

It's been almost 15 years since "Endings: An Exhibit About Death and Loss" appeared at the Boston Children's Museum, and it seems that I've been talking about it ever since, though far more controversial exhibits have shown up since then. This either means that I'm a sucker for writing things when asked, or that the environment at TCM remains an exemplar for the kind of experimentation and risk-taking that controversial topics demand. Or, maybe the later explosions have simply highlighted the issues we must grapple with when considering provocative subject matter. In any case, in this essay, I'll try to outline the four potential problem areas in doing such exhibits and then describe how each of these played out in the single example of "Endings".

Internal Controversy

Generally, internal misgiving is the first hurdle a controversial project must jump. Many ideas don't make it. It's easy to see why. Any institution has to find funding, please a board, serve up work in an equitable way amongst staff, and worry about the gate. Few institutions have mission statements that might outrightly encourage the kind of experimentation that difficult subject matter demands. It's only when there exists some unanimity of belief about the importance of a topic, and some passion on the part of its internal promoters that an overtly provocative project can get underway. The societal importance of AIDS education can over ride internal fears. The necessity of conservation messages to the core ideology of an institution can create an environment in which the pointed tackling of oil spills and industrial waste is possible. If this kind of internal agreement is not present at the outset of a project, it's probably not worth starting in the first place.

The more insidious problem is that of the dilution of the message over the course of the development process. We may all agree that AIDS education is imperative for teenagers, but how graphic are we actually going to be about the means of its transmission? Are we going to make sure that our teaching device actually works for the intended audience? This is, of course, where the rubber meets the road and our best and bravest intentions may fail us. Clarity of purpose and real evaluation of results are the only defense. And this defense must be used in the most politic of ways. Polarization can be death.

Sponsors/Funders and Controversy

When administrators sound the death knell on a topic or an approach to a topic, it's often funders that they have in mind. How will it look to our car company corporate sponsor if we make a big deal about automobile emissions in our new transportation exhibit? What will the conservative board member say about a sex education exhibit? How will the city feel about our political history exhibit? What will state funders do if they see our name in the headlines because of a provocative piece of art or an ethnic hot button some how pushed? There's a lot to protect, and it's a dirty job, but somebody has to do it. And people - mostly directors - have lost their jobs over such things.

The irony is that who has funded the exhibition is sometimes the very thing that creates controversy. Can an exhibit funded by an extermination company be telling us the truth about insects? How is it possible that a women's sporting event can be funded by a cigarette manufacturer? And when federal funding is involved, things can get even more complicated. The Mapplethorpe and Enola Gay exhibits would not have aroused half the controversy they did had they been privately funded and displayed. It was the very idea that citizen's tax dollars were being used that allowed so much pressure to come to bear.

Outside Stakeholders/The Media and Controversy

The truth is that without provocation and publicity, none of the issues mentioned above are likely to amount to anything. With provocation and publicity, the mildest of exhibits can find themselves in difficult straits. The first problem that can arise is that the institution may have overlooked potential stakeholders. This may be a result of 'ivory towerism', lack of homework, or just plain denial, or the controversy may arise from a source so unlikely that prediction is impossible. (I was once told a story about a big natural history museum doing the definitive human evolution exhibit and prepared for the creationists at the gate, only to discover instead, that an anti-apartheid group had arrived to picket because a skull in the exhibit had its origins in South Africa.) When institutions don't know what's coming, they can't engage potential stakeholders before the fact, and they can't prepare their staff, their visitors or themselves for the controversy that may follow. They are blindsided.

Potential publicity may be even harder to handle, but the same rules apply. Homework to uncover possible problems can be used to clarify the institution's reasons for attacking the issue in the first place, so they can be prepared to address the press with unity, logic, and a collective cool head.

There is, of course, also the theory that all publicity is good publicity. While probably true, it's usually only retrospectively that this adage can be appreciated, and not at the moment the director is on the phone with a city councilperson who's just read the morning paper.

The Visitor and Controversy

Oftentimes the formless fears of picketers, bad press, and rampaging funders are not invoked during the rejection or dilution stages of an exhibit. It sounds too paranoid. Rather, it is the poor, defenseless visitor (et. al.) who will presumably be offended. There are two things to note. The first is that this is by far and away the easiest group to take the temperature of, as the exhibit developer can simply go out on to the floor and ask them. Naturally, this is best done throughout the process by an accomplished interviewer with sophisticated instruments. But, at the outset of a project, there is no reason on earth not to inquire of twenty five or so visitors what their take would be on the institution doing an exhibit about AIDS prevention, human evolution, nuclear waste disposal or live whales. It's amazing what one can learn. It's of course also useful to talk to one's colleagues who have attempted such topics before, and, if the exhibit topic goes on to the development stage, to bring together an advisory committee who represent various points of view to address issues as they arise.

The second thing to note is that an interesting and well made exhibit that has taken into consideration the possibility of opposing points of view (even if it doesn't subscribe to them), is unlikely to be the butt of a debilitating controversy. Visitors (et. al.) are not stupid, and they have, after all selected your museum and this exhibit to see though they had many, many other choices.

Endings: An Exhibit About Death and Loss

This exhibit was first proposed many years before its' implementation by a natural history developer who was dying of cancer. Through her museum teaching experience and now her very personal experience, she had come to believe that difficult subject of death was very much worth exploring for both children - who were extremely interested in it - and for adults who had the hard job of trying to explain something to kids that was also difficult for them. This gifted teacher died before the exhibit could be funded, but the idea stuck, partly in memory of her and her passion to do the exhibit, but also because it rang true to the rest of us: we believed we were an organization whose job it was to create communication about subjects that were important to children and parents. So internally, the first hurdle had been jumped without much ado. However, the interesting issues of dilution were still before us.

These arose first in our board. One member in particular was dead set against it and did everything in her power to first prevent the exhibit and when that failed, to dilute it. Her suggestion was to incorporate the subject matter into other exhibits. The Japanese Home would celebrate O-Bon every August, the natural history exhibit would contain labels among the mounted specimens that addressed the confusion many younger kids express about the “realness” of “stuffed” animals. This is the point at which the exhibit might have vanished had not equally passionate voices both on the board and staff come to its rescue.

Funding this exhibit was not easy either. The topic was often picked out from our wish list for discussion on trips to agencies and foundations, but rarely seriously considered. When we were finally invited to submit to a federal agency, the proposal never went to review after the staff read it. They called in a panic explaining that they hadn’t realized that our proposal about death and grieving was actually about death and grieving! They suggested we resubmit with a version that took a more “anthropological” view: death among the Victorians, or tribal peoples in Amazonia for instance. Another dilution attempt to which we stood firm and finally found a small state level funder who was not only unafraid, but excited about our straightforward approach. This had taken about five years.

In the meantime, we were out on the floor talking to the public. I would go to the pet store and collect dead gold fish, or set up a table when one of our turtles or guinea pigs died and simply talk to children and adults. This is what I learned: First, everyone, almost without exception, wanted to engage over this subject, asking questions, telling stories, showing their children, touching something that is dead. Second, no adult, almost without exception, wanted to be surprised by the subject matter and I soon learned to announce that “I have some live animals here and some dead animals here”. (Visitors of all ages flocked to the table. However, if I neglected this introduction, many adults were upset to discover after arrival that some of the animals were dead.) And finally, three year olds do not perceive that a goldfish is dead unless it is floating belly up in a fish bowl. (I think they think that if you take it off the paper towel and put it in water, it will be alive again.) This kind of experimentation and conversation convinced me that the exhibit was not only doable, but also important. It also gave me a well of experience with real visitors to draw on later both to develop the exhibit and to use to counter later dilution attempts.

The advisory committee we formed was also an important part of the equation. The most useful members were those from the psychological community who had an even bigger well of experience in talking to real people around issues of death and grieving. Their assurances that one could straightforwardly broach the topic without in any way “uncorking” or

damaging participants was a great source of strength. Other advisors included members of the educational, religious and support group communities.

As the development continued, almost everyone engaged in fearful behavior. It became clear to us that if every object that made someone uncomfortable were removed, there would be no exhibit left. What's most interesting is that the same object was rarely cited by more than one individual. Objects brought up for discussion included: bottles of embalming fluid (fluid replaced with colored water), a time lapse film from Nova of a decomposing mouse, a video that talked about death on TV (this was curtained off with a parental discretion sign), a dead frog, a casket (finally displayed opened, upright and plexed over). You get the picture. Dismay (and a need for dilution) was in the eye of each individual beholder.

Of course, when we finally opened the exhibit, it felt like a whole experience and all the talk about this object or that object ceased. We did do two important things not previously mentioned. Remembering the early try-outs, we made the entrance distinct and set back, so that entering the exhibit would be a choice, and we put four different talk-back areas in the exhibit so that everyone had a chance to state an opinion. These were heavily used, and sometimes the writer did want to tell us that they thought the exhibit was inappropriate in some way, but they mostly wrote to thank us or tell us a story of their own. There was one exception: a very small, but quite vocal contingent of people of fundamentalist Christian belief. They wrote nastily to tell us to read our Bibles to see that there was no such thing as death! (I think they were also upset by the exhibit's 'secular humanist' stance: all major religions and afterlife beliefs - including that there was none - were represented in the exhibit.) We were blindsided by them. The rabbi, minister, priest contingent on the advisory council had never foreseen this and neither had we.

Fortunately, the media was also blindsided. Not knowing exactly how to do PR for this exhibit, we simply didn't. An AP editor came to the opening however, and asked to write a blurb. We agreed. Six or eight paragraphs suddenly appeared in over 70 newspapers all over the country. Local TV then showed up enmasse, as did Today, and Nightline. Except for Nightline, most turned up to do the kind of human interest story we were used to having. Nightline smelled a controversy and went for the jugular. They sent a particularly nasty stringer to interview me and rattle me in to admitting the exhibit was somehow dangerous for kids. (This made me angry, but fortunately, not stupid.) They went to the psychological community in Boston to find someone to debate me on national TV. (This was the very community most supportive of the exhibit!) They interviewed visitors on the space who all told them how much they enjoyed the exhibit. (One grandfather even said he'd made a special trip with his grandkids as a way to broach the subject of his own nearing death.) They never found the fundamentalists. Thank God.

In the end, all publicity was good publicity, and while this exhibit was never a blockbuster, it did reasonably well for us. I like to think we followed the rules. We were clear and committed as an organization. We did our homework and stuck to the things we learned. We produced a good exhibit that offered room for many kinds of ideas and points of view. When the media came, we remained clear and kept our heads. But, it was a risky business and it wasn't easy. And some of it was just plain luck. Had Nightline ever located the fundamentalists who know if I'd be writing this?

Endings: An Exhibit About Death and Loss appeared at the Children's Museum, Boston in 1983-4. It was conceived by Kakhi Aldrich, developed by Janet Kamien and designed by Signe Hanson. Janet Kamien is currently the Vice President, Science Center at the Franklin Institute, Philadelphia. She works with Roberta Cooks, another author in this edition. Cross your fingers for them.