

Visitor Observations: Seeing is Believing

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Shedd Aquarium

We all observe our visitors...



Short (Selective) History

- Melton
- Wolf
- Serrell
- Underhill
- Digital

Arthur Melton

- “See George Hein’s book, Learning in the Museum”
- Study sponsored by AAM
- The floor tiles at the exhibit became worn out and had to be replaced every few weeks

Naturalistic Observation

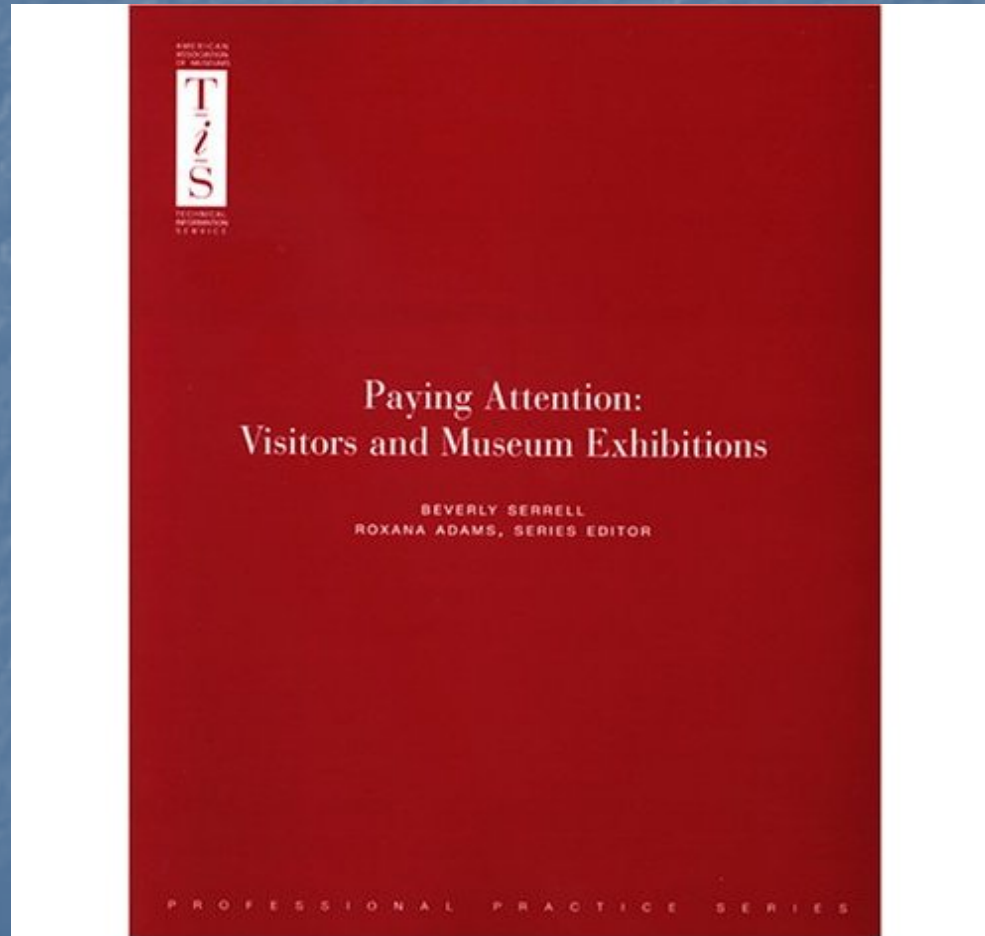
1978 Robert Wolf and Barbara Tymitz

"...based on a new evaluation perspective--naturalistic evaluation--which can help museum staff assess their programs in a more interpretative, less judgmental way. "

“Naturalistic evaluation is characterized by concern with spontaneous activities rather than pre-stated and/or overly formal objectives” ...and orientation toward a search for meaning of an entire experience such as a museum visit.

“Particularly useful types of data include descriptive data about settings, accurate descriptions of visitor actions and behaviors,... and observation of wear-spots on carpet near exhibits.”

Beverly Serrell's work



“Paying Attention”

More time spent implies increased likelihood of learning

If visitors don't stop at part of an exhibition they miss that message

Target is 51% of visitors stopping at 51% of the components of an exhibition

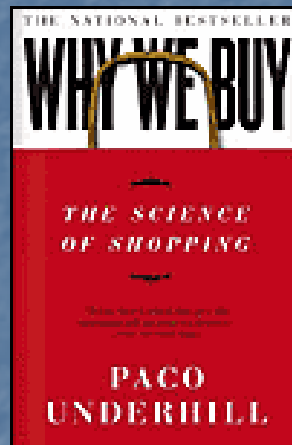
ENVIROSELL

UnderHill - Consumers



“Combining traditional market research techniques, anthropological observation methodologies and videotaping, Envirosell has established its reputation as an innovator in commercial research and as an advocate for consumer friendly packaging and shopping environments.”

Paco Underhill



- Worked with William Whyte “Project for Public Spaces”
- Has been referenced for placement of signs, wayfinding and guest services as well as exhibit design

Digital age – Interactives



Digital age – Web Sites

- Unobtrusive:
Using software
to track eye
movements
- Observe visitors
doing assigned
tasks and noting
satisfaction



Three Chicago Examples

- Lincoln Park Zoo ape house study
- Shedd Aquarium Timing and Tracking
- Chicago History Museum web site re-design

Lincoln Park Zoo

- Previous studies assisted in design of exhibit
- Pre-defined behaviors logged on hand-held computers
- Results to be presented at Visitor Studies Conference in July



Shedd Aquarium

- Part of master planning
- Unobtrusive observation followed by an interview
- Some data was pre-defined but other observations used too
- High cost in money and time

Observation data needs crunching



Things we learned

- Average visit time, and variation due to time of day and crowding level
- What guests visited and what they missed
- Time spent waiting, at exhibits, using services
- The visit starts well before entering the exhibit area

Chicago History Museum

- Digital behavior is real
- CHM used guided rather than unobtrusive observation
- Critical to brand, marketing and mission



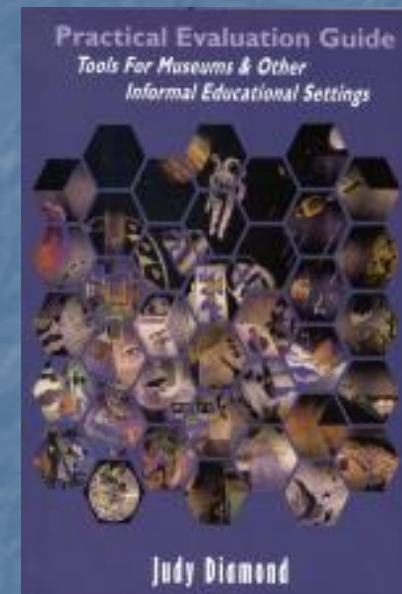
CHM Web Usability Study



Practical Evaluation Guide: *Tools for Museums and Other Informal Educational Settings*

Judy Diamond

Counting Heads
Tracking movements
Brief observations
Recording detailed observations
Recording equipment
Observation categories
Behavior sampling methods
Validity and reliability
Participant observation



Tracking Movements

- Use a simplified floor plan to record patterns
- Record only one person/one person in a group at a time
- You can note time and codes for behaviors
- Select a variety of conditions



Electronic Tracking?



Brief Observations

- Especially good for formative evaluation
- Use the most diverse subjects you can find
- Your data collection sheet reflects what is important to know about visitors as well as how they behave



Recording Detailed Observations

- Visitors interact with each other as well as exhibits
- Provides rich data, but challenging to interpret
- Qualitative findings harder to generalize

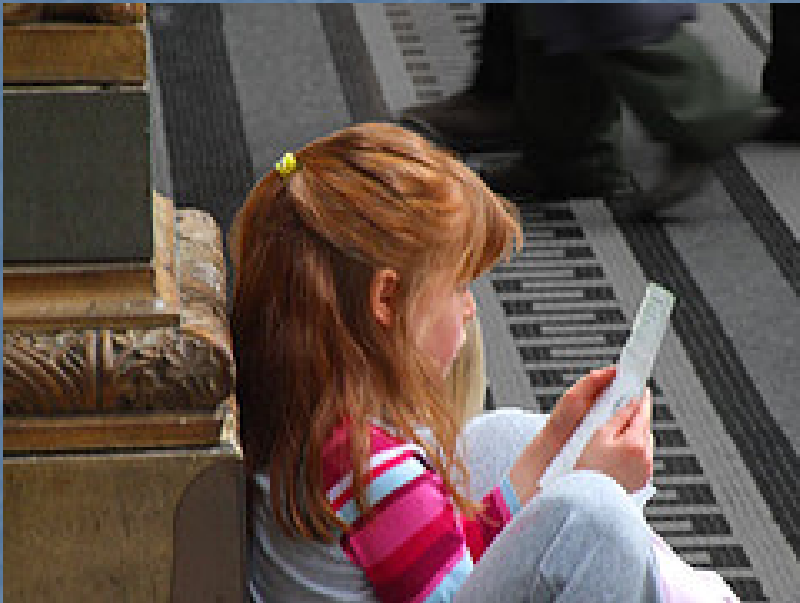


Recording Equipment

- Check sheets
- Event recorder
- Audiotape
- Videotape
- Multiple methods



Observation Categories



- Determine your major categories of behavior
- Conduct some preliminary observations and list all behaviors
- Define behaviors so categories are unambiguous

Behavior Sampling methods

- Behavior occurs in a constant stream
- Will you record continuously or at intervals?
- Are you sampling for a specific behavior?



Validity and Reliability

- Is what you are observing a true indicator? (validity)
- If this was repeated, would results be consistent? (reliability)
- Are your data collectors applying the method in the same manner (intra observer reliability)



Participant Observation

- Take descriptive data about settings
- Describe actions and behaviors accurately
- Record key words in a train of thought or discussion exactly as stated – interpret later
- Record your subjective feelings and reactions as well



Who is observing who?



- Visitors record themselves, each other and us
- What of social sites? YouTube, Flickr et al?

