

# MAKING A SCHOOL EXCURSION A LEARNING EXPERIENCE 1: A WORK IN PROGRESS

*Paper presented at “Musing on Learning” Seminar, Australian Museum, 20 April 1999, Helen Whitty, Education Services Coordinator, Powerhouse Museum*

## **Abstract**

The school audience is often treated with mixed feelings and responses by museums. Whilst they are a core, and therefore valuable audience they can be seen as an amorphous group that requires processing by museum staff rather than understanding. At its heart the audience is the school children themselves, in all their diversity. Yet they are surrounded by a litany of adults who can and do have an impact on planning and running the visit.

This paper focuses on the relationship between the school system and cultural institutions via the experiences of the Powerhouse Museum with its school audience. Both are educational institutions but with quite different cultures. Before we can even begin to explore whether and how learning takes place within a museum we need first to understand the complexity of the main meeting ground-the school excursion and its components, including key players.

The Powerhouse Museum's Evaluation and visitor research unit led by Carol Scott has managed visitor research into educational excursions for over 5 years.

This paper dips into the research most relevant to school excursions, undertaken by, or on behalf of the museum and how it is informing the Education services practice. It 'muses' on the years ahead, especially in relation to learning in our institution.

## Introduction

*“Museum collections ignite the imagination. They are rich resources for diverse experiences because of the many stories they tell, the varieties of information they convey, and the different ideas they suggest. While any object could be used to enhance creative thinking, museum objects rank among the highest calibre of stimuli.” (1)*

To expand thinking, to fire the imagination...rings loud bells for me when I think about museums and specifically the Powerhouse. However is this the ingredient being selected by schools when they look at the excursion menu and point to museums?

In fact, what are schools looking for when they choose an excursion venue?

## Who is the audience?

The school audience's true form and texture is actually more varied than is sometimes assumed or at least implied via the treatment it may receive on excursions. At its heart the audience is the school children themselves-from Kindergarten to year 12. Children come in a range of shape, sizes, colours not to mention age, gender, ethnicity, class, culture, ability, interests etc etc.

They are surrounded by adults who can all have an impact on the decision to visit a museum including:

- The class teacher
- Other teachers
- Curriculum and other advisers
- The principal
- School policies, (devised by a myriad of groups from head offices to school councils)
- The school secretary
- The parent/carer

These adults act within the milieu as individuals, subject to the same shaping forces as everyone else; (simply put teachers are people too!). They also act within a role within an institutional framework. And their motivation to plan excursions is based on goals as varied and diverse as the students they are supervising. These goals may be curricular, social, cultural or vocational .

## **The studies**

I wish to draw on three main reports undertaken under the guidance of the Evaluation and Visitor Research Coordinator, (3-5) since 1992. Three important notes:

1. In every study the teachers planning or undertaking the excursion were the main qualitative source. Whilst they commented on other players expectations and responses, (including their students) it is the teachers interpretation of those reactions.
2. There is great commonality between the reports, but with emphasis changing over the years.
3. This paper concentrates on the educational nature of the excursion rather than other factors explored in the studies.

## **What do we know about the audience?**

From the 1992 study:

- Assistance by staff and volunteers enhanced visitor satisfaction
- Hands on component of exhibition or service is a strength
- Teachers require better preparation for a visit

From a 1993 study we discovered that teachers value:

- an extension and expansion of outlook beyond the classroom;
- the opportunity for experiential learning as a contrast to verbal
- the opportunity to broaden the social experience of the students; and
- safety for the group as a whole.

From the 1994 study:

This study observed a tangible difference in the response from Government, (G) compared to Non Government, (NG) schools. For example:

- NGs appeared more thoughtful and organised. Teachers stressed links to the syllabus and greater knowledge of what different venues offered.
- NGs were more confident in their role as professionals and therefore expected museum staff to be professionals and complement their skills rather than supplement. They emphasised academic rigour.
- Gs emphasised the practical difficulties in organising excursions. For example, getting and handling money was an issue for Gs.

### Between primary and secondary school teachers

- The older the student the more important is the link to the specific unit of work. Primary school students could be taken out, occasionally, for fun.
- Student safety was a more important issue for primary school teachers
- Student interest in the excursion was more significant for secondary school teachers than primary school and more important for Gs rather than NGs.
- In fact there was an indication for some Gs that unless the student wanted to visit the venue the excursion would not proceed.
- Parents played a more significant role in primary schools. Further NGs demanded of their parents a high standard of interest if they accompanied the excursion.
- Gs merely hoped their parents would find the excursion satisfactory.

### Generally

- Links to the syllabus were not necessarily the reason for the excursion but were important to justify it.
- All teachers found organising and taking excursions stressful
- The importance of providing essential life experiences and seeing something real was stressed
- Importance of a guide who had excellent communication skills; educators to develop the program and clockwork organisation were similarly stressed
- Handouts and hands-on were expected

### From 1998 study

- Museums are in a highly competitive environment. For example students could leave school to visit anything from Macquarie Centre Ice Rink, (ice relating to their study of the Winter Olympics) to The Olympic site at Homebush. From Planet Hollywood, (food technology) to the local Nursing home, and of course museums and galleries...
- Commitment by teachers to a common philosophical ideal that excursions are a valuable educational experience
- Factors within many secondary schools mitigate against real enthusiasm for excursions. Teachers are very busy and want personal customer service that is attuned to their needs.
- Teachers want a good quality, memorable educational experience which promises a valuable advantage in terms of personal educational goals.
- Cultural, social, vocational and academic goals affect perspectives on participation at particular venues
- *“Students and parents idiosyncratic definition of and strong adherence to educational goals can negate the importance of excursion experiences; and or increase discernment and expectations in relation to the venue.”* Having said that, teachers

want well designed teaching material which reflects the most important perspective on curriculum content, with clearly discernible relevance and value to educational and/or vocational goals.

- Cost, safety and security are important issues affecting venue choice.
- Venue must have appropriate and involving activities, status as a venue and be able to generate enthusiasm from the students.
- Teachers and students need to have a very clear handle on what it is the venue is offering. The particular excursion at a particular venue must resonate with them.

So here is what teachers want and need. They are individuals acting in a stressful and competitive work environment. They want 'the best' for the students and they want 'the best' for themselves. The 'best' for their students varies from teacher to teacher and from school to school. It is not only academic goals which must be met but social, cultural and vocational. The 'best' for the teacher is a well planned successful stress free excursion which will reflect well on them as professionals. In other words, a customised excursion "package".

**What about the students?** Both the later studies indicated that the students wishes were important, especially for the older ones. Either directly or indirectly the student needed to express enthusiasm for the venue.

**What about the parent?** The indication is that they also carry a variety of perspectives when it comes to excursion venues and their views will accord different weight according to the school their child attends.

There are practical needs for the teachers, parents and students. There are also the less tangible but equally important 'positioning' of programs. They must be able to sit comfortably and intelligently with all these players.

### **And what about museums and learning in this complex web of motivations?**

George E Hein in looking for evidence of learning in museums says, (p 153):

- People learn in museums. People have enriching, stimulating, rewarding, or restorative experiences in museums. They learn about themselves, the world, and specific concepts; they have aesthetic, spiritual and 'flow' experiences.
- To maximise their potential to be educative, museums need first to attend to visitors' practical needs.
- Orientation, amenities, making museum agendas clear, maximising the possibility that the intended interactions between the content of the museum and visitor be as positive as possible
- People incorporate the content of museums into the agendas they bring with them, and their social interactions, attentions, feelings and fantasies include and often focus on, the content of museums.
- Museums are not efficient places for traditional 'school' education, learning specific facts and concepts, because people don't spend enough time and are not there primarily for that purpose
- Staff should never underestimate the value of wonder, exploration, mind expanding, cognitively dissonant and aesthetic experiences.
- Interaction with the contents of the museum must allow visitors to connect what they see, do and feel with what they already know, understand and acknowledge.

Teachers want well organised excursions-the practical side. Hein says learning cannot take place without a visitors practical needs being taken into account. There is a synergy between what teachers are saying that they want from an excursion and what is being said here about learning in museums. If indeed learning is very broadly defined within a museum and programs built around this definition it can serve to meet the variety of goals articulated by teachers for excursions, and the assumed, (but as yet untested) expectations and needs of the students.

### **So what is the problem?**

The museum has worked very hard over the years to respect and know its schools audience and then to meet their needs. The Powerhouse has diversified its programs, removed or alleviated many practical barriers to participation. It will continue to do so. We are very interested in learning in our museum. The basis or rationale of the program of visitor studies cited here was very worthy-to ensure we were meeting the needs and expectations of schools when taking excursions and thereby maintaining our schools audience. It was not to discover or research what or how students are learning on excursions. But lo and behold we discover that this is exactly what we need to do even if we are operating purely in a marketing framework! We need a clear positioning of our programs underpinned by their educational framework for all the players in the excursion game.

Oh if only they understood us the marriage would be made in heaven! Well not quite. Whilst we must be true to ourselves as unique institutions with an educational mandate and know what this means we must also ensure the communications channels are open with a shared language. Otherwise we are simply polishing silver in our ivory tower.

## **The Powerhouse Museum**

The working definition of Museum Learning for our museum, (developed by Peter Mahony, Lorraine Barlow, Lysele Assarapin and Linda Larsen as part of the Orientation Working Party) is this:

*Museum Learning is an ongoing process and engages the senses, stimulates memory, personal meaning and imagination, arouses curiosity and encourages understanding of and respect for cultural heritage and other people.*

We intend to take this working definition and marry with our own education services in accordance with the museums own profile.

The Powerhouse is about HOW things work and WHO made these things. It expresses the STORIES underpinning creativity and ingenuity and has the ability to inspire and transform our visitors to express their own creativity. Once we have our definition of learning we can better share it with our communities and then begin to review our programs and construct our own research paradigms on learning. And so the learning circle goes on and hopefully so will our relevance as educational institutions...

## **Sources**

Using museums to expand creative thinking by Alan Gartenhaus  
Office of Public Management Generic Outcomes Hierarchy-Competitive services  
Looking at schools (prepared by the Education and Visitor services department for the Powerhouse Museum, unpublished, 1992)  
Teacher responses to excursions, unpublished survey, (reported by Carol Scott, 1993)  
Environmetrics market watch series (observed by Helen Whitty for the Powerhouse Museum, unpublished presentation, 1994)  
Evaluation of educational programs and services (by Quadrant Research Services, unpublished, 1998)  
Learning in the museum by George E Hein, Routledge 1998  
Effective Schools by Barry McGraw et al ACER 1991  
Schools as learning communities-a discussion paper DSE 1995