Creating a Culture of Evaluation in an Art Museum

National Gallery of Art + Museum of Fine Arts, Boston

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Guiding Questions

1. How can a museum education department create a working process centered on intentional planning and evaluation?

2. What impact can a culture of evaluation have on a museum’s education department and its institution?
Indicators of a “Culture of Evaluation”

Staff...

• Include the visitor’s voice
• Seek out evaluation
• Feel excited about evaluation
• Make evidenced-based decisions
• Conduct their own evaluations
How we started...

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART
1. Engaged Outside Help

- Involved whole staff
- Began intentional planning process
2. Harnessed Internal Strengths

- Integrated uniting concepts, standards, and mission
- Created interdepartmental working group
- Established evaluation position
3. Established Shared Language

• Developed division-wide tools

• Provided professional development for staff
4. Put Vision into Action

• Supporting program planning and reflection

• Launching exploratory projects

• Collaborating with internal partners
Impact over time...

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, BOSTON
1. Developed Trust and Interest

- Building trust over time
- Making thinking visible
Evaluation: Results Build Trust

• Anticipating good news

• Supporting grant proposals

• Knowing that visitors get your message

Made in the Americas: Front-end Exhibition Study

“The fact that there was a cultural exchange that I had no concept of, and striking similarities in some of the pieces.”

“It's very interesting. Things there I've never seen, and a chance to learn something different.”
Planning Facilitation:
Trust in the Process Follows Results

“I have great belief in the fact that whenever there is chaos, it creates wonderful thinking. I consider chaos a gift.”

- Septima Clark
Planning Facilitation:
Results Follow Trust

“Five Whys”

What impact do we want to have?

Solutions: how to
- Find new resources
- Stop doing some things
- Work differently
Planning Facilitation: Making Thinking Visible
2. Became More Visitor-focused

• Program development and improvement

• Exhibitions and installations
Program Development and Improvement: Children and Families

MFA Playdates:
Matching lesson plans to age through staff professional development

The Family Art Cart:
Less is more and challenge is good
Embrace families’ preferences
Exhibitions and Installations

Triumph of the Winter Queen: An immersive experience

“It's wonderful. Really well done. It's like having your own docent take you through [the painting].”

The Michael C. Ruettgers Gallery for Ancient Coins:

Responding to visitors’ confusion

We changed this to this
2. Fostered Collaboration and Communication

• The org. chart matters

• Hands-on learning

• Sharing results
Sharing Results

The MFA Guide for John Singer Sargent Watercolors contained 16 "stops" – sets of multimedia features focused on one or a small group of paintings. This unprecedented exhibition drew on the extensive holdings of Sargent’s watercolors in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, and the Brooklyn Museum.

Our sample
104 MFA Guide users surveyed and interviewed
90 intercepted at random
14 recruited ahead of time
58% - frequent art museum visitors
34% - MFA members
64% - over 35 years of age
69% - female
Half typically use audio/multimedia guides in art museums
Many visitors in our sample used all or most stops. They primarily or exclusively used the Introductions.

"It showed his art and the art of his contemporaries... It was a comprehensive discussion which was really enriched by the visual references available on the screen."
"The device draws my attention to specific parts of the painting."
"You have different layers of information."
"It captures the complexity of context and voices in a very cordial way."

Visitors were highly satisfied with the Guide’s content for this exhibition. They expected the Guide to enhance their experience; it fulfilled and often exceeded their expectations.

Visitor suggestions for improvement focused on usability and presentation.

What We Learned
The Guide is most effective when it:
- Explains technique and process while visually referencing the artwork
- Provides historical, social, cultural, and personal context
- Focuses on details visitors might otherwise miss

Visitors liked:
- Images/videos that teach them something new
- Learning personal details about Sargent’s life and contemporaries
- Primary sources (e.g. photos)
- Comparisons with other works
- The "Looking Closer" feature
- Learning about Sargent’s depiction of light and shadow

Age differences
- Younger visitors have greater price sensitivity
- Older visitors express less confusion about how to use the Guide
- Older visitors want Guide content available online; younger visitors prefer a mobile app

Visitors using the Guide:
- Wanted more help with navigation and understanding its features
- Largely treated the Introduction as an auditory experience while looking at the artworks
- Expected the Guide to work like a Smartphone

What We Did Right
Bedouins gave historical and cultural context so that visitors could appreciate Sargent’s respectful representation of a culture different from his own

By showing a watercolor that Sargent completed at age 14, Mountain Fire gave visitors a unique opportunity to see his development as an artist.

The glimpse into Sargent’s personal history – that the models were family members – helped visitors connect to the painting and the artist on a more human level.

Comparing Sargent’s Venice to photographs helped visitors appreciate Sargent’s point of view and personal approach.

White Ships showed the complexity of Sargent’s composition and strategic use of blank paper, prompting visitors to visually explore the painting and appreciate aspects they may have missed.

Corfu: Lights and Shadows also encouraged visual exploration, resulting in visitors’ deeper appreciation of Sargent’s skill in depicting light and shadows.

What We Recommend
1. Remove or radically limit the "talking head" videos. Use video and images to provide visitors with something they can’t see in any other way, and especially to visually reference the art.
2. Match visitors’ actual Guide use. Have only two features per stop: an introduction, and one other feature that explores in more depth, using strategies found to best engage visitors
3. Design a more extensive how-to-use tutorial within the Guide
4. Building Institutional Knowledge:

• More evaluation leads to less evaluation

• We don’t have to study everything
Building Institutional Knowledge: Interactive Media

- Redundancy
- Clear, concise instructions
- Looking prompts
- Sometimes results need replication
Building Institutional Knowledge: Interpretation

Having so many interpretive studies in the past four years, we have a really solid sense of what works for people. It gives us a real toolbox.

- Adam Tessier, Head of Interpretation

Ancient coins: something for everyone

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<th>Written explanations</th>
<th>Magnifying glass</th>
<th>Map</th>
<th>Make your own coin touch screen activity</th>
<th>iPads</th>
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Introducing contemporary art: Less is more
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