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VISITORS' LEARNING EXPERIENCES IN DUTCH MUSEUMS

Abstract. Through audience surveys much is known about visitors' characteristics, but still little is known about how visitors perceive and experience the museum and how this influences their learning. This chapter presents the results of two empirical studies on personal learning experiences of museum visitors. Quantitative and qualitative instruments are used to get more systematic information about the learning experiences. Data were collected in Dutch museums with mixed collections of art objects, historical objects and ethnographic objects. Three dimensions of museum guidance are distinguished: a cognitive dimension (clarification of subject matter), a meta-cognitive dimension (information on the goals and the set-up of the exhibition, the routing etc.) and an affective, emotional dimension.

INTRODUCTION

From the many museums to which my parents took me, one is still vividly on my mind. When I was ten years old we visited an ethnographic museum in Leiden and while exploring the building I ended up in a dimly lit room with five large Buddha statues. I sat down on a bench in front of the statues and was absorbed by these mysterious images. During the rest of the visit I returned several times in order to confirm my first experience in that room and on the way out we bought a post card of the statues which I hung on the wall of my room.

I would now describe my experience as a mixture of aesthetic involvement and indefinite religious feelings and as Hein (1998) writes, it is not unusual for visitors to describe epiphanies in recounting their own history with museums. The memory of the visit to the Leiden museum was revived, when as a researcher I asked people to write about profound experiences in museums (Haanstra 1992). A woman wrote about the same Buddha statues in the dusky room in Leiden museum which she experienced as a place for silent contemplation. However the last time she saw them the museum was under reconstruction. The statues were placed in a small room and there was a high pitched noise of some electric machinery. To her sadness the magic was gone.

Somewhat later I was asked to evaluate an exhibition in the Leiden National Museum of Ethnology on Japanese way of life around the 1850's. The Buddha statues were exhibited there as well, but now in a totally different context. I had not known the statues were Japanese and finally learned some background information. In this evaluation study again visitors told about how they experienced the statues and some did so in comparison to the original presentation.

The different methods of display of the Buddha statues and the diverse ways in which visitors experience them illustrate the questions addressed in this chapter:

What are the learning experiences of museum visitors? And: How can we 'measure' these experiences? This chapter presents the results of two empirical studies on this topic in Dutch museums. First we present some contextual information on museum visits in the Netherlands and a theoretical background to the studies.

MUSEUM VISITORS IN THE NETHERLANDS

The studies reported here took place in the 1990s and were carried out in four different museums. During and after the studies all four museums have been expanded and redesigned. This is characteristic of the frantic renovations in many museums in the Netherlands in trying to keep up with what they consider to be the desires of the public. As in many other countries Dutch museums battle with all kinds of recreational sites, amusement parks, shopping malls etc. Museums try to attract visitors with renovated buildings, more spectacular presentations and a more visitor-oriented approach in general. Not only the quality and quantity of museum exhibitions have risen but also the supplies in the museum shops and the menus in the museum restaurants. Museums have been organising more and more events and activities such as workshops, lectures, demonstrations, living history, museum theatre, master classes etc.

Since World War II the number of museum visits had constantly been rising, but since the middle of the 1990s the numbers have been showing a stagnation. The Netherlands is a small country and with about 730 museums, the museum density is high. About half of these museums have historical collections and about 10% are exclusively art museums. Compared to other western European countries the Dutch population shows an average interest in museums: about 31% yearly visits one or more museums (SCP, 2000). People who have enjoyed higher education are strongly represented and measured against civil status and family situation, the museum visiting public (in particular museums for the visual arts) includes a relatively high proportion of single people (de Haan, 1997). The museum public contains a growing number of people aged 40 and over, whereas visits to museums by young people have actually declined since the 1970s.

Through audience surveys much is known about visitors' characteristics in the Netherlands, but still little is known about how visitors perceive and experience the museum. That was the reason the educational section of the Association of Dutch Museums commissioned a research project on this topic. The study had to look into ways of getting more systematic information about these learning experiences. The undertaking of this research gave a broader scope on learning and evaluation than did the more usual museum studies.

NEW VIEWS ON LEARNING AS A FRAME OF REFERENCE

Current visitor research primarily serves marketing goals. Besides questions on background variables of the visitors they frequently contain a number of evaluative questions. Sometimes a general opinion about the museum or an exhibition is asked but most of these questions deal with the kind and quantity of information given, for

instance whether the visitors attended the audio-visuals and how they liked them. Evaluation studies on learning effects are scarce. And, as in Great Britain and the US, traditional museum research on learning effects in the Netherlands followed a strict goal-attainment approach, in which goals refer to measurable learning or performance outcomes shown by visitors as the result of exhibit exposure. This approach was criticised for its behaviourist premises and its restricted means-end model (Haanstra, Heijden & Sas, 1996). The passive nature most goal referenced studies attribute to the visitor as well as the environmentally deterministic manner in which the effectiveness of exhibitions is explained were in disagreement with new theories of human information processing.

Constructivist learning theories stress that individuals are actively engaged in attempting to understand and interpret phenomena for themselves. Theories on learning styles indicate that people have different ways for perceiving and processing information. New theories also take into account that affective variables play an important role in learning (e.g. Simons, Van der Linden & Duffy, 2000). Quality of learning outcomes is largely dependent on the quality of the learning activities. The internal regulation of learning activities (by the student, the visitor) and external regulation of learning activities (by the instruction, the exhibition) act upon each other.

Vermunt (1989, 1992) presents a theory, which attempts to connect theories of learning and theories of instruction. He describes three kinds of internal learning activities. Cognitive processing activities refer to the functions that pertain to information processing and task execution as such (e.g. relating, structuring, analysing, and memorising). Affective processing activities relate to the motivational and emotional aspects of learning (e.g. expecting, generating emotions, appraising, motivating). Meta-cognitive regulation refers to the functions that control and steer the cognitive and affective functions (e.g. orienting, planning, monitoring, evaluating, and reflecting).

Instructional activities parallel the three different kinds of learning activities. Cognitive instructional activities (presenting and clarifying the subject matter) can be distinguished from affective instructional activities (creating a promoting affective climate) and meta-cognitive instructional activities (regulating the learning processes). The way in which museum curators and educators design displays, presentations and instruction often have consistent, stylistic aspects, that just as in the case with the diverse learning styles of visitors, are connected to their mental models of learning and instruction and to their instructional character and orientations.

These theoretical approaches to learning and instruction are influencing new directions in visitor studies (e.g. Falk & Dierking, 1992; Hein, 1998) and demand a more open-ended approach to evaluation, in order to gain insight into the attitudes, values, preferences and experiences of museum visitors. Hein recognises a pragmatic approach using multiple methodologies (both quantitative and experimental design and qualitative naturalistic) as well as multiple instruments, ranging from pre-structured questionnaires to open-ended interviews. The studies reported here follow this eclectic approach.

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