

# Empowering Museum Educators to Evaluate

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Museum educators today operate in an outcomes-based work environment, one riddled with accountability and pressure to demonstrate impact to their communities, learners, and supporters. In addition, museum educators have increasingly incorporated reflective practice into their work to understand their craft more holistically and to refine their practices. This environment of accountability and reflection demands that more attention be paid toward evaluation of education at museums. However, museum educators are all too often challenged by the lack of time, resources, or experience to fully meet the needs for evaluation.

This guest-edited issue of the *Journal of Museum Education (JME)* takes a new approach by providing a range of case studies highlighting how others have faced some of the challenges of conducting evaluation of museum education. The articles in this issue give museum educators, and those that support them, practical evaluation tools and techniques to maximize these efforts. They are designed to emphasize how to approach evaluation within a work environment of limited time and resources. From building staff capacity, to developing standardized evaluation methods, to communicating results this issue will serve as a real-world guide and inspiration for those in the field who need to demonstrate the impact of their work.

This special issue of the *JME* was inspired by a colleague's idea for an evaluation book that focused on the theory of evaluation but also featured one case study at the end of each chapter. The inclusion of case studies was intended to provide a "how-to" for museum education practitioners. Though the book did not come to fruition, we believed that the case studies themselves had value and should be shared with the field, as they provide concise examples to illustrate

the sometimes lofty ideals of evaluation. Many museum educators conceptually understand the importance of evaluation but don't have the tools necessary to break down the process into manageable pieces that they can grapple with, conceptualize, implement, and accomplish. Case studies spell out, in real ways, how evaluation works in various institutions and in doing so become highly relevant and appealing. Museum educators can use them as "how-tos" as they work to integrate evaluation into their day-to-day work. This practical case study format positions the *JME* as a balance of researcher and practitioner-based perspectives and applications.

We thought of the evaluation process when approaching the organization and authors for this journal — How do you start? How do you share? How do you grow? The first few articles focus on building an evaluation culture in your institution and the first steps you need to take as you think about creating an evaluation, including some of the ethics that are crucial to consider as you start talking to people and asking them for information. The middle part of the issue focuses on data collection methods and ideas around communicating and sharing results internally and with the larger museum community. We end our case studies with ideas of how to grow, including working with external evaluators, forming university partnerships and collaborating with peers.

## How Do You Start?

In "Empowering Educators to Evaluate: Building Staff Capacity to Evaluate in Museum Education," Joy Kubarek, Ph.D., Vice President of Learning, John G. Shedd Aquarium, shares how the aquarium enabled a diverse cadre of museum educators with varying degrees of evaluation experience to not only participate in the evaluation process, but to drive it. Her case study details the premise of empowerment evaluation and how it was applied at this one museum while suggesting potential applications in other museum contexts.

Elizabeth (Elee) Wood, Director of the Museum Studies program at Indiana University-Purdue University of Indianapolis and Public Scholar of Museums, Families and Learning at The Children's Museum of Indianapolis, provides great example questions and strategies used in small, medium, and large-scale studies in her brief overview of thinking about the overall scope of an evaluation project in "Defining the Scope of Your Evaluation."

As you begin to design survey questions, initiate interviews and run focus groups, you need to be aware of the ethics of evaluation in museums. As Joe E. Heimlich, Ph.D., Professor at Ohio State University and President of the

Visitors Studies Association, states in “The Ethics of Evaluation in Museums,” there are the things we are required to do, but more importantly, there are things we ought to do. This article focuses first on understanding ethics in research, and then on how the consequences of our work require us to take ethical considerations into account.

To survey or not to survey? In “Data Collection Methods for Evaluating Museum Programs and Exhibitions,” Amy Grack Nelson and Sarah Cohn, Research & Evaluation staff at the Science Museum of Minnesota, explain how to purposefully select the right data collection method for your project. They provide a description of nine different data collection methods, from interviews to web analytics and participation data, describe why each method is useful, and share examples of how each method was used to support a museum evaluation project.

## How Do You Share?

After you have created, implemented and evaluated a program or exhibition you need to communicate your findings effectively. “Don’t Let Your Message Die on Delivery!” by Lauren Trainer, Principal of Trainer Evaluation, shares design concepts based on research on how people scan and retain information, and presents ideas about how to simplify and present data in a manner that will grab your stakeholder’s attention and invite a call to action.

Allison Price, Steve Ross, Emily R. Boeving and Marisa A. Shender, all of the Lincoln Park Zoo, demonstrate the importance of sharing — and applying — the findings of evaluation work internally to help make informed decisions and shape future plans. “Understanding the Effectiveness of Demonstration Programs” details how the internal communication of findings helps secure buy-in and roots plans in evidence rather than opinion or anecdotes.

## How Do You Grow?

Part of growing means streamlining your efforts so that you can work smarter, as illustrated in “Using One Evaluation to Affect Many.” This article from Angie Ong, Principal of Spotlight Impact, LLC and Christina Cadenhead, Evaluator, explores the evolution of evaluation at the Pacific Science Center. Evaluation of Research Weekend events began as isolated, independent activities at the Science Center. After a few years, when it became evident that these events were more similar than different, the team decided it would be to its advantage

to streamline methods and use similar instruments and question strategies for all visitor studies.

Some projects require that you work with an external evaluator. In this case it is crucial that both parties are clear about goals, desired outcomes, and critical questions that frame a project, and to consider practical issues that will maximize its effectiveness. In “Working with External Evaluators,” Lauren Silver, Vice President of Education at the Computer History Museum, and Scott Burg, Senior Researcher at Rockman et al., draw upon a long-term partnership to describe the museum-evaluator relationship from both sides and provide tips for a successful collaboration.

For museums interested in expanding their evaluation capacity and reach, local universities partnerships can be mutually beneficial. However, they also require a shared investment of time, clarity regarding roles, and a commitment to support student learning, as shared in “Collaborations between Museums and Universities to Enhance Evaluation Capacity” Kathryn Owen, Audience Research Manager at Seattle’s Woodland Park Zoo and Nick Visscher, Coordinator for Professional Experiences with the Museology Graduate Program at the University of Washington and a Principal at Spotlight Impact LLC, detail the lessons they have learned over five years of collaboration and offer suggestions for museum professionals who may be considering such a partnership.

Peer collaboration, which allows you to maximize your efforts through collaboration and work toward consistency across the industry is another way to extend and enhance your evaluation culture. In “Building Evaluation Capacity as a Museum Network” Marley Steele-Inama, Director of Audience Research and Evaluation at Denver Zoo, explores how the Denver-area Evaluation Network (DEN) has built evaluation capacity in museum professionals through a variety of multidisciplinary activities, including workshops, trainings, meetings, mentoring, and conducting both institutional and pan-institutional audience studies. The author shares lessons learned for others interested in starting and sustaining a similar network.

While books are great resources — many museum educator’s shelves are full of well thought out and researched books that provide a comprehensive overview of important topics. Sometimes, however, the very depth and breadth of a comprehensive book means that it lives on our shelves and not within our valuable and limited workspace. We hope that this *JME* issue, dedicated to concrete, achievable case studies is exactly the type of reference that will live on your desk — the resource that you will reach for when trying to understand how to introduce/improve/maximize your evaluation efforts. And although

we hope that this issue inspires you to seek out additional resources, such as those outlined in the annotated bibliography, “Evaluation Resources to Help with the Next Step” our goal for this issue of the *JME* to become the dog-eared journal that you pass around the department with notes that say — “READ CASE STUDY 2: here is a template we can use to develop a connection with our university to support our evaluation needs,” or “See article on Empowerment Evaluation — inspiration to build our staff capacity for evaluation?” Each of you may have different needs for evaluation within your museum; this issue is dedicated towards providing a diverse range of tips and lessons learned to address those needs. We hope these case studies leave you inspired and rejuvenated to tackle evaluation at your museum.

#### About the Guest Editors

Joy Kubarek is the Vice President of Learning at the Shedd Aquarium in Chicago, Illinois. She has worked in the field of informal science education for over ten years. She has conducted research on various aspects of informal learning, including teacher professional development, student problem-solving and inquiry, and field trips. Previously she helped establish the Learning Planning & Evaluation department dedicated to evaluating the learning impact of the aquarium. She holds a M.Ed. in Environmental Education and a Ph.D. in Science Education.

Lauren Trainer is Principal of Trainer Evaluation, an audience insights and evaluation firm in Denver, CO. She was an internal evaluator at the Denver Museum of Nature and Science for six years and prior to moving to Colorado Ms. Trainer was the Director of Education at the Autry National Center in Los Angeles and the Acting Curator of Education at the Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum at Rutgers University. She received her MS in Museum Studies from the University of Colorado, Boulder in 2007 and her MA in Art History from the University of Arizona in 1997.