, i.e. where is push-button effective, how is labelling done, what are the hands-on elements, and how are additional resource materials presented. I am anxious to use the most effective strategy for each exhibit and feel free to borrow from both innovative and traditional techniques.

Levels

c) Are there multiple entry levels so that many members of my audience can get something from the exhibit. I am most interested in installations that allow for different styles and different levels of interest. I am always concerned that we allow the beginning learner to feel comfortable but want to include some material for the more advanced learner as well. I pay attention to language levels so that I am not eliminating understanding by using words that are too difficult for children to understand. I like to include many different "sense" entries so that sight isn't the only way to understand.

I am especially interested in the single exhibit installation that allows many different outcomes. For example, in an exhibit about "How Movies Move" at the Boston Children's Museum one draws on strips of paper and places the strips in revolving drums. When one looks at the paper spinning, the illustration of motion is created. This exhibit works well for the handicapped person just spinning the drum, a young child learning to use a crayon, and the artist making an elaborate cartoon.

Each person is rewarded by success, each learns an individualised next step and yet, the physical exhibit element is exactly the same for each.

Try out and revision

d) Prior to building an exhibit, have I tried out the individual ideas and do I have a possibility to revise what does not work? Building in a philosophy of try out and revision allows one the freedom to be wrong and one is often wrong. It also allows the staff the optimism of knowing that errors can be corrected. Nothing is more painful for a staff member than to work daily in an exhibition that does not work, assess the problem and be unable to correct it. Budgets need to be written which include revision so that all exhibits can have an evolutionary process.

Collections

e) And finally, are there installation techniques that are protective to collections and engaging to the visitor. I am fascinated currently with "hands-off" techniques that still allow some audience response, for example, the opening of drawers and cabinets is an audience activity. If the drawers have been covered with plexi glass and the collections have been installed to protect them against the shock of motion we have "do touch" (the drawer opening) "don't touch" (the drawer as exhibit case) and surprise "what is in that drawer? Which drawer shall I open?"

Traditionally educators have often been precluded from participating in exhibit design, only being allowed to interpret a completed exhibit that may not work well for them.

I suspect they have been left out partly because the curators staff felt that the educators were not especially sensitive to collection preservation. A focus on installations that are protective to collections is not only good museum practice but also puts educators and curators on the same side of the fence, and is, therefore, good politics.

Question: If I see all audiences as my audience and all exhibit techniques as my techniques then should there be separate programs for children and separate children's museums?

Answer: I am hopeful that more "adult" museums will see their mission to serve families. I think proliferation of children's museums tend to compete with already established institutions. Furthermore, segregating children into their own institutions alleviates other institutions responsibility in dealing with them. Many museums will be well served to turn their attention to the beginning learner and understand that only one of the elements of a beginning audience is children. Designing for children has good side effects:

1. Lower placement of labels works well for the wheelchair visitor.
2. Simpler labels work well for the learning disabled, or poorly educated.
3. Hands-on activities work well with the non-English speaking audience.
4. Bringing children to learn something allows adults to surreptitiously learn too.

These few examples serve to remind me that when we include children in our museum thinking we tend to be more inclusive generally. We also tend to be more humanistic and more informal in our museum policy. Yet I am not advocating a situation in which chaos ensues. Just as I would like to see all ages feel comfortable in the Museum I also understand we need to maintain protection of our property.

However, all museums do not need to be for all people. I believe there is a place for scholarly museums as well as entry level institutions. It is incumbent on all of us to identify our audience with accuracy and then to assess the real not imagined ways of attracting them.

- If we really want families then we must make internal spaces feel comfortable to bring children without them getting lost.
- If we really want unevenly educated adults then we must think about appropriate reading level in our labels.
- If we really want ethnic minorities then we must think about involving them directly in policy and planning.
- If we really want the handicapped then we must address accessibility.
- If we really want the elderly then we must make seating available.

And so it goes on. It is not enough to say the museum is for everyone for there are subliminal signs the audience reads that announce that we really don't mean it.

Question: Do I see this vision of a museum as relevant for other countries?

Answer: I believe a broad definition of museum which emphasises three-dimensional materials, beginning learning as well as second level, cross-generational pluralistic audiences and comfortable neutral space will tend to make institutions a hybrid between a traditional museum, a community centre and a resource centre. It will encourage exhibitions as well as kits, performances as well as training, scholarship as well as student clubs.

Emerging countries have collections and history of great strength, they need to present that history in terms that are understandable by all, regardless of educational level, and that can reach rural as well as urban neighbourhoods. We are all in need of self pride and it is often access to the artefacts of our own personal as well as collective history that allows us to feel proud.

It is my hope that designing for all ages, interests and education and using a broadly based definition of objects will allow countries to experiment with new museum models that will work well for them and be instructive to us all.

Finally

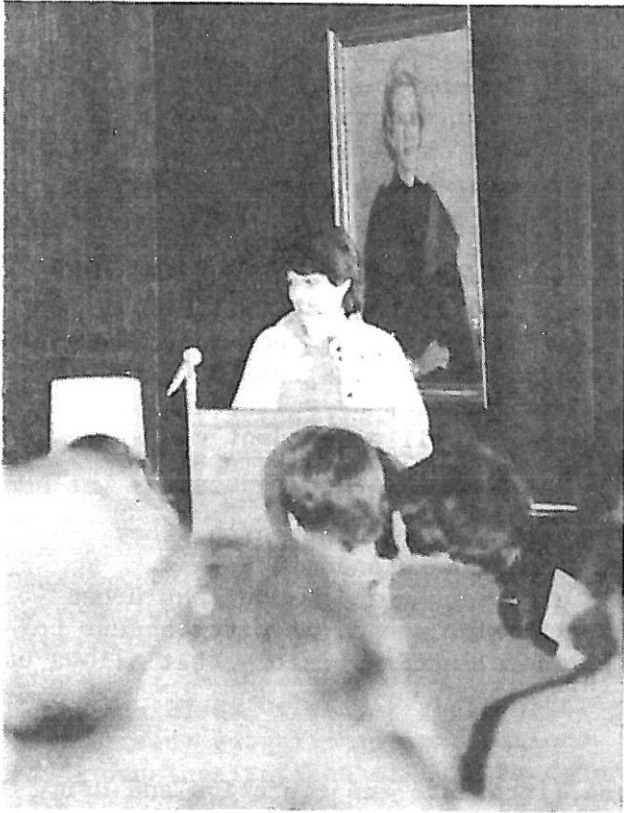
Question: Do I like my Job?

Answer: I am wild about it. We, in this room, are lucky people for we can think about something so rich, complex, and unwieldy as museums.

- If we fail to collect accurately an element of our society will be lost.
- If we fail to preserve carefully the material will be lost anyway.
- If we interpret boringly only a few people will come.
- If we interpret flamboyantly and lots of people come, we will be accused of pandering to the worst element.
- If we interpret inaccurately, we will mislead.

In an age where schools are under scrutiny, in an age where self education known as life long learning is being extolled, in an age when all people are realising that their traditions and artefacts need preservation - we are sitting here with the "stuff".

Why are we sitting here, let's get to work!



An Australian Perspective on Museum Education

by Deborah Barber,
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Over the last 10 years, perhaps 5 years in particular, there has been a great influx of funding into special education. In most cases where the departments of education have provided funds for secondments, and such things as capital works, then fairly substantial financial commitments have been made to these specialist services.

Financial commitments are usually indicative of the educational value which is placed upon the services provided. (If I wanted to be cynical I might say it was more a measure of the "trendiness" of the issue.) However, departments of education have provided the funding necessary for the operation of education programs.

As we are all aware, money is now being restricted; is there any section here which has not felt the pressures of financial cuts or threatened financial cuts? (The recent example is where the number of seconded officers to Adelaide Zoo was reduced by one-third, a situation that can only be deplored by all here.) With funding so tight, as education sections we will be