

Visitor Learning Outcomes at the Museum of Peoples and Cultures

Tammy Messick
Brigham Young University

Research Question

What are the learning outcomes of visitors at the Museum of Peoples and Cultures?

Background

The Museum of Peoples and Cultures (MPC) is an anthropology museum at Brigham Young University. The MPC's institutional mission strives to enhance both cognitive-based learning as well as increased awareness of diverse peoples and cultures. In order to gain a baseline understanding of visitor learning at the Museum, this research relied on a framework which identified eight recurring learning outcomes evident in museum experiences. These include knowledge, skills, values, museum literacy, social learning, creativity, and awareness (Falk, Dierking, Adams 2006).

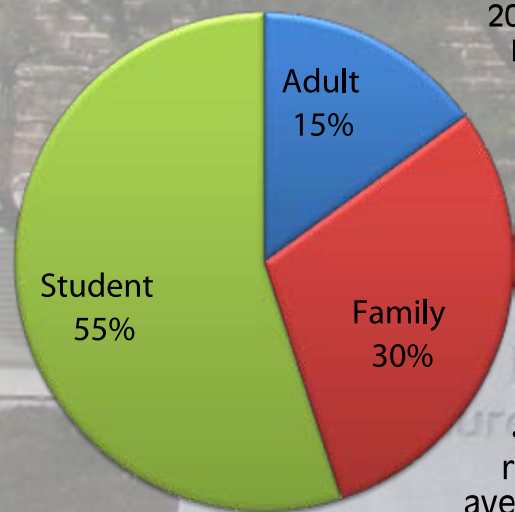


Methodology

Utilizing ethnographic methods, 33 walk-in visitors were interviewed and a total of over 70 visitors were observed over the course of three months. This project was two-fold: first, gathering demographics of visitors for the museum and second, identifying the main learning outcomes for the MPC's visitors.

Demographics

The Museum's audience in the winter of 2008 comprised (in order of frequency) BYU students, families, and non-student adults.



- Of the students, 53% visited the museum for class assignments and the other 47% visited for leisure purposes.
- Non-student adult visitors ranged from retired couples passing through the area, to amateur archaeologists.
- Visitor time spent in the galleries ranged from 25 to 65 minutes with an average of 40.5 minutes.

Results

At the MPC, there is evidence that visitors gain learning outcomes from several of the categories, but the most significant outcomes at the MPC are knowledge and awareness. The dominance of these two learning outcomes is evidence that the MPC is in fact meeting its institutional mission. In addition to these, the museum's visitors are gaining other outcomes such as museum literacy, and social learning. Falk and Sheppard (2006) found that visitor learning outcomes are greatly influenced by the visitor's motivation for attending the museum. This study at the MPC demonstrated that visitors who attended the MPC as part of their coursework gained the most factual knowledge regarding the exhibit. Conversely, those who visited the museum with friends during their leisure time gained an awareness of new cultures. Others who visited with their peers discussed how their interpersonal relationships were enhanced by their museum-going experience.

Figure 1

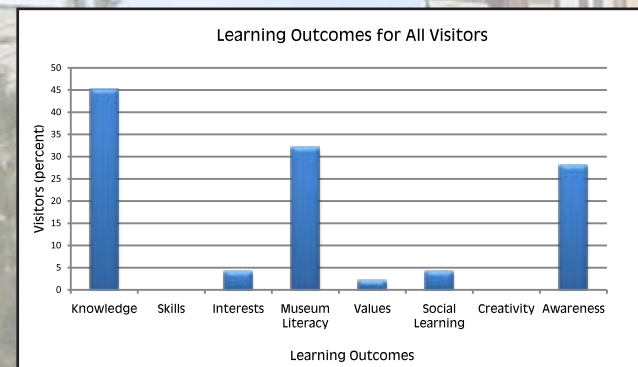


Figure 1 shows the overview of the learning outcomes at the MPC. 45% of visitors reported gaining knowledge from their experience.

Figure 2

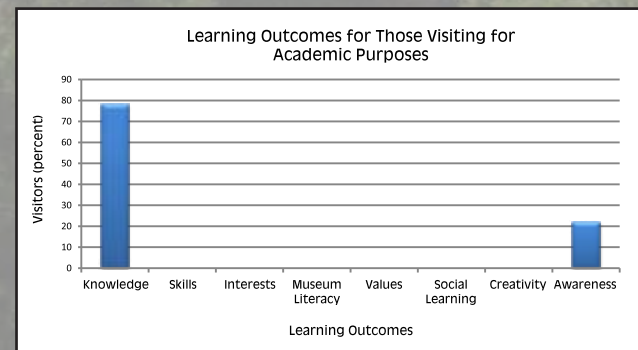


Figure 2 shows that the two primary learning outcomes for those visiting for academic purposes were knowledge and awareness.

Figure 3

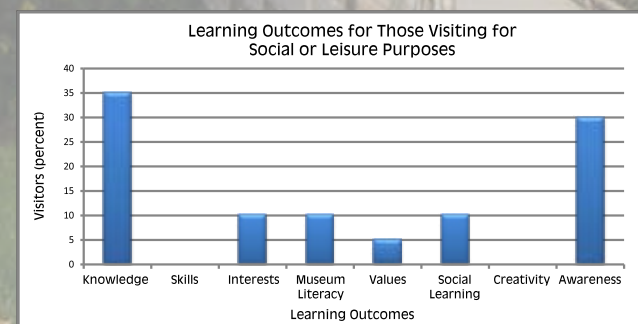


Figure 3 shows those visiting for social or leisure purposes had a wide variety of learning outcomes.

The Visitor's Voice

The following are ethnographic examples of the types of learning captured at the MPC:

Knowledge

"I know about a new culture now I've never heard of before. I am just remembering all the little designs and how geometric some of them were and how some of them just looked like animals. Also, I learned about some of the animals, like the dog, they would bury them with people sometimes to accompany them in the underworld. I thought that was kind of cool. And just some other stuff about their religion, like how they sacrificed their animals."



Awareness

"For me, as I was reading everything I gained a greater appreciation for Native Americans that lived in that area and how hard life was and how much they had to adapt. And, how rich their culture is...It appears they had a diverse, rich culture."

Value

Some visitors to the MPC expressed surprise for the types of worship and rituals performed by various religions associated with artifacts on display. One father expressed his surprise at one of the displays saying "I thought a lot about the picture of those people praying, in front of the guy dressed up with the cigarette and the tie... Can that be real? It seemed strange that anyone would worship an object so clearly made with man's hands." As such, the Museum has the challenge to remain sensitive, yet informative to its audience.



Next Steps

Based on my research, I recommended that the museum diversify and deepen the learning outcomes for visitors' experiences. These findings have led the exhibit team to first diversify experiences by creating components which enhance learning in the areas of skills and creativity. Next, the museum plans to conduct more research to understand how to best deepen the learning outcomes for visitors.

Acknowledgements
Special thanks to BYU's Office of Research and Creative Activities for providing funding for this research and to Paul Stavast, Interim MPC Director, for mentoring and encouraging the project.

Key References
Falk, John H., Lynn D. Dierking, and Marianna Adams
2006 Living in a Learning Society: Museums and Free-choice Learning. In A Companion to Museum Studies. Sharon McDonald, ed. Pp. 323-339. Blackwell Publishing: Malden.
Falk, John H. and Beverly K. Sheppard
2006 Thriving in the Knowledge Age. Lanham: AltaMira Press.
Hein, George
1998 Learning in Museums. London: Routledge.
Zahava Doering
1996 Questioning the Entrance Narrative. Journal of Museum Education 21(3): 20-23.