Changing the Rules

Making Space for Interactive Learning in the Galleries of the Detroit Institute of Arts

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Abstract Three years after the Detroit Institute of Arts opened with all new, "visitor-centered" galleries, the museum's executive director of learning and interpretation shares the processes, successes, and lessons learned at an institution that embraced an array of hands-on learning models. The models are discussed as components of a comprehensive interpretive plan that built on the DIA education department's earlier focus on innovative interpretation and took advantage of extensive visitor research and evaluation. The article concludes by discussing the challenges art museums face when integrating hands-on learning in galleries that display rare and aesthetically-significant objects.

It's been more than three years since the Detroit Institute of Arts (DIA) reopened with all new galleries and a comprehensive interpretive plan where interactive learning opportunities play a critical role.[1] Since that time, the museum has enjoyed some success and wrestled with a few considerable challenges. In this article, I focus on how the DIA developed interactive learning components[2] for its interpretive plan, explaining how they fit within a larger context of the visitor experience.

When the Detroit Institute of Arts launched its comprehensive reinstallation project in 2002, there was no doubt that opportunities for interactive learning would be a part of the mix. In 1996, Nancy Jones, director of education at the time, established a work group within the department to focus on issues of interpretation and independent learning in the galleries. This work group, which I was hired to lead, began exploring what gallery interpretation would look like if it was based on a constructivist learning model. At the same

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time, Jones encouraged us to investigate how Abigail Housen's aesthetic development research could be used to help visitors find more meaningful connections with art in the galleries. The department also became engaged with visitor studies and evaluation. This immersion in learning theory, aesthetic development research, and visitor studies led the department to push for interpretive plans and hands-on, interactive components in the DIA's special exhibition program. Results were generally well-received. When planning for the reinstallation began, museum leadership described the project as an opportunity to apply the work we'd been doing in temporary, special exhibitions to our permanent collection.

Early planning documents for the reinstallation project declared that the DIA would become "visitor-centered," and museum leadership challenged staff to put the public's expectations, needs, and experiences at the front and center of our planning process. The education department had been a strong advocate for this approach and was eager to harness the museum's resources on a grand scale. The DIA's 90 galleries display 5,000 works of art, and we were to develop a comprehensive, visitor-centered interpretive plan for all of it. Putting the visitor at the center of an interpretive plan suggests that the works of art are pushed out of the center and to the side. What really happened at the DIA was that visitors were brought into the center, *with* the objects.

At the outset of the DIA's reinstallation project, cross-departmental teams developed seven visitor-centered outcomes informed by visitor research. The outcomes were organized into three categories and can be summarized as follows: *Enabling* outcomes focused on our desire to have visitors feel welcome, comfortable, and intellectually and physically oriented in the museum space. *Satisfaction* outcomes addressed our desire to facilitate exciting, inspiring and personally meaningful experiences that would encourage visitors to return. *Learning* outcomes challenged us to 1) help visitors recognize the similarities and differences between cultures, exploring their own identities in the process, 2) encourage visitors' feelings of revitalization at the human capacity for imagination and creative expression, and 3) facilitate visitors' deeper relationships with art by helping them build skills of independent looking and interpretation. Cross-departmental teams would address these outcomes, utilizing extensive visitor research and evaluation and interpretive strategies that included hands-on activities and technology.

The DIA's four interpretive educators[3] were assigned with curators to individual teams responsible for developing specific content areas of the museum. The educators also formed a team on our own and became the engine for the

museum's overall interpretive plan. While the curators worked only on their collections areas, the four interpretive educators discussed and assessed experiences for all areas of the collection and studied visitor evaluation reports from across the museum. Though dispatched to work on different parts of the collection, the educators consistently returned to the round table in our shared office space to discuss how people learn, what people value about museum experiences, and overall strategies for addressing the visitor outcomes. As we immersed ourselves in the project, we deepened our understanding of how the seven outcomes were intricately related, becoming even more confident that we needed to address visitors' physical comfort, their understanding of the organization of the spaces they were in, and their satisfaction that we had something meaningful and relevant to offer.

In the early months of the project, the team of educators created a menu of interpretive models to guide the creation of specific low and high-tech activities across the museum. We began by identifying target audience groups, which included families, students, dating couples, and people who'd never been to an art museum. We considered the visitor outcomes, and then identified the types of human behaviors that supported what research told us about art museum visitors' expectations and desires. We knew, for example, that many people come to the museum for social experiences; discussions with our colleagues at the Victoria & Albert Museum about their British gallery installation taught us that people like to test themselves in quiz formats; other published studies had us focusing on visitors' desires to be inspired and escape the everyday, all while learning new things about the world. The DIA's visitor panels, groups of potential visitors who came to the museum in multiple sessions to give feedback on our plans, told us they wanted to use their imaginations when in the DIA galleries, and feel as if transported to another time and place.

We scoured the museum world for examples of interactive interpretation that facilitated our desired visitor experiences, traveling to, among other places, Chicago, Toronto, New York, and London. We were looking for newer installations where staff had taken risks and broken new ground with interpretation and design. Interpretive moments that were elegantly designed, surprising, and delightful caught our attention, and we imagined how they could be adapted for use with the DIA's collections and interpretive plans. We shared our growing list of ideas with the design team and invited them to develop prototypes that expanded our thinking. Some of these early ideas were mocked-up and shown to our visitor panels for feedback. Once we had a solid list of

possible models, we reviewed it to make sure it included attractive options for addressing the visitor outcomes with all our key audiences. We then looked at the museum floorplan, attempting at this early stage to make sure that the proposed models would work well across all the collections and with a variety of art media. Finally, we asked ourselves whether the range of options could be balanced across the museum to allow visitors both a delightful number of differing activities and the ability to build a repertoire of familiar activities.

We reviewed the interpretive models list at various stages of development with the Steering Interpretive Team (SIT), which consisted of the museum's director, the chief curator, and the directors of education, collections strategies, and marketing. This group provided overall guidance throughout the reinstallation project and made sure our work aligned with the broadest museum goals. Most conservators, collections management staff, and individual curators did not see or comment on the interactive components until they were proposed by educators for specific galleries. At that time, conservators and collections management staff offered feedback on problematic installations and placements, which were then negotiated on a case-by-case basis. Though use of interactive components in the galleries represented a significant culture change at the DIA, there was little formal resistance to their inclusion. Perhaps this was because we were three years into the project by the time specific applications were designed, and staff members had either fully embraced the new direction or knew that arguments against it would be unsuccessful. Skeptical staff members simply showed little interest in working with the interpretive staff on the interactives.

The process of developing the interactive interpretive models list took more than a year. In the end, it included thirteen experiential models that included "conversation starter," "immersion," "making art," "multiple perspectives," "object exploration," "express yourself," "go deeper/broader," "pause," and "take a quiz." We devised an interpretive goal for each, and then listed specific vehicles for facilitating these experiences. For example, our "multiple perspectives" goal was "to provide more than one opinion on a complex or controversial issue or object" and we considered viewpoint fliplabels, interview videos, and changeable, projected captions as possible vehicles. The "object exploration" goal was "to encourage looking at the visual details, stylistic elements, or iconography of a work of art." Vehicles for addressing this goal included magnifiers, "I Spy" fliplabels, and graphic panels where reproduced images of works of art had details called out with text. The goal of the "immersion" model was to imaginatively "transport the visitor to

the original time and place of the art object" and we proposed using photo murals, architectural details, environmental video installations, and digital versions of objects as vehicles. "Express yourself" interpretation was meant "to allow visitors to contribute opinions, personal stories, or ideas about a controversial object or issue." To address this goal, we imagined response stations where visitors could explore an issue, reflect, and then share their opinions or experiences in a public way. By the time of the museum's grand re-opening, some of these ideas fell away but the majority remained very much in play.

All of these interactive interpretive elements are contextualized in DIA galleries that utilize Beverly Serrell's Big Idea concept,[4] meaning that all the works of art and interpretation in a gallery support an organizing thesis chosen for its broad relevance to our visitors. As an example, instead of organizing our 18th-century European decorative arts objects in a stylistic chronology, we chose to display them according to the time of day in which they were used: the rituals of morning dressing, afternoon leisure pursuits, the dinner banquet, and evening entertainments. Not all of our Big Idea galleries stray far from art historical categorization, but all attempt to link the works in some way that is accessible to an audience unfamiliar with the typical narratives of art history. This is not to say that the content in these galleries was overly simplified. As visitors sit at a dining table in the 18th-century European decorative arts gallery and interact with a projected video re-enactment of an elaborate banquet, surrounded by cases of objects like those in the video, they are challenged to consider the vast systems established to sustain such a luxurious lifestyle. Situated next to early 19th century galleries called "Era of Revolution," the 18th-century galleries raise questions about sustainability.

One of the DIA's African galleries provides a similar example of the complexity involved in the DIA's interpretive planning. In a gallery where the art is organized according to its associations with the life milestones of birth, adolescence, marriage, and death, visitors encounter a response station where they are invited to consider the different ways objects help people all over the world mark important moments. They are asked to write a short story about how they commemorate their own significant life moments, and we invite them to leave their stories so we can post them on our website. This response station was designed to provide an opportunity for sharing, but it is also meant to encourage personal connection with African objects and social practices that are generally less familiar to Westerners than are American or European objects and social practices. The station consistently produces thoughtful and deeply reflective stories.

Our goal was to offer visitors easier and more attractive access to complex ideas, which they would then be more motivated to consider. Looking through the lens of our outcomes, we strove to provide visitors with an intellectual and physical orientation that removed barriers to personal connection so that learning could more readily take place. By the time of the DIA's grand re-opening in November 2007, the galleries featured eleven types of low-tech interactives and seven types of high-tech interactives. The high-tech interactives exist mainly as single iterations—expense being a critical factor—while the low-techs are present in various formats for more than 100 specific applications.

Anecdotal evidence tells us visitor engagement is up. We see visitors consistently pointing to works of art, talking to each other, reading labels, and using the hands-on, interpretive components in our galleries. While the DIA awaits the results of an IMLS-funded summative evaluation of the reinstalled galleries, ongoing visitor satisfaction surveys continually rank interpretive experiences as one of the best things about the DIA. Focus groups conducted in metropolitan Detroit in 2010 tell us that the public does not see the DIA as elitist, but as a place where everyone is welcome.[5] Though I would be the first to say there are decisions about the DIA's galleries that I'd like to revisit, we continue to receive overwhelmingly positive feedback from our visitors about their experiences with art in our galleries. A first-time DIA visitor recently captured the tenor of this response when he wrote to us: "Most art museums focus on teaching you a history lesson with a page of text beside the artwork. The interactive displays at the DIA helped me learn by engaging me: by directing my eyes, by planting questions I wanted answered, and by helping my imagination."

Of course, the integration of active learning in DIA galleries has not been without challenges. Even before re-opening, we knew that the prism-shaped multiple perspective labels that visitors were meant to turn were problematic. They are too low, causing adult visitors to bend at the waist to read them. It is also not obvious that they can be turned. Problems with the multiple perspectives labels are the direct result of skipping the mock-up stage. We had seen and tested all other interactive devices in some sort of three-dimensional form before production. Critical lesson: Museums must make time to conduct formative evaluations for every interactive learning tool, especially because the final versions are often expensive to produce.

Inviting visitors to touch interactive learning components did not result in immediate engagement with all of our visitors. The DIA had spent years

prior to the reinstallation project teaching its members and regular visitors that they shouldn't touch anything in the permanent galleries; naturally, some were hesitant to touch even when we gave permission. During formative evaluation of many interactives, we had to change our simple "please touch" logo to something much more specific, like "please turn over" or "please lift for answer" in order to help everyone feel comfortable about what to do. Critical lesson: It is important to use specific, concrete language when asking visitors to touch or interact with learning tools in the art museum; anything less causes confusion and discomfort.

By shifting to a visitor-centered model, adding interactivity, and launching a massive marketing campaign meant to welcome a broader public, the DIA did change its reputation and became seen as a more welcoming and less elitist place. We happily welcome many first time visitors to the DIA who readily engage in many of the interactive learning tools. Understandably, this audience is unfamiliar with the museum behavior codes we too often take for granted. After the reinstallation, we encountered greater numbers of visitors who did not understand our prohibitions against touching art, stepping on platforms, and leaning on cases. As a result, we produced and installed a significant quantity of white, 6 × 8 inch signs that read "please do not step on platforms" and "please do not touch the art." As a quick fix, the marketing department also created a large sign that explained why we asked visitors to avoid touching art. A better solution now in the works is a series of labels, interspersed through the galleries, that addresses the issues in a light-hearted but informative manner. Critical lesson: Visitors don't feel welcome if they are embarrassed. It's important to be transparent about museum expectations.

Interactive galleries need to be checked on a regular basis, and components require repair and replacement. Projector bulbs burn out, response stations run out of cards and pencils, layered labels get torn, and individual pieces of games go missing. These things need to be monitored and repaired on a regular basis. And while one could argue that looking at the same work of art many times is a valuable experience, it's harder to argue that testing yourself with a fliplabel activity is as fun the third time as it was the first. The DIA, in fact, just created 25 new "I Spy" fliplabels and revised their design to make them easier to change in the future in response to visitors' requests for more instances of this popular gallery game. With most of the DIA's interactive interpretation nearly four years old, we now find ourselves challenged to allocate staff and financial resources to permanent gallery updates for those visitors we have enticed to return. Critical lesson: Moving to a compre-

hensively interactive museum requires new staff responsibilities, budgets for maintenance, and an ongoing plan to keep the experiences relevant and interesting for repeat visitors.

The DIA remains committed to exploring innovative interpretive strategies for its permanent collections galleries and its temporary, special exhibitions. The reinstallation project demonstrated for us the importance of putting both the visitor and the object at the center of our planning, and that work continues. We wrestle with what it means to be a place of independent, interactive learning where rare, valuable, and aesthetically-significant objects are held in public trust. In such a place, changing the rules of access is no small thing.

Notes

1. For a thorough description and early reaction to the DIA's reinstallation project, see *Curator: the Museum Journal, 52*(1) (2009); the entire issue was dedicated to the DIA's project.
2. This article uses the terms "interactive" and "hands-on learning components" to refer to in-gallery interpretive materials that visitors touch and manipulate. The DIA's interactive components include several different types of fliplabels, response stations, booklets, digital versions of books in the collection, projected videos, and Velcro boards on which visitors create compositions.
3. During the course of the reinstallation project, it became helpful to distinguish the educators who focused on gallery interpretation from the educators who continued to work on school and public programs, and so the name "interpretive educators" was adopted. These professionals are now referred to as "interpretive specialists" and the name of the department has been changed from "education" to "learning and interpretation" in an attempt to be more transparent about the department's work.
4. Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: an Interpretive Approach* (New York: AltaMira Press, 1996), 1–8.
5. The DIA hired the Mellman Group to study local perceptions about the DIA in February, 2010.

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