

The impact of museum displays: improving the evaluation of permanent exhibitions

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Abstract

Museums do not routinely evaluate their permanent displays. These are the areas most visited by audiences, but there is little work undertaken to determine their impact. Museum industry standards have no requirement for evaluating them; funders, including the government, show little interest. This thesis aims to determine the factors that influence current evaluation practice in the UK, to establish the improvements needed to increase the applicability of evaluation to permanent displays, and to examine how the provision of improved resources can increase the understanding of the impact of museum exhibitions.

A literature review demonstrates that there is a disconnect between evaluation and research, with the latter viewed as academic and the former as more practical. Multiple heritage organisations have created evaluation toolkits, but an analysis of these proves they are not focussed on exhibitions and recommend methods that do not provide robust results. Sector-specific courses are expensive and inaccessible. In response, this research has fed into a suite of Impact Evaluation Resources and training materials, and tests the applicability of these in museums, particularly on permanent displays.

The research was undertaken in the museums of the University of Cambridge, which encompass venues of varied sizes and subject matter. It uses a qualitative methodology, foregrounding pragmatism, which was essential as the data collection took place during the COVID-19 pandemic. The results of interviews with eight museum staff members are analysed using Grounded Theory, while reflective autoethnography incorporates the experience and perspective of an established museum professional. The research concludes with the practical application of the resources in training and reporting to funders to demonstrate the impact of permanent displays.

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List of abbreviations used

ACE	Arts Council England
DCMS	Department for Culture, Media, and Sport
GACE	Great Art and Culture for All
GEM	Group for Education in Museums
GLO	Generic Learning Outcome
GSO	Generic Social Outcome
GT	Grounded Theory
HEMG	Higher Education Museums, Galleries and Collections Fund
IER	Impact Evaluation Resources
IIT	Insight and Impact Toolkit
ILFA	Inspiring Learning For All
MA	Museums Association
MAA	Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology
MLA	Museums Libraries and Archives Council
NLHF	National Lottery Heritage Fund
NPO	National Portfolio Organisation
PwC	PricewaterhouseCoopers
REF	Research Excellence Framework
UCM	University of Cambridge Museums
UKRI	United Kingdom Research and Innovation
UMG	University Museums Group

Chapter 1

Introduction

Prologue



Figure 1.1 The man trap on display in Moyse's Hall Museum in 2024.

As a child, my favourite artefact in my local museum (Moyse's Hall Museum in Bury St Edmunds) was the man trap. This was displayed with the toothed jaws snapped shut, the poacher having escaped, but with neither boot nor foot. The fascination the object held for me meant that it was the one artefact guaranteed to cheer me up when I was upset or sad. As of 2024 the trap is still on display, so whenever I visit the museum it is the item that I am still certain to stop at for several minutes, in a moment that combines both nostalgia and bewilderment. How many other visitors stop to stare at this artefact? Are the memories they attach to it as strong as mine? I later worked for this local authority museum, beginning my professional career within sight of the man trap. Since then, I have spent time working in an independent museum and a sector support organisation, although most of my working life has been in university museums. For the majority of the time I was undertaking the DHeritage, I was employed part-time as the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM) Evaluation Associate (paid for from the Higher Education Innovation Fund, through UKRI), and part-time as the Head of Public Engagement and Learning at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA).

Museums have always been an integral part of my life. Free venues to visit for an essential cheap day out growing up. Work experience for a university placement. Employment for twenty-five years. They, and the people who work in and visit them, hold endless fascination for me. Why visitors come, what they do in our venues and why they look at the displays, has no doubt been influenced by my own formative

museum memories. Passionate staff, extremely qualified and talented, often choose their entire career path based on the objects held in a particular museum. The better we can understand the interactions between visitors and the space they visit, the more we can create experiences that will keep them coming back. Being able to undertake the research behind this DHeritage has helped me better understand museums, my colleagues, visitors, and myself.

1.1 Background to the problem

Museums are not static. They are not a building or a collection. Museums are the interface between the space they inhabit, the collections they hold and the people that interact with both. *People encountering objects encountering people* as written on the wall of MAA (see Figure 1.2), or as Michael Spock (vice president for public programmes at the Field Museum in Chicago in the 1980s and 1990s) wrote: ‘a museum is not a building: it is that interaction between people and stuff’ and by focussing on audiences the museum becomes ‘not *about* stuff, but *for* somebody’.¹ Despite enormous progress integrating new technologies and display methods into many aspects of museology, the way museums assess their audiences remains an overreliance on ‘attendance figures and anecdotal evidence’, stuck at paper or online questionnaires, usually at the end of a temporary exhibition, or the ‘any other comments?’ section of a tatty guest book sitting at reception.²



Figure 1.2 Text on the wall in the entrance to MAA.

I am not the first person to notice this inconsistency. There has been debate for decades about whether museums can do evaluation better, and how they can act upon the results. In 2013 the Evaluating Evaluation report was published, written by Christian Heath (King’s College, London), and Maurice Davies (Museums Association), with funding from the Wellcome Trust and the Heritage Lottery Fund.

¹ Lisa Falk, “‘Not about Stuff, but for Somebody’: Michael Spock on the Client-Centered Museum”, *The Journal of Museum Education*, 12.3 (1987), pp. 14–15 (p. 14).

² John H. Falk, ‘Assessing the Impact of Museums’, *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 43.1 (2000), pp. 5–7 (p. 5).

The report was the product of a year of research into summative exhibition reports by the authors. Their stinging indictment was that

despite the substantial resources that are spent on the summative evaluation of museums and galleries, the research has little impact and largely remains ineffectual.³

This paper referenced a summative exhibition evaluation at MAA that I had presented at the University Museums Group conference in 2012.⁴ We had, in fact, used the results of our summative report as part of gallery redisplay in the permanent collections, but this was unusual. The national picture of museum evaluation is patchy, frequently focussed on summative reports related to temporary exhibitions, often produced at the behest of funders.

Many museums have funding that is uncertain or short-term; institutions are often pulling together small pots of money into a patchwork of support. Since the 1960s, this has encouraged the focus on the ‘blockbuster’ temporary exhibition to bring in large visitor numbers and, increasingly, revenue from ticket sales: the British Museum reported an admissions income of £3.1 million in 2022/23, a significant amount of money in heritage.⁵ It is therefore unsurprising that the focus in museums has been on keeping visitors coming back with a rolling programme of exhibitions. Redisplaying permanent collections often happens only when it is the focus of large-scale funding applications, involving the entire venue. Most recently in Cambridge, the University Museum of Zoology redisplayed all their galleries, opening in 2018 with improved access and facilities, partly funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF).⁶

Permanent displays in museums often grow and develop in an almost free-form way, created and curated over generations. They show the stratigraphy of the interests of previous staff and historical institutional collecting policies. There is often no real storyline or thread to guide a visitor through the space, rather a combination of eclectic objects juxtaposed in seemingly esoteric ways. The director of MAA, Nicholas Thomas, wrote in *The Return of Curiosity*:

³ Maurice Davies and Christian Heath, ‘Evaluating Evaluation: Increasing the Impact of Summative Evaluation in Museums and Galleries’ (King’s College London, 2013), p. 3.

⁴ Sarah-Jane Harknett, ‘Assembling Bodies Exhibition Evaluation’ (presented at the UMG/NCCPE Impact and Evaluation Seminar., UMG/NCCPE, 2012).

⁵ Nicholas Thomas, *The Return of Curiosity: What Museums Are Good For in the 21st Century* (Reaktion Books, 2016), p. 41; The British Museum, ‘The British Museum Report and Accounts for the Year Ended 31 March 2023’ (London, 2023), p. 26.

⁶ Charis Goodyear, ‘The University Museum of Zoology Reopens’, *University of Cambridge*, 2018 <<https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/university-museum-zoology-reopens>> [accessed 27 May 2024].

If temporary exhibitions generally have a linear structure (if only because people have to produce tickets at a specific entry point, or because their layout aims to facilitate ‘people flow’), the opposite is true of most permanent galleries. The planetarium, birds, Asia, Margaret Mead, the native cultures of the northwest coast and dioramas of the fauna of the tundra or the savanna may be encountered in more or less that order, the reverse, or various others in the American Museum of Natural History.⁷

Thomas expands on the many and various motivations that museum visitors have, from a pilgrimage quest to see specific objects in a collection, the desperate search for the toilets, or a fast sweep through a gallery to get a general impression of the highlights.⁸ Visitor motivations have been well studied and categorised, perhaps most influentially by John Falk, who has imposed five identities onto the ‘deeply personal’ experience of a museum visit.⁹ Marketing and heritage consultancy firms have cemented theoretical ideas of motivation into audience segmentation (see Chapter 3), with each defining their own segments, using different characteristics or demographics. While such shorthand methods of categorisation are no doubt appealing, trying to confine each museum visitor and every visit into one motivation per experience feels futile. Museum visits are a unique combination of the person, their emotions, background, interests, and experience, captured at a particular point in time. They can be influenced and affected by the weather, the delayed bus, the smells, sounds and actions of other visitors in the gallery, a myriad of other factors, or a combination of any of them.

The focus of evaluation in museums has also concentrated on temporary displays, alongside short-term (often externally funded) projects and programming. These are the areas which impact finances and getting them right is key when money is tight. Special exhibitions and programmes are usually time-limited, focussed on a specific audience or audiences, and linked to detailed, measurable learning outcomes. These factors make evaluation significantly easier to carry out, and potentially simpler to enact conclusions. There are numerous examples of temporary exhibition evaluations available in the academic and popular literature. Alongside time-limited activities, evaluation is also a necessary part of a funding deal: ‘a crucial part’ of measuring the impact of the NLHF’s financial investment; the Arts Council imploring

⁷ Thomas, p. 47.

⁸ Thomas, p. 48.

⁹ John Falk, ‘Viewing the Museum Experience through an Identity Lens’, in *Visiting the Visitor: An Enquiry Into the Visitor Business in Museums* ed. by Ann Davis and Kerstin Smeds (transcript Verlag, 2016), pp. 71-88 (p. 72).

museums to find ways ‘to measure and express what quality looks like for you’.¹⁰ Visitors might cite their main reason for attending a museum to be a programme or temporary exhibitions, but almost all will, at some point, walk through or past elements of permanent displays, and these present challenges for evaluation.

Perhaps because of the funding gap for permanent galleries in museums, they have become something of an evaluation afterthought, especially in the UK. While permanent displays are thought to be ‘one of the paramount activities of museums’, this ‘is not being satisfactorily fulfilled’.¹¹ Evaluation of such displays is also a gap, there being relatively few studies that have concentrated on permanent displays, while those that do exist usually focus on specific research questions. A study commissioned in 2013 by the Natural Sciences Collections Association, for example, examined the experience of visitors to museums with mixed collections. Through a combination of online questionnaires and interviews, the conclusion was that the preferred type of gallery for visitors was that containing natural science specimens.¹² A recent archaeological study by McDowall for her doctoral research focused on permanent displays of prehistory in museums, using visitor observations to determine that text panels were infrequently stopped at, and for a short period of time.¹³ Studies of non-temporary displays remain few and far between. National museums perpetuate the trend towards evaluating short-term outputs. The British Museum website includes a section on visitor research and evaluation, but of the six reports online, five are for temporary exhibitions, the sixth being for ‘The World Conservation and Exhibition Centre’, funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.¹⁴ It is difficult to find specific evaluations of permanent displays, let alone see learning and change from these evaluations permeate into the rest of the museum.

Considering this background, the aim of my DHeritage research is to improve evaluation of permanent museum displays to increase their impact. I will do this

¹⁰ ‘Evaluation Good Practice Guidance’, National Lottery Heritage Fund, 2021
<<https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/funding/good-practice-guidance/evaluation>> [accessed 20 April 2024]; ‘Essential Read: Ambition & Quality’, Arts Council England, 2022
<<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/blog/essential-read-ambition-quality>> [accessed 20 April 2024].

¹¹ Barry Lord, ‘Permanent Collection Display’, in *The Manual of Museum Exhibitions*, ed. by Barry Lord and Gail Dexter Lord (AltaMira Press, 2001), pp. 262–75 (p. 262).

¹² Sarah Jenkins, Jenny Lisk, and Aaron Broadley, *The Popularity of Museum Galleries: Evaluation for Natural Sciences Collections Association* (Natural Sciences Collections Association Subject Specialist Network, October 2013).

¹³ Felicity A. McDowall, ‘Lost in Temporal Translation: A Visual and Visitor-Based Evaluation of Prehistory Displays’, *Antiquity*, 97.393 (2023), pp. 707–25.

¹⁴ ‘Visitor Research and Evaluation’, The British Museum, n.d.
<<https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/projects/visitor-research-and-evaluation>> [accessed 23 September 2022].

through identifying the factors that are influencing current evaluation practice in UK museums, by determining the position of permanent displays within those factors, assessing current exhibition evaluation practice in UCM, and establishing the impact on UCM of resources that support the evaluation of permanent displays. Throughout, I will be returning to my research questions: what factors are influencing current evaluation practice in UK museums, and where are permanent displays positioned? What improvements need to be made to evaluation to increase its applicability to permanent displays? How does the provision of improved evaluation resources increase our understanding of the impact of permanent displays?

A fundamental part of the research has been the creation and testing of the Impact Evaluation Resources (IER), and associated training materials. The IER were developed during the research period and were iteratively tested with audiences until they reached their final version (see Appendix 1 for the full suite of resources). They draw on my professional expertise and respond to some of the gaps I identified through my examination of both the academic literature and other practical guides that are used in museums. While the IER were originally tested with museum staff in Cambridge, they were also used to train National Trust volunteers (see Chapter 3), as well as research students and university staff in Cambridge. The IER have been designed to be used as a standalone resource without my intervention; an accompanying training course was also developed to support staff development and to respond to the specific needs of museum professionals that were uncovered as part of the research. The training materials (replicated in Appendix 2) bridged an identified gap in evaluation skills provision and improved the applicability of the IER to permanent displays. The modular nature of the course allows sections to be added or removed to select the most relevant aspects for the audience. This training has been used with museum professionals as well as research students and university staff, and dovetails with the Resources to provide the fullest possible experience. Both the IER and the training use robust evaluation techniques to respond directly to my research objective about providing improved evaluation resources to the sector. The DHeritage research has been designed around the development and testing of these resources, and they therefore form a crucial element in my submission.

1.2 Definition of Terms: What is evaluation?

There are many definitions of evaluation in a museum context. It is perhaps easier to start with what it is not. Evaluation is not audience development. This usually sits within marketing departments and aims to better understand actual and potential

visitors through collecting demographic information and information about visitor attitudes. The term ‘audiences’ is preferred to visitors in this context, as it would include non-visitors as well as those who interact online.¹⁵ In order for museums to gain the industry minimum standard of Accreditation they must collect information about current users and create an Audience Development Plan (see Chapter 4).¹⁶ This emphasis on marketing aims to increase or broaden the audience, especially for specific temporary exhibitions or events. Traditionally, museum evaluation has had a broader remit than this, with an emphasis on measuring what people *do* as much as who is attending; for displays with a specific learning outcome the question commonly asked is: ‘how will we know when we get there?’¹⁷

In many definitions of evaluation, the museum is the catalyst: it is the mechanism that produces change in those attending. Learning and evaluation have frequently been linked in the literature and in practice evaluation work is often positioned within education departments and roles. The literature reflects this placement. The 1989 publication *Museum Education: History, Theory, and Practice* concluded with a chapter on evaluation.¹⁸ In 1991, ‘tests’ were being suggested as an exhibition evaluation technique, to determine visitors’ skill or knowledge (even though people ‘will not readily submit themselves for assessment’ unless you ‘call it a game and make it fun’).¹⁹ The 1997 UK government publication *A Common Wealth*, which researched education in museums and galleries, declared that ‘research and evaluation of public learning should be the lifeblood of museum practice’ and called for museums to make evaluation a key priority moving forward.²⁰ The links were sometimes subtler: Judy Diamond’s 1999 *Practical Evaluation Guide* aimed at museums suggests that evaluation is a way to ‘determine the effectiveness of exhibits and programs’, later adding that this would provide ‘insights into how people learn’.²¹ The correlation between museum learning and evaluation was cemented in the 2000s with the Inspiring Learning for All framework produced by the Arts Council (and explored in detail in Chapter 3).

¹⁵ Susan Anderson, ‘Visitor and Audience Research in Museums’, *The Routledge Handbook of Museums, Media and Communication*, 2019, pp. 80–95.

¹⁶ ‘UK Museum Accreditation Scheme’, Section 3, Arts Council England <<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/supporting-arts-museums-and-libraries/uk-museum-accreditation-scheme>> [accessed 23 July 2023].

¹⁷ Lord and Lord, *Manual of Museum Exhibitions* (2001), chapter 4, p. 39.

¹⁸ *Museum Education: History, Theory, and Practice*, ed. by Nancy Berry (National Art Education Association, 1989).

¹⁹ Michael Belcher, *Exhibitions in Museums*. (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1991), p. 177.

²⁰ David Anderson, *A Common Wealth: Museums and Learning in the United Kingdom. A Report to the Department of National Heritage. N85*. (London, 1997), p. 63.

²¹ Judy Diamond, *Practical Evaluation Guide: Tools for Museums and Other Informal Educational Settings* (AltaMira Press, 1999), p. 11.

Some definitions of museum evaluation take a more scientific approach. Randi Korn's 1989 introduction to evaluation suggests that it is 'systematic processes using various data collection methods that are used to examine programs and exhibitions and their effect on the museum visitor'.²² Her article draws out several important factors, asserting that those doing evaluation should triangulate their data through multiple methods and apply these to different aspects of the museum experience. Korn continues to centre the change to the visitor as the main outcome of evaluation. This theme of museums making a change to their visitors is commonly picked up in the literature as a positive outcome, certainly as something desirable, exemplifying the 'museum as catalyst' model, with the visitor the subject.²³

Moving these definitions on slightly is the concept of museum evaluation as conversation between visitor and venue. As early as 1985, evaluation was being considered to be a process of 'collaboration between the museum professional and the visitor'.²⁴ In this model, evaluation could provide an opportunity for visitors to have a voice, advancing them from being merely 'interlocutors without discussion partners in the museal conversation' into dialogue with the museum and its staff (although this author situates museums firmly as places of learning, where 'individual museum goers have the right to be educated').²⁵ This discussion could become unidirectional if the evaluation only takes place at the end of a project or exhibition, as a summative piece of work. To make the process truly conversational, exhibition evaluation should occur at multiple stages. This should start with front end evaluation as work begins, when the exhibition is being planned, potential audiences are consulted and previously held data is analysed. As ideas become more concrete, formative evaluation might concept test exhibition elements while there is time to incorporate changes or review project progress. Summative evaluation follows at the end of the project, to determine whether aims and objectives have been met. Results from this final stage should feed back into front end evaluation for the next exhibition, project, or audience focus.²⁶ Previous researchers have noted that museums most

²² Randi Korn, 'Introduction to Evaluation: Theory and Methodology', in *Museum Education: History, Theory and Practice* (National Art Education Association, 1989), pp. 219–38 (p. 219).

²³ See, for example, Barbara J. Soren, 'Museum Experiences That Change Visitors', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 24.3 (2009), pp. 233–51.

²⁴ Steven Griggs, *Evaluating Museum Displays* (AMSSEE, 1985), quoted in Belcher, p.202.

²⁵ Susan A. Crane, 'Memory, Distortion, and History in the Museum', *History and Theory*, 36.4 (1997), pp. 44–63 (p. 45, 48).

²⁶ This temporal evaluation breakdown is mentioned in many places, but see for example: 'Visitor Research and Evaluation', The British Museum, n.d.
<<https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/projects/visitor-research-and-evaluation>> [accessed 23

commonly focus resource on summative evaluation and that the ideal iterative process of reusing this for front end planning rarely takes place.²⁷ Evaluation as collaborative conversation has not developed into a truly two-way dialogue, rather each side takes turns in monologuing to a potentially disinterested discussion partner.

Indeed, the entire 'museum as catalyst' definition is flawed. In chemistry, a catalyst creates the reaction, but itself remains unchanged.²⁸ Evaluation should not be recording only the change in the visitor but should be able to evidence the change that takes place in the museum and with museum staff. Duncan Grewcock suggests something similar in his chapter on museum evaluation in *The Manual of Museum Exhibitions*: 'much has been written on how visitors learn in museums, evaluation is a process through which *museums* can learn'.²⁹ While this sounds transformative, Grewcock still positions the visitor in the centre of his Exhibition Evaluation Cycle, referring to them as the 'target'.³⁰ For too long, museum evaluation has paid lip service to being conversational, while its methods have remained static and unquestioned. Evaluation should include museums listening to all their audiences, receptive to what they are hearing, with all parties eager to take on the challenges being presented to them.

The definition I will be using is that evaluation is a process of critical reflection, in a manner that enables change. This is closer aligned to the Goal-Free Evaluation (GFE) model as suggested by Michael Scriven in the 1970s.³¹ This requires the evaluation to take place without reference to the goals or objectives of the museum or programme. It allows the opportunity for unintended impacts to be recorded and measured. Much of the work related to this thesis is not pure GFE, as that requires external evaluators to undertake the work, something that is generally outside the financial possibilities for most museums.³² But exploring the *actual* impacts rather than intended ones remains an important aspect to evaluation, especially when

September 2022] and Harriet Foster, *Evaluation Toolkit For Museums* (SHARE Museums East, 2020), pp. 3–4.

²⁷ Davies and Heath, p. 3.

²⁸ 'Catalyst', Cambridge Dictionary, 2024 <<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/catalyst>> [accessed 1 April 2024].

²⁹ Duncan Grewcock, 'Before, during, and after: Front-End, Formative, and Summative Evaluation', in Lord and Lord (2001), pp. 44-57 (p. 44).

³⁰ Grewcock, p.45.

³¹ Michael Scriven, 'Pros and Cons about Goal-Free Evaluation', *Evaluation Practice*, 12.1 (1991), pp. 55–62.

³² Brandon W. Youker and Allyssa Ingraham, 'Goal-Free Evaluation: An Orientation for Foundations' Evaluations', *The Foundation Review*, 5.4 (2014), pp. 51-61 (p.55).

considering permanent displays, where their eclectic nature renders goals almost superfluous. It is easier to suggest GFE within the context of university museums, which have until recently been relatively protected from some of the performance indicators that colleagues elsewhere in the industry have had to adhere to (in local authority-reliant museums for example). In all museums, however they are funded, visits are influenced by many factors, some of which lie outside the control of the museum and staff. This is especially true for those visiting permanent displays. Attempts to tie 'learning' to 'goals' in a museum setting begins to sound like folly, and exhibition evaluation must be broad enough to capture both intended and unintended outcomes.

The 'reflective' element in my definition of evaluation is essential. Reflection and reflective practice have long been used by teachers and educators, but its benefits to museums are only starting to be felt, where it should not be 'some add-on or after-thought... but is instead absolutely central to breaking through towards ethical and effective relations between museums and people'.³³ While reflection has been used in collaborative projects and co-curation, it has, until recently, been less developed in exhibition evaluation. Beverly Serrell's 2006 *Judging Exhibitions: A Framework for Assessing Excellence* was written to assist museum professionals to 'think more deeply about their work' and was among the first to encourage reflection when analysing displays.³⁴ Those staff members who are more involved in the curation and creation of exhibitions often pass over reflecting on what they have been doing, quickly moving on to the next project or display. Including a reflective element to evaluation may help staff to 'understand how and why things happen the way they do', and therefore create change.³⁵ Purposeful reflection is therefore critical to display evaluation.

1.3 University museums: some unique challenges, some common challenges

The research will focus on a small set of museums within the United Kingdom. We cannot attempt to define a museum, as these descriptions 'are being pushed and reformed all the time- a definition is chaos', but I use the term 'museum' to include

³³ Bernadette T. Lynch, 'Neither Helpful nor Unhelpful – a Clear Way Forward for the Useful Museum', in *Museums and Social Change: Challenging the Unhelpful Museum* (Routledge, 2020), pp. 1-31 (p. 23).

³⁴ Beverly Serrell, *Judging Exhibitions: A Framework for Assessing Excellence* (Routledge, 2006), p. 8.

³⁵ Hallie Preskill and Rosalie T. Torres, *Evaluative Inquiry for Learning in Organizations* (SAGE Publications, Incorporated, 1998), p. 58.

art galleries and heritage sites.³⁶ For the purpose of the research, I have focussed on the University of Cambridge Museums (UCM). Across the UK there are around 170 university museums or collections, represented nationally by the University Museums Group (UMG).³⁷ Sitting within the Higher Education sector, university museums unite research and researchers with the public, through exhibitions, learning programmes and public engagement. Working at the intersection of education and arts and culture, funding streams are precarious and usually time-limited, as is common across the heritage sector. As UMG states, the dedicated governmental source of funding (UKRI HEMG) has reduced by 44% in the last twenty years.³⁸ Given their role, and the funding pressures, many staff in university museums are highly skilled in communicating with and between academics and a wide variety of different audiences.

There are eight University of Cambridge Museums, which vary in size, resourcing, and subject matter. All these venues are open to the public, all are Accredited as meeting UK industry standards, and five are Designated as being of national and international importance: MAA, the Fitzwilliam Museum, the Sedgwick Museum of Earth Sciences, the Whipple Museum of the History of Science, and the Museum of Zoology.³⁹ Two of the UCMs, the art collections of the Fitzwilliam Museum and Kettle's Yard, are Non-School Institutions within the University. The remaining six museums are embedded within their academic departments, spread over four Schools:

Non-School Institutions	Fitzwilliam Museum	Kettle's Yard
School of Physical Sciences	Sedgwick Museum of Earth Sciences	Polar Museum
School of Biological Sciences	Museum of Zoology	
School of Humanities and Social Sciences	Whipple Museum of the History of Science	MAA
School of Arts and Humanities	Museum of Classical Archaeology	

Figure 1.3 Table of University of Cambridge Museums within the academic schools.

³⁶J. Lynne Teather, 'Museum Studies: Reflecting on Reflective Practice', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 10.4 (1991), pp. 403–17 (p. 412).

³⁷ 'About', University Museums Group, n.d. <<http://universitymuseumsgroup.org/about/>> [accessed 6 January 2024].

³⁸ 'About', University Museums Group'.

³⁹ 'UK Museum Accreditation Scheme'; 'Designated Collections', Arts Council England, n.d. <<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/designated-collections>> [accessed 9 March 2024].

During the research period, some shared services were available through the central UCM Partnerships Team. This included limited joint marketing, some shared events, evaluation, and collation of reporting to funders (primarily ACE, but also Cambridge City Council and the Higher Education Museums and Galleries Fund through UKRI). All the Cambridge University museums have both permanent and temporary exhibitions, but these vary enormously in size from an individual case to large amounts of floor space taking up entire galleries. A particular strength of the consortium is the assortment and range of collections, making them ideal to use as a research field. Perhaps surprisingly, the constituent museums operate in a reasonably autonomous fashion. While the collections themselves belong to the University, the museums all have different management structures, with most policies and procedures being developed by each venue individually rather than imposed centrally by the University or other body. The museums act independently of each other, applying for minimum standards, such as Accreditation, on their own basis. Directors meet monthly, with cross-museum working groups formed for specific projects. The smallest museum has three members of staff (of which two are part-time), the largest over 200. Like museums across the country, almost all rely on significant numbers of volunteers.

There is considerable variety in the size of the collections too, from around five thousand objects in the Polar Museum to two million specimens in the Museum of Zoology. The collections come from every continent, inhabited or otherwise, and cover the entire history of the planet. Situated in a square mile in the city of Cambridge, it is probably the 'highest concentration of internationally important collections outside London'.⁴⁰ The subject matters of the museums are also diverse, with almost any material represented somewhere. The research period for this DHeritage coincided with a difficult financial time for UCM. While they retained their National Portfolio Organisation status in the 2023-8 funding announcement, Arts Council England reduced their financial support for UCM by 40%, from £1.2 million to £617000, creating a 'significant challenge' for the museums, in an already challenging financial landscape.⁴¹ This variety and combination of funding sources should ensure that any conclusions drawn from my research should be applicable to other museums, collections or venues.

⁴⁰ 'Collections in Action', University of Cambridge Museums, n.d. <<http://www.museums.cam.ac.uk/story/collectionsinaction>> [accessed 10 May 2024].

⁴¹ Arts Council England, 'Investment Programme 2023-26 Data - Offered Organisations, NPO, IPSO, Transfer', 2022; 'Cambridge Collections Awarded Arts Council England Funding', University of Cambridge, 2022 <<https://www.cam.ac.uk/news/cambridge-collections-awarded-arts-council-england-funding>> [accessed 11 May 2024].

While UCM is a productive research area, where results can be applied to other types of museums, there are certainly limitations. As some core funding is provided by the University, there is a financial stability that is not always present in the sector, especially for small, independent museums. University museums can therefore take greater risks, both in programming and displays, that might not be applicable in other venues. But as other types of museums are dependent on short-term funding, having a solid foundation in evaluation techniques is still essential. University museums have a greater emphasis on research than the rest of the heritage sector. Academic researchers may not consider smaller museums as a venue for exploration or for demonstrating the impact of their work, but this is a lack of imagination on the part of the researcher and not the museum, and university museums should encourage their departmental colleagues to work with other heritage sites.

An important facet of academic life in recent years has been the challenge of measuring the impact of research in higher education. Introduced in 1986, initially as a peer review process through the Research Assessment Exercise, the Research Excellence Framework (REF) was carried out in 2014 and subsequently in 2021.⁴² It was set up to 'assess the quality of research and produce outcomes in UK higher education institutions'.⁴³ One measure used was the 'impact' of research, defined as 'an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia'.⁴⁴ Professor Mark Reed, in his *Research Impact Handbook*, defines impact simply as 'the good that researchers can do in the world'.⁴⁵ For many researchers a museum exhibition was a simple and effective way to get their work into the public sphere. This output was supported by the publication of the criteria for the assessment panels of REF 2021, where the 'impacts on creativity, culture and society' section explicitly suggests collaboration with museum professionals as an effective way to show impact, 'including museum and gallery exhibitions'.⁴⁶ Indeed, museums were a popular addition to all case studies in both 2014 and 2021, being included in around 12% of submissions each year: in 2014, of the 6637 case studies in the online

⁴² 'Research Assessment Exercise - Themes - Making History', Institute of Historical Research, n.d. <https://archives.history.ac.uk/makinghistory/themes/research_assessment.html> [accessed 6 January 2024].

⁴³ 'REF 2029', REF, n.d. <<https://www.ref.ac.uk/>> [accessed 21 April 2024].

⁴⁴ 'REF Impact', UKRI, n.d. <<https://www.ukri.org/who-we-are/research-england/research-excellence/ref-impact/>> [accessed 1 June 2024].

⁴⁵ Mark S. Reed, *The Research Impact Handbook* / Mark S. Reed. (Kinnoir, Huntly, Aberdeenshire : Fast Track Impact, 2016), p. 13.

⁴⁶ Research England and others, 'Panel Criteria and Working Methods', 2019, p. 79.

database, 811 contain a reference to museums; the 2021 REF database contains 6781 case studies, of which 850 mention museums.⁴⁷

While the REF criteria did not specify temporary exhibitions (as opposed to permanent displays) as the output, for many researchers they were the obvious way to reach wider audiences with their work. With much research funded short-term, and a desire to produce impact quickly, temporary displays appeared to many to be the answer. In my work at MAA, I have read and responded to many enquiries from researchers about the possibility of creating a new display (occasionally this request came after the museum had been written into funding applications). As with many museums, however, our temporary exhibition schedule is planned many years in advance, and they are often based on our own collections, foregrounding the research of staff attached to the institution: in the Cambridge academic landscape, museum (and library) research staff were included in the 2021 REF for the first time.⁴⁸ With the idea of a ‘blockbuster’ tempting researchers, there is a status accorded to a temporary exhibition, especially in one of the national museums. Yet research could have even greater impacts if it were included in a permanent gallery space, with an immediate increase in its longevity and legacy. I argue that it is possible to record and measure the impact of research in permanent displays and this could in fact be more beneficial for all parties. In the concluding chapter to *Museums and Higher Education Working Together*, the authors state that museums and universities ‘urgently need to find ways of arguing for, and measuring the impact of... social, cultural and public good’.⁴⁹ Contributions to permanent exhibitions could be a way of cementing the impact of research for both academics and museums.

1.4 The research in context

My background is in museum education, a sphere highly influenced by constructivism. Constructivism suggests that people ‘construct their own realities’ and some have asserted that museums are possibly ‘the perfect environment in which to use constructivist theory’.⁵⁰ George Hein has spent decades applying

⁴⁷ ‘Results’, REF, n.d. <<https://impact.ref.ac.uk/casestudies/Results.aspx?val=museum>> [accessed 27 May 2024]; ‘Results and Submissions : REF 2021’, REF, n.d. <<https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/outputs>> [accessed 27 May 2024].

⁴⁸ ‘Our World-Leading Research: REF 2021’, University of Cambridge, 2022 <<https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/REF-2021>> [accessed 27 May 2024].

⁴⁹ Anne Boddington, Jos Boys, and Catherine Speight, *Museums and Higher Education Working Together: Challenges and Opportunities* (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2016), p. 182.

⁵⁰ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museum, Media, Message* (London and New York: Taylor & Francis Group, 1995), p. 11; Kodi R. Jeffery-Clay, ‘Constructivism in Museums: How Museums Create Meaningful Learning Environments’, *The Journal of Museum Education*, 23.1 (1998), pp. 3–7 (p. 5).

constructivism to museum education, suggesting that 'both knowledge and the way it is obtained are dependent on the mind of the learner'.⁵¹ Within museums, we see 'learning' occur in many ways and times (see Chapter 4), sometimes in intentional ways, but often unintentionally. Museum exhibitions and displays are usually seen as 'learning environments' in the broadest sense. Museum education staff are, I assert, inherently reflective in their practice, perhaps more so than many other museum professionals. Those employed in learning are in the midst of the 'objects encountering people encountering objects' continuum on a daily basis, personally facilitating and initiating those encounters. Those who curate exhibitions are also an important part of this process, but their preparation work generally occurs away from visitors, or before such encounters take place. Recognising the different roles of museum professionals led me to the use of ethnographic methods as a prime focus for my research.

Ethnographic methods have been used for audience research for many years, with participant observation and accompanied visits often practised; I have used these techniques to evaluate museum displays across UCM.⁵² In these studies I, the ethnographer, was observing museum visitors as the subject of my research, but elsewhere the ethnographic approach has been used to research the exhibition process, especially with respect to curatorial staff. The most notable example is that by Sharon Macdonald in her 2002 book *Behind the Scenes at the Science Museum*.⁵³ The Science Museum referred to the book as 'a foundational text of the museum studies field' when celebrating the 35th anniversary of the exhibition the research centred on.⁵⁴

Macdonald, at the time in a fixed-term research role in the Centre for Research into Innovation, Culture and Technology at Brunel University, undertook her analysis to 'study the construction of science in museum exhibitions'.⁵⁵ From 1998 until the

⁵¹ George E. Hein, 'The Constructivist Museum', *Journal for Education in Museums*, 16 (1995), pp. 15-17 (p. 15).

⁵² Sarah-Jane Harknett, 'What Do You Find Out When You Observe Three Hundred Visitors in a Museum?' Cambridge University Museums, 16 March 2018 <<https://www.museums.cam.ac.uk/blog/2018/03/16/what-do-you-find-out-when-you-observe-three-hundred-visitors-in-a-museum/>> [accessed 31 December 2022]; Sarah-Jane Harknett, 'How We Located the Most Visited Object in Our Museums' Cambridge University Museums, 13 April 2018 <<https://www.museums.cam.ac.uk/blog/2018/04/13/how-we-located-the-most-visited-object-in-our-museums/>> [accessed 31 December 2022].

⁵³ Sharon Macdonald, *Behind the Scenes at The Science Museum* (Berg, 2002).

⁵⁴ 'The Past and Present of the Future of Food with Sharon Macdonald' Science Museum, n.d. <<https://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/researchers/research-events/past-and-present-future-food-sharon-macdonald>> [accessed 10 May 2024].

⁵⁵ Sharon Macdonald, *Behind the Scenes at The Science Museum*, p. 3.

opening in 1999, she followed the production of the Food for Thought exhibition, shadowing curators, making tea, attending meetings, participating in the frantic cleaning, being present at the ceremonial opening. Importantly, this was not to be a temporary exhibition; rather, it remained open in the Science Museum for some years (but certainly closed by 2005).⁵⁶ Macdonald felt that she was considered by many museum staff to be part of 'the Team', one among those given a nickname by visitor services staff: 'the Magnificent Seven'.⁵⁷ Following the exhibition opening, she carried out evaluation with visitors: some interviews, tracking and observation, and 'a degree of general hanging around the gallery'.⁵⁸ The study, named by Hooper-Greenhill and Moussouri as 'pioneering', still involved the researcher gaining acceptance as an outsider in the process.⁵⁹ My research builds on Macdonald's but positions the researcher inside the space from the outset, by using autoethnography.

Autoethnography is a technique that can 'describe and systematically analyse... personal experience... in order to understand cultural experience'.⁶⁰ Expanding beyond ethnography, autoethnography emphasises the individual as simultaneously the researcher and subject of the research. It has value when the autoethnographer has the 'ability to capture, probe and render understandable' their experiences.⁶¹ Having the experience is not enough, they must be analysed and written up for them to qualify as autoethnographic (see Chapter 3). For the DHeritage, I refocussed my research from analysing the work of other people in their engagement with museums, towards understanding my own experiences embedded in the culture of the UCM. Autoethnography allowed me to be academically rigorous, while acknowledging this work in a professional context will also be 'emotional, therapeutic and inclusive of personal and social phenomena'.⁶² These characteristics are often separated from the research field, but for the practice-based doctorate I wanted to bring all of myself to this work: a museum professional for 25 years. As a researcher,

⁵⁶ The exhibition department were not sure of the exact date when I emailed them in 2024.

⁵⁷ Sharon Macdonald, *Behind the Scenes at The Science Museum*, p. 105.

⁵⁸ 'The Past and Present of the Future of Food with Sharon Macdonald | Science Museum'.

⁵⁹ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill and Theano Moussouri, 'Researching Learning in Museums and Galleries 1990-1999: A Bibliographic Review', 2000, p. 12.

⁶⁰ Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, 'Autoethnography: An Overview', *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12.1 (2010), pp. 273-290 (p. 1).

⁶¹ Norman K. Denzin, *Interpretive Autoethnography*, Second Edition (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2023), p. 36.

⁶² Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 'Autoethnography: An Overview'.

I was also an ‘embodied presence’ in the museum, attached ‘inextricably’ with the subjects of my research: my colleagues.⁶³

1.5 Dissertation structure and chapter summary

The structure of this dissertation follows a logical progression through the research process, with chapters building on each other and responding directly to my aims and objectives. In Chapter 2 I provide the fundamental background to the academic context, through an examination of the literature that considers the history and challenges of evaluating museums. This highlights the work on temporary exhibitions, projects, and programming, but also the gap in the literature when it comes to permanent displays. The gap is particularly pertinent to museums of the UK: many of our museums are free, and this changes how the visitor experiences the space. Conclusions reached in temporary exhibitions or permanent displays where there is an entrance fee may not be applicable more broadly. While establishing the history of the field, the literature highlights how permanent displays have become something of an afterthought. Chapter 2 determines some of the factors that influence current evaluation practice, and begins to untangle the improvements needed, opening research avenues which the Impact Evaluation Resources respond to.

Having demonstrated that the evaluation of permanent displays is a current gap in the literature, I lay out the methodology I used in my research in Chapter 3. I examine the use of constructivism and the importance of pragmatism during a particularly uncertain period. As I began to plan my research during early 2020, COVID-19 inexorably altered its trajectory. My two methods, interviews with staff and autoethnography, guided the production of both the Resources and the training materials, and quotes from staff members are used to support my arguments. There are limitations and important ethical considerations for both methods, which are examined in this chapter. Through the staff interviews, and further background reading, it was clear that there was a further significant player in evaluation demands: funding bodies. Chapter 4 therefore moves the analytical review to the UK heritage sector, looking at the main funders of culture and their funding requirements. This demonstrates the emphasis on the evaluation of short-term projects, and the importance of robust evaluation methods, which the IER was designed to assist with.

⁶³ Kath Woodward, 'Autoethnography', in *Methodologies for Practice Research: Approaches for Professional Doctorates*, ed. by Carol Costley and John Fulton (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2023), pp 137-149 (p. 138).

Building on the requirements of staff and funders, Chapter 5 discusses the development of the IER and training materials. It examines practical toolkits that have proliferated over the last decade that are suggested as best practice in museum evaluation, as well as testing current evaluation courses that are offered in the heritage sector. The chapter draws on the autoethnographic method by providing a narrative account in defence of the main output of the research: the suite of evaluation resources. It is both a reflection on the iterative nature of their creation, as well as an examination of how they are already being incorporated into professional practice. These elements respond to my research objective to understand the impact of the IER on museums in Cambridge, drawing on both the academic literature, toolkits currently in use and my practice as a museum professional. The concluding chapter shows how using the suite of Resources can prove the impact of permanent displays, even when responding to the demands of funding bodies. The conclusions include worked examples of the impact of the Resources on gallery evaluation, as well as how it has influenced researchers and the sector. Finally, I explore areas that would benefit from further research and the lessons learned from the research for the evaluation of permanent museum displays. The Impact Evaluation Resources are reproduced in their entirety in Appendix 1. The training presentations that were used with a variety of heritage audiences can be found in Appendix 2. Appendix 3 contains the transcripts of the interviews with museum professionals.

1.6 Conclusion

This chapter has introduced the aims and objectives of my DHeritage, outlining the core themes at the heart of the research, linking both my academic investigations and my professional practice. I have located the research within the context of the University of Cambridge Museums, during a challenging period in higher education, a difficult funding environment for heritage institutions, amidst the devastation of a global pandemic. My research led me to suggest improved robust evaluation techniques and to find new ways to apply this thinking, particularly in relation to permanent museum displays, which led to the creation of the Impact Evaluation Resources: a crucial output of the DHeritage. I have suggested my own definition of evaluation: that it is not a single event, but rather an ongoing process, using a variety of methods to allow critical reflection, and should be undertaken in a manner that both encourages and enables change. I have described the journey of my research, which is reflected in the structure of the chapters in this dissertation. To begin answering my research questions, I must determine the factors that are of most

importance in current evaluation practice in the UK, by turning attention to the history of the field as defined through the literature. More than merely tracing the historic development of the field of museum evaluation or audience research, Chapter 2 explores the broader context of my research and lays the foundation for the creation of the IER by identifying the challenges and gaps that will be resolved by their application in a variety of museum contexts, but most especially for determining the impact of permanent museum displays.

Chapter 2

The development of museum evaluation in the literature

2.1 Introduction

Over the last 100 years there has been a growing body of academic literature around evaluation in museums and visitor studies. The academics producing these papers have often been peripherally involved with day-to-day museum work. Occasionally they have curated or been involved in the production of temporary exhibitions, or are evaluating specific exhibitions, programmes, or practice. These academics usually return to research, away from quotidian museum business. Simultaneously, museum development organisations and the like have been producing practical toolkits and training, which are often aimed at the time-poor, on-the-ground museum professional, with simple directions for evaluating their practice. These miss much of the theoretical basis and background that could help legitimise the support they provide. The literature therefore has a disconnect between academic publications and these practical toolkits. There is also a gap in the literature, both practical and academic, that evaluates permanent gallery displays. Much effort in the past has been on temporary displays, audience interventions, programming, and participatory practice: the areas where project funding is often focussed. But many smaller museums have limited space and resources allocated to special or temporary exhibitions, and visitors still come to museums to look at permanent displays.

This review of published works provides the overarching context to my research by identifying some of the factors that have influenced current evaluation practice, therefore directly responding to one of my research questions. I begin with an examination of the academic literature, initially by charting the history of the academic field of visitor studies, locating the gaps and the disconnect with practical museum work. Academic interest in evaluation was in its infancy through the first half of the twentieth century, with a large growth in attention from the 1970s. The field vacillated between qualitative and quantitative methods, with frequent appearances of lists of specifications for creating the 'ideal' visitor experience. Repeated revisions to such standards demonstrate that they were not achieving their aims. A further theme found in the literature of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century is the divide between understandings of evaluation and research, with the former considered largely theoretical and the latter practical. This divide has contributed to pushing the field of evaluation out of the academic field, diminishing its potential

influence, and adding to the reduction of attention to permanent museum displays and their impact.

2.2 A brief history of visitor studies

The early years to the 1960s

The aim of museum visitor studies is to provide ‘understanding of the interaction between museums and their visitors’.⁶⁴ Fundamentally, there are two ways of studying visitors, their behaviour, and their learning in heritage spaces: the evaluator can ask the visitor to tell what they are doing, thinking, and seeing; or the visitor can be observed while they do, think, and see in a museum. While the questions that are asked and the underlying theory has shifted over the years, the basic history of visitor studies has vacillated between these methods, or a combination of them. The field began with visitor observation, putting the responsibility of interpretation of behaviour onto the museum professional, as it was felt that ‘observations are more objective and reliable than what people might say in interview’.⁶⁵ Evaluation later shifted to attempts to impose order through quantitative methods, before combining the strands in the first part of the twenty-first century.

The history of the study of visitors to museums and galleries has been traced back to its foundations in the early twentieth century.⁶⁶ The founding father of visitor research is usually cited to be Benjamin Ives Gilman, who worked at the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston for 32 years from 1893. His interest in psychology led him to study museum visitors, publishing his paper *Museum Fatigue* in 1911. The paper includes a series of 30 photographs showing a pre-selected visitor (‘an intelligent man with good eyesight’) who, when asked specific questions about the displays, had to locate the correct answer.⁶⁷ The museum was therefore seen as a place of learning, where facts could be determined through close observation of exhibitions. The study brings together several themes which will be returned to throughout the history of visitor

⁶⁴ Belinda Crawford Seagram, Leslie H. Patten, and Christine W. Lockett, ‘Audience Research and Exhibit Development: A Framework’, *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 12.1 (1993), pp. 29–41, p.30.

⁶⁵ Eileen Hooper-Greenhill, ‘Studying Visitors’, in *A Companion to Museum Studies* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2006), pp. 362–76, p.363.

⁶⁶ For example: Hooper-Greenhill, ‘Studying Visitors’.; Bernard Schiele, ‘Visitor Studies: A Short History’, *Loisir et Société / Society and Leisure*, 39.3 (2016), pp. 331–56.; Ghislaine Lawrence, ‘Remembering Rats, Considering Culture: Perspectives on Museum Evaluation’, in *Museum Visitor Studies in the 90s* (Science Museum, 1993), pp. 117–24.

⁶⁷ Steven Lubar, ‘Looking through the Skiascope: Benjamin Ives Gilman and the Invention of the Modern Museum Gallery’ *Panorama: Journal of the Association of Historians of American Art*, 2017 <<https://journalpanorama.org/article/looking-through-the-skiascope-benjamin-gilman-and-the-invention-of-the-modern-museum-gallery/>> [accessed 24 July 2022]; Benjamin Ives Gilman, ‘Museum Fatigue’, *The Scientific Monthly*, 2.1 (1916), pp. 62–74 (p. 62).

studies: a small, focussed study; the use of technology to record results; the idea that the visit will, to some degree, revolve around learning; and the desire to find and therefore study a 'typical' visitor.

Following Gilman, early evaluations were largely visitor observation studies, including those by Edward Robinson in the United States. Robinson was a Professor of Psychology at Yale University, and from 1925 he undertook a two-year study of visitors, advancing Gilman's study on a single subject. Robinson, with his assistants Dr Irene Case Sherman and Lois E. Curry, aimed to provide 'a series of investigations of the behaviour of the casual visitor in museums of art'.⁶⁸ He was intent on learning information about visitors rather than the venues they were in: 'our purpose was at no time that of evaluating individual museums'.⁶⁹ Another of Robinson's assistants, Arthur Melton, published his own book, *Problems of Installation in Museums of Art*, in 1935.⁷⁰ In a frighteningly prescient statement on the history of museum evaluation, former Science Museum Curator Ghislaine Lawrence notes that the 1920s was a period 'when many [museums] were under pressure to justify funding'.⁷¹ These early years of visitor studies, with their roots in psychology, had been spent pursuing so-called 'scientism', with a quest for empirical results.⁷² Melton and Robinson published many studies, but their impact was slight, both on the field more broadly or even on other museums: American psychology Professor Stephen Bitgood acknowledged that 'visitor research by others was not one of the immediate fruits of their efforts', with the field lying somewhat dormant until the 1960s and 1970s.⁷³ By then, visitor studies was moving away from observation, with most of the evaluation being achieved by visitors self-reporting their experiences by questionnaires and surveys.⁷⁴

Perhaps the most influential use of surveys was by Bourdieu and Darbel in their 1969 book *L'amour de l'art*, which introduced the idea of 'cultural capital': any of the various cultural advantages a person has which gives them a higher status in

⁶⁸ Edward Robinson, 'The Behaviour of the Museum Visitor', *Publications of the American Association of Museums*, 5 (1928), pp. 1–72 (p.5).

⁶⁹ Robinson, p.5.

⁷⁰ Arthur Melton, *Problems of Installation in Museums of Art* (American Association of Museums, 1935).

⁷¹ Ghislaine Lawrence, 'Remembering Rats, Considering Culture: Perspectives on Museum Evaluation', in *Museum Visitor Studies in the 90s* (Science Museum, 1993), pp. 117–24 (p.117).

⁷² Schiele. p. 332.

⁷³ Stephen Bitgood, 'Notes from the Editor', *Visitor Behavior*, 3.1 (1988), p. 3.

⁷⁴ Lawrence, *Remembering Rats*, p. 118.

society.⁷⁵ Bourdieu and Darbel undertook their research in five European countries, leading them to conclude that museum visitors at that time remained predominantly middle class and privileged; indeed only the most privileged were attending exhibitions.⁷⁶ Several factors, they contend, are at play in the creation of cultural capital. The most relevant for museums are the fields of art and education, especially when viewed as potential leisure activities. Museum academic Eilean Hooper-Greenhill has suggested that the highly theoretical and philosophical stance taken by Bourdieu and Darbel influenced the museum world less than perhaps might be expected, possibly due to the lack of an English translation of their corpus of literature until the early 1990s: thirty years after original publication.⁷⁷ Hooper-Greenhill suggests a note of caution against applying Bourdieu's ideas too heavily in museum theory: continental Europe of the 1960s was an entirely different context to that of the UK in the twenty-first century.⁷⁸ Bourdieu's conclusions, she asserts, should be seen as 'valid in their context', while also raising 'essential questions...about museums and their overt and implicit social purposes'.⁷⁹ The question of cultural capital has been returned to frequently: for example in Tony Blair's 2007 celebration of free museum entry (without it 'museums, far from being full, would have gradually diminished in importance as charging reduced the audience to the middle class'), through to the 2019 Ofsted inspection update which informed schools that they would be judged on the extent to which they were 'equipping pupils with the knowledge and cultural capital they need to succeed in life'.⁸⁰

Returning to the history of audience evaluation, in the late 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s the work of American museum thinkers Harris Shettel and Chan Screven applied scientific reasoning to exhibitions, especially around designing displays that increased learning. Screven defined museum evaluation as the 'systematic assessment of the value (worth) of a display', judging against an 'educational goal for the purpose of making decisions (continue it, redo it, stop it, throw it out, avoid it

⁷⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, Alain Darbel, and Dominique Schnapper, *L'amour de l'art : Les Musées d'art Européens et Leur Public* (Les Éditions de Minuit, 1969); Pierre Bourdieu and Richard Nice, *Distinction : A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2010).

⁷⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, 'Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction', in R. Brown (Ed.), *Knowledge, Education, and Cultural Change* (Tavistock Publications), pp. 71–112 (p. 76).

⁷⁷ Hooper-Greenhill, 'Studying Visitors', p. 364.

⁷⁸ Hooper-Greenhill, 'Studying Visitors', p. 360.

⁷⁹ Hooper-Greenhill, 'Studying Visitors', p. 370.

⁸⁰ 'Blair's Speech on the Arts in Full', *The Guardian*, section Politics, 6 March 2007, <<https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2007/mar/06/politicsandthearts.uk1>> [accessed 25 June 2024]; Ofsted, 'School Inspection Update' (Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills, 2019).

in future)'.⁸¹ Shettel felt that evaluation should be carried out by scientists, who would test 'research hypotheses by changing the variables in order to establish a series of measurable objective criteria in the long term'.⁸² This 'goal-referenced approach' and its step-by-step manner was appealing at the time. Shettel and Screven made the evaluation process simple: exhibitions were seen as a didactic experience, where audiences would be clearly defined and learning could be objectively measured.⁸³ From this, the worthiness of the exhibition was determined. For the time-poor museum worker, these are attractive concepts, proposing a constant evolution towards objectively 'better' exhibitions. Being able to prove learning success and value in a potentially standardised manner would help to justify a display's presence, possibly even a museum's existence. Sadly, these theories failed to consider highly changeable aspects: visitors and their motivations.

The 1980s and 1990s: order, organisation and agendas

In the United Kingdom, the emerging area of visitor studies in the early 1980s and 1990s was gaining traction, but with an academically scattergun approach across both arts and sciences. Despite its 70 year history, in 1987 visitor evaluation was referred to as a 'new tool for management'.⁸⁴ The scientific methodology was retained, with museums in that field leading the way, for example through the 1993 publication from The Science Museum: *Museum Visitor Studies in the 90s*.⁸⁵ The influence of psychology similarly remained strong, but there was a growing impact in the museum world from education, learning, and broader visitor studies methodologies. This is exemplified in Alt and Shaw's 1984 article 'Characteristics of ideal museum exhibits', which brings together many of these elements. It was published in the *British Journal of Psychology* and is based on studies of visitors to the 'Hall of Human Biology at the British Museum (Natural History)'. Their checklist approach concludes by identifying 53 characteristics of ideal displays, although they recognise that they were working towards 'a consensus across the population' of the visitors and that it might be necessary to apply audience segmentation to 'discern different 'clusters' of individuals with identifiably different requirements for their ideal exhibit'.⁸⁶

⁸¹ Screven, p. 273.

⁸² Schiele, p. 339.

⁸³ C.G. Screven, 'Exhibit Evaluation: A Goal-Referenced Approach', *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 19.4 (1976), pp. 271–90.

⁸⁴ Ross J. Loomis, *Museum Visitor Evaluation: New Tool for Management* (American Association for State and Local History, 1987).

⁸⁵ Sandra Bicknell, Graham Farmelo, and Science Museum (Great Britain), *Museum Visitor Studies in the 90s* (Science Museum, 1993).

⁸⁶ M. B. Alt and K. M. Shaw, 'Characteristics of Ideal Museum Exhibits', *British Journal of Psychology*, 75.1 (1984), pp. 25–36 (p. 26 and p. 35).

The checklist approach of Alt and Shaw continued through the 1990s and into the 2000s, with many academic papers focussed on providing museum staff with a list of suggestions to create the most successful display for visitors: a set of golden rules. Stephen Bitgood is chief among these, with papers published throughout this period on designing exhibitions, methods for creating and testing engaging text and labels, guidelines for interactive exhibits, and the circulation of visitors within a space.⁸⁷ Bitgood's intention is to design for 'success': exhibitions, he asserts, 'may fail dismally if they are poorly designed'.⁸⁸ For Bitgood, success varies according to what is being produced, but it is certainly measurable, usually against specific learning objectives. For labels, success includes the probability of visitors reading the text and 'visitor satisfaction', as well as 'meeting the educational objectives of the exhibition'.⁸⁹ For interactive displays, the 'most important outcome' for Bitgood is 'communicating the message'.⁹⁰ The checklist approach, however, was not limited only to the exhibition, but also extended to the field of visitor studies itself. Museum educator Mary Ellen Munley wrote an influential article in 1986, which provided a framework of reasons to carry out audience evaluation. These were: a justification of the value of the institution or its outputs; information-gathering for long-term planning; formulation of new outputs; assessing existing outputs; research and theory construction.⁹¹ From this checklist, museum workers could identify – as if following a flowchart – whether they were required to do demographic studies, evaluation or research.⁹² The distinctions between these elements became an important aspect of the academic field of visitor studies, explored further in section 2.4.

Where Alt did differ from the prevailing literature was in his idea that the visitor, rather than being a passive participant in the exhibition, was an 'active agent', who

⁸⁷ Stephen Bitgood, 'Designing Effective Exhibits: Criteria for Success, Exhibit Design Approaches, and Research Strategies', *Visitor Behavior*, 9.4 (1994), pp. 4–15; Stephen Bitgood, 'Suggested Guidelines for Designing Interactive Exhibits', *Visitor Behavior*, 6.4 (1991), pp. 4–11.; Donald Thompson and Stephen Bitgood, 'The Effects of Sign Length, Letter Size, and Proximity on Reading', *Visitor Studies*, 1.1 (1988), pp. 101–12; Stephen Bitgood and Sherri Lankford, 'Museum Orientation and Circulation', *Visitor Behavior*, 10.2 (1995), pp. 4–6.

⁸⁸ Bitgood, 'Suggested Guidelines for Designing Interactive Exhibits', p. 4.

⁸⁹ Bitgood, 'The ABCs of label design', *Visitor Studies: Theory, Research and Practice*, 3 (1990), pp.115-129 (p. 115).

⁹⁰ Bitgood, 'Suggested Guidelines for Designing Interactive Exhibits', p. 10.

⁹¹ M. E. Munley, 'Asking the Right Questions: Evaluation and Museum Mission', *Museum News*, 64.3 (1986), pp. 18–23.

⁹² See also Kathleen F. Wagner, 'Acceptance or Excuses?: The Institutionalization of Evaluation', *Visitor Behavior*, 11.2 (1996), 11–13; and Hooper-Greenhill, 'Studying Visitors'. p.69.

uses displays according to their 'own perceptions'.⁹³ Lawrence, in her history of visitor studies, signals that Alt does little to remove the primacy of psychology, but the field was incorporating other disciplines and moving away from objective measurement.⁹⁴ Lawrence was in the thick of the debate in the United Kingdom; her stance was that it was time to move on from only using surveys. She advocates for developing alternative methods, such as those commonplace in the social sciences, going further than the cognitive approach that the behaviourist evaluators had taken. She called for greater reflexivity, where meaning is central. This has relevance for the museum environment, with her definition of meaning being a 'social product formed through the activities of people interacting'.⁹⁵ There was, naturally perhaps, a push-back from other evaluators, especially Miles, whose response (in the same publication as Lawrence's critique) was that Lawrence had failed to make an adequate distinction between evaluation and research (see section 2.4 below).

Alternative evaluation techniques such as ethnographic methods began to gain ground, most notably and influentially by Sharon Macdonald's large-scale study into the exhibition process, published as the book *Behind the Scenes at the Science Museum*.⁹⁶ The research began in 1988, continuing through to the opening of the permanent *Food for Thought* gallery the following year. Her research began on the day that the Science Museum introduced admission charges, a time of change when, it was claimed, the museum's remit for research was threatened.⁹⁷ In a perhaps unwitting nod to Gilman's 1893 study, the book includes a selection of photographs of museum staff stiffly posing in front of displays on the opening day of the exhibition. By revealing the exhibition process to a wider audience, Macdonald surfaced the decisions made in offices and meetings which the visitor contends with once the exhibition is open. For curatorial colleagues, opening day is the end of their process, but as Macdonald demonstrates, this is the tip of the exhibition iceberg.

Meanwhile in America, Beverly Serrell was championing a return to visitor observation. Unlike Macdonald, Serrell did not view this as ethnographic and she promoted a 'scientific' approach through her seminal works on tracking, published in

⁹³ Michael Alt, *A Cognitive Approach to Understanding The Behaviour of Museum Visitors* (PhD Thesis, Institute of Education, 1982).

⁹⁴ Lawrence, p. 119.

⁹⁵ Lawrence, p. 118.

⁹⁶ Sharon Macdonald, *Behind the Scenes at The Science Museum*, (Oxford, Berg, 2002).

⁹⁷ Macdonald, *Behind the Scenes*, p. 3, 10.

1997 and 1998.⁹⁸ Unlike many of those before her, Serrell was not working for an academic institution, rather writing from the position of a practitioner: the director of the consultancy 'Serrell & Associates'.⁹⁹ She had extensive experience in exhibition evaluation: 'Paying Attention' drew on data from 108 exhibitions in North America (covering museums, galleries, zoos and aquaria).¹⁰⁰ With a Masters in Science Teaching, and influenced by some of her funding for her evaluation work being supplied by the American National Science Foundation, Serrell was keen to create formulae to categorise visitor behaviour that could be applied across venues.¹⁰¹ Her generalisations about exhibition visiting were illustrated with two key concepts: the Diligent Visitor Index (DVI) and Sweep Rate Index (SRI). A Diligent Visitor is one who looks at 50% or more of the exhibition elements, while the SRI is the proportion of the floor space covered by visitors. Continuing the desire of those before her to create comparable methods and data sets, Serrell produced a numerical standard which can be rigorously applied across venues regardless of size or subject matter. Such checklists and empirical results are appealing at first sight: they provide a means to define the success of an exhibition through observable targets. But the didactic approach discounts the variety that makes up the visitor body. This had unwittingly been an unacknowledged underlying problem: the checklists have to be adapted and revised and are returned to in the literature frequently. This should perhaps have been a clue that there is not a set of perfect conditions for exhibitions, or indeed the perfect visitor; Science Museum staff concluded that 'exhibit developers should consider the characteristics of the visitor, and not the objects'.¹⁰²

There were important debates taking place in exhibition discussions through the 1980s and 1990s which foregrounded learning. The 'Pandora's box of 'meaning'' had been opened, and it led to the influence of a wide variety of other disciplines, as 'learning' was moving towards a constructivist approach: where meaning making *is* learning.¹⁰³ Falk and Dierking's publications *The Museum Experience* (1992) and

⁹⁸ Beverly Serrell, 'Paying Attention: The Duration and Allocation of Visitors' Time in Museum Exhibitions', *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 40.2 (1997), pp. 108–25. Beverly Serrell, *Paying Attention: Visitors and Museum Exhibitions*, American Association of Museums, (1998).

⁹⁹ 'About Beverly Serrell', Serrell Associates, n.d. <<https://serrellassociates.com/about>> [accessed 25 June 2024].

¹⁰⁰ Serrell, 'Paying Attention: The Duration and Allocation of Visitors' Time in Museum Exhibitions'.

¹⁰¹ Beverly Serrell 'Beverly SERRELL | Director | M.A., Science Teaching, Governors State University, Illinois. Thesis Dealt with Teaching Natural Science in Non-School Settings | Research Profile', *ResearchGate*, n.d. <<https://www.researchgate.net/profile/Beverly-Serrell>> [accessed 25 June 2024]; Serrell, 'Paying Attention: The Duration and Allocation of Visitors' Time in Museum Exhibitions', p. 111

¹⁰² Sandra Bicknell and Peter Mann, 'A Picture of Visitors for Exhibition Developers', *Visitor Studies*, 5.1 (1993), pp. 88–98 (p. 94).

¹⁰³ Schiele, p. 347; George E. Hein, 'Is Meaning Making Constructivism? Is Constructivism Meaning Making?', *The Exhibitionist*, 18.2 (1992).

Learning from Museums (2000) draw extensively on constructivist approaches, theorising that visitors create their own meaning, in a personal, continuous way.¹⁰⁴ Those coming to museums do so with their own agenda, which will directly affect and influence their visit. They, along with George Hein, were keen to shift the focus from the facts and information that people were learning (the absorption-transmission model), towards more personal meaning-making, highly individualised according to the visitor's pre-existing knowledge, interests, and understanding. Hein also incorporated the visitor's path within a display space, their ability to select their route and what they engage with, what they do and talk about with others (the constructivist-relativist model).¹⁰⁵ If a museum visit is no longer about following a didactic path and learning 'facts', the evaluation model must also change. This was a dramatic shift from the idea of a set of checklists for the 'perfect' exhibition. Falk and Dierking were rewriting the evaluation rulebook by asking museum professionals to 'set aside the expectation that all learning will follow a totally prescribed and predictable course'.¹⁰⁶ They used qualitative methodologies in their work, often interviews, visitor observation and tracking, and followed up after extended periods of time to see what 'learning' remained with the visitor.¹⁰⁷ Falk and Dierking state that previous behaviourist studies commonly failed to show that much learning happened at all in museums, but they assert that this was the fault of the measurement model, not the exhibition or visitor. Their research showed that almost all visitors learned in museums, 'although not necessarily exactly the learning an educator or developer would predict, or even necessarily hope for'.¹⁰⁸ In America at least, the museum was moving from 'being about something to being for somebody'.¹⁰⁹ As the context for visitor studies widened, so did the range of things that were being evaluated, and the next period sees the movement from exhibition evaluation towards programme evaluation.

The purpose of 'the museum': research field or field of encounter?

The early proponents of visitor studies, such as Gilman and Robinson, were clear that they were undertaking scientific experiments at the intersection of visitor with

¹⁰⁴ John Falk and Lynn Dierking, *The Museum Experience* (Washington, D.C.: Whalesback Books, 1992); John Falk and Lynn Dierking, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning* (Walnut Creek, California: 2000)

¹⁰⁵ Hein, *Meaning Making*, p. 150.

¹⁰⁶ Hein, *Meaning Making*, p. 152.

¹⁰⁷ Marianna Adams, John H. Falk, and Lynn D. Dierking, 'Things Change', in *Researching Visual Arts Education in Museums and Galleries: An International Reader*, ed. by Maria Xanthoudaki, Les Tickle, and Veronica Sekules (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2003), pp. 15–32.

¹⁰⁸ Falk, *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning*, p. 173.

¹⁰⁹ Stephen E. Weil, 'From Being about Something to Being for Somebody: The Ongoing Transformation of the American Museum', *Daedalus*, 128.3 (1999), pp. 229–58.

gallery space. Robinson compares his visitor studies methodology to astronomers measuring an eclipse of the sun or the process of an object in a vacuum. He uses 'laboratory conditions' to pinpoint the elements which might change a visitor's behaviour.¹¹⁰ As outlined above, Shettel and Screven were advocates of the scientific method, until their ideas were challenged in the 1990s with the rise of constructivist learning theories. The debate between the museum as research laboratory or the museum as a place of encounter was one that continued through the 1990s and into the 2000s. The work of some academics pushed against the concept of the visitor as lab rat, experimented upon by the curator and the displays. Lawrence was keen to separate her reflexive approach from that of her predecessors who experimented 'on the presumed rat-like visitor by altering the museum maze'.¹¹¹ Hooper-Greenhill identifies the different academic branches that constitute 'visitor studies', also tracking the move from observational studies where the museum is conceived as 'a neutral research laboratory' towards the idea of museum as teacher.¹¹²

Constructivism, with its focus on multifaceted learning experiences, put visitor studies and evaluation firmly within the remit of learning and education teams, and predominantly it is here that the field has stayed. While Hein's 1998 book is entitled *Learning in the Museum*, it covers the history and future of audience research, both in theory and practice. Hein draws constructivism and learning theories deeper into evaluation by comparing 'experimental design' with 'naturalistic' paradigms.¹¹³ The former, he asserts, use the comparison with a laboratory, as opposed to the 'real-world' arena of the naturalistic paradigm. Consultant Randi Korn researched and wrote about moving beyond museums being just a venue for learning: learning, she states, should not be used 'as a catch all for the entire visitor experience'.¹¹⁴ If we are only looking for and measuring learning (in its constructivist sense) then Korn feels we are missing many aspects of what visitors encounter. Her opinion is, like Sheldon Annis before her, that museums fulfil deeper human needs such as reverence, or experiencing 'symbolic engagements' in a space that is 'a cultural warehouse'.¹¹⁵ Anthropologist Mary Bouquet suggests taking an anthropological view, moving from visitors as passive recipients of the exhibition, towards visitors as 'agents... who may

¹¹⁰ Robinson, p. 12.

¹¹¹ Lawrence, p. 117.

¹¹² Hooper-Greenhill, 'Studying Visitors'. p. 768.

¹¹³ George E. Hein, *Learning in the Museum* (London: Taylor & Francis Group, 1998), p. 69.

¹¹⁴ Randi Korn, 'Redefining the Visitor Experience', *The Journal of Museum Education*, 17.3 (1992), pp. 17–19 (p. 17).

¹¹⁵ Sheldon Annis, 'The Museum as a Staging Ground for Symbolic Action', *Museum International*, 38.3 (1986), pp. 168–71.

embroider, subvert or reject their role in unexpected ways'.¹¹⁶ The development of the theme of the visitor as an active participant, and the introduction of new methods and methodologies, continued in the early twenty-first century.

Through the 1990s to 2020s: Enthusiastic disappointment and new technologies in the UK

The prevailing theme for visitor studies, particularly in Britain, from the mid-1990s to the 2010s could be summed up as a feeling of enthusiastic disappointment. In America, the Summer 1996 edition of the journal *Visitor Behavior* was dedicated to 'Institutional Acceptance of Evaluation' but the field in the UK was languishing.¹¹⁷ Hooper-Greenhill in particular was quick to acknowledge this gap. In 1994 she wrote that 'neither research nor evaluation has been embraced with great enthusiasm... in Britain'. The following year she called the research on visitor behaviour in the museum space 'lamentably thin,' and, in the UK at least, still 'largely unexplored territory' by as late as 2006, particularly outside of science museums.¹¹⁸ Bicknell noted in 1995 an increased interest in the field, but that it was 'associated with unconditional enthusiasm, ignorance, cowboys (and cowgirls) and some hostility'.¹¹⁹ The gap between the academic literature and museum practitioners widened.

In the UK, as noted above with Macdonald, another important change in museums was occurring: the introduction of free entry. Bourdieu and Darbel, writing thirty years earlier, did not view this as the removal of a barrier to widen access and participation, but a means for those with high levels of cultural capital to increase their own advantage and legitimise their privilege, as 'free entry is also optional entry, reserved for those who, equipped with the ability to appropriate works of art, have the privilege of making use of this freedom'.¹²⁰ Visitor figures at UK museums soared after the introduction of free entry, but there was some evidence that, initially at least, the visitor profile remained broadly similar to those who traditionally came to museums.¹²¹ Long-term projects at the British Museum have proven the difference in

¹¹⁶ Mary Bouquet, 'Thinking and Doing Otherwise: Anthropological Theory in Exhibitionary Practice', *Ethnos*, 65.2 (2000), pp. 217–36.

¹¹⁷ Stephen Bitgood, 'Visitor Behavior', 11.2 (1996).

¹¹⁸ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and Their Visitors* (Taylor & Francis Group, 1994) (p. 70); Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museum, Media, Message* (Taylor & Francis Group, 1995) (p. 4); Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, 'Studying Visitors', in *A Companion to Museum Studies* (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2006), pp. 362–76 (p. 364).

¹¹⁹ Sandra Bicknell, 'Here to Help: Evaluation and Effectiveness', in *Museum, Media, Message* (Routledge, 1995), pp. 281–93 (p. 281).

¹²⁰ Pierre Bourdieu and Alain Darbel, *The Love of Art: European Museums and Their Public* (Stanford University Press, 1990), p. 113.

¹²¹ Andy Martin, 'The Impact of Free Entry to Museums', *Cultural Trends*, 12.47 (2002), pp. 1–12.

audiences and their behaviour in free permanent displays compared to paid-for temporary exhibitions, with more attention paid in the latter. Their studies have shown that visitors in the dedicated exhibition gallery are more absorbed, 'looking at most of the objects and engaging with the majority of the interpretation'.¹²² With the acknowledgement that visitors behave differently when they pay for exhibition entry, there was a more questioning attitude towards applying 'scientific' methodologies developed in paid-for museum spaces (such as Serrell's) in free UK museums. Macdonald highlights the increasing research into 'sociological arguments about individualisation', through the late 1990s and early 2000s which, alongside rising levels of audience segmentation, were rendering Bourdieu's conclusions out of touch with what was taking place in the UK at least.¹²³

In the first two decades of the twenty-first century, academic visitor studies incorporated new and emerging technologies. In visitor tracking and observation, recordings of eye gaze, video recordings, and 'stereophonic digital cameras' were suggested as means to enable better or more accurate results. These suggestions were beyond the budget of many museums or were impractical to use in gallery spaces that may have minimal staffing. Into the early 2010s, academic papers still expressed surprise that technology such as video was not utilised in evaluation more, given that it could be used to compare raw information about visitor behaviour both within and across venues.¹²⁴ University museums were using new technologies experimentally, usually with a project-based approach, such as the Grant Museum of Zoology (part of UCL) trial with QRator in 2011 to 2015.¹²⁵ This was an attempt at a digital visitor comments book, with tablets placed around the gallery space. Each tablet had a provocative question about natural history, which visitors could respond to in the gallery or online. An early analysis of 2784 comments collected over a 9-month period revealed that 41% of responses were relevant to the question, while 42% were general remarks on the museum in general.¹²⁶ 17% of responses were completely off topic or inappropriate. All comments were available for public view on an accompanying website, where they were divorced from the gallery context. This

¹²² 'Visitor Research and Evaluation', The British Museum, n.d.

<<https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/projects/visitor-research-and-evaluation>> [accessed 23 September 2022].

¹²³ S. Macdonald, 'Interconnecting: Museum Visiting and Exhibition Design', *CoDesign*, 3.sup1 (2007), pp. 149–62 (p. 151).

¹²⁴ For example: Davies, Maurice and Heath, Christian, 'Evaluating Evaluation: Increasing the Impact of Summative Evaluation in Museums and Galleries' (King's College London, 2013), p. 19.

¹²⁵ 'QRator', UCL Culture, 2016 <<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/culture/projects/qrator>> [accessed 31 July 2022].

¹²⁶ Andrew Hudson-Smith and others, 'Experiments with the Internet of Things in Museum Space: QRator' (presented at UbiComp12, 2012).

highlighted the irrelevant responses for one reviewer, who noted that answers 'are frequently short and sometimes nonsensical: people signing their names, for example, or children writing silly messages to each other.'¹²⁷

QRator was marketed as a way for visitors to 'get involved in conversations about the way that museums like ours operate and the role of science in society today'.¹²⁸ It is not clear whether 'museums like ours' refers to museums of zoology or university museums. The 'conversation' between the Grant Museum and the public quickly became didactic as responses from curators reduced and there was no possibility to respond to specific comments written by previous visitors.¹²⁹ The new technology may have interfered with the curatorial ambition rather than enhanced the experience, with limited discussion and the public keener to use the tablets as a digital visitor comments book or graffiti wall. This visitor desire to add off-topic comments or illustrations, referred to in the literature as 'graffiti', in museum spaces has also been noted by every museum worker who has had to remove inappropriate comments or drawings from comments books. Mazda and Gammon's studies at the Science Museum in London found a large proportion of comments at two of their exhibitions being such 'graffiti': they suggest only 34% and 22% of comments were on-topic.¹³⁰ While QRator had a higher proportion of relevant answers compared to the Science Museum studies, this is by no means a method that is low-intervention from museum staff or low cost to instate.

Alongside embracing new technologies, there were studies by consultants examining the disappointing state of UK evaluation. The 2006 publication, *The Responsive Museum*, sets out to describe twenty-first century museum work; it includes a critique on the state of evaluation by freelance consultant Kate Pontin. Pontin calls out museum evaluation for not drawing attention to negative project outcomes, for being 'limited in its validity', for being short-term, and for a lack of clarity on the 'depth of learning'.¹³¹ Pontin calls for a move towards greater rigour, through ethical standards,

¹²⁷ Rachel McGoff, 'Website Reviews', *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, 25, 2012, pp. 205–8.

¹²⁸ Joanna Scott and Jack Ashby, 'The Museum and the iPad: How the Grant Museum Is Using Social Media to Make Us All Curators: London Blog', 15 February 2012 <<http://blogs.nature.com/london/2012/02/15/the-museum-and-the-ipad-how-the-grant-museum-is-using-social-media-to-make-us-all-curators>> [accessed 31 July 2022].

¹²⁹ Mia Ridge, 'Review: QRator at the Grant Museum of Zoology Journal of Digital Humanities', *Journal of Digital Humanities*, 1.2 (2012) <<http://journalofdigitalhumanities.org/1-2/qrator-at-the-grant-museum-of-zoology-by-mia-ridge/>> [accessed 31 July 2022].

¹³⁰ Ben Gammon and Xerxes Mazda, 'The Power of the Pencil: Renegotiating the Museum-Visitor Relationship Through Discussion Exhibits at the Science Museum, London', *Exhibitionist*, Fall (2009), pp. 26–33 (p. 30).

¹³¹ Kate Pontin *The Responsive Museum: Working with Audiences in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. by Caroline Lang, John Reeve, and Vicky Woollard, pp117–128. p.120, 121.

improved data collection and analysis, and reflexivity on the part of the evaluator. Her practical example to draw these conclusions together is a short-term project with young people in Birmingham, where they visited 'carnivals and other museums' and workshops about video and graffiti.¹³² This is among the weaker parts of her argument: putting evaluation back to project-based, short term and somewhat detached from museums. Pontin is an experienced evaluator and manages to draw together theoretical literature to draw a practical way forward with evaluation. She concludes with a call for better training for museum staff 'so they can assess the reports they read with greater skill'.¹³³ This skills gap, bridging the difference between theory and practical outcomes is clearly articulated, and something that I aim to address with the Impact Evaluation Resources I developed.

A few years later, Davies and Heath undertook a year-long study of summative exhibition evaluation, predominantly looking at permanent displays, published in 2013 as 'Evaluating Evaluation: Increasing the Impact of Summative Evaluation in Museums and Galleries'.¹³⁴ At the time, Heath was Professor of Work and Interaction at King's College, London, and Davies was Head of Policy and Communication at the Museums Association (MA). The MA is an independent membership organisation in the UK, funded through membership and grants from various bodies. Their paper was written in response to the wealth of summative exhibition evaluation produced in the ten years previously, which, they lamented, was having little practical influence in the heritage field, outside of the institution which initiated the study. Rather than setting up the more common research vs evaluation dichotomy, the report contains a discussion on the difference between research and 'consultancy'. They develop this argument through quotes from independent research agency BMG Research, Arts Council England, consultant Ben Gammon and the Wellcome Trust. The paper brought together disparate findings from a wide variety of institutions, some of which used external evaluators, other studies being produced in-house. I presented the results of an internal summative exhibition evaluation from MAA at the 2012 University Museums Group Conference, and this was quoted in the Heath and Davies Report.¹³⁵ The data from MAA was used in several places in Evaluating Evaluation to support some of their conclusions, such as the lack of engagement with text panels, the holding power of mirrors, and the effect of popular objects on nearby displays. Davies and Heath identify a methodological gap, that evaluation

¹³² Pontin, p. 125.

¹³³ Pontin, p. 126.

¹³⁴ Davies and Heath.

¹³⁵ Sarah-Jane Harknett, 'Assembling Bodies Exhibition Evaluation' (presented at the UMG/NCCPE Impact and Evaluation Seminar, UMG/NCCPE, 2012).

needs 'more systematic use and awareness of research methods in the social sciences' as well making more use of technology especially in data collection and analysis.¹³⁶ Ultimately, the authors were 'disheartened' by both the results of their comparisons and the range of visitor responses to exhibitions, which were more of disinterest than engagement.¹³⁷ They had set out with the intention of identifying the recurring themes that were successful in holding visitor attention. They admit to their tendency to want to create a checklist, or 'golden rules' of ways to create engaging displays, but rather than dismissing this approach, they feel that the rules may still be found 'through a better approach to evaluation focused on clearer research questions'.¹³⁸ Heath and Davies think the problem is not the search for a checklist, but the evaluation reports themselves. Ultimately, the findings of 'Evaluating Evaluation' fail because Heath and Davies are trying to compare across a huge variety of venues and exhibitions, without an understanding of the audience motivations and the content of the display.¹³⁹ While the authors looked at summative evaluation reports, they conclude that 'summative evaluation may not be the answer', instead suggesting long-term evaluation which is embedded in the museum.¹⁴⁰

In the decade since its publication, 'Evaluating Evaluation' has had little practical impact. Davies left the MA in 2014, and the organisation itself offers limited evidence of the benefit of exhibition evaluation and interpretative research on its website. Their section on 'Empowering Collections' includes a set of recommendations, the third of which is to update old displays, using 'co-produced and project work as a basis for updating them', with no suggestions of how this should take place.¹⁴¹ Indeed, exhibitions and displays are not a top-level menu item on their website, which seems to be a remarkable omission for an organisation whose stated purpose is to 'advocate for and support museums and everyone who works in and with them'.¹⁴² Evaluation for the MA has returned to the realm of learning and audiences, as they reference evaluation within the question of 'when to measure' for 'socially engaged practice' or as part of 'learning and engagement' (with a case study from Manchester

¹³⁶ Davies and Heath, p. 14.

¹³⁷ Davies and Heath, p.66.

¹³⁸ Davies and Heath, p.66.

¹³⁹ Zahava D. Doering and Andrew J. Pekarik, 'Why Time Is Not Quality', *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 40.4 (1997), pp. 249–52.

¹⁴⁰ Davies and Heath, p.33, 34.

¹⁴¹ 'Recommendations: Empowering Collections', Museums Association, n.d.

<<https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/collections/empowering-collections/recommendations-empowering-collections/>> [accessed 19 September 2022].

¹⁴² 'About Us' Museums Association.

using participatory action research). For many staff, the MA and their website are reliable sources of information and support. The gap between the academic and the professional literature widens.

2.3 The move towards multiple audiences and active learning

‘As hard as it may be,’ wrote Korn in 1992 about museum visitors, ‘we must acknowledge the way people are and not the way we want them to be.’¹⁴³ From the late 1980s onwards museums focussed less on presenting themselves as the expert voice, giving out their wisdom, and instead began to highlight individualised learning, with the visitor undergoing a voyage of discovery, ultimately realising a ‘flow experience’.¹⁴⁴ The focus shifted from trying to gain a deeper understanding of museum exhibitions, towards understanding visitor motivations, movements and the moments they spend in the gallery space. There was a pushback against the rigid enforcement of ‘standards’ across exhibitions, with authors recognising that the ranges of engagement Serrell encountered with her Sweep Rate Index and Diligent Visitors could be less about exhibition differences, instead representing audience differences.¹⁴⁵ The emphasis moved from evaluators testing audience knowledge and the understanding they had gained from the museum display, towards a deeper consideration of the different audiences and their experiences. Applying multiple evaluation methods enabled researchers to combine time spent in an exhibition with visitor motivations, giving more nuanced results. There was a growing recognition of the varied reasons for visiting, and the effect of other visitors on the gallery experience. After all, ‘the public is not a monolith. It comes to museums for many different reasons and it gets many different things out of that experience’.¹⁴⁶ The emerging sense was of multiple audiences (rather than one museum audience), and evaluators stopped questioning what the museum was delivering, and began to attempt an understanding of what audiences were taking away. Additionally, there was the recognition that some people visited a museum for enjoyment: a concept that, if not forgotten, had been rarely promoted.¹⁴⁷

The academic literature began to ask ‘broader questions of how people conceptualise museum visiting and how it articulates with their conceptions of their

¹⁴³ Korn, ‘Redefining the Visitor Experience’. p. 19

¹⁴⁴ Marlene Chambers, ‘Beyond “Aha!”: Motivating Museum Visitors’, *The Journal of Museum Education*, 14.3 (1989), pp. 14–15 (p. 15).

¹⁴⁵ Doering and Pekarik, p. 250.

¹⁴⁶ Stephen E. Weil, p. 254.

¹⁴⁷ Seagram, Patten, and Lockett, p. 30.

identity and locality'.¹⁴⁸ This move towards visitors creating their identity and motivations was spearheaded by Jay Rounds in his 2006 paper 'Doing Identity Work in Museums', and Falk's 2009 book *Identity and the Museum Experience*.¹⁴⁹ 'Identity' to Rounds is 'the processes through which we construct, maintain, and adapt our sense of personal identity, and persuade other people to believe in that identity'.¹⁵⁰ For museums, this meant that judging and categorising visitors was difficult: an acceptance of the visitor who was 'just browsing'. Indeed, there was a growing acknowledgement that visitors rarely visit displays as a sole agent. In busy exhibitions people 'coordinate their conduct with each other and configure their participation both in each other's activities and with the objects and artifacts within that space'.¹⁵¹ Visitor studies methods had barely kept up with this idea, with many techniques still isolating individuals and their responses on a questionnaire or tracking study.

Museums were moving towards being 'participatory', as Nina Simon writes about so eloquently.¹⁵² In the participatory museum, visitors create their own meanings, and share them with other visitors. The social elements of the museum visit and the museum as a place in which to begin to redress issues of social inequality are movements which have become increasingly important, although evaluating the entire participatory museum has not always been smooth. LI

LI asserts that the traditional museum remit of exhibitions and displays renders true participation impossible, due to the way museums exclude or 'other' individuals or groups, the way they allocate display space, and whether audiences are encouraged to be active participants.¹⁵³ There is no simple solution, Sandell feels, and his argument is partly made through an analysis of evaluation methods of two displays: the comments cards and visitor book in the permanent galleries at St Mungo Museum of Religious Life and Art (Glasgow) and the live voting results in a temporary exhibition at The Anne Frank House (Amsterdam). When visitors bring their own perspective, they can draw the opposite conclusions to those which the museum intends: 'a "boomerang effect" where intended messages are not simply

¹⁴⁸ Sharon Macdonald, 'Theorizing Museums: An Introduction', in *Theorizing Museums Representing Identity and Diversity in a Changing World* (Blackwell, 1996).

¹⁴⁹ Jay Rounds, 'Doing Identity Work in Museums', *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 49.2 (2006), 133–50; John Falk, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (Routledge, 2009).

¹⁵⁰ Rounds, p. 133.

¹⁵¹ Vom Lehn, Heath, and Hindmarsh, p. 190.

¹⁵² Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Museum 2.0, 2010).

¹⁵³ Richard Sandell, 'Constructing and Communicating Equality: The Social Agency of Museum Space', in *Reshaping Museum Space* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2005).

resisted but turned around by audiences'.¹⁵⁴ For Simon, participation is essential for the future of museums, and she, too, uses evaluation examples to make her argument.¹⁵⁵ She draws on the example of video feedback areas, which are touted as a place for visitors to offer their voice in an exhibition, but are not designed for others to fully engage with recordings that have already been made. To fix this 'broken feedback loop', Simon suggests that museums need to have suitable structures in place to enable the 'full spectrum of participatory behaviour and provide responsive value to those who engage'.¹⁵⁶ Evaluation processes were being used to recentre displays around the visitor voice, but not necessarily to evaluate the exhibition itself.

While museums were called to listen and respond to multiple voices, there was a similar call to upskill visitors in their critical thinking skills. Art historian Margaret Lindauer's 2005 paper, 'The Critical Museum Visitor', walks the reader through the process of critiquing a museum display. She includes a check list of suggestions that 'the ideal visitor' (as opposed to 'the typical' visitor) would use. She contends that the role of exhibition critique is to 'influence museum practice' by proposing 'suggestions that seem compatible with the museum's mission' but are currently missing in the display.¹⁵⁷ Lindauer's desire is to create 'a critical mass of critical museum visitors' who 'might develop to become agents of change' to improve exhibition practice.¹⁵⁸ Lindauer suggests there are two types of museum visitor: those that are skilled in critical thinking and those that are not. Rounds rejects the idea of skilled museum visitors, preferring to suggest that the haphazard way people go around displays, what he calls 'ineffective visiting strategies', reflects a particular type of visitor motivation, not a lack of competence or familiarity with museums.¹⁵⁹ Lindauer's perspective of turning all visitors into critics is novel, but even more critique might be too much to bear for many museum professionals. This was reflected in the interviews I carried out as part of my research with museum staff across the UCM, the methodology for which is explained in Chapter 3, and analysis developed further in Chapter 5. As one staff member explained:

¹⁵⁴ Sandell, p. 197.

¹⁵⁵ Nina Simon, 'Participatory Design and the Future of Museums', in Bill Adair, *Letting Go?: Sharing Historical Authority in a User-Generated World*. (Routledge, 2011), pp. 18–33.

¹⁵⁶ Simon, 'Participatory Design and the Future of Museums', p.24.

¹⁵⁷ Margaret Lindauer, 'The Critical Museum Visitor', in *New Museum Theory and Practice: An Introduction*, ed. by Janet Marstine (John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, 2005), pp. 203-225 (p.216).

¹⁵⁸ Lindauer, p. 223.

¹⁵⁹ Jay Rounds, 'Strategies for the Curiosity-Driven Museum Visitor', *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 47.4 (2004), pp. 389–412 (p. 391).

there's a really massive part of me that says I don't want to hear the criticism because I feel like there are so many demands on my time and... sometimes it just feels really impossible.

B1 (Curator)¹⁶⁰

As these theories of learning, meaning making, and multiple audiences developed, they necessitated new visitor evaluation methods. One of these was personal meaning mapping (PMM), a technique Falk et al introduced in their 1998 paper specifically because it uses a 'relativist-constructivist, as opposed to a positivist-behaviourist, approach to measuring learning'.¹⁶¹ In PMM visitors or participants write or draw words, ideas or phrases in response to a central concept before and after an experience (such as a programme or exhibition visit). Chang points to several museums who were using PMM from the 1990s, and the 'rich insights that could not have been gleaned from surveys, tracking or interviews as to how specified learning experiences affect each individual's meaning-making process'.¹⁶² PMM is, as the name suggests, personal. This makes it an apt method to draw out individual learning or emotional responses. It can, and has, been used to evaluate museum displays as well as programming. Other individualistic evaluation methods were suggested, such as that of Taiwanese researchers Sheng and Chen, who captured information about museum visits in reflective narrative diary pieces in 'backpacker style'.¹⁶³ Reflective journaling had been used as a method of data collection in a variety of fields and was introduced as a qualitative evaluation method in museums from the 1990s onwards. This ethnographic technique acknowledges the 'researcher as the research instrument', and more reflective practices became increasingly commonplace into the twenty-first century.¹⁶⁴

Alongside these more personal methods, there has been much written about how to evaluate other aspects of museum work, and the various audiences who may, or indeed may not, visit. But in the recent academic visitor studies or evaluation literature, permanent displays are less frequently mentioned. Many case studies are published each year which look at temporary exhibitions, specific gallery

¹⁶⁰ Appendix 3, Transcript B1.

¹⁶¹ John H. Falk, Theano Moussouri, and Douglas Coulson, 'The Effect of Visitors' Agendas on Museum Learning', *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 41.2 (1998), pp. 107–20 (p. 109).

¹⁶² EunJung Chang, 'Interactive Experiences and Contextual Learning in Museums', *Studies in Art Education*, 47.2 (2006), pp. 170–86 (p. 182).

¹⁶³ Chieh-Wen Sheng and Ming-Chia Chen, 'A Study of Experience Expectations of Museum Visitors', *Tourism Management*, 33.1 (2012), pp. 53–60 (p. 55).

¹⁶⁴ Valerie J. Janesick, 'A Journal About Journal Writing as a Qualitative Research Technique: History, Issues, and Reflections', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 5.4 (1999), 505–24 (p. 3).

interventions or programming. As seen in this chapter, the history of producing checklists for creating the best possible exhibition will have contributed to this, as the temporary exhibition can become an area for experimentation. Temporary exhibitions have an appeal for academic literature: they are, by their very nature, new and so should reflect current thinking and research, both about the subject and in their presentation style. As attention moves to a multiplicity of voices, and the creation of identity in museums, so the evaluation pendulum continues its swing away from looking at permanent exhibitions, or to move on to the next project without evaluating what has recently opened.¹⁶⁵ Academic literature vacillates between different evaluation methods and different ideas of learning, and museum practitioners are generally not producing robust evaluation that is being used to improve the exhibition experience.¹⁶⁶ Toolkits and assessment criteria from funders usually examine programmes and temporary exhibitions (see Chapter 4). The evaluation of permanent displays is a significant gap, other than formative evaluation before a gallery redisplay (and this is often only to fulfil funder requirements).¹⁶⁷ This is out of step with the visitor experience. For most visitors, looking at the permanent collection will almost always be part of the reason for their visit. According to a 2014 Audience Agency survey, 71% of visitors listed their reason for coming to the University of Cambridge Museums as a 'general visit', and this will have included time spent looking at non-temporary exhibitions.¹⁶⁸ Many academic papers which have practical recommendations assume that the practitioner is creating a new display, in a dedicated space with a well-defined target audience and an understanding of visitor motivations.¹⁶⁹ For most museums evaluating their permanent displays, none of these things may be true. In a time-poor profession, seeking to create a popular display that can generate income, the checklist has been a popular option to fall back on.

2.4 Exhibition checklists: the format persists

'Everyone would like to have a simple, reliable method for comparing exhibitions' wrote Doering and Pekarik in their blistering critique on Serrell's methods and results in 1997, and museum professionals continued to search for this method.¹⁷⁰ Doering

¹⁶⁵ S. Macdonald, 'Interconnecting' p. 159.

¹⁶⁶ Davies and Heath, p. 8.

¹⁶⁷ For example: Roger Miles, 'A Natural History Museum in Transition: Reflections on Visitor Studies in Practice', *Visitor Studies*, 10.2 (2007), pp. 129–35.

¹⁶⁸ Pamela Pfrommer and Daniel Cowley, *Cambridge University Museums benchmarking 2014 Aggregate report* (London: The Audience Agency, 2015), (p. 22).

¹⁶⁹ For example: Kutay Guler, 'An Exhibition Design Checklist for Visitor Circulation', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 30.1 (2015), pp. 63–74.

¹⁷⁰ Doering and Pekarik, p. 252.

and Pekarik assert that empirical methods are doomed to failure, due to ‘impossible assumptions’ about both exhibition content and audiences: ‘would we consider it meaningful to compare books by measuring the number of pages visitors read in one minute?’ they ask.¹⁷¹ Yet the exhibition checklist, toolkit, practical ‘creative’ evaluation suggestions and the search for the ‘golden rules’ for success continues through the literature, both practical and theoretical, particularly through the early years of the twenty-first century.¹⁷² Toolkits and practical publications are frequently divorced from the theoretical basis outlined above, and some would fail on Pontin’s demands for rigour, ethics, and unbiased data collection.¹⁷³ Yet there is the continued desire for evidence, a scale, the ability to demonstrate success or otherwise, and for this to be comparable across venues, conveying in Stephen Weil’s words ‘something less than a numerical scale, but also something more than blind faith’.¹⁷⁴

Despite critique of her work, Serrell has continued to create even more assessment criteria, most recently with a book: *Judging Exhibitions*, published in 2006.¹⁷⁵ The book, and the CD which accompanies it, are intended to provide (according to the subtitle) ‘a framework for assessing excellence’, which has been created through an iterative and experimental process using museum professionals exploring exhibitions across the United States. Serrell’s suggestion is that this framework can be used, following some training, by any museum professional to assess any exhibition. For maximum impact, it is preferable for the assessors to have had some understanding of ‘the body of research in informal settings’, emphasising the need for those doing the critique to be museum practitioners (rather than leaving it to the audience as Lindauer suggested).¹⁷⁶ The photocopiable framework (which can also be downloaded from the CD, should the technology still be available) consists of five pages, which take the judges through the steps from first meeting to final consensus.¹⁷⁷ A reflective, autoethnographic assessment approach is both acknowledged and encouraged; the judges are asked to ‘observe [their] reactions and try to identify which exhibit features caused them’.¹⁷⁸ The first page of the

¹⁷¹ Doering and Pekarik, p. 252.

¹⁷² For example: Amy Hield, ‘Creative Evaluation Toolkit’ (Artworks Creative Communities, 2012). Foster, *Evaluation Toolkit For Museums*. Annaleise Depper and Lesley Patterson, ‘Little Book of Evaluation Tools: Curiosity Carnival Case Studies’ (University of Oxford, 2017).

¹⁷³ Pontin, ‘Understanding Museum Evaluation’.

¹⁷⁴ Stephen Weil, ‘A Success/Failure Matrix for Museums’, *Museum News*, 84 (2005), pp. 36–40.

¹⁷⁵ Beverly Serrell, *Judging Exhibitions: A Framework for Assessing Excellence* (Routledge, 2006).

¹⁷⁶ Serrell, *Judging Exhibitions*, p. 65.

¹⁷⁷ Serrell, *Judging Exhibitions*, pp. 41–46.

¹⁷⁸ Serrell, *Judging Exhibitions*, p. 28.

framework outlines the assessment procedure (suggesting that this should be introduced in an initial two-hour meeting) and takes the team through the four assessment criteria against which the exhibition will be judged: whether it is comfortable, engaging, reinforcing, and meaningful. Two pages are devoted to 'call outs': space for the reviewer to write about the exhibition 'in the form of sentences with feeling verbs'.¹⁷⁹ The following two pages of the framework are intended to be completed alone, after the exhibition visit has been completed. These are the 'criteria', scored between one and six, and the 'aspects' that are the evidence for the criteria (scored on a five-point scale). The final page is for a second team meeting (again, two hours are suggested), where ratings are compared, and a final agreement is reached. While these scores are numerical, Serrell gives no definition of 'excellence', just that this is the goal of museum work.

Serrell devotes one chapter of the book to the 'theoretical underpinnings' of the framework, outlining both the academic literature it draws upon, and how it compares to reviews, critiques and exhibition standards.¹⁸⁰ There is an extensive bibliography of academic literature and a glossary defining the terms used, so all practitioners are consistent in their approach. While it is firmly rooted in both academic literature and the practice of museum professionals, Serrell is keen to point out that visitors' intentions 'have informed the very core of our criteria'.¹⁸¹ Unlike the voices and critique of the professionals, which are included both in the text and as side quotes, there is no information given about how visitors were included in either the development or testing of the framework. Indeed, she firmly states that no visitors were spoken to as part of the formation of the framework (as that would be 'research or evaluation').¹⁸² Practical applications of the framework in the academic literature are elusive. A 2008 review of Serrell's framework was published in the *Journal of Museum Ethnography*.¹⁸³ The reviewer and her British Museum colleagues tested it during a museum visit and found it helpful for their group discussions, although somewhat time-consuming. Howgill suggested in 2015 that the *Judging Exhibitions* framework can be used in the assessment of exhibitions containing archival material.¹⁸⁴ She applied the standards to a temporary display at the National Army Museum in 2012 but draws no conclusions specifically about the framework. In a

¹⁷⁹ Serrell, *Judging Exhibitions*, p. 42.

¹⁸⁰ Serrell, *Judging Exhibitions*, p. 89.

¹⁸¹ Serrell, *Judging Exhibitions*, p. 35.

¹⁸² Serrell, *Judging Exhibitions*, p. 27.

¹⁸³ Rhiannon Johns, 'Book Review of Judging Exhibitions by Beverly Serrell', *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, 20, 2008, pp. 183–85.

¹⁸⁴ Emma Howgill, 'New Methods of Analysing Archival Exhibitions', *Archives and Records*, 36.2 (2015), pp. 179–94.

tangential move, the framework was used in 2015 to review Science Cafés, and while it is not designed for programme evaluation it was deemed to be ‘a very effective... uniquely valuable tool’ for that purpose.¹⁸⁵ The limited reference to this framework in academic literature is similarly reflected in references in practical toolkits. Only one (the National Trust Audience Evaluation toolkit) refers to Serrell at all, although the reference is to her 2010 online article on timing and tracking, rather than this framework. Although immersed in the museum evaluation world for many years, I had not come across *Judging Exhibitions* until research for the DHeritage began.

A further example of the exhibition checklist for success is the 2015 academic paper on exhibition design by Kutay Guler. This focusses on visitor circulation, and includes 20 points for success.¹⁸⁶ While heavily embedded in theory, this paper sets out to be practical, and Guler tests the checklist through an experiment with 76 undergraduate students, filling a ‘small imaginary exhibition space... consisting of two rectangular areas’ with artworks.¹⁸⁷ For UK museums, often in historic buildings, the notion of ‘rectangular areas’ – or even one straight wall – already moves this list into the realm of the fanciful. While the result of the student experiment was somewhat disappointing in its application of the checklist, Guler’s defence of the concept is that they are ‘widely used in fields such as aviation, surgery, and firefighting. Although exhibition design may be a much less stressful process, simple mistakes seem to be common.’¹⁸⁸ This somewhat melodramatic summary glorifies the museum exhibition to the level of lifesaving, further increasing the divide between practical and theoretical. The Steno Museum in Denmark applied their own ‘golden rules’ for design to their permanent display ‘Dear, Difficult Body’ in 2011.¹⁸⁹ They created their principles based on internal evaluation of two previous (temporary) displays, their audience, and other frameworks from the 1980s and 1990s.

These examples generally applied in-house guidance and internal research to their own practice. This appears to be a marginally more successful way of working, rather than attempting to rigidly apply golden rules and checklists developed by other

¹⁸⁵ Ari Einbinder, ‘Understanding the Popular Science Café Experience Using the Excellent Judges Framework’, *Informal Learning Review*, 6 (2013), pp. 6–10.

¹⁸⁶ Kutay Guler, ‘An exhibition design checklist for visitor circulation’, *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 30.1 (2015), pp. 63–74.

¹⁸⁷ Guler, p. 64.

¹⁸⁸ Guler, p. 72.

¹⁸⁹ Morten A. Skydsgaard, Hanne Møller Andersen, and Heather King, ‘Designing Museum Exhibits That Facilitate Visitor Reflection and Discussion’, *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 31.1 (2016), pp. 48–68.

people, some of whom are detached from practical museum work. As can be seen in the history of museum evaluation studies, most examples and theory advancing the discussions are coming from North America. In the academic literature, checklists seem to be attempting to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Those of Lindauer and Serrell come steeped in learning theory. Others have tried to leave learning at the exhibition entrance and provide alternative suggestions around other display factors. In 2010, Stefanie Moser detailed the eight areas that should be taken into account when analysing an exhibition: architecture and space; design and light; subject and message; layout; display type; exhibition style; audience; reception.¹⁹⁰ While these suggestions could be useful for the student analysing an exhibition, or to understand the knowledge construction taking place within the gallery, for the museum professional, there is little here that is not obvious.

To museum professionals, this type of critique, from 'assessing excellence' with Serrell to Lindauer's 'suggestions', is among the most unwelcome. The research interviews I carried out (see Chapter 5) demonstrated that curators were very aware of poor content in permanent displays. In many cases these had been inherited by current staff, who had not input into their creation. In some instances, curatorial colleagues knew that the content (both object choice and labelling) was incorrect; staff were acutely aware of the weak spots in displays. Exposing these to the public and having others comment and critique areas that the 'experts' know are incorrect makes staff feel vulnerable. Staff are stretched very thinly in their work. An avoidance of evaluation of permanent displays also avoids revealing the problems that they know are there, but that they do not have the capacity to resolve.

It's really horrible when someone is complaining about something you feel that you can't do anything about... I do have a guilt list; there are lots of things that activate guilt in me, and then that can make me defensive or it can make me want to bury my head in the sand. So there's a part of me that [doesn't] want to know... I only want to know about the things I can do something about.'

B1 (Curator)¹⁹¹

2.5 Practical research: 'independent of theory'?

'Evaluation research... is usually concerned with practical issues independent of theory' wrote Miles in 1988.¹⁹² Within the field of visitor studies, there is a significant

¹⁹⁰ Stephanie Moser, 'The Devil Is in the Detail: Museum Displays and the Creation of Knowledge', *Museum Anthropology*, 33.1 (2010), 22–32.

¹⁹¹ Appendix 3, Transcript B1.

¹⁹² Roger S Miles, *The Design of Educational Exhibits*, 2nd ed. (London: Unwin Hyman, 1988), p. 164. Quoted in Lawrence.

gap between theory and practice. In this chapter I have traced the history and theoretical foundations of evaluation, but little of this is seen within museum spaces, where the methods perpetuated are frequently surveys, comments cards and visitors' books. Perhaps part of this disconnect between theory and practice is the discussion about the line between academic visitor research and evaluation. Figure 2.1 summarises the differences drawn out by key thinkers on the perceived differences.

	Research	Evaluation
Korn (1989) ¹⁹³	• Knowledge creation • Testing hypotheses, developing theories • Not immediately useful	• Data collection • Used to created change or improvement in short-term
Miles (1993) ¹⁹⁴	• Aim: exploring empirical generalisations • Rigorous methodology, including statistics • Often includes comparison across displays • Time-consuming; expensive	• Aim: to determine how well something is working, decision-making • Often qualitative, often informal, practical • One exhibition at a time • Quick; cheap
Hooper-Greenhill (1994) ¹⁹⁵	• Driver: developing conceptual frameworks and creating new knowledge • For professional/personal awareness • Longer-term	• Driver: need for information • Exploration and investigation • For assessment • Short-term
Bitgood and Shettell (1996) ¹⁹⁶	• Larger area of study; broad principles • Proof is formalised, inflexible, not attributable to chance • Quantitative • Results disseminated through conferences and journal articles. Open to scrutiny	• Targeted on specific questions • Proof is less formalised and more flexible • Mixed methods • Internal to an institution

¹⁹³ Korn, 'Introduction to Evaluation: Theory and Methodology'.

¹⁹⁴ Miles, 'Grasping the Greased Pig'.

¹⁹⁵ Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and Their Visitors*.

¹⁹⁶ Stephen Bitgood and Harris H. Shettel, 'An Overview of Visitor Studies', *The Journal of Museum Education*, 21.3 (1996), pp. 6–10.

Hein (1998) ¹⁹⁷	• Aim: increasing knowledge • Results can be generalised • No outcome required • Uses same methods as evaluation	• Aim: to find out whether something works • Takes place over a shorter time • Uses same methods as research • Focussed on practical issues
Pontin (2007) ¹⁹⁸	• Open-ended • Driver/aim: to create theory and meaning	• Hypothesis driven, but should be rigorous • Aim: to answer specific questions on specific outputs
Davies and Heath (2013) ¹⁹⁹	• Grounded, representative, replicable, robust • Aim: produce knowledge • Reflects the data	• Subjective, not representative • Aim: practical guidance • Reflects the personal or organisational opinion

Figure 2.1 Table comparing definitions of ‘research’ and ‘evaluation’.

To these academic authors, evaluation is practical, short-term and answers specific questions. Research, conversely, takes a longer view, is more open-ended and is the domain of the professional researcher or those in academia; it is the arena for knowledge creation and objective results that reflect the data. These discussions introduce some academic superciliousness and creates a false dichotomy between those working on the ground and those in academia. University museums, which bridge both worlds, have been relatively silent in this field. The academic literature is punctuated with research studies examining exhibitions across the world, while popular publications often push against academic rigour, attempt to democratise the evaluation process while deriding the traditional triumvirate of interviews, questionnaires and surveys. These methods are seen as out of touch with modern audiences, as they ‘don’t naturally enable a deep level of imaginative thought or complex recollection of events’.²⁰⁰ Social scientists might disagree. The movement towards increasingly participative evaluation methods attempts to make the evaluation ‘light-touch’ and ‘part of the activity’.²⁰¹ This leaves an ethical consideration: if evaluation is part of the event, do visitors know they are partaking in a study? If not, can there be informed consent?

¹⁹⁷ George E. Hein, *Learning in the Museum* (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 1998), p. 56-7.

¹⁹⁸ Pontin, ‘Understanding Museum Evaluation’.

¹⁹⁹ Davies and Heath. Their distinction between evaluation and research is developed through quotes from other people.

²⁰⁰ Hield. p.4.

²⁰¹ Depper and Patterson.

Among the more robust of the recent toolkits is that written by Harriet Foster for the East of England Museum Hub in 2008, with an updated version published by SHARE Museums East (then a sector support organisation funded by the Arts Council) in 2020.²⁰² A subtle, though important, shift in the 12 years between toolkits was the change in title from *Evaluation Toolkit for Museum Practitioners* to *Evaluation Toolkit for Museums*. This could reflect evolving workplaces, where people cover multiple roles and are expected to have several areas of expertise, the toolkit therefore covering the museum rather than the staff working in it. The aim of the 2008 publication was to fill a gap in provision, as Foster's review of resources 'revealed that some were not specific enough to museums, and few, if any, provided the full range of current information needed for a museum practitioner to carry out, commission or manage evaluation at the present time'.²⁰³ The updated version was produced to reflect 'changes in museums, in technology and to legislation'.²⁰⁴

The toolkit purports to be an entry level document, peppered with practical examples, ideas and quotes. There is a curious imbalance throughout the publication between aspirational assessment and practical advice, as Foster picks her way through the research/evaluation separation seen above. Foster quotes a top tip from Evaluation Support Scotland: 'You aren't a social scientist. It doesn't need to be perfect. Learn to live with complexity and imperfection'.²⁰⁵ She expands this to state that museums should not 'be put off evaluating because you think it needs to be complicated to be valid', again laying out the foundation that this document will help in a simple fashion.²⁰⁶ A large font quote from a 2010 edition of *Museum Practice* is included: 'It's about identifying a good story to tell and telling it loud and often. Find simple stories and statistics you can repeat'.²⁰⁷ Foster continues to recommend comments books, visual methods and graffiti walls. The use of sticky notes, shaped feedback cards, postcards and voting with sticky dots are other methods suggested in the toolkits. These are all self-selecting methods, with no sampling strategy, thus

²⁰² Harriet Foster, *Evaluation Toolkit for Museum Practitioners* (East of England Museum Hub, 2008); Harriet Foster, *Evaluation Toolkit For Museums* (2020).

²⁰³ Foster (2008), p.6.

²⁰⁴ Foster (2020), p 1.

²⁰⁵ 'Messages about Evaluation From Grantholders For Other Grantholders', Evaluation Support Scotland, 2019

<http://evaluationsupportscotland.org.uk/media/uploads/messages_about_evaluation_-_update_oct_2019.pdf> [accessed 2 May 2022].

²⁰⁶ Foster (2020), p. 6.

²⁰⁷ Foster, (2020), p.13.

potentially invalidating any conclusions.²⁰⁸ Yet in practice across museums (including within UCM), exhibition evaluation continues to use all these methods.

The detachment between theory and practice is disappointing because there is some useful content in the toolkit. Foster clearly articulates the differences between different evaluation methods, indicating those that have ethical issues.²⁰⁹ Other publications do better. The National Trust's 2017 toolkit does embed the theoretical context: the 12 'further resources' they suggest include many that Foster refers to, as well as the ethical guidelines from the British Educational Research Association, and two open access papers on tracking.²¹⁰ There are some practical publications that maintain intellectual rigour, without resorting to the checklist approach. Judy Diamond's 1999 *Practical Evaluation Guide: Tools for Museums and Other Informal Educational Settings* is among the best of these.²¹¹ Diamond's book carefully goes through the steps from planning a study to presenting the data and reporting, with sections on observational evaluation tools, interviews and questionnaires, as well as ethical issues such as 'protecting and selecting subjects'.²¹² The book is rigorous, including 17 pages of references and further reading, and is punctuated with practical examples and case studies: testament to her role as a professor in a University Museum.²¹³ Her focus is still on learning, but she takes a broad view of informal learning, including enjoyment, 'excitement, exploration, and play'.²¹⁴ A deeper exploration of sector toolkits is in Chapter 5.

2.6 Comments: from closed book to 'democratisation' of interpretation

Many evaluation methods have been subject to academic critique, including that most ubiquitous evaluation item, the visitor comment book. Such books have been used to understand emotional responses to particularly sensitive displays, such as

²⁰⁸ Eric Jensen, 'The Siren Call of the "Easy Option" in Public Engagement and Informal Learning Evaluation: Post-It (Sticky) Notes, Comment Cards, Drop a Token and Tap a Button Options', Department of Sociology, University of Warwick, n.d.
<https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/sociology/staff/jensen/ericjensen/evaluation/#siren_call> [accessed 31 July 2022].

²⁰⁹ Foster, pp. 40–41.

²¹⁰ National Trust, *Audience Evaluation: Interpretation with Insight*; The tracking papers referred to being: Serrell, 'Paying More Attention to Paying Attention' and Steven S. Yalowitz and Kerry Bronnenkant, 'Timing and Tracking: Unlocking Visitor Behavior', *Visitor Studies*, 12.1 (2009), pp. 47–64.

²¹¹ Judy Diamond, *Practical Evaluation Guide: Tools for Museums and Other Informal Educational Settings* (Oxford, AltaMira Press, 1999).

²¹² Diamond, p. 33.

²¹³ Diamond, p. 191.

²¹⁴ Diamond, p. 32.

those at Hiroshima or the Nazi party rally grounds at Nuremberg.²¹⁵ In these exhibitions, a space for reflection and comment is often welcomed by visitors, for active reflection on an emotive subject. This is not always as reflective as some might like. In a seemingly impossible turn of events, a museum visitor book hit the headlines in 2013, following the visit of pop singer Justin Bieber to Anne Frank House. His much-criticised addition to the guestbook was: 'Truly inspiring to be able to come here. Anne was a great girl. Hopefully she would have been a belieber'.²¹⁶ For some academics such as Macdonald, the visitor book is 'an integral part of [an] exhibition— an interactive exhibit in which many visitors participate (either by writing or reading)'.²¹⁷ Other academics have argued that for visitors, the comments book is not always seen as an evaluation method, but can be perceived as an attempt to redress curatorial bias.²¹⁸ There is still a sense of authority in the comments book, but this time the authority emanates from the voice of the general visitor, rather than the museum professional. This has been noted in participatory exhibitions at the Science Museum in London, where visitors were motivated to contribute to the discussion as 'an outlet for their anger or frustration' while the museum felt the comments book 'provided balance'.²¹⁹ Indeed, this concept of the visitor voice being given almost equal status to that of a curator has been given as a reason *not* to include visitor comments in displays.²²⁰

Through the 1990s and 2000s, visitor comments moved from concealment in a book at the end of a display or venue and into the interpretation itself, particularly in participatory museums, as discussed above. Sometimes this was in the format of the 'discussion exhibit': a space for people to contribute their own comments on an exhibition theme.²²¹ This occasionally occurred by accident, such as McLean's very early experience in 1979 when a book for the contact details of people requesting a catalogue for a social history exhibition spontaneously turned into an area for feedback and reflexive discussion: 'I remember thinking that many of the comments were more compelling than much of the exhibition text and were a powerful

²¹⁵ Chia-Li Chen, 'Representing and interpreting traumatic history: a study of visitor comment books at the Hiroshima Peace Memorial Museum', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 27.4, (2012), 375-392. Sharon Macdonald, 'Accessing Audiences: visiting visitor books', *Museum and Society*, 3.3, (2005), 119-136.

²¹⁶ 'Anger over Justin Bieber's Anne Frank Message', *BBC News*, 14 April 2013, section Europe <<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-22146859>> [accessed 16 October 2022].

²¹⁷ Sharon Macdonald, 'Accessing Audiences: Visiting Visitor Books', *Museum and Society*, 3.3 (2015), pp. 119-36.

²¹⁸ Gammon and Mazda, p. 31.

²¹⁹ Gammon and Mazda, p.28, 29.

²²⁰ McLean, p.3.

²²¹ Gammon and Mazda, p. 26.

untapped resource'.²²² Audience Researcher Douglas Worts was an early adopter of discussion through visitor comments, in the Art Gallery of Ontario in 1993. This was borne out of his desire to 'become true partners with our visitors and to share authority over the experiences which happen in the galleries'.²²³ Worts asserts that viewers of artwork are needed to complete the artwork, and as this occurs for each visitor individually the experience is highly personalised (and therefore out of the museum's control). Worts set out to better understand public 'needs' through 'Share Your Reaction' cards in the display space.²²⁴ The museum reported that 12,000 cards were 'used' in nine months, although the article does not tell how many of these comments were on-topic, rather saying that many people drew something, and most responses are 'personal and reflective'.²²⁵ Worts uses the high level of public engagement and contribution as the driver for his 'model of museum experience', and ideas of how museums can help individuals create their own identity.²²⁶ The forward-looking conclusion he draws from analysis of visitor comments is that the museum of the future will present factual information that can integrate with the imagination of the visitor, eliciting more emotional responses: 'it is this inner space that, in my view, is the real museum'.²²⁷ This highly individualised learning journey for the museum visitor laid the groundwork for many of the studies to follow. Importantly, Worts used his analysis of the comments to try to create something bigger, exemplifying evaluation as research method.

As time went on, the visitor contribution became less about research and simultaneously more introspective and superficial. Nina Simon gives the example of the 2007 exhibition 'On the Road' in Massachusetts, which included Jack Kerouac's manuscript for the book of the same name.²²⁸ Museum staff created a feedback area for visitors to add comments, where rather than using traditional paper and pen, visitors sat at a desk with a typewriter and typed their responses to the Kerouac quote 'never say a commonplace thing'. Simon details that in the first six months, visitors typed over 12,000 messages, some of which were consequently displayed in the exhibition.²²⁹ Similar to Worts above, Simon does not tell the reader how many of

²²² McLean, p. 3.

²²³ Douglas Worts, 'Extending the Frame: Forging a New Partnership with the Public', in *New Research in Museum Studies: (Vol. 5) Art in Museums* (London: Athlone Press, 1994), pp. 164–91 (p. 165).

²²⁴ Worts, p. 166.

²²⁵ Worts, p. 170.

²²⁶ Worts, p. 188.

²²⁷ Worts, p. 191.

²²⁸ Simon, chapter 6 (<https://www.participatorymuseum.org/chapter6/>).

²²⁹ Simon, *The Participatory Museum*, chapter 6.

the comments were off topic, 'graffiti' or commonplace. It could be that, as with QRator, the method of collecting comments became the novel thing, rather than the visitors' desire to contribute, albeit this time using an old technology.

Where visitor comments as interpretation differ from standard comments books is in the shift to asking people to explicitly contribute to a conversation or debate.

Soliciting contributions from visitors in response to specific prompts might move the conversation away from the 'graffiti effect' seen above, where inscribing one's name in the exhibition is more important than what one writes. More museums have been experimenting with labels written by visitors: encapsulating what McLean calls the 'forumlike nature of museums'.²³⁰ Gammon and Mazda have suggested that including visitor comments in exhibitions at the Science Museum is a 'popular, cheap and effective interpretation tool for engaging visitors in debates about emotional and controversial scientific issues'.²³¹ There is always a cost, however. Whether that is editing comments for language or inappropriate illustrations, or curators responding to specific questions, there is a time and staffing implication for this method of studying visitors. The lack of capacity to deal with visitor comments came up in several interviews with UCM staff:

Pre-COVID [we] had volunteers on the front desk on weekdays. And they had a book where they could note down visitor comments... But we needed a prompt to actually go and have a look at it. And we often didn't, until... the moment had passed... It would also be the occasional slightly bored volunteer who would just write a list of everything they thought was a bit rubbish about the museum.

C1 (Curator)²³²

In an already stretched role, museum staff are unlikely to spend time responding to visitor comments from such installations (something that Gammon and Mazda said they would 'attempt to do in future').²³³ Even feedback from an institution's own volunteers can take a back seat alongside the myriad other demands on curatorial time. When asked whether volunteers had given the curator at Museum E useful feedback as part of the evaluation process, they responded:

They certainly have. The downside to that was that they didn't quite understand why if they sent me something in September, it wasn't solved by

²³⁰ McLean, p. 5.

²³¹ Ben Gammon and Xerxes Mazda, 'The Power of the Pencil: Renegotiating the Museum-Visitor Relationship Through Discussion Exhibits at the Science Museum, London', *Exhibitionist*, Fall (2009), 26–33 (p.32).

²³² Appendix 3, Transcript C1.

²³³ Gammon and Mazda, p. 29.

October, or may not have been solved 18 months later. And they're like, would it be helpful if I wrote this label for you, or if I did the design work for you?

E1 (Curator)²³⁴

Using visitor comments as part of the interpretation is referred to as 'dialogic interactivity' and is extolled as a method to help visitors create their own meanings.²³⁵ As seen by the examples above, it has been used in all types of museums and art galleries. The visitor feedback space has become reasonably common in the temporary exhibition; most recently, I have been involved in visitor feedback areas at the Fitzwilliam Museum (for 'Feast and Fast' in 2019-2020, and 'Black Atlantic: Power, People, Resistance' in 2023-2024) and MAA (in 'Colour: Art, Science, and Power' in 2022-2023). The format is rarely used in permanent displays. Dialogic interactivity is not usually a method of studying the audience, but to encourage visitors to interact with an exhibition. Feedback spaces do give visitors a voice. And very occasionally this can become a conversation *between* visitors: in their paper, Gammon and Mazda draw attention to 'four consecutive responses' at one display in the Science Museum that 'gives the impression of a dialogue'.²³⁶ This is only ever an impression of a dialogue. There may well be a significant time gap between each comment being added. Beyond the initial prompt, the curatorial voice is usually missing in the conversation. At the end of the temporary exhibition, what happens to the careful visitor contributions? In my experience, they are archived, or (more usually) recycled. The dialogue, if it existed at all, is temporary. But the time and environmental implications become costly.

2.7 Conclusion

Through this overview of the academic literature I have directly addressed one of my research questions by identifying some of the factors that are influencing current evaluation practice and the position of permanent displays. By charting the development of museum evaluation, I have shown how there has been a movement from testing knowledge in a didactic space of information transmission, towards the centring of visitor voices and individualised learning. The strong influence of constructivism, especially through the work of Hein, Falk, and Dierking, highlighted the impact of new interpretations of learning on evaluation. There remain significant gaps in the literature around the practicalities of evaluating permanent exhibitions,

²³⁴ Appendix 3, Transcript E1.

²³⁵ For example, Skydsgaard, Møller Andersen, and King, p.52.

²³⁶ Gammon and Mazda, p. 28.

beyond the creation of generalised lists. Academic discourse makes a distinction between research and evaluation, with the former said to be rigorous and replicable, while the latter is more practical and informal; this could partially explain the lack of robust academic methods of determining the impact of permanent museum displays. This disjunct between academia and practice have had repercussions on the wider heritage sector, weakening the position of evaluation in museums. A significant additional contribution to this is the insecure way in which museums have been funded; the evaluation methods demanded by funding bodies will be explored in detail in Chapter 4. Having determined the academic context, the following chapter will turn to the research process, the methods that I used to address my research questions and my pragmatic methodological approach.

Chapter 3

Methodological approaches to the research: autoethnography and interviews

3.1 Introduction

My research aims to determine how we can practically improve the evaluation of museum permanent displays in order to demonstrate their impact. The previous chapter has explored the history of audience research, and the scant attention that has been paid to permanent displays. In this chapter I examine the underlying methodological approach that demonstrates the academic rigour used to undertake my research, particularly addressing the question of assessing current evaluation practice. As I critically explore my own research position, rooted in constructivism, the rationale for focussing on qualitative methods only is demonstrated. In qualitative investigations the researcher is included as part of the process, rather than being a subjective analyst. As a practice-based researcher, allowing me to insert myself into the process was essential, built on my objectives, and encouraged me to bring the knowledge and perspective built up over two decades of work in museums. For these reasons, I relied on two strands of data collection: autoethnography and interviews with members of staff. The ethical issues and limitations of both methods will be scrutinised.

Through the lens of pragmatism, I explore the profound influence of the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in the first year of my DHeritage. The sequence of lockdowns and inherent uncertainties re-shaped my processes but ultimately positively developed my research. Indeed, as my access to members of the public was limited, I identified a gap in current exhibition evaluation practice, that of speaking to staff as an audience. The importance of developing evaluation with and for staff opened new avenues for me as well as shaping my practical outputs. As an autoethnographer in the UCM, this chapter thoroughly addresses the ethics, implications, and the blurring of boundaries between my professional arena and that of researcher. After examining the interview process that formed part of my research, I argue for the applicability and replicability of my research findings in contexts outside academia. I critique the creation of the evaluation hub for training materials and further research and address the issue of reflexivity. My methods align with my research questions, which guided both my data collection and its analysis.

3.2 My research position

My research maintains its epistemological position in constructivism. In its broadest sense, constructivism is the theory that people ‘construct their own realities’ or knowledge representations.²³⁷ It has been suggested that the museum setting ‘may be the perfect environment in which to use constructivist theory’, a viewpoint which has influenced decades of museum research and learning.²³⁸ George Hein consistently applied constructivism to museum education, suggesting that ‘both knowledge and the way it is obtained are dependent on the mind of the learner’.²³⁹ Constructivism acknowledges that researchers are not neutral and objective, but allows the researcher to be an active participant within the research.²⁴⁰ As a practice-based researcher, this was important to me, allowing my observations to be part of the knowledge construction process, in an iterative fashion. A six-point summary of constructivism from a museum perspective was made by psychology professor and museological commentator Stephen Bitgood in 1997.²⁴¹ The essential characteristics, he contends, are that in constructivism:

- 1 The learner constructs [their] own meaning from experience
- 2 Knowledge is relative rather than absolute
- 3 Learning is unpredictable
- 4 The emphasis of education is on the learner rather than on the subject matter
- 5 Learning environments should be flexible
- 6 Specific goals and objectives of learning are inappropriate.²⁴²

These facets are ideally suited to the museum environment, with the combination of visitors arriving with their own motivations, goals and histories; the objects they freely encounter, at their own pace, within the space. Falk and Dierking have summarised these as three interacting and overlapping contexts: that of the visitor individually, the visitors socially and the physical entities they encounter (both building and objects).²⁴³ For the museum professional, these are the parameters they constantly work within, particularly when designing museum displays and exhibitions. My

²³⁷ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, *Museum, Media, Message* (Taylor & Francis Group, 1995), p. 11; Kodi R. Jeffery-Clay, ‘Constructivism in Museums: How Museums Create Meaningful Learning Environments’, *The Journal of Museum Education*, 23.1 (1998), pp. 3–7 (p. 3).

²³⁸ Jeffery-Clay, p. 5.

²³⁹ Hein, ‘The Constructivist Museum’.

²⁴⁰ Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln, ‘Editors’ Introduction’, in *The Qualitative Inquiry Reader*, Sage Research Methods (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2002), p.1; John Fulton and others, ‘Methods of Enquiry’, in *Professional Doctorate: A Practical Guide* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 48–62 (p. 51).

²⁴¹ Stephen Bitgood, ‘The Hein-Miles Debate: An Introduction, Explanation, and Commentary’, *Visitor Behavior*, 12.3 & 4 (1997), pp. 3–7.

²⁴² Stephen Bitgood, ‘The Hein-Miles Debate’, p. 5.

²⁴³ John H. Falk and Lynn Dierking, *The Museum Experience*.

background is in museum education, a sphere highly influenced by constructivism. Within museums, we see 'learning' occur in a multitude of different ways and times, sometimes in intentional ways, but often unintentionally. Museum exhibitions and displays are usually seen as 'learning environments' in the broadest sense. In my experience, there may sometimes be learning goals which the curatorial team want to project (going against Bitgood's sixth point), although these are often broad, and could be as much about enjoyment, wonder, or a change in attitude. This wide understanding of museum learning led to the development of the Generic Learning Objectives, as defined by Hooper-Greenhill (and explored in Chapter 4).²⁴⁴

The research paradigm used to determine an in-depth understanding of the current situation and future potential of exhibition evaluation was qualitative only. Qualitative research was chosen for its flexibility, allowing the opportunity to gain rich, in-depth information, exploring the 'whys and hows of human behaviour, opinion and experience'.²⁴⁵ It has been suggested that quantitative methodologies apply a 'natural science' approach, but qualitative methods are also rigorous.²⁴⁶ This rigour can be demonstrated through 'the systematic collection, organization, description and interpretation of textual, verbal or visual data'.²⁴⁷ My research involved collecting interview data from museum professionals, interpreting and coding the results. I triangulated these results through autoethnography, using grounded theory, and through a longitudinal case study encompassing my professional practice. Analytic autoethnography requires larger themes and theories to be teased out of the data. Qualitative approaches enabled me to retain the fluidity required to respond to 'novel or unanticipated findings and the possibility of altering research plans in response to such serendipitous occurrences'.²⁴⁸ The flexibility of qualitative data collection methods proved to be essential in a research period that was punctuated by the COVID19 pandemic and multiple lockdowns. Also of importance was the 'constant comparative method' of Grounded Theory, where I could both collect data and analyse it at the same time.²⁴⁹

²⁴⁴ Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, 'Measuring the Outcomes and Impact of Learning in Museums, Archives and Libraries' (Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) Department of Museums Studies, University of Leicester, 2003).

²⁴⁵ Greg Guest, Emily E. Namey, and Marilyn L. Mitchell, 'Collecting Qualitative Data: A Field Manual for Applied Research', (SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2024), pp. 1-40 (p. 1).

²⁴⁶ Alan Bryman, 'The Debate about Quantitative and Qualitative Research: A Question of Method or Epistemology?', *The British Journal of Sociology*, 35.1 (1984), pp. 75–92.

²⁴⁷ K. Hammarberg, M. Kirkman, and S. de Lacey, 'Qualitative Research Methods: When to Use Them and How to Judge Them', *Human Reproduction*, 31.3 (2016), pp. 498–501 (p. 499).

²⁴⁸ Bryman, p. 78.

²⁴⁹ Virginia Dickson-Swift and others, 'Doing Sensitive Research: What Challenges Do Qualitative Researchers Face?', *Qualitative Research*, 7.3 (2007), pp. 327–53 (p. 330).

Grounded Theory (GT) was developed in the United States in the 1950s by Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, originally through an ethnographic fieldwork study of people who were dying.²⁵⁰ The method they developed, published in 1967 as *Discovery of Grounded Theory*, was firmly rooted in practical examples, as they felt that 'adequate theory' could only arise from 'the systematic investigation of the real world'.²⁵¹ This connection makes it a good fit for the qualitative practice-based researcher, especially for those conducting autoethnography in workplaces. The approach allows the researcher to analyse data as it is being collected, constructing theory that is therefore grounded in, and arises from, the data itself.²⁵² This 'constant comparative' process of creating 'analytical interpretation' during data collection leads to new avenues, continuing to both 'inform and refine' analysis and any further data collection until saturation is achieved.²⁵³ Indeed the history of GT arising from practical fieldwork was imperative to the development of the type of research I was undertaking, giving 'respect' to 'first-hand experience' and offering 'a systematic way of building generalisations' from this experience.²⁵⁴ GT also includes an important relational element of care, calling for the researcher to 'step outside themselves' and 'access other people's experiences' with a view to 'constant and careful sensitivity towards the words and actions of participants'.²⁵⁵ This factor made it a natural fit for my research with colleagues.

For qualitative research, GT has considerable merit, as it is 'firmly rooted' in the conjecture that hypotheses arise from both the data and its analysis, and that it creates new theory.²⁵⁶ As the process is iterative, it modifies as internal or external changes occur during the entire research process, permitting new analysis and alternative data collection methods as the investigation dictates. This contrasts with

²⁵⁰ Juliet M. Corbin and Anselm Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research : Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, Fourth edition. (Thousand Oaks : SAGE Publications, Inc, 2014) (p.7).

²⁵¹ Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research* (Hawthorne, N.Y.: Aldine de Gruyter. 1967); Wes Sharrock and John A. Hughes, 'Ethnography in the Workplace: Remarks on Its Theoretical Bases', *Team Ethno*, 1.1 (2001).

²⁵² Juliet M. Corbin and Anselm Strauss, p.6; 'The Grounded Theory Methodology of Barney G. Glaser - What Is GT?', Grounded Theory Institute, n.d. <<http://www.groundedtheory.com/what-is-gt.aspx>> [accessed 1 January 2023].

²⁵³ Kathy Charmaz, 'Grounded Theory: Objectivist and Constructivist Methods', in *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. by Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2000), pp. 509–35 (p. 509).

²⁵⁴ Sharrock and Hughes, p. 15.

²⁵⁵ Massimiliano Tarozzi, 'Conclusions : Theoretical Sensitivity as a Virtue', in *What Is Grounded Theory?*, 1st edn (London: Bloomsbury ACADEMIC, 2020), pp. 141–50 (p. 143).

²⁵⁶ David Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research / David Silverman.*, Fourth edition. (London : SAGE Publications Ltd, 2013), p. 108.

some other thematic techniques, where analysis takes place at the end of a period of data collection, when classification is undertaken, patterns are noted, and analysis completed. GT was chosen above other forms of thematic analysis as it allowed the disparate threads to be held together throughout the research period, without waiting to begin analysis when data collection is completed. This would not have suited the data collection methods chosen, nor the workplace situation due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. Practically, as it is an ongoing process, GT was used not only during data collection, but also during data analysis and the writing up process.

The Grounded Theory process has been described as ‘spiral-shaped’, constructing theories grounded in the data while also exploring new theory and data: summarised in the concept ‘theoretical sensitivity’.²⁵⁷ Data is commonly drawn from many sources, and the analytical process begins with coding.²⁵⁸ My data collection involved investigating both academic and sector-relevant resources, interviews, and extended periods of autoethnography. I coded data throughout the research period, following Charmaz’s suggestions of interacting with the data and posing questions of and to my research and conclusions, revealing gaps for further areas of investigation.²⁵⁹ The next step in the GT method is to create ‘memos’, which Corbin and Strauss define as ‘written records of analysis’, and can be in words or diagrams.²⁶⁰ For me this was an essential (and natural) part of my writing process, with memos written and discussed with colleagues and peers. GT builds this reflective process into research early, and this kept my thinking and analysis from quickly becoming out of control and avoiding getting ‘lost in mountains of data’.²⁶¹ After memo writing, GT methods move to ‘theoretical sampling’, defined by Corbin and Strauss as collecting data ‘based on concepts derived from the data... from people, places and events that will maximise opportunities to develop concepts... uncover variations, and identify relationships between concepts’.²⁶² By practising theoretical sampling I realised the gap in my data surrounding the requirements of heritage funding bodies in the United Kingdom, and led me specifically to that area for further data collection (and developed in Chapter 4). Ultimately, with GT, conclusions drawn from research are not intended to be ‘imposed’ upon the data, but should spring from it, it should ‘originate in the many ways in which the social world

²⁵⁷ Tarozzi, ‘Conclusions’, p. 142, p. 149.

²⁵⁸ Charmaz, p. 514.

²⁵⁹ Charmaz, p. 515.

²⁶⁰ Corbin and Strauss, p. 57.

²⁶¹ Charmaz, p. 517.

²⁶² Corbin and Strauss, p. 134.

is experienced and acted upon'.²⁶³ These concepts were appropriate to my research aims and the methods I used to fulfill them.

3.3 Autoethnography from the inside

My research used the strategy of autoethnography, as a way to 'describe and systematically analyse... personal experience... in order to understand cultural experience'.²⁶⁴ Going beyond ethnography, this method has its emphasis on the individual as both the subject of the research and the researcher. It has value when the autoethnographer has the 'ability to capture, probe and render understandable' their experiences.²⁶⁵ Having the experience is not enough, they must be analysed and written up for them to qualify as autoethnographic. Autoethnography was an appropriate method due to the way it considers 'self-experience... valuable and worthy of examination'.²⁶⁶ The value placed upon the individual within a setting was fitting for me as a practice-based researcher undertaking professional doctoral research. Indeed, I would agree with authors who maintain that to be autoethnographic, individuals included should be well-known to the author; staff were open with me and there was no need for a prolonged period of rapport building, which would have been very difficult during the pandemic.²⁶⁷ By applying this methodological framework I was able to get honest reflection from colleagues and could produce robust self-reflection.

Ethnographic methods are a familiar domain for the audience researcher, where close observation of participants and similar evaluation techniques are often practised. Prior to the doctoral research, I have used such techniques myself, for example in a four-phase study over three years in one museum, or to find out the most visited display item in the UCM.²⁶⁸ For this research, I moved beyond analysing the work of others (including museum visitors), towards understanding my own experience and part in the culture of the UCM. Autoethnography allowed me to use an appropriate academic method, while acknowledging this work in a professional context will also be 'emotional, therapeutic and inclusive of personal and social

²⁶³ Iddo Tavory and Stefan Timmermans, 'Two Cases of Ethnography: Grounded Theory and the extended case method', *Ethnography* 10(3) (2009), pp. 243-263 (p. 252).

²⁶⁴ Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams, and Arthur P. Bochner, 'Autoethnography: An Overview', *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 12.1 (2010), pp. 273-90 (p. 1).

²⁶⁵ Norman K. Denzin, 'Interpretive Autoethnography', by pages 35-49, Second Edition (55 City Road: SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2023), p. 36.

²⁶⁶ Jane Edwards, 'Ethical Autoethnography: Is It Possible?', *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 20 (2021), p. 1-20 (p. 1).

²⁶⁷ Martin Tolich, 'A Critique of Current Practice: Ten Foundational Guidelines for Autoethnographers', *Qualitative Health Research*, 20.12 (2010), pp. 1599-1610 (p. 1606).

²⁶⁸ Harknett, 'How we located the most visited object in our museums'.

phenomena'.²⁶⁹ These characteristics are often separated from the research field, but for the practice-based doctorate I wanted to bring all of myself to this work. Anderson defined analytic autoethnography in his 2006 paper, where he suggests the researcher should be:

1. a full member in the research group or setting
2. visible as such a member in the researcher's published texts, and
3. committed to an analytic research agenda focused on improving theoretical understandings of broader social phenomena.²⁷⁰

As a member of staff in one of the UCMs, and working across the consortium co-ordinating evaluation projects, I am a full member in the setting. University museums are in themselves a research setting, as they see research and teaching as a core part of their purpose.²⁷¹ Regarding the second point, prior to commencing the DHeritage programme I had published and spoken on evaluation within the UCM and further afield (for example at the National Association of Interpretation Conference in 2010 and chairing a Museums Association seminar on using visitor data 'intelligently' in 2017). To enhance my visibility during the research period, I contributed additional posts to the UCM blog, taught evaluation methods to masters and doctoral students, informally supervised two PhD candidates who were including museum evaluation in their research, and spoke on formative exhibition evaluation at the Visitor Studies Group conference in 2022. I would go further than Anderson on the third area, suggesting that analytic research must improve both theoretical *and* practical understanding. Anderson's premise of 'analytical autoethnography' is intended, as the name suggests, to be analytical rather than emotional, although he gives little practical advice on how the analysis might be carried out. The addition of GT by researchers like Pace have brought together the 'evocative' and emotional autoethnography of Ellis, Adams and Bochner with Anderson's analytical ability to generalise.²⁷² As a professional doctoral student, this is an important distinction. The results of my research must have broader implications (both theoretically and practically) than my current workplace and situation. For this reason, I have applied the learning from my initial research to practical projects within the UCM context, and further afield. During the period of this doctoral research, working across two roles

²⁶⁹ Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 'Autoethnography: An Overview'.

²⁷⁰ Leon Anderson, 'Analytic Autoethnography', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 35.4 (2006), 373–95 (p. 375).

²⁷¹ 'About Us', University of Cambridge Museums, n.d. <<https://www.museums.cam.ac.uk/about-us>> [accessed 31 December 2022].

²⁷² Steven Pace, 'Writing the Self into Research: Using Grounded Theory Analytic Strategies in Autoethnography', *TEXT*, 16 (Special 13). Creativity: Cognitive, Social and Cultural Perspectives (2012), pp. 1–15; Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 'Autoethnography: An Overview'.

meant I was frequently in contact with members of staff to advise and assist on many aspects of exhibitions, evaluation and data collection. The very act of undertaking a professional doctorate demonstrates my improving ability to analyse research to improve both ‘theoretical understandings’ (as suggested by Anderson) and provide practical outcomes, situating me as the constructivist active research participant. Throughout the research period, the pragmatic approach of John Dewey has necessarily been adopted, that is: ‘looking for what works in practice’.²⁷³ The combination of pragmatism and autoethnography should ensure the results have application within both theory and practice. The iterative approach to the methodology design involved evaluating the stated intentions of staff (elicited through interview) against what is happening in practice, implementing improvements through the Impact Evaluation Resources, and reassessing.

Within the museum literature, the ethnographic method is well-established, perhaps most significantly by Sharon Macdonald in her fieldwork in the Science Museum in the late 1980s, discussed further in Chapter 1. Macdonald’s aim was to follow ‘the local players and [try] to understand their concerns and their ways of seeing and doing’ during the development of a permanent display at the Science Museum.²⁷⁴ Macdonald was a researcher based in academic institutions, and while she felt she was fully immersed in her setting in the Science Museum, she would always be an outsider, leaving the museum at the end of her research. While I took my inspiration from Macdonald’s work, my method was different. As an autoethnographer my initial aim was to do my professional work to the best standard possible, which later became the research arena. As an ‘insider’ within the system I was studying, my perspective will be different to that of Macdonald, with the additional benefit of my memories: or, as Collins and Gallinat, put it, my ‘head-notes’.²⁷⁵ In this way, as is common in autoethnography, I was constructing the research in hindsight, in an autobiographical process.²⁷⁶ There are constraints to this method, highlighted by Strathern who contends that auto-anthropology in the ‘home’ context has limitations, although she does concede that there is an ‘unwitting reservoir of information’ in this environment.²⁷⁷ My aim was to draw on the reservoir, while being mindful of the ethical limitations (which I will develop later in this chapter). Balancing these together

²⁷³ Fulton and others, ‘Methods of Enquiry’, p. 54.

²⁷⁴ Sharon Macdonald, *Behind the Scenes at The Science Museum* (Oxford: Berg, 2002), p. 7.

²⁷⁵ P Collins and A Gallinat, ‘The Ethnographic Self as Resource: An Introduction’, in *The Ethnographic Self as Resource: Writing Memory and Experience into Ethnography* (Berghahn Books, 2010), p. 10, 14.

²⁷⁶ Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, ‘Autoethnography: An Overview’, p. 3.

²⁷⁷ Marilyn Strathern, ‘The Limits of Auto-Anthropology’, in *Anthropology at Home*, ed. by Anthony Jackson, 1987, pp. 59–67 (p. 30).

led me to use autoethnographic methods as the most appropriate for my research. Autoethnography is ‘a methodology that produces never finished, always living texts—until the author puts them away’.²⁷⁸ My autoethnographic research needed an endpoint, which I took to be the end of a large-scale exhibition evaluation I spear-headed through 2021 and 2022.

Grounded Theory has been suggested as being ‘highly compatible’ as a theoretical basis for the workplace-based autoethnographer, particularly for those following constructivist GT methods.²⁷⁹ Charmaz has championed this combination of methodological approaches as she asserts that ‘a constructivist approach to grounded theory reaffirms studying people in their natural settings’, which was the exactly the position of my autoethnographic research.²⁸⁰ Indeed, the constant comparative method of GT is crucial, as ‘in the ethnographic setting it is *all* data’, and a significant strength of GT is the recognition of this ‘complexity’.²⁸¹ By using GT, I could continue to collect data through the combination of interviews, academic and other readings as well as observing and reflecting on daily occurrences in my workplace. This was iteratively influencing the production of the Impact Evaluation Resources. By the time the large-scale exhibition evaluation reporting was being drawn together, I felt I had reached data ‘saturation’, that point in GT data collection when there were no new analytical themes developing and theoretical gaps that been explored.²⁸²

3.4 Pragmatism: the impact of COVID

At the outset of the DHeritage, I had thought that my research aim, to improve museum exhibition evaluation, would concentrate on improving the way the evaluation process engaged with visitors. The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically altered my research process, giving me new opportunities and research avenues. My application for initial registration was submitted in June 2020, although I had been designing my data collection methods since my application for the course (see Figure 3.1 for a timeline of the pandemic period mapped against my DHeritage journey). My original research design used experimental evaluation with exhibition

²⁷⁸ Leanne Pupchek, ‘A Review of: “Carolyn Ellis, Revision: Autoethnographic Reflections on Life and Work.”’, *Southern Communication Journal*, 75.4 (2010), pp. 454–56 (p. 455).

²⁷⁹ Simone F. Pettigrew, ‘Ethnography and Grounded Theory: A Happy Marriage?’, *Advances in Consumer Research*, 27 (2000), pp. 256–260 (p. 258).

²⁸⁰ Kathy Charmaz, ‘Grounded Theory: Objectivist and Constructivist Methods’, in *The Handbook of Qualitative Research*, ed. by Norman Denzin and Yvonna Lincoln (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2000), pp. 509–35 (p. 510).

²⁸¹ Sharrock and Hughes, p. 5; Pettigrew, p. 258.

²⁸² Corbin and Strauss, p. 140.

visitors, especially amending existing methods, such as comments books.²⁸³ My data collection phase was due to begin in summer 2020, with a positivist quantitative approach, using objective measurements and testing replicability across UCM sites. With the immense changes taking place both locally and globally in 2020, responsive rethinking was required.

As part of the UK national lockdown, museums and heritage attractions closed for an unforeseen amount of time from 24 March 2020. Restrictions were lifted allowing 'entertainment venues', including museums, to open from 14 August 2020.²⁸⁴ In Cambridge, many of the museums and galleries closed their doors on Sunday 15 March 2020, not re-opening until September.²⁸⁵ The second national lockdown, with museums again closed, took place between 5 November and 2 December 2020, the third from 6 January until March 2021, although the government roadmap out of this lockdown decreed that museums were indoor venues and could not reopen earlier than the 17 May.²⁸⁶ The museums of UCM 'began April 2021 as we did the April before: closed to the public'.²⁸⁷ Due to the timing of Christmas closures, many museums were closed from the 20th December until mid-May 2021 (see Figure 3.1). When venues reopened, public confidence remained low, and visitors to Cambridge museums did not return in their pre-COVID numbers until early 2023.²⁸⁸ As museums looked towards reopening in 2020 and 2021, restrictions prevented the use of items that would be touched by multiple people, rendering the option of visitors' books (even shared pens) an impossibility.

While museums nationally were closed to the public, behind-the-scenes work on collections and exhibitions continued. In UCM, both new and updated displays were planned and written during and between lockdowns in 2020 and 2021.²⁸⁹ The central

²⁸³ Sarah-Jane Harknett, 'DHeritage Research Proposal', 2019.

²⁸⁴ Institute for Government, 'Timeline of UK Coronavirus Lockdowns, March 2020 to March 2021', 2021.

²⁸⁵ 'Coronavirus: Cambridgeshire Museums and Venues Close', BBC News, 17 March 2020, section Cambridgeshire <<https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-cambridgeshire-51933458>> [accessed 28 July 2024].

²⁸⁶ 'Covid Roadmap: Let England's Museums Reopen Earlier', Museums Association, n.d. <<https://www.museumsassociation.org/campaigns/advocacy/covid-19/covid-roadmap-let-englands-museums-reopen-earlier/>> [accessed 8 April 2023].

²⁸⁷ Hannah Price. 'The Road to Recovery: April-September 2021' Cambridge University Museums, 2021 <<https://www.museums.cam.ac.uk/blog/2021/11/03/the-road-to-recovery-april-september-2021/>> [accessed 27 July 2024].

²⁸⁸ 'University of Cambridge Museums Activity Update, October 2022 – March 2023' Cambridge University Museums, 2023 <<https://www.museums.cam.ac.uk/blog/2023/11/28/university-of-cambridge-museums-activity-update-october-2022-march-2023/>> [accessed 27 July 2024].

²⁸⁹ Alexander Shtyrov, and Amy Howell 'Varsity Investigates: Cambridge's Museums in Lockdown', *Varsity Online*, 3 March 2021 <<https://www.varsity.co.uk/news/20943>> [accessed 28 July 2024].

UCM team were preparing for programming on the theme of 'Power and Memory', at the centre of which was an exhibition at the Fitzwilliam Museum: 'Black Atlantic: People, Power, Resistance'. This work had been scheduled prior to the pandemic but grew in significance after the murder of George Floyd and the backdrop of Black Lives Matter protests across the UK in summer 2020. Taking the pragmatic approach and recognising that evaluation methodologies must be responsive and work practically for museums, my research shifted to new areas.

Pivoting the research area in response to these global challenges, I re-established my methodology in constructivism, with its understanding 'that social phenomena are in a constant state of change because they are totally reliant on social interactions as they take place'.²⁹⁰ The 'constant state of change' we lived through in 2020-22 meant that this was the most applicable technique and opened fresh research avenues. Any research plans with members of the public were impossible due to the unpredictability of the pandemic. This afforded me a new opportunity: taking the pulse of the heritage sector during a major historical event, testing the relevance of evaluation in particularly difficult circumstances, and working with a key audience: museum staff.

²⁹⁰ Nicholas Walliman, 'Social Research Methods', (SAGE Publications, Ltd, 2024), pp. 14-28 (p. 14).

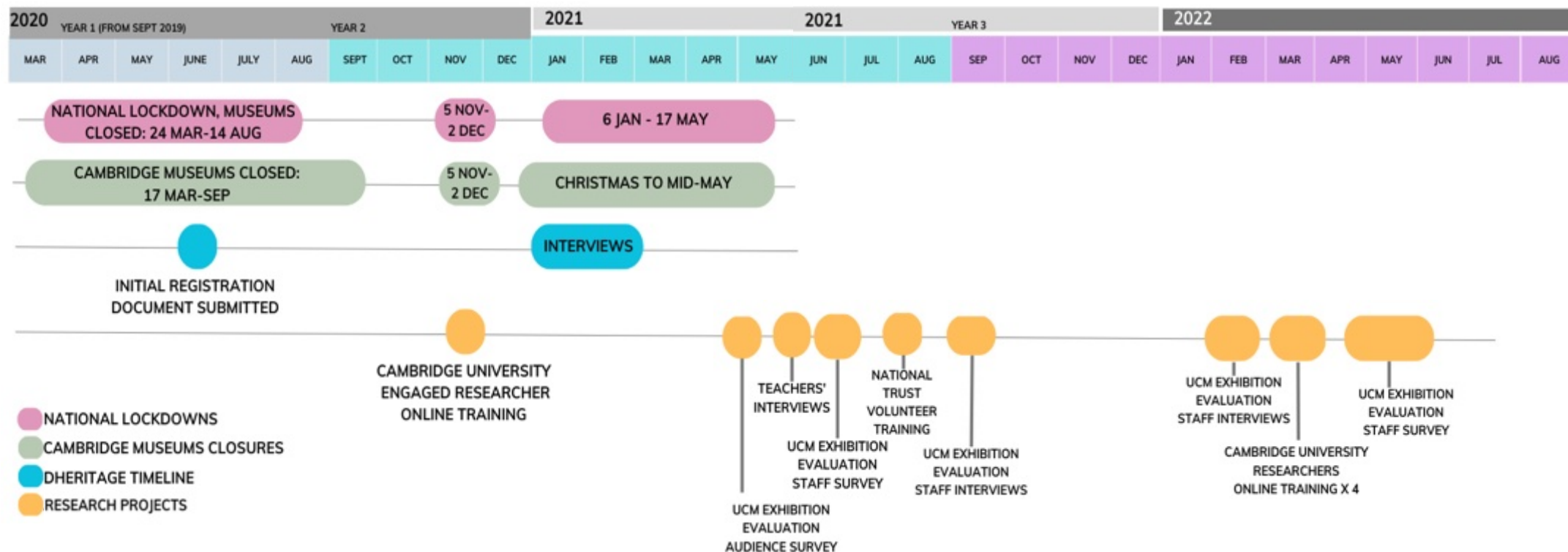


Figure 3.1 Timeline of museum closures, national lockdowns, and my DHeritage journey.

In a 2011 study by Bernadette Lynch, museum staff were identified as an audience which does not communicate with each other about their opinion on their own practice, and she found this was true as much within institutions as across them.²⁹¹ Such conversations can, according to Lynch, lead to practical improvements, but perhaps equally as importantly, also reduce professional disillusionment. While the Lynch paper specifically researched public engagement (in Paul Hamlyn-funded institutions), her conclusion that ‘the opportunity the study provided to reflect openly on practice was surprisingly unusual’ has, in my own experience, resonance with many more elements of day-to-day museum experiences.²⁹² The impacts of the pandemic on museums, with frequent closures and low levels of confidence from the public, moved research focus to members of staff. Again, this builds on the work of Macdonald, who in her ethnographic research in the Science Museum listened to, and injected into her account, the voices of those with ‘deep expertise’: museum staff.²⁹³ Rather than attempt to reach out to potential visitors, my research moved to the same audience as she did, but instead of Macdonald’s ethnographic approach, I used autoethnography. The use of autoethnography allowed me to be reactive, exemplifying the ‘messy, fluid, and highly contextual approach’ that is inherent in the method.²⁹⁴

Staff are not commonly thought of as a museum ‘audience’, with this term more frequently applied to those external to the institution. Audience Researchers Ben Gammon and Jo Graham recognised the need to consider curatorial colleagues as an audience for their work in their 1998 paper ‘Putting Value Back into Evaluation’: ‘curators are people too, you know’.²⁹⁵ Gammon and Graham saw their carefully crafted evaluation reports being ignored and disregarded by those working on exhibitions, but surmised that this was less ‘due to their lack of interest or willingness’, and more down to staff not having the ‘time, energy, motivation or freedom from distractions’ to read the audience evaluation.²⁹⁶ ‘We are asking them to do what we would never expect our visitors to do— read, memorise and draw conclusions from vast quantities of text’, they wrote perceptively.²⁹⁷ Having

²⁹¹ Bernadette T. Lynch, ‘Custom-Made Reflective Practice: Can Museums Realise Their Capabilities in Helping Others Realise Theirs?’, *Museum Management and Curatorship* (1990), 26.5 (2011), 441–58.

²⁹² Lynch, p. 447.

²⁹³ Macdonald, *Behind the Scenes at The Science Museum*. p. 9.

²⁹⁴ Edwards, p. 3.

²⁹⁵ Ben Gammon and Jo Graham, ‘Putting Value Back into Evaluation’, *Visitor Studies Today!*, 1.1 (1998), pp. 6–8.

²⁹⁶ Gammon and Graham., p. 6.

²⁹⁷ Gammon and Graham, p. 6.

experienced this myself with my own evaluation reports and practice, a new paradigm for communication was clearly required. Both Lynch and Gammon and Graham use in-person, interactive methods to encourage better communication within the staff body. Lynch used participatory drama, while Gammon and Graham developed four gallery exercises for colleagues to take part in with visitors. These approaches were not possible during periods of lockdown, and these methods felt less appropriate to museums where staff numbers were sufficiently low that contributing to exhibitions was one of their many areas of responsibility. Many curatorial positions within UCM are also academic research roles, and such participatory techniques (or at times, even an icebreaker) have, in my experience, been viewed with suspicion or disregard. Participatory methods such as drama in museums can make people feel unsafe and alienated.²⁹⁸

The conclusions of both Gammon and Graham and Lynch were that staff were not being researched as an audience, that their views were often dismissed, and internal communication was an area of deficit. Focussing on staff also seemed a natural outcome of the professional doctorate, where I, like those before me, have been 'empowered as a researcher to recognise my previous experiences and acknowledge the potential impact' I could have.²⁹⁹ Indeed, personal response is a natural aim of autoethnography, through which lens it is possible to 'recognise the innumerable ways personal experience influences the research process'.³⁰⁰

Interviewing members of the culture is a recognised method within both ethnography and autoethnography.³⁰¹ Macdonald, too, focussed on staff, her 'local players'.³⁰²

Drawing these themes together, approaching staff for interviews was the natural arena for my research to move into. Interviews were chosen to gather rich, qualitative data, providing the opportunity to explore multiple themes. Staff within the UCM are frequently approached by students for research interviews, so are familiar with the method. I chose to do no interviews or other research with museum visitors or other members of the public during the research period. This was a methodological decision based on my research aims, particularly the opportunity to understand changes in the sector due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. While I could have returned to more data collection when visitors returned to museums, my

²⁹⁸ Sandra Bicknell and Susie Fisher, 'Enlightening or Embarrassing? Drama in the Science Museum, London, United Kingdom', *Visitor Studies*, 6.1 (1993), pp. 79–88.

²⁹⁹ Sara Smith, 'Methodology and the Professional Doctorate – the Muddy Waters of Knowledge Creation, Transfer and Workplace Capital', *Professional Development in Education*, 48.2 (2022), 353–60.

³⁰⁰ Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 'Autoethnography: An Overview', p. 2.

³⁰¹ Strathern, 'The Limits of Auto-Anthropology'.

³⁰² Sharon Macdonald, *Behind the Scenes at The Science Museum*, p. 7.

qualitative iterative approach meant that I was also reacting to the issues I uncovered in my staff interviews. As an autoethnographer, my research area is the UCM, the staff, and the broader university staff body interested in exhibition evaluation (especially as part of the REF process explored in Chapter 1). The Impact Evaluation Resources were aimed at these staff members, and therefore had to work for the intended audience.

3.5 Ethical issues in autoethnography

There are various pertinent ethical issues within autoethnography, among the biggest being the impact of increasingly blurred boundaries: between the researcher and the participants, and between formal and informal data collection.³⁰³ Gilbert, writing on emotions in qualitative research, talks about the ‘fuzziness’ of boundaries and their continual renegotiation, while seeking balance ‘between the dangers and benefits of being too far in or too far out of the lives of the researched’.³⁰⁴ The continual negotiation of boundaries is of profound importance to the autoethnographer, especially when researching within the workplace. The pandemic itself was a time of increasingly blurred boundaries, where work and home overlapped in new ways. It is the blurring of boundaries, that is of interest to the autoethnographer: the ‘ethnographic edge’.³⁰⁵ Again, in contrast to Macdonald, I was already a colleague of those that I interviewed and those I carried out research with, although like others before me, I too found it ‘difficult to draw neat boundaries around “rapport”, and “friendship”’.³⁰⁶ These boundaries between friendship and research participation have been highlighted as a potential ethical difficulty by other authors.³⁰⁷ Watson et al. coined the term ‘researcher-friend’ in their longitudinal studies, but I was starting from the opposite viewpoint: the ‘friend-researcher’.³⁰⁸ Unlike many other research projects, with the autoethnography that I was carrying out the relationships remain post-research, I was not just entering someone’s life for the research, but I was within my workplace.³⁰⁹ This has the potential to be ethically

³⁰³ ‘Blurred boundaries’ is explored in Virginia Dickson-Swift and others, ‘Blurring Boundaries in Qualitative Health Research on Sensitive Topics’, *Qualitative Health Research*, 16.6 (2006), pp. 853–71.

³⁰⁴ Kathleen R Gilbert, *The Emotional Nature of Qualitative Research / Edited by Kathleen R. Gilbert*. (Boca Raton, Fla : CRC Press, 2001), p. 12.

³⁰⁵ Vicki Smith, ‘Ethnographies of Work and the Work of Ethnographies.’, in *Handbook of Ethnography* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2011), pp. 220-233 (p. 229).

³⁰⁶ Jean Duncombe and Julie Jessop, “Doing Rapport” and the Ethics of “Faking Friendship”, in *Ethics in Qualitative Research*, by pages 108-121, 2nd edn (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2012), (p. 112).

³⁰⁷ Dickson-Swift, et al., *Blurring Boundaries*, p. 862.

³⁰⁸ Lynne Watson, Jeanette Irwin, and Sharon Michalske, ‘Researcher as Friend: Methods of the Interviewer in a Longitudinal Study’, *Qualitative Health Research*, 1.4 (1991), pp. 497–514 (p. 509).

³⁰⁹ Dickson-Swift and others, ‘Doing Sensitive Research: What Challenges Do Qualitative Researchers Face?’, p. 330.

ambiguous, with it being unclear when research is occurring, and when it is not. Like Goodwin et al., my presence went unquestioned, in itself an ethical issue.³¹⁰

In qualitative research, there is a need to create rapport, to access the story of the research participant.³¹¹ For the workplace-based autoethnographer, there is already a working relationship in place, but this can be a blurred boundary as working relationships are replaced by research participation. Macdonald wrestled with this relationship, finding it difficult to 'negotiate [her] way between empathetic support for the Team and critical distance'.³¹² Unlike Macdonald, I already held a position in my research environment, but this may have created blurred boundaries, and potential ethical problems. Having spent twenty years working in the UCM, the relationships that I had with fellow colleagues had already lasted for an extended period. These issues of rapport building and trust when researching people that are already known can be difficult for both researcher and participant. Blurred boundaries can cause distress within professional settings for both, and while it would be ideal for researchers 'to be clear about their role in the research process', in practice in the workplace this is not always possible.³¹³ When researcher and participants have a personal and professional relationship it would be almost impossible for these lines not to become blurred. Sherman found a similar issue when researching with family members. She acknowledges her own positionality alongside the competing expectations of her subjects, concluding that 'conducting fieldwork among members of our own families may be equally or more difficult than studying people who are strangers to us'.³¹⁴ I was not researching with family members, but with people I have had an extended professional relationship with. For my research it would have been worse if the boundaries were sharp: researchers have a 'need to be human' and the blurred boundaries sometimes allowed me the opportunity to bring myself to both work and research without denying either role.³¹⁵ Having boundaries that were too clear could have introduced another issue Sherman identified: attempting to fulfil two positions at the same time has the potential to lead to a drop in performance in either or both.³¹⁶ As important as the impact on the research participants is, there is also the ethical issue of the research on me, the researcher, as an active participant in

³¹⁰ Dawn Goodwin et al., 'Ethics and Ethnography: An Experiential Account.', *Qualitative Health Research*, 13.4 (2003), pp. 567–77 (p. 570).

³¹¹ Dickson-Swift et al., *Blurring Boundaries*, p. 855.

³¹² Sharon Macdonald, *Behind the Scenes at The Science Museum*, p. 105.

³¹³ Dickson-Swift et al., *Blurring Boundaries*, p. 865.

³¹⁴ Sharon R Sherman, "'That's How the Seder Looks': A Fieldwork Account of Videotaping Family Folklore", *Journal of Folklore Research*, 1986, pp. 52–70 (p. 69).

³¹⁵ Dickson-Swift et al., *Doing Sensitive Research*, p. 335.

³¹⁶ Sherman, p. 59.

the research. Was I just 'using' the goodwill and professional relationships for my own research? Dickson-Swift has recognised the potential guilt that researchers feel in similar situations, concluding with the importance of 'researchers to reflect on how their research may impact on them personally'.³¹⁷ These were implications that I had to work through as part of my writing up process, and was where I felt the boundaries blurred the most keenly. There were moments of discomfort as I had to unpick whether a decision was made as a researcher or a professional. While I do not think this changed the way that participants and colleagues responded to me, I think it occasionally made me more withdrawn, introspective and self-reflective in some professional areas while I disentangled research and professionalism.

Blurring of boundaries raises the issue of informed consent: were my colleagues able to give informed consent to be part of an ongoing piece of research? As I was researching in a workplace setting, it would have been difficult for colleagues to withdraw from the study without leaving their jobs. Requesting retrospective consent after research had started would have been impossible.³¹⁸ On the other hand, it has been claimed that due to the 'iterative and emergent' analysis in autoethnography, it is impossible to acquire informed consent.³¹⁹ This is partly due to the impracticality of trying to anticipate all ethical problems in advance, as the research is exceptionally context specific, and can be an issue with qualitative methodologies. Rather than relying on a momentary consideration of ethics, and a signature at a single point in time, I had to remain constantly ethical in my conduct.³²⁰ I had to continually adapt my approach and remain reflective on any ethical dilemmas as they arose. My hope is that my research addresses relational ethics and will redress the balance by allowing the subjects to reflect upon a research process that has taken place across several years. This process will allow the opportunity to 'talk back' to their representation within my research.³²¹ To maintain my ethical standpoint, I relied on formal feedback processes to supplement my research. For example, the evaluation of online researcher training sessions was carried out centrally by the University and sent to me in an anonymised fashion, and the anonymous results of UCM staff surveys.

³¹⁷ Dickson-Swift et al., *Doing Sensitive Research*, p. 347.

³¹⁸ Catherine Lee, 'Culture, Consent and Confidentiality in Workplace Autoethnography', *Journal of Organizational Ethnography*, 7.3 (2018), pp. 302–19.

³¹⁹ Sara Delamont and Paul Atkinson, 'The Ethics of Ethnography', in *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research Ethics* (SAGE Publications Ltd, 2019), pp 119-132 (p. 120).

³²⁰ Goodwin et al., p. 568 and p. 659; Delamont and Atkinson, p. 122.

³²¹ Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 'Autoethnography: An Overview', p. 9.

Given all these points, and to carry out my research in an ethical manner, I amended some of my methods. For example, to preserve the anonymity of the interviewees, I chose to redact much of the personal information from the interview transcripts, such as the name of the museum, names of previous workplaces, and, at times, information about the gender of the interviewee. Job titles have been altered to generic areas rather than the title used by the individual. Such information would have made the participants too easily identifiable in a relatively small field of employment. This was a decision in direct contrast to Macdonald, who named both institution and individual staff members, as well as their educational background and even their paygrade.³²² My decision was partly based on the interview paperwork stating that participants would remain anonymous, and the issue of 'internal confidentiality'.³²³ The museum world is small, and I wanted to do my best to ensure that an interviewee could not be identified from a swift internet search. The most appropriate way to do this was to strip out any information that could be used to identify the participant. My autoethnographic account is therefore heavily personally reflective, rather than drawing extensively on my colleagues. This avoided the potential for colleagues to over-disclose based on rapport built over decades.³²⁴ It was important for my autoethnography to be personal, to represent my own experiences, while acknowledging the other actors within it.³²⁵ Finally, in my ethical considerations, my research was not on a particularly sensitive subject, and while it was of importance to me, the area is not one that could impact significantly on the career trajectories of my colleagues. While I was therefore acutely aware of the potential ethical issues of an autoethnography, I felt the risks to both research participants and me were ultimately relatively low and had been considered carefully.

3.6 Ethical issues in staff interviews

In speaking to current professionals in various roles in the museums, my aims were to determine the attitudes of staff towards current practice and how they engaged with evaluation. In line with the main research aim, the interviews would focus on evaluation of exhibitions and displays, particularly those that are on view for a long period of time (as opposed to the short-term, temporary exhibition). This was to move conversation away from the many forms of evaluation and data collection that centre on basic visitor numbers or the results of programming and on to exhibitions. I chose not to do a survey with a wider audience of museum staff. This would have

³²² Sharon Macdonald, *Behind the Scenes at The Science Museum*, p. 13; pp. 97-103.

³²³ Tolich, p. 1606.

³²⁴ Dickson-Swift et al., *Doing Sensitive Research*, p. 331.

³²⁵ Edwards, p. 5.

been more in line with a quantitative study, which was not a methodology I was pursuing, and an anonymous staff survey would not give me the same depth of responses that I was seeking. Interviews allowed me to probe deeper and interrogate responses. Setting the interviews within my autoethnographic approach meant that I could move between the methods, increasing the reliability of any findings. Lareau, in her practical guide to ethnographic and listening methods, promotes both methods to increase validity, 'since participant observation is not a one-shot survey, but ongoing for a while'.³²⁶

The constructivist qualitative approach meant that a small sample of interviewees could be chosen, without harm to the rigour of the research. Interview subjects were selected using non-probability, purposeful sampling.³²⁷ Non-probability sampling does not give each staff member an equal chance of being selected for interview. As there was to be no statistical inferences drawn from the interviews non-probability sampling was the appropriate tool.³²⁸ Purposeful sampling, as a subset of non-probability sampling, is used to identify people who are the best fit with the intended research aim, and this was decided based on judgement sampling of the staff member's expertise and involvement. Non-probability, purposeful sampling gave me control over who was going to be approached, increasing the likelihood of subjects agreeing to the interview and ensuring I would approach only staff who had an element of exhibition production or evaluation in their role. As I had been working in my UCM role looking at evaluation for some time, I had relevant contemporary knowledge of staff members in each institution who fitted the sampling criteria. The easy access to interviewees, an 'immediate rapport', and an area where I could gather 'data directly related to the research interest', afforded me as close to an ideal research setting as was possible in a pandemic.³²⁹

Within the sampling strategy, I wanted those selected to be broadly representative of the different museums of the University of Cambridge. As detailed in Chapter 1, the eight museums vary in size, resourcing, and subject matter, with different management structures. I made the decision not to approach for interview anyone from the Fitzwilliam Museum or Kettle's Yard. The Fitzwilliam is the largest UCM institution in terms of numbers of staff, and, unlike any of the other museums, it has

³²⁶ Lareau, *Listening to People: A Practical Guide to Interviewing, Participant Observation, Data Analysis, and Writing It All Up*, p. 34.

³²⁷ Johnnie Daniel, *Sampling Essentials: Practical Guidelines for Making Sampling Choices* (Thousand Oaks, California, 2022), 66-80.

³²⁸ Daniel, *Sampling Essentials* p. 69.

³²⁹ Steven J. Taylor, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods: A Guidebook and Resource* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2015), p. 40.

a dedicated department for exhibitions. Kettle's Yard has a curator specifically working on exhibitions. Neither institution are attached to a University department, being non-School Institutions. Both the Fitzwilliam and Kettle's Yard house collections of contemporary and historic art (with the Fitzwilliam also containing antiquities), and these subject matters could be adequately covered through interviews with staff in other museums. Reduced funding for museums over the last twenty years has resulted in staff across the sector co-ordinating multiple responsibilities simultaneously. My intention with the interviews was therefore to understand the pressures on staff who are juggling multiple roles so that the results could be more relevant to museums in general, including outside the University model. The size, subject matter and staffing structure of both Kettle's Yard and the Fitzwilliam meant they did not fit the sampling criteria. In addition to the careful selection of representative museums, I wanted to ensure a variety of staff members were approached for interview. My aim was to include differing perspectives: senior management, curatorial staff, visitor services, and office staff who were responsible for reporting evaluation results to funding bodies. The interviews were not meant to be an exhaustive study of all staff: a questionnaire or survey would have been a more appropriate means to obtain information had that been my intention. Rather this research was designed to be a deep dive into the perspectives of key colleagues. To maintain the anonymity of the museums, they have been categorised as small, medium, or large. Small is defined as having up to 5 employees, medium 6 to 15 and large as having 16 or more staff members. Number of employees was selected as the defining category rather than visitors, as staff capacity was mentioned more often as a limiting factor. I work part-time for one of the museums that was selected. All the museums represented in the interviews have a combination of permanent displays and spaces for short-term, temporary displays or interventions.

The inherent disadvantages to the interview approach should be made clear. I was interviewing my colleagues, some of whom I had worked with for a considerable time, and while I have at no point held a formal position of power or supervision over any of the interviewees, some of them had employed me in the past.³³⁰ The main topic of the discussion, evaluation, was one I have a substantial interest in, and all those interviewed knew this. These factors had to be broached to avoid negatively introducing bias, I did not want to lead the respondent to state that they place more value on evaluation to placate my research interests. There were also some of

³³⁰ Annette Lareau, *Listening to People : A Practical Guide to Interviewing, Participant Observation, Data Analysis, and Writing It All up* (Chicago, 2021), p. 42.

Kvale's 'power dynamics' at play: I requested and set up the interview, and the topic was within my professional sphere.³³¹ These 'dominance' narratives are very often present in the interview scenario. I attempted to mitigate for these concerns with careful framing of the interview from the outset and by wording the interview schedule such that the subject felt able to disagree and challenge my research position. Qualitative research methods require some level of trust between the researcher and those being interviewed, and my knowledge of the interviewee's situation meant that 'deceit' or attempts to overexaggerate their interest in evaluation were almost impossible.³³² Indeed, some of the colleagues I interviewed were possibly *more* open than they may have been with an external researcher. One reason for this was the ongoing pandemic, where messaging from museums to staff was frequently around wellbeing and acknowledging our different experiences. Additionally, I know the museum displays of each interviewee better than many researchers. This led to open exchanges, such as this with D1, where the staff member both acknowledges my position and insider knowledge, yet is simultaneously critical of museum evaluation:

Yes, I mean, it's an interesting thing, because you know our displays, they don't really have any interpretation. And so in some ways, it's like, what is there to evaluate?

D1 (Director)³³³

The interviews were, for my part, a method to produce knowledge from the community for use within my research. The interviewee was free to withdraw at any time, yet they chose to participate. This aligns with Strathern's suggestions that 'information is normally produced in the context of an exchange in which both parties retain their autonomy', rather than through the exploitative action of 'extraction'.³³⁴ The interviews were not part of a power imbalance but were an aspect of the autoethnographic construction of exchange. This highlights a new issue, however, that of 'relational ethics': the ethical dilemma encountered when researching with colleagues who are already known to the interviewer, without implicating them within the research.³³⁵ This supported my decision to anonymise staff and museum details as has been possible, and some further identifying information has been redacted in

³³¹ Steinar Kvale, 'Dominance Through Interviews and Dialogues', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 12.3 (2006), 480–500.

³³² Immy Holloway and Stephanie Wheeler, *Qualitative Research in Nursing and Healthcare* (John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2009), p. 7.

³²¹ Appendix 3, Transcript D1

³³⁴ Strathern, p. 21.

³³⁵ Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, p. 9.

the interview transcripts, such as names of museums people were previously employed in and names of museum objects.

While it is important to acknowledge the specific angle that comes from interviewing colleagues, the research process is never neutral: a standpoint which autoethnography is open about, in that it both 'acknowledges and accommodates subjectivity, emotionality, and the researcher's influence on research'.³³⁶ Further mitigations came from my position as an autoethnographer, situated within the community I was studying. Both 'power' and 'dominance' can be thought of in a negative light, as demonstrating the act of exploitation. While no one I interviewed then or since made any reference to feeling or being exploited during the process, this could have been an underlying issue. As an auto-ethnographer within UCM, I have had to continue to work with these same colleagues since the interviews: living in what Ellis et al. call the 'world of relationships', where my research 'is embedded after the research is completed'.³³⁷ Indeed, both before and after the interview process, I have supported all of the interviewees with their evaluation work, and have been called upon by several of them for my expertise within the field. This leads to a counter point: Collins and Gallinat suggest that as autoethnographers, the group we are researching can end up 'treating us as a resource', with our relationship being transactional, Strathern's concept of the interviewer 'extracting 'raw materials' for 'social' use'.³³⁸ These aspects demarcate my research from those using pure ethnographic methods in a research sphere they do not reside in, such as Macdonald, who was able to leave the Science Museum behind at the end of her research period. I maintain my relationships with these colleagues and therefore transparency was crucial at all stages.

3.7 The interview process

The research interviews took place remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. This method was chosen despite it previously being discouraged by oral historians, as online interviews may reduce the ability to build strong rapport with the subject and have the potential of missing non-verbal feedback.³³⁹ During the pandemic, while everyone was working from home, online interviewing was the only available research method. The advantages of attempting remote interviews during periods of

³³⁶ Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, p. 2.

³³⁷ Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, p. 9.

³³⁸ Collins and Gallinat, *The Ethnographic Self as Resource: An Introduction*, p. 16; Strathern, 'The Limits of Auto-Anthropology', p. 22.

³³⁹ Charlie Morgan and others, 'Advice on Remote Oral History Interviewing during the Covid-19 Pandemic' (Oral History Society, 2021), p. 3.

lockdown were that work calendars were slightly clearer, and there was a neutrality in the interview location: subjects were in their own homes rather than in the institution that employs them. Once ethical approval had been granted, paperwork could be sent and returned electronically, and a mutually appropriate time could be chosen. Recordings of the interview could easily be made and used for transcription, and recording quality was good (poor sound and internet connection had previously been cited as reasons not to do remote interviews).³⁴⁰ The interviews were scheduled at a time suitable for the participant, and, a year into the pandemic, all of those interviewed were familiar with online meetings and the relevant software. Additionally, staff seemed to be looking for an in-person connection, even if mediated through a screen, rather than responding to a survey. It has been said that 'qualitative researchers are concerned with the meaning people attach to things in their lives'.³⁴¹ Professionals working in the arts have been shown to have a strong connection between their identity and their work, and during COVID this led to a profound sense of 'grief at the losses that the lockdown' imposed.³⁴² Elements of this were present in the interviews, as some of the conversations show an almost wistful recollection of museum life pre-pandemic, and staff were keen to talk about the collections that they were powerfully emotionally attached to, but physically distanced from.

Seven interviews took place in early 2021 (summarised in Figure 3.2, transcripts in Appendix 3). Due to furlough, interview A2 was delayed until the autumn of 2021. One further interview with a member of staff involved in exhibition production was requested, but due to a combination of furlough early in 2021, and work pressures during museum reopening (following the easing of coronavirus restrictions) it was not possible to schedule this interview. The delay and deferral of two interviews highlighted to me that the pragmatic approach had been the correct course of action. Even though I was drawing on well-established networks (as suggested by Silverman), I still struggled to achieve all the interviews I had envisioned.³⁴³ During COVID, approaching museums outside the UCM network, and where I did not have a pre-established relationship, could have curtailed my data collection even further.

³⁴⁰ Morgan et al., p. 8.

³⁴¹ Steven J. Taylor, *Introduction to Qualitative Research Methods : A Guidebook and Resource* (John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated, 2015), p. 18.

³⁴² Neta Spiro and others, 'The Effects of COVID-19 Lockdown 1.0 on Working Patterns, Income, and Wellbeing Among Performing Arts Professionals in the United Kingdom (April–June 2020)', *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11:594086 (2021), pp. 1–17 (p. 14).

³⁴³ David Silverman, *Doing Qualitative Research / David Silverman.*, Fourth edition. (London : SAGE Publications Ltd, 2013), p. 215.

Museum	Small (1-5 staff) Medium (6-15) Large (more than 16 staff)	Who was interviewed?	Who is responsible for evaluation?	Evaluation methods in use pre-COVID
A	Large	A1 (Curator) A2 (Head of visitor services)	Learning team Visitor services staff and volunteers	Comments book
B	Small	B1 (Curator)	Curator Volunteers	Comments book
C	Small	C1 (Curator)	Collections assistant Curator Education officer/assistant	None; informal visitor observation
D	Medium	D1 (Director) D2 (Administrator)	Exhibitions staff Visitor services staff and volunteers	Comments cards
E	Medium	E1 (Curator) E2 (Education Officer)	Curator Education officer/assistant Visitor services staff and volunteers	Comments book and comments cards

Figure 3.2 Summary of staff interviewed.

An interview schedule was prepared, which was used as the basis for the conversation, but still allowed for the interviewee to move into areas of more relevance or interest for them. Ellis et al. suggest that the ‘interactive interview’ of the autoethnographer should be more conversational, situated as it is in the established relationship between researcher and interviewee.³⁴⁴ The schedule started very generally, by asking the participant to describe their current role and then the museum. I then asked a series of questions about current evaluation practice: what was currently taking place in their institution (or had been taking place prior to lockdown closures), who would typically manage this, what happened to the results,

³⁴⁴ Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, ‘Autoethnography: An Overview’, p. 7.

whether any changes had been made in response to visitor evaluation, and how exhibition evaluation was approached or encouraged. The schedule finished with two general questions: what the interviewee would like to know about their museum visitors, and whether they had seen evaluation examples in any venue they thought worked particularly well. These questions were asked of each interviewee, but the conversational nature meant that sometimes areas were developed further with additional queries.

Due to the autoethnographic approach, these interviews were not the first contact with any staff member but were part of an ongoing professional dialogue that had taken place over many years. GT techniques allowed me to adapt the questioning style for each interview, carrying out the analysis dynamically throughout. Because of the professional networks I have built, the formal section of the interviews was bolstered both before and after by numerous informal conversations, emails and requests for support. The GT tools of 'reflexivity, flexibility, focus and openness' proved invaluable for this aspect of the research.³⁴⁵ I also used the research tool of 'self-disclosure' at times to encourage the respondent to be open.³⁴⁶ By talking about my own struggle to allocate time to exhibition evaluation in the museum I work for, I hoped that others would feel at ease to confess to similar issues. In more than one interview, the interviewee asked me to respond to the questions I had delivered to them, encouraging the conversational style and openness.

The interviews were transcribed initially using the Otter software system, then manually checked. While the software removes the verbal pauses such as 'um', and I physically removed hesitations or repeated phrases, I considered re-introducing them (as suggested by Roulston), to convey the voice of each interview participant.³⁴⁷ However this technique became distracting to the overall flow of the conversation, so I did not include them or repeated words in transcripts. Using GT, the first part of interview analysis was coding the results. Because of my autoethnographic approach, the interview transcripts were part of my larger professional relationships. In common with my GT method, the analysis used 'the analytical power of the constant interplay between induction (in which [I was] never *tabula rasa*) and abduction'.³⁴⁸ Because I was bringing my own professional

³⁴⁵ Thornberg and Charmaz, 'Grounded Theory and Theoretical Coding', p. 156.

³⁴⁶ Dickson-Swift and others, 'Doing Sensitive Research: What Challenges Do Qualitative Researchers Face?', p. 332.

³⁴⁷ Kathryn Roulston, 'The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis', pages 297-312 (London: SAGE Publications Ltd, 2023), p. 299.

³⁴⁸ Thornberg and Charmaz, p. 162.

expertise and autoethnographic perspective to the coding exercise, I was moving between data and theory in an abductive manner. The initial (open) coding process was not an opportunity to rigidly define each statement, thought or gesture into a particular character, but was an opportunity to apply a 'flexible way of seeing' to the transcripts.³⁴⁹ This highlighted key concepts, which, through the process of focussed coding once the data had been reorganised, brought to the fore the larger concepts and ideas inherent in the interviews.³⁵⁰ These top level categories were determined from the data, and each was covered by multiple staff members. The two main themes I identified, and that will be explored more thoroughly in Chapter 5, are that staff know (or feel they know) their visitors and their venue, and that there is currently insufficient clear, overarching strategy, process, or resources. Some of the additional topics arising from the interviews were the pressures felt by curators when they inherited displays which they had had no control over, and a curatorial desire for both critique and praise. Some people spoke of using evaluation to provoke dialogue, but that this led to unrealistic expectations from visitors, other staff, volunteers, and themselves, with expectations raised in an evaluation process which then could not be matched by staff capacity.

3.8 Creating and testing the resources

The use of GT meant that alongside the interview process, I could create the Impact Evaluation Resources (IER) that would assist museums in evaluating permanent displays. The iterative creation of the resources was therefore deeply embedded in the research process, and highly reactive to the needs of staff as well as responding to gaps in academic and sector literature to provide structure and practical support. Director D1 commented that there currently 'isn't a systematic approach to evaluation'³⁵¹ and the IER was designed to directly address that issue. The first resources created were those for popular exhibition evaluation techniques in UCM: visitor observation and meaning mapping. I had previously written a training document for volunteers for visitor observation, but it lacked assistance on ethics or safety, and had little specific direction on the practicalities of the method. It relied on a trainer to deliver the content, and the intention of the IER was to be independent of me and useful more broadly. As I was regularly training volunteers and students to undertake visitor observation, I was able to finalise the sections and content for this resource iteratively and responding to specific questions and areas that required clarity. The template resource therefore included a short preamble introducing the

³⁴⁹ Thornberg and Charmaz, 'Grounded Theory and Theoretical Coding', p. 156.

³⁵⁰ Roulston, 'The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Data Analysis', p. 305.

³⁵¹ Appendix 3, Transcript D1.

method, a 'how to do it' section walking the reader through the process of using the method, detail on how to analyse the data, an 'ethics, safety, and security' section, which would assist those who may have to complete an ethics application but would also be more broadly useful to highlight areas to consider for the safety of all participants. A 'cautions and caveats' highlights limitations of the method so that users are fully aware of what each evaluation method cannot determine. To create robust and rigorous evaluation resources, appealing to those within the academic sphere, each resource has a short bibliography appended, bridging the gap between theory and practice. The diversity of subject matters among the museums in Cambridge, and differing staff backgrounds had already been informally highlighted to me as something that was an important factor when venues were considering exhibition evaluation. Collections with a stronger science focus were frustrated by resources that only talked about (for example) art galleries and they felt disassociated from a perceived focus on 'arts' from the Arts Council. For this reason, I spent a great deal of time carefully searching for relevant bibliographic references for each resource that gave examples for both arts and science collections, something that was lacking in current evaluation resources (see Figure 5.1 for this comparison).

The bibliographic section is a distinctive element of the IER, which responded also to requests from researchers in training session who were particularly interested in producing REF Impact case studies. Museum evaluation is a relatively well-established field academically (see Chapter 2), and each method of audience research has a robust literature behind it, with a well-researched methodological approach. This robustness is commonly missing from evaluation resources provided by funders, or by methods recommended within the sector (as explored in Chapter 4). Some evaluation suggestions include those with poor (or no) sampling strategies, such as graffiti walls, postcards, and voting with tokens, by organisations including the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement and the University of Oxford.³⁵² Staff that were interviewed recognised the lack of rigour of some evaluation methods, compared with methods that the IER advocated. Curator E1 specifically related exhibition evaluation as a vital part of the decision-making process in a redevelopment, as 'having that data of how people were engaging with the collections was really helpful, and did inform... a number of the decisions that we

³⁵² National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement, 'How to... Evaluate Public Engagement Projects and Programmes', 2017
<https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/sites/default/files/publication/evaluating_your_public_engagement_work.pdf> [accessed 23 April 2023]; Depper and Patterson.

made, particularly in the [specific] gallery.³⁵³ Another interviewee noted the difference in the reports produced using IER methods, and their importance as advocacy documents:

I think the evaluation reports that you've done in the past... have been... key pieces of strategic evidence... They're robust pieces of work, that help us step beyond the anecdotal and the rather half-baked evaluation, that sometimes happens for practical and reasonable reasons.

D1 (Director)³⁵⁴

The addition of bibliographies underlines the robustness of the IER, and empowers staff to explore related resources if they need to advocate for the use of a particular approach. Alongside the recognition of the uses of evaluation reports for funders and policy-makers, staff repeatedly spoke of the lack of an overarching strategy for exhibition evaluation; while this was being surfaced in interviews, I responded by writing a top-level resource on planning evaluation for the IER.

Interview feedback, the researcher training, staff feedback, and the exhibition evaluation I was carrying out as part of my work led me to identify further resources that were needed; qualitative, reflexive research and the constant-comparative use of Grounded Theory methods allowed me the opportunity to create such 'highly context specific' outcomes.³⁵⁵ Using my own practical knowledge of exhibition evaluation I added resources on techniques that may not have been in widespread use, with resources on accompanied visits, meaning maps, creative outputs and focus or user groups being tools added to the suite. I had used each of these to evaluate exhibitions, with meaning mapping being particularly well-received at the Fitzwilliam Museum. Here I had developed the technique over several years, and exhibition reports highlighted the way meaning mapping was able to demonstrate visitor understanding of exhibition themes in a way that other evaluation techniques did not. For example, meaning maps completed by visitors to an exhibition about religious life in the home in Renaissance Italy showed a shift in language towards more 'domestic, familial, and everyday terms' after their visit: themes that were missing in the pre-visit evaluation.³⁵⁶

³⁵³ Appendix 3, Transcript E1.

³⁵⁴ Appendix 3, Transcript D1.

³⁵⁵ Gail M. Sullivan and Joan Sargeant, 'Qualities of Qualitative Research: Part I.', *Journal of Graduate Medical Education*, 3.4 (2011), pp. 449–52 (p. 449).

³⁵⁶ Sarah-Jane Harknett, 'Fitzwilliam Museum: Madonnas and Miracles. Tracking Final Report', 2017, unpublished internal report.

Both meaning maps and drawings had successfully been used to demonstrate the impact of engaging with real Egyptian artefacts on a group of Key Stage 2 children at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology. In February 2020 I produced a report analysing 164 meaning maps on the theme of 'Egypt' before and after the pupils had visited the museum.³⁵⁷ The number of stereotypical images (such as pyramids, the sphinx, pharaohs, and cats) reduced, with an increase in the specific artefact types being mentioned (such as scarabs, shabtis and headrests). A key objective of the teaching session had been knowledge of Egypt as a place where people live now, and the children demonstrated an increased understanding of everyday lives in both ancient and modern Egypt through the meaning maps, for example children mentioned objects that they 'could relate to their own lives, such as the make-up palettes and headrest, as well as images they were shown of houses, boats, cars, television and schools'.³⁵⁸ The same project studied 328 children's drawings on the theme of 'Life in Ancient Egypt' and 'Life in Modern Egypt' before and after the museum visit and classroom teaching from archaeologists. The drawings provided vital evidence of learning specifically about modern Egypt, with houses being included and foregrounded in the post-teaching pictures.³⁵⁹ This report and the evidence from the evaluation was used as part of the evidence for a REF Impact case study.

Having demonstrated the importance of drawings and meaning maps through my own work, I decided to add these to the suite of resources. The standardised format was developed for the visitor observation resource initially, with resources added throughout the research period. The IER was given out as part of volunteer training, and was used to evaluate a variety of museum displays (see Chapter 6 for its use in different contexts). It became an integral part of the Impact Evaluation training sessions. As these sessions were delivered several times each year, they were similarly developed in an iterative fashion, amended according to the questions that were raised and recognising areas that researchers had little knowledge of (such as the range and variety of UK museums, Accreditation requirements and the evaluation lifecycle). Appendix 2 is the final version of the slides and course notes that were delivered.

Much of the testing of the Resources occurred within the context of their creation, the museums of the University of Cambridge. To be truly helpful within the broader

³⁵⁷ Sarah-Jane Harknett, 'The evaluation of the impact of archaeological workshops for teaching primary school pupils about ancient and modern Egypt', 2022, unpublished internal report.

³⁵⁸ Harknett, 'The evaluation of the impact of archaeological workshops'

³⁵⁹ Harknett, 'The evaluation of the impact of archaeological workshops'

heritage field, some examination outside of this specific arena should be discussed. This process of creating and testing the resources enabled me to confront what American sociology Professor Jack Katz has called the '4 Rs' of qualitative studies: representativeness, reactivity, reliability and replicability.³⁶⁰ Reliability and reactivity have been approached above and in previous sections, so here we turn to representativeness and replicability.

It could be argued that there are some factors around representativeness that make the museums overly similar and potentially a problematic research arena, possibly rendering outcomes non-transferable to other heritage situations. While it should be acknowledged that qualitative studies allow for conclusions to be drawn from single case studies, there were limitations to focussing on UCM.³⁶¹ The museums share a geographical location, in a small area in the centre of what appears to be an affluent and thriving UK city.³⁶² Cambridge, however, is a fundamentally divided city, the most unequal in the UK according to a 2018 Centre for Cities report.³⁶³ Some of these factors could have been ameliorated by conducting interviews with staff at other University museums, or outside the University system. On the first point, interview subjects were chosen to include several members of staff who had recently been employed in museums outside UCM, some of which were significantly better resourced for audience evaluation. For example, C1 (Curator) compared their Cambridge role to previous experience in a large London museum:

I used to work at the [Large London Museum] where they have a whole team of people (I mean, what luxury!), who are thinking about audiences, and audience research was absolutely embedded in several of the projects I worked on... So yeah, I have worked somewhere where it was extremely integrated. And I kind of came to [this museum] going 'Yeah, we should do...' Oh, there's four of us.³⁶⁴

E1 (Curator) also contrasted an exhibition project in their previous job in a University Museum outside Cambridge, which again had more staffing support:

The one exhibition that I've created that we did evaluate, it was at the [non-Cambridge university museum]... It was an [externally] funded project across

³⁶⁰ Jack Katz, 'A Theory of Qualitative Methodology: The Social System of Analytic Fieldwork', *Méthod(e)s: African Review of Social Sciences Methodology*, 1.1–2 (2015), 131–46.

³⁶¹ Silverman, p. 218.

³⁶² Donna Ferguson, 'Beyond Cambridge's Colleges, UK's Most Unequal City Battles Poverty', *The Observer*, 12 January 2020, section UK news <<https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/jan/12/beyond-cambridge-spires-most-unequal-city-tackles-poverty>> [accessed 28 July 2024].

³⁶³ Centre for Cities, 'Cities Outlook 2018', 2018.

³⁶⁴ Appendix 3, Transcript C1.

five museums, each museum creating a different exhibition around the same object. Because we were obliged to evaluate a very specific set of criteria from the project, so we employed people to come and do it. And it was great... we haven't done it so much at Cambridge, because [the] exhibitions team has really only been me.³⁶⁵

While acknowledging the limitations of the study, I feel there is still sufficient rigour in the selection of UCM to render my research reliable. There are differences between the venues, and the city they are located in supports applicability of findings to other areas.

To determine the replicability of the Resources, they were tested in a non-university museum, with a different audience make up and non-academic staff. In 2021 I was approached by a local National Trust property who were undertaking a period of evaluation prior to a National Lottery Heritage Fund gallery redevelopment. Some of the Impact Evaluation Resources (planning framework, sample questionnaires, visitor observation documentation) were sent over to staff. They recruited volunteers specifically for the project, based on role descriptions I also provided. Ongoing concerns with COVID-19 and a distributed (elderly) group of volunteers meant that two training sessions took place online during the autumn of 2021, I led these using the Resources as the basis for the sessions. In the delivery phase, the volunteers asked over 100 people to take a questionnaire and completed a similar number of visitor observations along the visitor route in the historic property. The staff member who took on the responsibility for the evaluation project received additional training and support from me in data analysis, with her final reports shared with the funding body and the property's exhibition team. Not all the Resources worked equally well. The phrasing of one of the suggested questions did not result in the same depth of responses I had experienced with UCM visitor surveys. One of the members of the public suggested that this sort of question 'might go over better somewhere like Cambridge'. The volunteers, however, found the project both valuable and enjoyable and talked about the 'new insights' they had gained. The staff overseeing the project were also pleased with the results, suggesting that they would build exhibition evaluation into more of their projects.³⁶⁶

³⁶⁵ Appendix 3, Transcript E1.

³⁶⁶ Sarah-Jane Harknett, 'Summary of UCM/National Trust Evaluation Collaboration', 2021, unpublished internal report.

3.9 Reflexivity and reflection in autoethnography

Reflexivity and reflection are important stages in research, but with different foci. Gillie Bolton has written extensively on both, and it is to her that we will turn for some definitions. Reflection is, according to Bolton, 'a process of focussed thinking', while reflective practice is not static and navel-gazing, but purposeful, locating oneself within the structures one is in professionally.³⁶⁷ Reflexivity takes reflection a stage further, being 'self-critical reflection', or the ability to find 'strategies to question our own attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions, to strive to understand our complex roles in relation to others'.³⁶⁸ For the qualitative researcher, reflexivity is essential to maintain rigour.³⁶⁹ Having worked in museum education since 2004, both reflection and reflexivity are essential parts of my working practice. As an educator, I frequently receive feedback on my teaching. Sometimes this is a formal evaluation process, such as teacher and student surveys and questionnaires, or peer feedback. This can be an informal process as well: I can also see in front of me how engaged (or otherwise) a group is. Their verbal and non-verbal communication tells me whether the information I am conveying is hitting the target, or whether we need to move to another area of the museum or discussion. Reflecting on what we do and how we deliver it becomes engrained in the work of museum educators, and fieldwork should by necessity include reflexivity.³⁷⁰

For this DHeritage, I had to re-learn reflexivity and reflection as research methods. For the autoethnographer, reflexivity is both a core skill and an eternal struggle: 'self-knowledge', wrote Strathern, 'is bottomless'.³⁷¹ This 'self-knowledge' in autoethnography can often manifest in 'epiphanies': those 'aha' moments that come from analysing motivations and key moments that arise from being a part of the culture and community in question. Such epiphanies may come from a time 'of existential crisis that force a person to attend to and analyse lived experience'.³⁷² For the doctoral student, these moments may seem familiar; this is equally as true for the professional doctoral student, who may be researching within their own community of practice, and where autoethnography can become the 'mirror' through which the

³⁶⁷ Gillie Bolton, *Reflective Practice : Writing and Professional Development*, 3rd ed. (London: London : SAGE, 2010., 2010), p. 10-12.

³⁶⁸ 'Bolton with Delderfield: Reflective Practice | Online Resources', n.d. <<https://study.sagepub.com/education/education-all-phases/bolton-with-delderfield-reflective-practice>> [accessed 17 August 2024]; Bolton, *Reflective Practice: Writing and Professional Development*, p. 13.

³⁶⁹ Wilma J. Koopman, Christopher J. Watling, and Kori A. LaDonna, 'Autoethnography as a Strategy for Engaging in Reflexivity.', *Global Qualitative Nursing Research*, 7 (2020), p. 1.

³⁷⁰ Collins and Gallinat, 'The Ethnographic Self as Resource: An Introduction', p. 3.

³⁷¹ Strathern, 'The Limits of Auto-Anthropology', p. 27.

³⁷² Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 'Autoethnography: An Overview', p. 3.

research experience is viewed.³⁷³ For me, those epiphany/crisis moments were times of self-reflection and knowledge creation. While they may have been difficult, they pushed my research in new and interesting directions. These moments are significant to the Grounded Theorist, who, while desiring order and harmony must learn to 'live in the chaos'.³⁷⁴

An initial area of reflexivity, and another reason why I chose not to include research with museum audiences, was around public expectations of museums, particularly university museums. One theme from the staff interviews was that visitors sometimes held unrealistic expectations about what was possible in exhibitions. Perhaps visitors always hold high expectations, but this is undoubtedly highlighted in the museums of the University of Cambridge, which must seem, to the outsider, to be an apparently well-resourced and funded institution. As a research project (see Figure 3.1), in summer 2021, during the formative evaluation for the Fitzwilliam Museum's exhibition 'Black Atlantic: People, Power, Resistance', I decided to add a research question to our generic visitor survey.³⁷⁵ Having written and tested the question with a focus group, it was added to the online survey: 'do you think it is the responsibility of museums to explore the topics of colonialism, legacies of enslavement and racial inequality?'. As this was a non-standard question, we had to communicate with the Audience Agency, who we were paying to run the survey as part of our funding requirements through ACE. They advised us not to add in a free text, open-ended question, suggesting that a more appropriate method would be a separate survey focussed on this theme (for an additional cost). Based on our understanding of our audiences, the specific timing (the summer of 2021) and the subject matter, we persisted. Had we wanted to do this research just two years later, the ability to change our own ACE survey would not have been open to us (ACE evaluation requirements are explored further in Chapter 4). I was justified in pushing for the additional research. The results from the public were overwhelming: in less than six weeks I had over 30,000 words of responses from 1396 people to analyse, a far higher level of engagement than usual. The results from this one question have been used to give staff confidence in their research, and supported the creation of the final exhibition, which opened in 2023. While this was a successful approach for formative exhibition evaluation, the number of responses justified not pursuing

³⁷³ Koopman, Watling, and LaDonna, p. 2.

³⁷⁴ Massimiliano Tarozzi, 'Conclusions : Theoretical Sensitivity as a Virtue', in *What Is Grounded Theory?*, 1st edn (London: Bloomsbury ACADEMIC, 2020), pp. 141–50 (p. 142).

³⁷⁵ 'Black Atlantic: Power, People, Resistance', The Fitzwilliam Museum, n.d.
<<https://beta.fitz.ms/plan-your-visit/exhibitions/black-atlantic-power-people-resistance>> [accessed 17 August 2024].

general visitors as a research area, which could have quickly given me an overwhelming quantity of data.

As one might hope for a professional doctorate, the research period changed both me and my practice, as Ellis et al expect.³⁷⁶ In a process of self-reflection during the interview process, it became clear that this could be mutually beneficial and reflexive, for both interviewer and interviewee. One of those interviewed commented:

I think we should definitely find a way to pick up this conversation later.

Hopefully, we'll have the chance... this has really helped me think a lot about stuff... And if this would be useful for the PhD or anything else as well, can I interview you at some point? Because I think that that might work for both of us.

A1 (Curator)³⁷⁷

The power and importance of interviewing as an evaluation method was clear. I used interviewing to evaluate a project with teachers in lockdown, the data from which became part of a co-authored paper for the 2021 British Educational Research Association (BERA) conference.³⁷⁸ The extension of this was to determine whether it could be utilised to be a productive exhibition method. As outlined in Chapter 2, one of the biggest issues in museums is the widening gap between those who work in the academic realm of museology, and those who are doing the work in practice in museums. Teather suggests that part of the blame lies with the universities where museum studies courses are taught, as they are 'based on a view of knowledge that devalues practical competence and professional artistry'.³⁷⁹ The professional doctorate should be about redressing this balance, and for me, the ideal place to do this is within the boundaries of a consortium of university museums. To prove the practical relevance of my research, however, I wanted to replicate the use of the autoethnographic interview process with a larger exhibition evaluation study. In doing this, I wanted to move beyond individual to organisational reflexivity, as Lynch had in her 2011 study of museum staff. As Lynch before me, I was also searching for ways of 'supportive and collaborative exploration that helps undo assumptions towards developing mutually rewarding ways of working'.³⁸⁰ This fits within my institutional

³⁷⁶ Ellis, Adams, and Bochner, 'Autoethnography: An Overview', p. 6.

³⁷⁷ Appendix 3, Transcript C1.

³⁷⁸ Kate Noble and Sarah-Jane Harknett, 'Creative Pedagogies in the Museum: Practitioner Researcher Reflections on the Features of Creative Learning.', 2021.

³⁷⁹ J.Lynne Teather, 'Museum Studies: Reflecting on Reflective Practice', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 10.4 (1991), pp. 403–17 (p. 404).

³⁸⁰ Lynch, 'Custom-Made Reflective Practice: Can Museums Realise Their Capabilities in Helping Others Realise Theirs?', p. 444.

area: the 'self' in 'self-knowledge' has a wider sphere than just the individual, Strathern asserts, constructed knowledge is constructed within the community.³⁸¹

During the research period, UCM was in preparation for a two-year series of events, later branded 'Power and Memory'.³⁸² These were partly our public response to our commitment to 'exploring the legacies of empire and enslavement', following the University of Cambridge enquiry into its historical links into enslavement, as well as responding to the results of the visitor survey outlined above.³⁸³ The culmination of the 'Power and Memory' series was to be an exhibition at the Fitzwilliam Museum, with contributions from the other UCMs.³⁸⁴ In preparation, I created a mixed methods evaluation framework, working with audiences, community partners, the project team and the wider staff body. For the latter, we were keen to make sure staff members were prepared for any public backlash and questioning that might happen as part of the exhibition process, as well as identifying training needs and responding to issues as they arose. The framework brought together my academic research and the work on the IER, pragmatically adapting these to a new major project. I proposed a longitudinal study of staff interviews taking place regularly from autumn 2021 through to summer 2023 (after the exhibition had opened). Ethical approval for this study was gained using the Fitzwilliam Museum's process. A similar sampling strategy to that of the research interviews was used, with an element of snowball sampling to ensure the reach was slightly wider. 15 people were selected from across the collections and the central UCM team, each museum was represented, with participants from all roles. There were 4 rounds of interviews over nearly 3 years. The participants remain anonymous, to avoid any suggestion that they would receive any 'symbolic capital... merely by being seen as a confidants of the anthropologist'.³⁸⁵ Anonymous interviews allow the opportunity to challenge what Lynch identifies as the 'consensus culture' that can become commonplace in museums.³⁸⁶ The participants were reassured at each interview that the results would not be linked back to them individually or their museum. One of the people being interviewed in the Power and

³⁸¹ Strathern, 'The Limits of Auto-Anthropology', p. 27.

³⁸² 'Power & Memory', University of Cambridge Museums', n.d.

<<https://www.museums.cam.ac.uk/theme/power-and-memory>> [accessed 2 January 2023].

³⁸³ 'Exploring the Legacies of Empire and Enslavement' Cambridge University Museums, 22 July 2022 <<https://www.museums.cam.ac.uk/blog/2020/07/22/exploring-the-legacies-of-empire-and-enslavement/>> [accessed 2 January 2023]; 'Legacies of Enslavement: Report and Response', University of Cambridge, 2022 <<https://www.cam.ac.uk/stories/legacies-of-enslavement-inquiry>> [accessed 2 January 2023].

³⁸⁴ 'Exploring the Legacies of Empire and Enslavement – Cambridge University Museums'.

³⁸⁵ Collins and Gallinat, *The Ethnographic Self as Resource: An Introduction*, p. 16.

³⁸⁶ Lynch, 'Custom-Made Reflective Practice: Can Museums Realise Their Capabilities in Helping Others Realise Theirs?', p. 453.

Memory study was also part of the original cohort of interviewees for the DHeritage research. The results from the exhibition interviews were used to complement the quantitative results of an annual staff survey (which specifically asked questions around the themes and concerns of the legacies of enslavement and empire project). Results showed that staff appreciated being part of the interview process, people were keen to work across the consortium and to share stories, but they were concerned about how the work could continue at the end of the exhibition programme.³⁸⁷ Through asking specific questions to the interviewees, the impact of training was determined, and individual stories were drawn out which would never have been seen as important enough for a project report, but which showed the change in staff views across a longer period of time.³⁸⁸ Such positive outcomes from the 'Power and Memory' evaluation demonstrated the impact of carefully planned and executed evaluation, while still taking a pragmatic approach. These outcomes fed directly into the Impact Evaluation Resources which were in development at the same time.

The successful implementation of the mixed method framework for Power and Memory demonstrated the practical impact of strong evaluation, but the results required the input of an evaluator. It was particularly during this time that the Impact Evaluation Resources coalesced. The success of interviews and personal reflection led me to conclude that specific material should be available for both methods, relating them specifically to exhibition evaluation. This developed from a comment from several staff members, but Director D1 was the clearest that they 'encourage people to be thinking about that self-reflective and reflective' evaluation.³⁸⁹ They continued:

What I have tried to do with the new strategic approach to what the museum does is encourage us all to be more reflective and evidence-based... How did that exhibition work for the public? But also, how did it work for us? And how did it work for the researchers that were the co-curators of it? So that sort of culture, I'm trying to ease that in.³⁹⁰

Reflection on their work was clearly a vital part of the exhibition evaluation process, but there was little available to support this work. The Reflective Evaluation (with staff) Resource was written in direct response to this need. Additionally, the annual staff survey, with questions complementing and supporting conclusions from the

³⁸⁷ Sarah-Jane Harknett, 'What Will the Legacy of Legacies Be?', unpublished internal presentation, 2024.

³⁸⁸ Sarah-Jane Harknett, 'Long Summary for CMSG', unpublished internal report, 2022.

³⁸⁹ Appendix 3, Transcript D1.

³⁹⁰ Appendix 3, Transcript D1.

interviews, demonstrated the desire for content on writing clear questions that illicit suitable responses from a variety of audiences. In my teaching with students and evaluation training with academics, this had been highlighted as a need, often through being given sample questionnaires to comment on. As the Power and Memory research question in the public survey elicited such deep and useful responses, collating the skill of writing questions into a specific resource seemed particularly pertinent. In this way, the IER continued to develop through the research process.

3.10 Conclusion

A museum visit is a once only moment. The exact combination of visit type, exhibition, visitor attitude, and the gallery context is not replicable. A constructivist approach acknowledges that the visitor is in the museum during a specific point in their life and learning journey. There has been little research into staff views on evaluation; they are usually enacting evaluation requirements but are rarely asked their views on the process. By using a qualitative research approach, through interviews and autoethnography, I have been able to collect data 'that is simply unattainable' with other methods.³⁹¹ By applying this data in an iterative way to the Impact Evaluation Resources ensures that these are practical, robust resources that take us closer to improving exhibition evaluation, particularly in permanent displays.

Through this chapter I have traced the journey from methodological theory into a practical example within my sphere of work. Beginning my doctorate in 2019 meant that I was planning my data collection phase at a critical moment, and the pandemic shaped my thinking in fundamental ways I did not fully grasp at the time. Reflecting on this process in an autoethnographic manner has helped me to recognise that my altered plans ultimately led me to answer my research questions in a more effective manner. Through exploring ethical issues in both autoethnography and interviewing colleagues I have positioned the results as robust and representative, influencing the practical Resources throughout their development. The methods I selected for my research were appropriate ways to achieve my objectives around determining the improvements that are needed to increase the applicability of evaluation to permanent displays, and to gain an understanding of how evaluation is taking place in practice. To further respond to these research question, and to explore the practical pressures on exhibition evaluation, I needed to investigate the requirements and demands that funding bodies are applying; these will be studied in Chapter 4.

³⁹¹ Vicki Smith, p. 229.

Chapter 4

Government demands, funder requirements: everything but the displays

4.1 Introduction

The purpose of evaluation is to critically reflect on what we do, in a manner that enables change; it should record and measure transformation and influence future plans. Museums are rarely able to achieve this ideal, especially around permanent exhibitions. In addition to the academic literature examined in Chapter 2, this chapter further explores the underlying reasons for not achieving this ideal: the evolving demands of funders. The nature of museum evaluation in the UK has been profoundly shaped by these funder demands and priorities, and by the basic standards that govern the sector. As the government contributes the most financially to museums, it is changes here that have had the greatest effect on evaluation in the twenty-first century. For the first decade, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) was responsible for culture and heritage in England, with responsibility moving to the Arts Council England (ACE) in 2011. ACE was in operation prior to this time, but was primarily concerned with fine art, and taking on the broad spectrum of museums has been challenging on both sides. Shifting governmental priorities, changing senior staff, and financial crises have contributed significantly to the way museums have been asked to reflect on their work. The evaluation requirements of governmental bodies, including through the UK minimum standards of Accreditation, has considered a multitude of aspects of heritage work, but not the gallery spaces: the area that is unique to museums among cultural sector organisations.

Unless it can be integrated into everyday practice, evaluation can become side-lined, nothing more than a tick box exercise for staff reporting to funding bodies.

Summative museum evaluation research has previously been accused of having 'little impact and [being] largely... ineffectual' on professional practice.³⁹² For evaluation to impact the heritage industry more effectively, particularly on permanent displays, this needs to be seen as a priority at the funder level. Requirements for evaluation need to be rigorous as well as practical, not only looking to record success, but identify areas where failure, learning or change has occurred, for both visitors and staff. Evaluation needs to move beyond a segmentation or a visitor

³⁹² Davies, Maurice and Heath, Christian. p3

demographic tool and look at what the visitors are looking at: the displays. Most requirements from funders are much more basic: are they getting value from their investment? This chapter responds to my research aims by examining the further factors influencing UK museum evaluation and begins to uncover improvements that are therefore needed to evaluate permanent displays. This provides vital context against which the Impact Evaluation Resources were developed, further identifying the profound gap in knowledge and skill to carry out exhibition evaluation.

4.2 Evaluation in UK museums: industry minimum standards

The Accreditation scheme, overseen by the Arts Council, is the 'UK industry standard for museums and galleries'.³⁹³ Gaining Accredited status demonstrates that museums have structures and systems in place for management and governance, enables them to apply to various funding strands and imbues an air of professionalism. Known as 'museum registration' from 1988 to 2004, the Accreditation scheme was amended in 2011 and, most recently, 2018. After an initial application, museums are assessed and deemed to pass or fail. If they pass, museums must complete an Accreditation return every five years to ensure they keep their status. The 2018 Accreditation standard breaks the requirements down into three sections: the health of the organisation, collections, and visitors. Each of these sections has three further subcategories; these are again divided, giving a total of 21 subsections in the standards. According to the standards themselves, gaining Accredited status 'tells everyone involved with a museum that they're doing the right things to help people to engage with collections'.³⁹⁴ This should include visitors, as a group who are 'involved with' a museum.

There are 21 Accreditation Standards of which only one (8.2) directly mentions feedback from the public. In all other requirements the communication is from the museum. To meet the standards in Section 8, to 'understand and develop your audiences', museums need 'to use information to assess users' needs', with further instruction that the venue 'should use feedback from users to inform the development of the museum and its programmes'.³⁹⁵ The associated Guidance Notes, which expand on the standards and help museums prepare their application for Accredited status, explain the evidence required to fulfil standard 8.2. This should include processes that 'respond to user and non-user comments in the short and longer-term, analysing and evaluating these to plan improvements to your services'

³⁹³ 'UK Museum Accreditation Scheme'.

³⁹⁴ Accreditation Scheme for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom, 'Accreditation Scheme for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom: Accreditation Standard', 2018, p. 2.

³⁹⁵ Accreditation Standard, p. 10.

and that museums should use ‘a range of analysis tools’ providing both quantitative and qualitative data.³⁹⁶ Standard 8.2 superficially appears simple. In practice and with the addition of the guidance notes, it is more onerous. It includes a somewhat vague two-phase timeline (‘short’ and ‘longer-term’): this is not for collecting data, rather this is the timescale that museums must respond within. Accreditation requires museums to have a strategy to answer the immediate issues that visitors comment on, as well as committing to change in the future. The guidance requires the collection of both qualitative and quantitative feedback and all measures should be applied to both visitors and non-visitors. Standard 8.2 does not give a purpose for collecting these ‘comments’, but presumably they are to be used when working on Standard 8.3, which requires museums ‘to have a plan for developing your range of users’, based on data that has been collected.³⁹⁷ The Guidance Notes suggest that the audience plan developed in Standard 8.3 will ‘broaden the range of users and increase numbers where practical’.³⁹⁸

One other section of Accreditation suggests the use of visitor surveys and questionnaires in the Guidance Notes: standard 8.1 where museums are expected ‘to understand who uses your museum, and who doesn’t’.³⁹⁹ The type of survey needed to meet this could be solely collecting demographic information, and no qualitative data is requested in this standard. Section 9 of Accreditation requires museums to ‘engage with your users and improve their experiences’, including learning programmes and exhibitions.⁴⁰⁰ This requirement has no guidance or suggestion for how to ask visitors (or non-visitors) for their responses. Accreditation promotes the use of evaluation to (potentially) increase visitor numbers or to attract different audiences but is only used with audiences, not with staff. Data and comments are not being used to improve museums and what they do, rather to make sure museums work with an ever-increasing number of people. There is no recommendation to evaluate displays, either permanent or temporary, and Accreditation gives little practical guidance on what to collect or how often. Broad guidelines are helpful, especially given the range of museums Accreditation covers, but these requirements are unconstructive. The restrictive view of evaluation in the UK industry standard reduces the potential impact of all museum work, including exhibitions and displays.

³⁹⁶ Accreditation Scheme for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom, ‘Accreditation Guidance: Supporting Guidance for Accreditation Standard November 2018’, 2019, pp. 69-70.;

³⁹⁷ Accreditation Standard, p. 10.

³⁹⁸ Accreditation Guidance, p. 71.

³⁹⁹ Accreditation Standard, p. 67.

⁴⁰⁰ Accreditation Standard, p. 11.

Various sector organisations offer support to museums going through the Accreditation process. One of these is Collections Trust, who produce the Spectrum collections management procedures which are written into Accreditation standards. Collections Trust receives funding from the Arts Council as an IPSO (Investment Principles Support Organisation). From 2023 to 2026, they were awarded over £200,000 per year for their work.⁴⁰¹ The resources section of their website contains links for each of the Accreditation standards, with extensive help and support given for each subsection. Collections Trust resources are, somewhat naturally given the name, skewed towards help with collections areas of Accreditation. For section 8.2, assessing user needs, only one piece of support is included: a link to a resource to help museums with search engine optimisation.⁴⁰² This is not directly requested in the Accreditation process, and would arguably be better suited to 8.3, developing the museum user base. Collections Trust provides no further support with qualitative or quantitative analysis or the range of tools that could be used to achieve this. As there is an overlap between Accreditation Standard 8.2 (collecting information) and 8.3 (developing audiences for the future), Collections Trust resources could apply to both. There are seven resources listed on the Collections Trust webpage for 8.3.⁴⁰³ Of these, two are dead links (one to Inspiring Learning for All, which was quietly dropped by the Arts Council sometime in 2022, see below) and three are for The Audience Agency, who lost their Arts Council support in 2023. The limited help provided by Collections Trust belies the fact that additional resources are available to assist museums in their requirement to fulfil the evaluation aspects of Accreditation. These have been formulated over several years but are dispersed in various places on the internet. The Impact Evaluation Resources were developed in response to this poor level of sector support.

4.3 Requirements from funding bodies

Many museums make some income through admission costs, donations, or other charged activity, but generally each is funded by a variety of means, depending on their type. Local authority-dependent museums, for example, will receive some of their budget from the council they are situated within. As 'the biggest public investor in arts and culture in England', local government supports museums in diverse

⁴⁰¹ Arts Council England, 'Investment Programme 2023-2026 Data', 2023.

⁴⁰² 'Assessing User Needs', Collections Trust, n.d. <<https://collectionstrust.org.uk/accreditation/users-and-their-experiences/understanding-and-developing-audiences/assessing-user-needs/>> [accessed 30 July 2023].

⁴⁰³ 'User Development Plan', Collections Trust, n.d. <<https://collectionstrust.org.uk/accreditation/users-and-their-experiences/understanding-and-developing-audiences/user-development-plan/>> [accessed 30 July 2023].

ways.⁴⁰⁴ National museums receive their core funding from the government of each nation; university museums from their governing body.⁴⁰⁵ For activities and projects beyond the quotidian, museums often rely on applying for funding from a small group of bodies within the UK. These external funders will require museums to evaluate what they do and who they do it for, to varying degrees, usually in response to the sum of money being spent. These requests are in addition to the industry minimum standard of Accreditation. Each funding body has specific evaluation requirements, often relying on what visitors, trustees or the wider public value about the experience or heritage. As detailed in Chapter 2, the concept of ‘value’ of culture and heritage is not new. Sociologist Pierre Bourdieu developed the concept of ‘cultural capital’ in the 1970s, for Bourdieu this meant having ‘cultural competence’ and a ‘familiarity with dominant culture’, which was passed down with families.⁴⁰⁶ This influence remains an underlying current in the heritage world, where the twenty-first century has seen museums propelled into a role as catalysts for social change. In May 2000 the government published their Policy Guidance on Social Inclusion, which stated that part of the role of museums was

generating social change by engaging with and empowering people to determine their place in the world, educate themselves to achieve their own potential, play a full part in society, and contribute to transforming it in the future.⁴⁰⁷

This guidance simultaneously acknowledged that this was for a narrow section of UK society, with polls in the same year showing that social classes D and E were less frequent visitors to museums.⁴⁰⁸

Practically, measuring museums as social catalysts has increasingly translated into the evaluation tools that funders have recommended or insisted upon. In some cases (such as the Impact and Insight Toolkit, see below), this is seen in a movement towards increasingly reductive and didactic evaluation tools that result in museum experiences being allocated numerical values. Sometimes this has involved being explicit about measuring Bourdieu’s concept of ‘value’, for example the 2016

⁴⁰⁴ Arts Council England, ‘Great Art and Culture for Everyone. 10 Year Strategic Framework’ (Arts Council England, 2013), p. 15.

⁴⁰⁵ ‘FAQs’, Museums Association, n.d. <<https://www.museumsassociation.org/about/faqs/>> [accessed 27 March 2022].

⁴⁰⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, ‘Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction’, in R. Brown (Ed.), *Knowledge, Education, and Cultural Change* (London: Tavistock Publications), pp. 71–112 (p. 80).

⁴⁰⁷ Department for Culture, Media and Sport, *Centres for Social Change: Museums, Galleries and Archives for All* (London, May 2000), p. 8.

⁴⁰⁸ DCMS, *Centres for Social Change*, p.8.

AHRC publication *Understanding the Value of Arts & Culture*.⁴⁰⁹ Occasionally this is translated into financial sums.⁴¹⁰ The basic idea of ‘cultural value’ in the UK can be traced through the last twenty years, most particularly in governmental funding bodies. Value is not the only measure government has used, but as the main funding body of museums in the UK, their requirements and standards shape the industry. Constant changes in government departments, policy and personnel have had a profound influence in evaluation for the museum sector.

Government Bodies from 2000

While some authors erroneously assert that ‘the vast majority of heritage properties are in private hands and are not funded by the government’, a great deal of museum funding can be attributed to government spending on culture and heritage, often through local councils.⁴¹¹ This is not unconditional giving: ‘cultural heritage institutions are increasingly seen as instruments for government policies... and required to present evidence of their performance’.⁴¹² The 2022 Commission on Culture and Local Government estimated the annual council contribution to culture as £1 billion.⁴¹³ Primarily this funding has been channelled through the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). As the UK government department responsible for ‘our cultural and artistic heritage’, DCMS was founded in 1992 as the Department for National Heritage, becoming the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in 1997.⁴¹⁴ Digital was added to their remit and departmental name for six years from 2017 until governmental changes in February 2023, when digital moved to the newly created Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.⁴¹⁵ In the

⁴⁰⁹ Geoffrey Crossick and Patrycja Kaszynska, ‘Understanding the Value of Arts & Culture: The AHRC Cultural Value Project’ (Arts and Humanities Research Council, 2016).

⁴¹⁰ See, for example, Simetrica Jacobs and Creative Industries Policy Evidence Centre, *Measuring the Economic Value of Museums and Galleries Digital Offers: An Exploratory Use of Contingent Valuation Techniques*, 28 June 2023 <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/measuring-the-value-of-the-digital-offer-of-galleries-and-museums/measuring-the-economic-value-of-museums-and-galleries-digital-offers-an-exploratory-use-of-contingent-valuation-techniques>> [accessed 14 October 2023].

⁴¹¹ Mark Webb, ‘Can Training Increase the Confidence of Staff and Volunteers in a Sector with Inexperienced Fundraisers? Lessons Learnt from the “Giving to Heritage” Programme’, *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, 22.4 (2017).

⁴¹² Stephen Brown, ‘A Critique of Generic Learning Outcomes’, *Journal of Learning Design*, 2.2 (2007), pp. 22–30.

⁴¹³ ‘Commission on Culture and Local Government’ Local Government Association, n.d. <<https://www.local.gov.uk/topics/culture-tourism-leisure-and-sport/commission-culture-and-local-government>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

⁴¹⁴ ‘About Us’, DCMS, n.d. <<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/department-for-digital-culture-media-sport/about>> [accessed 13 March 2022].

⁴¹⁵ ‘25 Years of DCMS’, Civil Service Blogs, 13 July 2017 <<https://civilservice.blog.gov.uk/2017/07/13/25-years-of-dcms/>> [accessed 13 March 2022]; ‘Making Government Deliver for the British People (HTML)’ GOV.UK, n.d. <<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/making-government-deliver-for-the-british-people/making-government-deliver-for-the-british-people-html>> [accessed 4 June 2023].

seven years from 2017 to 2024, nine governmental ministers had responsibility for the department: seven were Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport between 2017 and 2023 (for an average of 9.5 months each), two individuals were the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport from 2023 to 2024. Since January 2021, DCMS have claimed to use evaluation in their 'approach to policy and decision making' through 'a culture and heritage capital approach', thus reinstating financial cultural value.⁴¹⁶ Government money is distributed through DCMS and into other cultural bodies, all of which have impacted on museum evaluation.

Museums Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) and the Generic Outcomes (GLOs and SLOs)

In 2000, the Museums, Libraries and Archives Council (MLA) replaced the Museums and Galleries Commission as the governmental 'strategic body' for the sector. They were a 'non-departmental public body', receiving their funding from DCMS.⁴¹⁷ One of their biggest contributions to sector evaluation was the production of the 'Inspiring Learning for All' (ILFA) framework, which promoted the use of a set of Generic Learning Outcomes (GLOs). These were developed following a 'Learning Impact Research Project' by the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries (RCMG) at the University of Leicester; GLOs were piloted in fifteen venues in 2002 to 2003. Training in using ILFA and GLOs was promoted via the Group for Education in Museums (GEM) email list from 2004, although the Arts Council assert that the national framework was launched in 2008. ILFA and GLOs took a broad definition of 'learning', moving beyond 'formal educational provision' to 'a lifelong process of making meaning'.⁴¹⁸ On an MLA webpage entitled 'What's new and exciting about this?', GLOs were advocated as a tool that would help to:

- Analyse our work and tell stories about its impact on individuals and communities
- Talk to colleagues, funders, evaluators and policymakers about learning in a language that they share and understand
- Design better learning experiences and spaces that inspire people to learn
- Reinforce for users the significance of their learning experiences⁴¹⁹

⁴¹⁶ 'Culture and Heritage Capital Portal', GOV.UK, n.d. <<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/culture-and-heritage-capital-portal>> [accessed 20 March 2022].

⁴¹⁷ 'About Us', MLA Inspiring Learning for All, n.d. <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20080727000510mp_/http://www.mla.gov.uk/about-us/> [accessed 13 March 2022].

⁴¹⁸ Hooper-Greenhill and others, 'Measuring the Outcomes and Impact of Learning', p. 10.

⁴¹⁹ 'A New Research Tool to Measure Learning', Inspiring Learning for All, n.d. <<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20081203181032/http://www.inspiringlearning.gov>>

This sense of supportive storytelling told through GLOs is demonstrated by a download on the same page, called 'Jim's story'. This case study concludes with a final call towards big data:

Imagine how powerful our evidence and the supporting messages will be when we can pull together and present the experience and evidence from many different users using the GLOs.⁴²⁰

The GLOs were intended to be practical, to demonstrate that 'learning' was inherent in more aspects of museum work than being the sole remit of education staff. The website included checklists to 'assess your practice' to promote discussion and 'raise awareness of everyone's role in supporting learning': this was now the responsibility of all staff and the GLOs idealise learning as being fully embedded throughout an organisation.⁴²¹

There were five top level Learning Outcomes: knowledge and understanding; skills; attitudes and values; enjoyment, inspiration, and creativity; activity, behaviour, and progression.⁴²² Each GLO has a minimum of five sub-categories. For example, museum activity that promoted learning through the Knowledge and Understanding GLO could be further allocated to one of the six sub-categories: knowing what or about something; learning facts or information; making sense of something; deepening understanding; how arts and cultural organisations operate; making links and relationships between things.⁴²³ It was suggested that GLOs could be used to code a variety of evaluation methods, including visitor comments, questionnaires, interviews, or survey responses. The online resources on the ILFA website provided a coherent set of training documents, including 'research tools', sample coding exercises, documents revealing the 'current thinking' on learning styles and an opportunity to work out your own learning preferences. For the evaluation of temporary and permanent displays, the GLOs provided some benefit; the learning

[.uk/measuring_learning/learning_outcomes/whats_new_about_this/default.aspx](http://www.inspiringlearning.gov.uk/measuring_learning/learning_outcomes/whats_new_about_this/default.aspx) [accessed 13 March 2022].

⁴²⁰ 'Jim's Story', MLA Inspiring Learning for All, n.d.

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20081203181032/http://www.inspiringlearning.gov.uk/measuring_learning/learning_outcomes/whats_new_about_this/default.aspx> [accessed 13 March 2022].

⁴²¹ 'Assess Your Practice', MLA Inspiring Learning for All, n.d.

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20081203180744/http://www.inspiringlearning.gov.uk/use_the_framework/inspiring_learning/inspiring_learning2/default.aspx> [accessed 27 March 2022].

⁴²² 'What Are the Generic Learning Outcomes?', MLA Inspiring Learning for All, n.d.

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20081203181028/http://www.inspiringlearning.gov.uk/measuring_learning/learning_outcomes/why_do_we_need_glos/_217/default.aspx> [accessed 13 March 2022].

⁴²³ 'Generic Learning Outcomes' Arts Council England, n.d.

<<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/measuring-outcomes/generic-learning-outcomes#section-4>> [accessed 13 March 2022].

outcomes from exhibitions could come under multiple GLOs, depending on visitor responses. Traditionally, exhibitions have been seen as a method of transmitting information from the museum to the visitor, thus fitting squarely with the ‘knowledge and understanding’ GLO, but museums would hope there would be some level of enjoyment, inspiration and creativity. Some displays are created to instigate a change in attitudes, or to instil in the visitor some sense of things they may do or change in response to the new information they have. The only GLO that a more traditional exhibition may not increase is skills-based learning, unless there is a particularly complex interactive. Interestingly, the GLOs are not limited to positive encounters, with two explicitly negative statements being measures under the ‘attitudes and values’ GLO: empathy, capacity for tolerance (or lack of these); negative attitudes in relation to an experience.⁴²⁴

The GLOs have been critiqued, for example by Professor Stephen Brown of De Montfort University, as being ‘subjective... not objective measure of performance’, that they don’t ‘measure learning directly’ focussing on ‘indirect factors associated with learning’.⁴²⁵ Much of the criticism from Brown is somewhat misplaced; the GLOs are, as the name suggests, designed to be concentrating attention on outcomes, often those that take place during the immediacy of a museum visit, rather than thinking longer-term or measuring against Brown’s objective ‘performance’ measures. Most museum evaluation that is designed to measure learning is summative, taking place at the end of a visit, event, or experience. Additionally, museums do not set learning objectives for most of their public activity, such as informal events or displays, so it is unclear what Brown thinks museums will measure against. Despite the critique, the ubiquity, longevity, and legacy of the GLOs is reflected in many places, including in archived threads on the Group for Education in Museums JISCMail list. This highly active discussion email list has archives back to 1998 and over 2000 subscribers. It reflects and records changes in thinking and practice as they happen. Every few years conversation turns to the matter of who continues to use GLOs (for example in 2013, 2015, and 2018). In 2013, Jo Reilly, the Head of Participation and Learning at the (then) Heritage Lottery Fund recognised on the JISCMail the impact of ILFA on the ‘outcomes framework’

⁴²⁴ ‘More About the Generic Learning Outcomes’, Arts Council England, n.d.
<<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/resources#section-3>> [accessed 3 April 2022].

⁴²⁵ Stephen Brown, ‘A Critique of Generic Learning Outcomes’, *Journal of Learning Design*, 2.2 (2007), pp. 22–30 (p. 26).

for HLF.⁴²⁶ Evaluation training that included GLOs continued to be offered on the GEM list up to 2019.⁴²⁷

For many people working in museums, the more fluid and broader view of ‘learning’ taken by the GLOs was a new concept and allowed them to define a wide range of work as ‘learning’. This is not entirely unproblematic, as even with this wider understanding the GLOs imply the main intention of museums is to be environments in which ‘learning’ takes place for members of the public: a didactic view of museums. The flexible nature of the ILFA framework and the GLOs allowed broad application in museum work, including to exhibitions and displays as well as informal learning events. They were written into exhibition guidelines such as those produced by Glasgow Museums (undated, but pre-2011).⁴²⁸ In the MAA, I wrote a general visitor survey in 2004, distributed in the autumn of that year, with 446 responses. This survey was undertaken because of the requirements of a short-term project, but questions were not tied to a specific event or temporary display, so visitor responses were centred around the permanent collections. The survey had three free text questions: ‘what did you particularly enjoy about your visit today?’, ‘did you learn anything new?’ and ‘Any further comments?’.⁴²⁹ The question about learning was asked to directly respond to the ILFA framework. All free text comments were analysed and reported according to their GLO, with an entire report dedicated to these outcomes.⁴³⁰ Learning and understanding was the most frequently coded GLO (170 comments), followed by enjoyment, inspiration and creativity. There was no evidence of skills-based learning. I continued to ask questions to generate comments to code to GLOs up until 2010 (when the Museum closed for 18 months for a development project), mainly in surveys related to temporary exhibitions and events. The flexibility of the GLOs and their broad evaluation applications was reflected in their longevity.

Between the pilot phase and widespread launch of the GLOs, a 2005 review instigated by MLA (and undertaken by Burns Owens Partnership) looked specifically

⁴²⁶ Jo Reilly, ‘Re: Generic Learning Outcomes’, GEM JISCMail, 9 October 2013 <<https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/wa-jisc.exe?A2=ind1310&L=GEM&O=D&P=46226>> [accessed 3 April 2022].

⁴²⁷ Jane Avison, ‘Free Evaluation Training in Hull 18th November 2019’ GEM JISCMail, 13 November 2019 <<https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/wa-jisc.exe?A2=ind1911&L=GEM&P=R382562>> [accessed 2 April 2022].

⁴²⁸ Glasgow Museums, ‘Glasgow Museums Display Guidelines: A Practical Guide for Exhibitions’, No Date.

⁴²⁹ Sarah-Jane Harknett, ‘Survey Results - September 2004’, unpublished internal document, 2004.

⁴³⁰ Sarah-Jane Harknett, ‘Visitor Survey Autumn 2004 Inspiring Learning for All Generic Learning Outcomes for Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology’, unpublished internal document, 2004.

at social policy and museums. One of the report's recommendations was to 'develop a generic social outcomes model', comparable to the GLOs, as the latter provided 'a model of how to introduce more rigour and standardisation into the development of an evidence base'.⁴³¹ The GSOs came into more widespread use from 2008, with the publication of the framework and an associated 'GSO Indicator Bank'. There were three top level GSOs: stronger and safer communities; strengthening public life; health and well-being.⁴³² Each of these has either four or five subsections, which include statements such as 'supporting cultural diversity and identity' and 'tackling the fear of crime and anti-social behaviour' under GSO1 and 'enabling community empowerment through the awareness of rights, benefits, and external services' for GSO3. The intention of GSOs was to move from measuring learning in museums, libraries and archives, to measuring the social impact of that learning: the difference between 'learning to use email' and 'using e-mail to stay in touch with family and friends' as the given example expands.⁴³³ Explicit within their formation was the intention for the framework to demonstrate 'how the sector delivers against key policy priorities', as the GSOs were 'informed by the idea of social capital', and that they were more closely aligned to local government outcomes.⁴³⁴

GSOs were not well-adapted to use with evaluation of exhibitions and displays, the MLA acknowledged that this is not the primary purpose of the framework:

It is harder to use the framework with self-directed use (like dropping into a museum or borrowing a library book), than with more 'facilitated' activities. So, looking at the impact of this kind of more 'casual' usage would be relatively ambitious and might not be the best starting point for using the framework.⁴³⁵

Perhaps because of their narrow focus and limitations on their use, GSOs did not have the same impact on the sector as GLOs. This could be due to their closer ties to government policy which, as reflected in the ministerial changes outlined above, has changed multiple times since 2008. In 2013, the Arts Council were still talking about the 'ambition to increase and demonstrate' the social impact of museums, but with no indication of how this might be undertaken, and no mention of the GSOs.⁴³⁶ It is hard to find any evidence of the GSOs being used in any exhibition evaluation. I

⁴³¹ Burns Owens Partnership, 'New Directions in Social Policy: Developing the Evidence Base for Museums, Libraries and Archives in England' (Museums, Libraries and Archives Council, 2005), p. 70.

⁴³² Burns Owens Partnership and MLA.

⁴³³ 'Generic Social Outcomes: An Introduction', MLA, n.d.

<https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20081007154359/http://www.mla.gov.uk/policy/Communities/gso_intro> [accessed 2 April 2022].

⁴³⁴ MLA, 'Generic Social Outcomes'.

⁴³⁵ MLA, 'Generic Social Outcomes'.

⁴³⁶ Arts Council England, 'Great Art and Culture for Everyone. 10 Year Strategic Framework', p. 23.

have never used or been asked to use the GSOs to evaluate any of our exhibitions, events, or wellbeing activities.

GLOs and GSOs: 2014 to 2022

Following the move of the ILFA framework and the GSOs and GLOs to Arts Council England (ACE), in 2014 there was a 'refresh' of the ILFA framework, accessible on the Arts Council website until 2022. Described as 'an improvement framework for the arts and culture sector', there were some changes and updates.⁴³⁷ Most significant to GSOs were amendments attributed to 'the changing nature of specific government policies': unsurprising given how closely tied these were to 'key policy priorities' and 'local government outcomes'.⁴³⁸ Case studies were still present, but rather than the previous friendly sounding 'Jim's story', the practical examples are instead framed around their organisation or type of evaluation.⁴³⁹ The refresh of GLOs revealed a perhaps more surprising change, specifically around the language used to talk about outcomes. ILFA was now defined as a tool that can support the organisation to:

- assess its strengths and plan improvements
- provide evidence of the impact of activities through the GLOs & GSOs
- improve strategic and operational performance
- identify best practice
- demonstrate impact.⁴⁴⁰

A comparison of the aims of MLA GLOs to the ACE refresh show that they do not directly map onto each other. The ACE vision for ILFA had some subtle but important shifts in language, moving to an evidence-based cultural value model. MLA uses the inclusive 'us' where ACE talked throughout about 'your organisation'; language shifts from 'design better learning experiences' (MLA) to 'improve your... operational performance' (ACE); from 'tell stories' (MLA) to 'provide evidence' and 'demonstrate' impact (ACE). Perhaps the biggest shift was that the Arts Council aims had no mention of benefit to the learners or participants in the activity, with the focus moved to the organisation, 'best practice', and impact. The original intention of the ILFA framework, as set out in the 2003 RCMG paper, was to acknowledge 'learner-centred processes', with the outcomes to be 'understood in relation to individuals'.⁴⁴¹ This aim was encapsulated in the original ILFA framework, where it suggested that it

⁴³⁷ 'About ILFA | Arts Council England'.

⁴³⁸ 'About ILFA | Arts Council England'.

⁴³⁹ 'Case Studies', Arts Council England, n.d. <<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/case-studies-0#section-1>> [accessed 13 March 2022].

⁴⁴⁰ 'Inspiring Learning for All' Arts Council England, n.d. <<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/inspiring-learning-all-home-page>> [accessed 13 March 2022].

⁴⁴¹ Hooper-Greenhill, 'Measuring the Outcomes and Impact of Learning in Museums, Archives and Libraries', p. 9, 11.

could ‘reinforce for users the significance of their learning experiences’.⁴⁴² The learner, audience or visitor was conspicuously missing from the ACE aims, with evidence being used to demonstrate proof of value. At some point in late 2022, all pages and references to both GLOs and GSOs were removed from the Arts Council website.⁴⁴³ The Inspiring Learning For All website no longer exists. There appear to have been no announcements or justifications for the withdrawal of support for GLOs and GSOs. This has possibly been triggered by transitioning between the Arts Council’s strategic frameworks, the most recent of which was published in 2020, but all generic outcomes have been thoroughly erased from the internet, with no suggested replacement. For all their faults and limitations, the GLOs had an enormous impact on museum evaluation for at least 14 years, including on displays and exhibitions, both permanent and temporary. Yet again, the lack of commitment, understanding and interest from a funding organisation has negatively impacted both the sector and its staff.

Arts Council England (ACE): 2012 onwards. From ‘Great Art and Culture’ to ‘Let’s Create’

The Museums Libraries and Archives Council was disbanded in 2012, with Arts Council England (ACE) taking over some of the work of the MLA from October 2011. ACE is an ‘executive non-departmental public body’, in receipt of funding through DCMS. The withdrawal of ILFA noted above may be related to the changeover between the 10-year frameworks produced by the Arts Council: Great Art and Culture for Everyone (GACE; 2010-2020) and Let’s Create (2020-2030). GACE was published in 2013, three years into the framework, following the addition of the museums and libraries to the Arts Council portfolio in 2011. The framework was underpinned by three goals: for arts and culture to ‘thrive and be excellent’, for that to be delivered to as wide an audience as possible, and with a particular focus on children and young people.⁴⁴⁴ This focus on excellence in the framework is problematic. Even GACE remarks that ‘excellence is difficult to define’, and there is an acknowledgement that it will therefore be difficult to measure.⁴⁴⁵ The foundations are laid in GACE for ‘a set of national quality measures’ to longitudinally measure ‘quality of engagement and experience’.⁴⁴⁶ This became the £7.5 million Audience Focus funding and ultimately contributed to Audience Finder (explored further

⁴⁴² ‘A New Research Tool to Measure Learning’.

⁴⁴³ I noted they had been removed in December 2022

⁴⁴⁴ ‘Our History’, Arts Council England, n.d. <<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/our-organisation/our-history>> [accessed 1 October 2023]. Great Art and Culture for Everyone, p. 6.

⁴⁴⁵ Great Art and Culture for Everyone, p. 25.

⁴⁴⁶ Great Art and Culture for Everyone, p. 44, 48.

below).⁴⁴⁷ These standards were designed to consider the views of ‘audiences, participants, users and experts’; feedback from staff is not included.⁴⁴⁸ The Arts Council maintained that a ‘core’ aspect of their work was advocating ‘to government, to local authorities, to our partners and to the public’ for investment and then to distribute that money.⁴⁴⁹ This has primarily taken place through the National Portfolio Organisations (NPO) and Major Partner Museums. UCM was an MPM from 2012 and became an NPO in 2018.

ACE published their next ten-year strategy, *Let’s Create*, in January 2020, with a strong emphasis on quality of experience, and there being ‘measurable benefit’ for communities: again an emphasis on being able to quantify outcomes.⁴⁵⁰ The new vision was that England should be a place ‘in which the creativity of each of us is valued and given the chance to flourish’, with everyone able to access ‘a remarkable range of high-quality cultural experiences’.⁴⁵¹ Rather than the three goals of GACE, the new strategy had three outcomes and four Investment Principles.⁴⁵² One of these is tangentially related to evaluation, the principle of ‘Ambition and Quality’, although it is noted that ‘judgements about quality are inevitably complex and open to debate’ and that there should be a continued conversation with cultural organisations to ‘establish a shared language around it’. Ultimately ACE would use their own ‘experience and expertise’ to decide what constitutes quality.⁴⁵³ This language is reminiscent of GACE, again there being no real definitions or standards offered. In *Let’s Create* however, there is the expectation that funded institutions will ‘gather the views of the public and their peers on the quality of what they do’ and take that feedback to both staff and boards.⁴⁵⁴ The previous ten-year framework mentioned surveys with the public, but this was to ascertain ‘the level of support for public funding for the arts and culture’.⁴⁵⁵ Rather than seeking the views of the public, GACE suggests that organisations would use self-evaluation as a key precursor to Arts Council investment.⁴⁵⁶ In a remarkable move, *Let’s Create* depends on public feedback to determine what quality is and whether a museum is achieving it.

⁴⁴⁷ Arts Council England, *Arts Council England Grant-in-Aid and Lottery Distribution Annual Report and Accounts 2013/14* (H M Government, 2014), p. 136.

⁴⁴⁸ *Great Art and Culture for Everyone*, p. 60.

⁴⁴⁹ *Great Art and Culture for Everyone*, p. 14.

⁴⁵⁰ *Let’s Create*, p. 38.

⁴⁵¹ *Let’s Create*, p. 14.

⁴⁵² *Let’s Create*, p. 28.

⁴⁵³ *Let’s Create*, p. 47.

⁴⁵⁴ *Let’s Create*, p. 47.

⁴⁵⁵ *Great Art and Culture for Everyone*, p. 45.

⁴⁵⁶ *Great Art and Culture for Everyone*, p. 51.

These two frameworks, covering twenty years of government priorities and focus, have minimal engagement with exhibitions or displays. There are very few mentions of these fundamental aspects of museum work in either framework. GACE has only five references to exhibitions, and they make their first appearance over halfway through the document (on page 39 of 65), where in a short paragraph it is declared that the collections should in themselves be excellent, and exemplify the ‘value of museums’ through interpretation and the way they both inspire and change visitors.⁴⁵⁷ Let’s Create talks about exhibitions once: in the context of the influence of the 2011 Arts Council’s ‘Creative Case for Diversity’.⁴⁵⁸ For such flagship publications, it could be expected for the quality of collections and displays, and public engagement with these might be of importance. This absence of direction for, and engagement with, exhibitions and displays is directly reflected in the evaluation requirements that the Arts Council put in place, explored in the next section.

Arts Council Evaluation Requirements for NPOs: Non-compulsory Self-Evaluation

ACE launched its National Portfolio Organisation (NPO) funding in 2012 as a programme for institutions to demonstrate their leadership and reflect the qualities laid out in GACE.⁴⁵⁹ NPOs must reapply each funding round, with different organisations moving in or out of the portfolio. In 2018 to 2022, 829 organisations were National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs), increasing to 927 in 2023 to 2026.⁴⁶⁰ In the 2018 to 2022 funding cycle there were three bands for NPOs, depending on the level of funding, from Band 1 (receiving £40 000 to £249 999 every year) to Band 3 (with funding over £1 million per year).⁴⁶¹ The level of evaluation institutions were required to carry out altered depending on the band the NPO was positioned in. These bands were removed from 2023. ACE has two main requirements around evaluation for NPOs: self-evaluation and research with audiences.

Up until 2023, ACE expected ‘all organisations to carry out regular self-evaluation’ to improve what they do and to directly influence their business plan.⁴⁶² The self-evaluation toolkit, developed by external consultants, could be completed

⁴⁵⁷ Great Art and Culture for Everyone, p. 39.

⁴⁵⁸ Let’s Create, p. 53.

⁴⁵⁹ ‘Arts Council Reveals NPOs’, Museums Association, 2014

<<https://www.museumsassociation.org/museums-journal/news/2014/07/01072014-arts-council-reveals-new-npos-including-museums/>> [accessed 14 September 2024].

⁴⁶⁰ ‘National Portfolio: FAQs’ Arts Council England, n.d. <<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/national-portfolio-2018-22-faqs>> [accessed 27 February 2022].

⁴⁶¹ Arts Council England, ‘Relationship Framework: How Arts Council England Works with National Portfolio Organisations 2018-22 and 2022-23’. p. 6

⁴⁶² Relationship Framework 2018-22 and 2022-23, p. 13.

anonymously online, and consisted of 24 questions for evaluating a 'project or service' that had finished. The questions were grouped under four headings, each with additional sub-sections; 'quality' again makes a top level appearance. The sections and sub-sections were:

- Quality and Impact (vision; impact; quality; repeat audiences; new audiences)
- People development (the team; roles and performance; professional development; wellbeing and job satisfaction; partnerships)
- Process development (planning and monitoring; information management; communications; resources and facilities; financial management; technical systems; legislation)
- Business development (internal alignment; national context; local context; research and evaluation; income generation; risk; future plans).

Each subsection has multiple further questions, each had two areas to respond to: performance and importance, with answers collected on a slider denoting a one to ten Likert scale (see figure 4.1 for an example). There is no option if the respondent is not sure, but they can add notes into two optional free text fields, one for general text about the score, and another to outline where improvements can be made. Additional notes are given in an optional help screen.⁴⁶³ While the use of this toolkit was encouraged, it was not compulsory, and no results had to be communicated back to the Arts Council. There was a huge number of questions to respond to, but attempting to summarise an organisational response to such searching questions into a one to ten scale seems reductive in the extreme. There is no data available on how many organisations used this 'regularly' as requested. The self-evaluation toolkit is not required to be used with 2023-26 round of NPO funding and was removed from the Arts Council website in 2023. Self-evaluation was a short-lived evaluation method, especially compared to GLOs. The broader theme of evaluation does at least appear in the self-evaluation toolkit, but only in the context of business development. No questions refer to exhibitions or displays, either permanent or temporary.

⁴⁶³ 'Self Evaluation Toolkit', n.d. <<https://www.selfevaluationtoolkit.org/>> [accessed 27 February 2022].

Business development
Research & evaluation

4.4
How well do you reflect, evaluate, research and innovate?

HELP THINKING ABOUT THIS AREA OF YOUR WORK

Performance
How well are things going? 6

Importance
How significant is this at the moment? 6

Notes about your scores (optional) ADD NOTES

Where can improvements be made? (optional) ADD NOTES

Figure 4.1 Screenshot of ACE self-evaluation toolkit, question 4.4.

Compulsory Audience Evaluation for NPOs: 2018 to 2023

Quality Metrics, Quality Principles and The Insight and Impact Toolkit (IIT)

From 2018 to 2023, Arts Council NPOs had two compulsory requirements for evaluation with audiences: the Insight and Impact Toolkit (IIT) and Audience Finder. The IIT evolved from a Public Value Measurement Framework, which was the outcome of a research project in Western Australia in 2010. This project developed Quality Metrics and Quality Principles, which became the ‘Culture Counts system’, later licensed by Counting What Counts Ltd, a ‘team of consultants and researchers’.⁴⁶⁴ In 2015, ACE gave a £300,000 grant to Counting What Counts to support the piloting of the framework with 150 NPOs and Major Partner Museums in the UK from November 2015 to May 2016. The pilot was considered a success, and the ‘competitive process to appoint a service provider’ began.⁴⁶⁵ The result was the Insight and Inspire Toolkit (IIT): described by ACE as ‘a quality evaluation framework that uses a set of metrics developed by the sector’.⁴⁶⁶ This digital toolkit was produced for ACE by Counting What Counts Ltd. The IIT was required to be used by

⁴⁶⁴ Sport and Cultural Industries; ‘Public Value’, Department of Local Government, n.d. <<https://www.dlgsc.wa.gov.au/culture-and-the-arts/research-hub/public-value>> [accessed 3 April 2022].

⁴⁶⁵ Arts Council England, ‘Arts Council Response to Quality Metrics Trial’.

⁴⁶⁶ Arts Council England, ‘Relationship Framework: How Arts Council England Works with National Portfolio Organisations 2018-22 and 2022-23’.

Band 2 and 3 NPOs from 2019 to 2023, at which point its use was no longer a requirement for NPOs although it was still offered for free if museums wanted to use it.⁴⁶⁷ IIT is another evaluation method which has had a short life span, leaving museums without the ability to evaluate their work longitudinally.

Part of the motivation for the use of Quality Metrics across the cultural sector was the desire for a 'a large scale, standardised evidence base'.⁴⁶⁸ In 2013, independent innovation agency NESTA funded the report 'Counting What Counts: What Can Big Data Do For the Cultural Sector'. This called for cultural organisations to view data as 'an asset to be used to the benefit of the artistic or cultural institution and its work'.⁴⁶⁹ Simultaneously, learning from other sectors was beginning to determine 'new ways of measuring the impact of arts and cultural investment on our wider society in terms of social capital and cultural value creation'.⁴⁷⁰ Government policy was again moving evaluation towards cultural value, feeling, as Sir Peter Bazalgette wrote in the introduction to GACE, that they were 'charged with getting the maximum value' out of public investment in the arts, museums and libraries.⁴⁷¹ It has been impossible for museums to create this evidence base and demonstrate their value with the constant changes in capturing and reporting their data.

The IIT used Quality Metrics statements, which can be freely downloaded from the ACE website (as of 2024). To comply with ACE funding requirements between 2018 and 2023, IIT responses were to be collected from staff involved in the project under evaluation in the formative stages. In the summative phase, feedback was required from three audiences: visitors, the venue, and a peer review by at least three people. The compulsory questions for the public were:

- Captivation: It was absorbing and held my attention
- Challenge: It was thought-provoking
- Concept: It was an interesting idea
- Distinctiveness: It was different from things I've experienced before
- Relevance: It has something to say about the world in which we live
- Rigour: It was well thought through and put together

⁴⁶⁷ 'How to Register for The Arts Council England Impact & Insight Toolkit', Arts Council England and Counting What Counts, n.d.<<https://culturecounts.cc/ace/assets/docs/npo-registration-form.pdf>> [accessed 3 April 2022].

⁴⁶⁸ 'Quality Metrics - Q&A', Arts Council England, n.d. <<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/sites/default/files/download-file/Quality%20Metrics%20Q%26A%20FINAL.pdf>> [accessed 3 April 2022].

⁴⁶⁹ Anthony Lilley and Paul Moore, 'Counting What Counts: What Big Data Can Do For the Cultural Sector' (Nesta, 2013), p. 3.

⁴⁷⁰ Lilley and Moore. p. 4.

⁴⁷¹ Great Art and Culture for Everyone, p. 3.

Project staff and peer reviewers had three further prompts:

- Excellence: It's one of the best examples of its type that I have experienced
- Originality: It was ground-breaking
- Risk: The artists/curators really challenged themselves with this work

Responses were recorded via a zero to 100 sliding scale (see figure 4.2), with public, peer and self displayed together for comparison (see figure 4.3 for an example). The survey is designed to be completed online and minimal demographic information is recorded, with participants asked for their age, postcode and how they would describe their gender.⁴⁷² UCM used the IIT from 2018 to 2023 as requested by ACE. In 2021-22, a temporary exhibition at MAA was evaluated using the toolkit (see figure 4.3), and multiple exhibitions and events at the Fitzwilliam Museum were also included. It is possible to apply the Quality Metrics to museum exhibitions, although the language is more suited to special displays on a single theme or topic, rather than permanent galleries. Within UCM it has never been applied to the evaluation of a permanent display.

The image is a screenshot of a digital survey interface. At the top, there is a question icon (a question mark in a square) followed by the text 'Captivation: It was absorbing and held my attention'. Below this, a smaller line of text asks 'Rate how much you agree or disagree with this statement'. Underneath, there are three labels: 'Strongly Disagree', 'Neutral', and 'Strongly Agree'. A horizontal slider bar is positioned below these labels, with a dark grey circular marker currently positioned exactly in the middle, corresponding to the 'Neutral' label. At the bottom of the slider, there is an upward-pointing arrow icon and the text 'Click or touch somewhere on the bar to record a response'.

Figure 4.2 Screenshot of the IIT Captivation question.

⁴⁷² 'IIT Mandatory Evaluation Guidance (21-22) | Impact & Insight Toolkit', Impact and Insight, n.d. <<https://impactandinsight.co.uk/docs/iit-mandatory-evaluation-guidance-21-22/>> [accessed 27 February 2022].

Dimension Outcomes

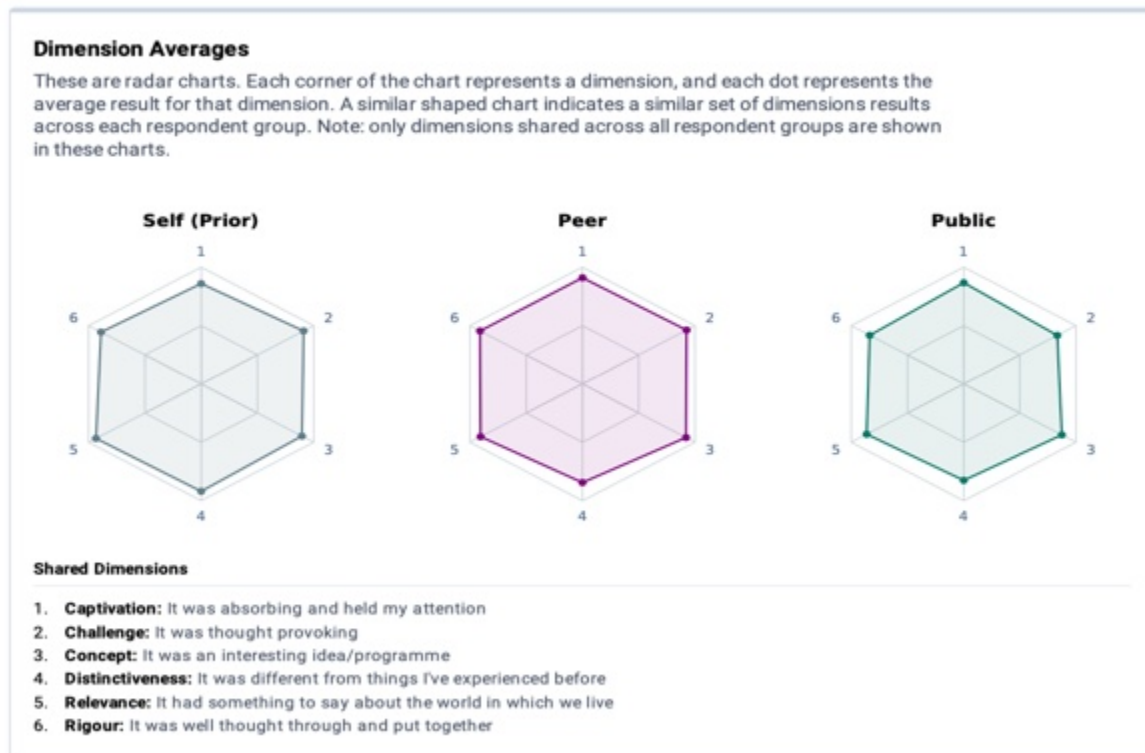


Figure 4.3 Screenshot of the IIT dimension averages from a temporary exhibition at MAA.

While it seems reasonable for museum visitors to comment on whether their attention was held and if they found the exhibition, programme, or event thought-provoking, asking them whether it was different to 'things they have experienced before' may depend on their familiarity with cultural organisations as well as recent cultural outputs. For some audiences who may not be frequent attendees, what they are evaluating may be entirely new; for frequent visitors the tropes may have been over-familiar. There appears to be value judgements in 'distinctiveness' and 'relevance'; the IIT implies that it is important that the experiences related to 'the world in which we live' and that it should always be new and different. The compulsory dimensions are very subjective, with vague terminology ('rigour', 'captivation') that requires quite a high level of understanding of English. To condense responses from both peer-reviewers and the audience to a numerical score is reductive, removing any opportunity for nuance in the feedback. It is possible for attendees or visitors to disagree with each statement, but little opportunity for further clarification: someone may not have felt the event spoke to the world in which they live, but they could have experienced art or culture as a respite.

In its favour, IIT was among the very few compulsory ACE evaluation methods that encouraged some feedback on exhibitions and displays. The Quality Metric criteria

was strongly associated with the questions raised in GACE, but they still have no clarification on what quality is, or how best to measure it. From 2023 the IIT was no longer a compulsory evaluation measure, although the Arts Council suggests it could be used to ‘measure progress against your ambitions’ as well as to ‘develop ambition and demonstrate your commitment to evaluation and the Ambition and Quality Investment Principle’, should museums want to do this.⁴⁷³

Quality Principles

Alongside the Quality Metrics, ACE developed a set of Quality Principles in 2014, specifically ‘to raise the standard of work being produced by, with and for children and young people’. The seven principles are:

- Striving for excellence and innovation
- Being authentic
- Being exciting, inspiring and engaging
- Ensuring a positive and inclusive experience
- Actively involving children and young people
- Enabling personal progression
- Developing belonging and ownership.⁴⁷⁴

UCM was among 51 organisation involved in the pilot phase in 2015. However, the internal summative report highlighted the disconnect between these principles and school curricula, and that the Principles ‘do not have a pedagogic basis or appear to closely relate to any particular learning model or existing learning evaluation tool such as GLOs’.⁴⁷⁵ Perhaps this partly explains why (unlike the GLOs) the quality principles have generated very little discussion and exerted next to no influence on the GEM JISCMail list, where they are only mentioned in the context of training.⁴⁷⁶ As the principles are designed to measure work for such a tightly defined group, they are very hard to apply to museum exhibitions or displays unless they are co-produced with children or young people.

⁴⁷³ ‘Illuminate FAQs’, Arts Council England, n.d. <<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/developing-creativity-and-culture/illuminate/illuminate-faqs>> [accessed 24 June 2023].

⁴⁷⁴ ‘Quality Principles’, Arts Council England, n.d. <<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/quality-metrics/quality-principles>> [accessed 3 April 2022].

⁴⁷⁵ Kate Noble and Lesley Sainsbury, ‘Arts Council/ NfER Quality Principles Pilot 3. Project Report’, 2015.

⁴⁷⁶ Kate Fellows, ‘Evaluation for museums, Wed 17 July, NRM, New York’, GEM JISCMail, 20 June 2019 <<https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/wa-jisc.exe?A2=ind1906&L=GEM&P=R88073>> [accessed 3 April 2022].

The Audience Agency and Audience Finder

Between 2018 and 2023, in addition to self-evaluation and the IIT, National Portfolio Organisations were also required 'to sign up and regularly contribute to an audience data insight and support platform', which at this time was Audience Finder.⁴⁷⁷

Audience Finder was provided by The Audience Agency, responding to GACE. The Audience Agency (created in 2013 from a merger of companies All About Audiences and Audiences London) was awarded three years of funding from 2012 to deliver Audience Finder, the aim of which was to 'shape, provide and define a strategic national approach to collecting and using audience data and intelligence'.⁴⁷⁸ £3.3 million in funding for this was provided by the Arts Council. ACE continued to provide funding to the Audience Agency in 2018-22, giving them a further £3 million as a Sector Support Organisation.⁴⁷⁹ This funding was severed in the 2023 funding round, signalling the end of the decade-long relationship between ACE and the Audience Agency, and yet again changing data collection and evaluation for museums and galleries.

For their reporting up to 2023, National Portfolio Organisations (such as UCM), were required to 'submit audience data to Audience Finder', or to have 'an official exemption'. NPOs could collect their data with another platform but were warned that 'they must ensure they ask all core questions in the Audience Finder survey questionnaire and in exactly the same way'. Audience Finder is primarily focussed on marketing and categorising audiences; questions are centred around demographic information (age, gender, ethnicity, disability), home postcode, group size and composition, how they found out about the venue, as well as whether they had visited before, their motivation for visiting (from a selected list), how good their experience in the venue was (recorded on a five point Likert scale).⁴⁸⁰ Yet again, there was no evaluation of displays and exhibitions included in the surveys. Five years of visitor data was held Audience Finder, which could be downloaded in report format (but not the raw data). There was very little room for flexibility with Audience Finder, which NPOs were locked into paying for and using as part of their agreement with ACE.

⁴⁷⁷ Relationship Framework 2018-22 and 2022-23, p. 16.

⁴⁷⁸ Arts Council England and Great Britain. Parliament. House of Commons, *Arts Council England Grant-in-Aid and Lottery Annual Report and Accounts 2012/13*, 2013, p. 22.

⁴⁷⁹ 'National Portfolio Organisations 2018 -22', Arts Council England, n.d.
<<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/national-portfolio-2018-22/more-data-2018-22>>.

⁴⁸⁰ 'Audience Finder 2021-22 Core Questionnaire for NPOS', The Audience Agency, n.d.
<<https://www.theaudienceagency.org/resources/core-questionnaire-npos-2021-22>> [accessed 6 February 2022].

Compulsory Audience Evaluation for NPOs: 2023 to 2026

The second round of organisations receiving NPO funding was finally made public on 4 November 2022, after a series of delays.⁴⁸¹ Among other changes, the three bands based on amount of investment were removed, with no variation in evaluation requirements based on the amount of investment. There were several other changes for data collection for NPOs, one being the move from an annual submission to quarterly submission of data.⁴⁸² Perhaps the biggest shock to the sector was the loss of funding for the Audience Agency. For the 2023-26 funding round, ACE moved to a contract model rather than grants for audience data collection. Chief Data Officer at the Arts Council, Sanj Jagait, suggested somewhat enigmatically that ‘an open procurement process was the best way to secure the best possible audience data tool’.⁴⁸³ The outcome of this was that the three-year, £1.6 million contract for data collection was awarded to PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) and their ‘new audiences and insight data platform’ Illuminate (a ‘service modelled on the Audience Finder one’ according to the Audience Agency).⁴⁸⁴ The Illuminate portal was late to launch, blamed on ‘contracting delays’, but finally went live on 1st June 2023: two thirds of the way through the first quarter of data collection (which started on the 1st April 2023).⁴⁸⁵ The move to PwC proved controversial in the arts world. There was suspicion around leaving the Audience Agency, a not-for-profit organisation that provided a service specifically focussed on cultural organisations, for PwC: ‘one of “the big four” global consulting firms’.⁴⁸⁶ Arts sector news service, *Arts Professional*, announced in mid-November 2022 that the contract allowed PwC to ‘commercially exploit’ the audience data, although this would not be permitted until the end of the contract in 2026.⁴⁸⁷ Later in November 2022, a blog post by the Arts Council tried to reassure the sector, clarifying that ‘the organisation awarded the contract doesn’t own the platform or the dataset, nor can they benefit commercially from it’.⁴⁸⁸ ACE

⁴⁸¹ ‘Statement on Pausing the 2023-26 Investment Programme Announcement’, Arts Council England, 25 October 2022 <<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/creative-matters/news/statement-pausing-2023-26-investment-programme-announcement>> [accessed 21 June 2023].

⁴⁸² Arts Council England, ‘Relationship Framework: How Arts Council England Works with National Portfolio Organisations 2018-22 and 2022-23’, p. 12.

⁴⁸³ ‘Five Questions With... Sanj Jagait’, Arts Council England, 29 November 2022, <<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/blog/five-questions-sanj-jagait>> [accessed 16 December 2022].

⁴⁸⁴ ‘New Perspectives Outside of the ACE National Portfolio’, The Audience Agency, 9 November 2022 <<https://www.theaudienceagency.org/news/perspectives-beyond-the-portfolio>> [accessed 23 June 2023].

⁴⁸⁵ ‘PwC Blames Illuminate Hold-up on “Contracting Delays”’, *Arts Professional*, 3 May 2023 <<https://www.artspromotional.co.uk/news/pwc-blames-illuminate-hold-contracting-delays>> [accessed 21 June 2023].

⁴⁸⁶ ‘New Perspectives Outside of the ACE National Portfolio’.

⁴⁸⁷ ‘Controversial PwC Contract Has “Commercial Exploitation” Clause’, *Arts Professional*, 18 November 2022 <<https://www.artspromotional.co.uk/news/controversial-pwc-contract-has-commercial-exploitation-clause>> [accessed 21 June 2023].

⁴⁸⁸ ‘Five Questions With... Sanj Jagait’.

explained again in *Arts Professional* in March 2023 that data would not be kept after the contract end.⁴⁸⁹ While they were no longer responsible for evaluation in England, the Audience Agency continued to collect audience data for Wales and Scotland and English organisations could also use the service, for a fee.⁴⁹⁰ This move away from the Audience Agency seemed a peculiar move for ACE, given the level of investment the Arts Council had provided.

There were several other changes in evaluation requirements from the previous NPO funding round. Let's Create had an emphasis on data collection, and this is reflected in the updated compulsory requirements from 2023, which necessitates collecting 'activity level information such as where and when it takes place and the number of attendees' and 'postcode and demographic data... from a representative sample of your audiences using a set of questions determined by the Arts Council'.⁴⁹¹ Illuminate has 12 compulsory questions, collecting age, ethnicity, whether participants consider themselves to be disabled, their socio-economic status (based on occupation), place of residence, gender, sexual orientation, the size of the group visiting with the respondent, age(s) of the group members and whether they had previously visited.⁴⁹² While this set of questions is not overly onerous, they are not particularly enlightening, and some are intrusive. By April 2024, less than a year following the launch of Illuminate, the order and responses to demographic questions had been altered to move 'prefer not to say' to the top of the list and giving more streamlined ethnicity options.⁴⁹³ Further problems with Illuminate led ACE to delay the mandatory reporting of data until April 2025.⁴⁹⁴ With the contract for Illuminate currently running until 2026, but the NPO funding extended to 2027, there is speculation that the connection with PwC might be terminated early, adding to industry uncertainty and the possibility of audience data again being held in a dead system.⁴⁹⁵

⁴⁸⁹ 'ACE Vows to Prevent "Commercial Exploitation" of Audience Data', *Arts Professional*, 14 March 2023 <<https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/ace-vows-prevent-commercial-exploitation-audience-data>> [accessed 24 June 2023].

⁴⁹⁰ 'New Perspectives Outside of the ACE National Portfolio'.

⁴⁹¹ Arts Council England, 'Relationship Framework: How Arts Council England Works with National Portfolio Organisations 2018-22 and 2022-23', p. 13.

⁴⁹² Arts Council England, 'Illuminate - Mandatory Audience Survey Questions 310523', 2023.

⁴⁹³ Arts Council, 'Illuminate – Mandatory Audience Survey Questions 2024-2025'.

⁴⁹⁴ 'Illuminate Audience Data Reporting Suspended for a Further Year', *ArtsProfessional*, 27 August 2024 <<https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/illuminate-audience-data-reporting-suspended-further-year>> [accessed 15 September 2024].

⁴⁹⁵ 'ACE in Talks on Future of Illuminate Data Platform', *ArtsProfessional*, 25 January 2024 <<https://www.artsprofessional.co.uk/news/ace-talks-future-illuminate-data-platform>> [accessed 15 September 2024].

Alongside the new platform, there were changes in other fundamental elements of data collection, such as the number of surveys required by PwC. There was a significant increase in the responses each venue needed to obtain, with many museums feeling the large numbers required were practically very difficult to achieve. After feedback from museums PwC acknowledged that venues felt these numbers were ‘ambitious’ and having ‘revised the methodology’ produced a lower minimum number, while still suggesting those in receipt of Arts Council money should aim for 10% of their audience responding to the survey.⁴⁹⁶ For many venues these figures remained burdensome, running into the thousands even for small museums. A further change was the addition of 62 optional questions to the survey, these covered a wide range of themes, including motivations for visiting, rating the experience, educational qualifications, money spent, and engagement with social media. None of the compulsory questions, and only two of the optional ones allow for free text responses. 72 questions are multiple choice or Likert scales and one of the free text questions allows for only very limited answers. The two optional free text questions are: ‘What three words would you use to describe your experience?’ and ‘Is there any other feedback you’d like to provide?’.⁴⁹⁷ From June 2023, the possibility of including additional questions developed by venues was not possible within the Illuminate platform, but NPOs were urged to ‘submit these requests to the Arts Council Customer service team’, where they would be ‘considered collectively and new [questions] added on a periodic basis’.⁴⁹⁸ The online Illuminate platform has no option to add questions, and no opportunity to reorder questions, making it inflexible for venues. ACE reordered the survey themselves in 2024, moving the demographic section to the end, after any optional questions selected by the venue.

Once surveys were uploaded, the Illuminate dashboard allowed the user to compare their data to other NPOs, either by region or discipline area (see figure 4.4). As it is not possible to add information collected from previous years into Illuminate, this comparison can only be from April 2023, and only for venues that have added information during the non-compulsory data collection period. The demographic questions are comparable across Illuminate and IIT, but the FAQs state that they ‘will not integrate with each other’. Neither does Illuminate integrate with the previous platform Audience Finder.⁴⁹⁹ Illuminate has the functionality to upload data collected elsewhere but this was not a recommended method, with warnings that venues

⁴⁹⁶ ‘Illuminate FAQs’, Arts Council England, n.d. <<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/developing-creativity-and-culture/illuminate/illuminate-faqs>> [accessed 24 June 2023].

⁴⁹⁷ Arts Council England, ‘Illuminate Optional Questions 050523’, 2023.

⁴⁹⁸ ‘Illuminate FAQs’.

⁴⁹⁹ ‘Illuminate FAQs’.

should make both questions and responses ‘identical to the mandatory questions’, and a caution that data being imported might need ‘a level of manual cleaning in advance of submission’, a time-consuming process.⁵⁰⁰ The system has not been designed for ease of data collection processes for funded institutions. For all its faults, IIT at least collected some information related to museum outputs, allowing visitors to comment on exhibitions. Illuminate is not encouraging such feedback.

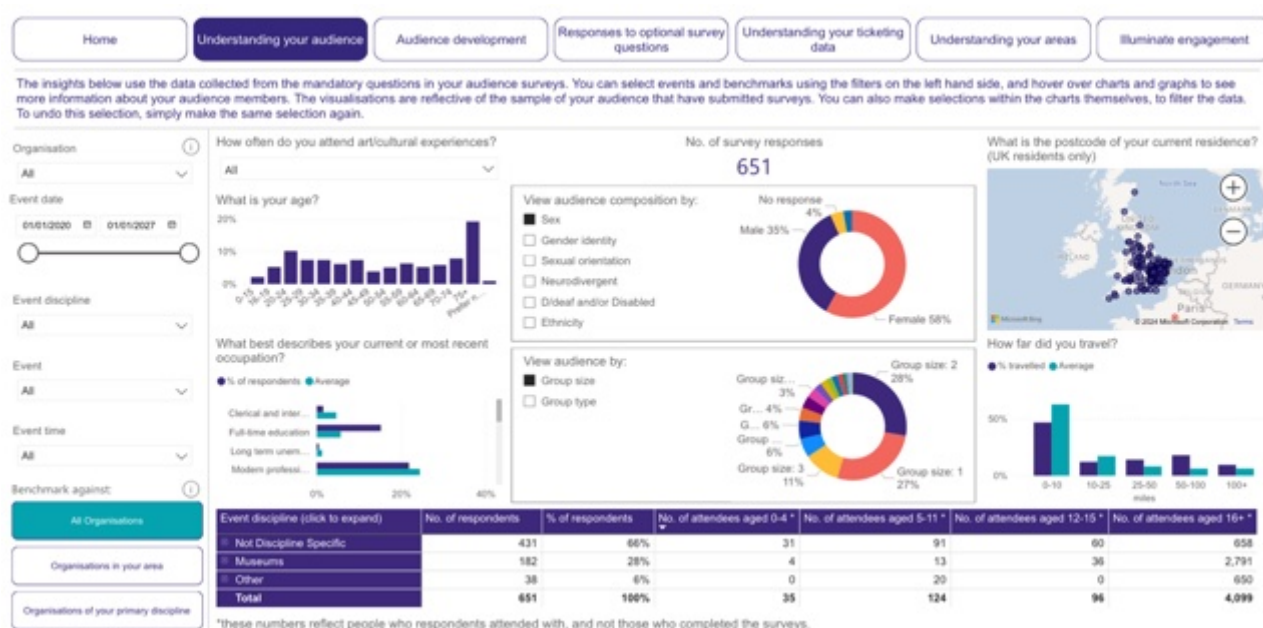


Figure 4.4 Screenshot of the Illuminate dashboard.

With a focus on scales and tick boxes and only one option for members of the public to give significant text responses, Illuminate has become an overly simplistic and formulaic demographic visitor survey. This method of data collection remains enormously inflexible for venues while providing significant amounts of easily comparable data from across England. The focus is on quantitative data sets, not on qualitative responses from audiences. For venues to gather qualitative data about their work, they would need to use a second survey, or set up their survey in a different platform and upload this to Illuminate independently. This creates a burden either on the audience or on the venue and feels like a wasted opportunity. Additionally, it creates little support for museums to achieve their obligations under Museum Accreditation. As seen above, subsection 8.2 of Accreditation requirements means museums must ‘use information to assess your users’ needs’ to develop both programmes and the museum.⁵⁰¹ At launch in 2023 and into 2024, Illuminate is not fit

⁵⁰⁰ ‘Illuminate FAQs’.

⁵⁰¹ Accreditation Scheme for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom, ‘Accreditation Scheme for Museums and Galleries in the United Kingdom: Accreditation Standard’.

for this purpose, and has been both controversial and difficult to work with from launch. Arts Council requirements on evaluation for museums yet again ignore the displays and exhibitions. The lack of nuance and the inflexibility of Illuminate hamper museums' abilities to understand their points of difference to the rest of the cultural sector.

Hard-stretched museum staff, heavily reliant on public funding for survival, must prioritise the varied data collection requirements of their funders. Inevitably this means neglecting significant areas of their work. Frequent changes in the tools the sector is required to use, with no ability to compare contemporary and historic data, are undermining the ability of institutions to listen to their audiences. Additionally, alterations reduce the opportunities for museums to fulfil the basic standards of Accreditation. Long-term changes in audience demographics or attitude become almost impossible to track when companies produce specific systems, without concern for those working in heritage. The tools that are recommended or essential to governmental bodies have moved towards greater standardisation, with attempts to produce comparable quantitative results across different types of cultural organisation, from contemporary art to theatre and opera. This has been reflected in the demands of other funders and cultural sector bodies. Given the lack of interest from the largest funder of UK museums, it is perhaps no wonder that the field of exhibition evaluation has floundered over the last 15 years.

University-specific funding: HEMG

University museums which are 'based at an approved fee cap higher education provider in England' are eligible to apply for funding from Research England under the Higher Education Museums and Galleries (HEMG) fund.⁵⁰² Having Accredited status, or working towards it, is a prerequisite for those wanting to make an application. The amount of money organisations can apply for is supposed to 'reflect the additional costs incurred in making resources available to researchers and students from outside the home institution', with the expectation that each HE institution would pay for any work with their own students.⁵⁰³ The most recent funding round was announced in April 2024; applications were judged on criteria that showed how institutions provided 'a service to the wider research community', including, in some areas, the general public.⁵⁰⁴ In 2024 to 2025 £14 million was distributed across

⁵⁰² 'Research England Museums, Galleries and Collections Funding', UKRI, 2023
<<https://www.ukri.org/opportunity/research-england-museums-galleries-and-collections-funding/>>
[accessed 13 August 2023].

⁵⁰³ 'Research England Museums, Galleries and Collections Funding'.

⁵⁰⁴ Research England, 'Review of Research England Museums, Galleries and Collections Fund 2023: Guidance for Submissions' (Research England, 2023), p. 1.

40 collections from 21 universities, with 30% of the total fund going to four museums at the University of Oxford (£3.9 million). The University of Cambridge had the largest number of funded collections (nine: seven UCMs, the Botanic Garden, and the University Herbarium); they were together allocated £2.9 million.⁵⁰⁵

HEMG's requirements around evaluation are slim. The 2023 submission template required institutions to respond in three sections of free text responses to the 'gateway criteria', 'quality criteria' and contextual data.⁵⁰⁶ The largest section, the quality criteria, where up to nine pages of text were permitted, includes questions about the benefits to the wider public. Question d asked applicants to respond to 'the extent to which the HEMG provides additional external benefit both digitally and in person, including engaging the public, schools and wider community with research'. Section 3 requests numerical data in ten categories for the previous academic year, including the number of higher and further education visits, the number of loans and website visits. Questions eight, nine and ten ask for the number of school students, the number of public events and, finally, the total number of visitors to the venue.⁵⁰⁷ Alongside the submission document, a Guidance documentation was published to assist with applications.⁵⁰⁸ This document does not specify what is meant by 'quality', nor suitable methods by which this can be measured. There are no questions or expectations around exhibitions or displays in the funding or reporting criteria. Given the prominence of displayed collections in university museums, they could be seen as a method to demonstrate the relevance of contemporary research to the public. It is disappointing that HEMG has no interest in their evaluation or assessing the impact of exhibitions.

Non-governmental funding bodies: National Lottery Heritage Fund

Outside of governmental sources, one of largest funders of heritage projects in the UK is the National Lottery Heritage Fund (NLHF). Having 'distributed over £8.3 billion to more than 49 000 heritage projects across the UK' since 1994, their funding can cover exhibitions and displays, including redeveloping permanent galleries in heritage sites.⁵⁰⁹ They have well-developed systems and expectations around project evaluation, summarised in their online Good Practice Guidance. Under the heading

⁵⁰⁵ UKRI, 'Higher Education, Museums and Galleries Funding 2024 to 2025', 2024.

⁵⁰⁶ Research England, 'Review of Research England Museums, Galleries and Collections Fund 2023: Submission Template' (Research England, 2023).

⁵⁰⁷ Research England, 'Review of Research England Museums, Galleries and Collections Fund 2023: Submission Template' (Research England).

⁵⁰⁸ Research England, 'Review of Research England Museums, Galleries and Collections Fund 2023: Guidance for Submissions'.

⁵⁰⁹ 'About', The National Lottery Heritage Fund, 2018 <<https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/about>> [accessed 30 January 2022].

‘why does evaluation matter?’ NHLF say that they want to know that their funding has ‘been spent appropriately’, as well as monitoring the difference that has been made for ‘heritage, people and communities’.⁵¹⁰ Their evaluation helps them learn through monitoring, evidencing, validating, improving, researching, and advocating. NHLF specify that they want to see evidence that those funded collect ‘as much robust information as possible’ through their evaluation. Their example research methods suggest numbers of participants, surveys and interviews, followed by google analytics metrics and sentiment analysis on social media.⁵¹¹ Quantitative data such as participant numbers and web metrics are particularly superficial factors, while surveys and interviews are traditional evaluation techniques, but not always the best method of getting information from audiences. While they use active language to energise and inspire around evaluation, their guidance measures the benefit to the Heritage Fund, with little benefit being measured for the audience of the project or programme, or even to the heritage itself. Given that much NLHF money goes to exhibitions and displays, including redispays of permanent collections (as in Cambridge at the Museum of Zoology and MAA), it is disappointing that there are no suggestions for alternative evaluation methods or additional organisations or support for assessing exhibitions specifically.

Although there appears to be several different bodies funding and supporting museums and galleries in their evaluation work, up to 2023 the relationship between Arts Council England, the Audience Agency and the NHLF were intertwined, with each supporting or funding the others. This small group of organisations were responsible for audience evaluation as well as setting standards within the heritage world, especially for those in receipt of ACE funding (see figure 4.5 for a summary). While money moved around these bodies, there was no co-ordination around evaluation, with each organisation asking for different data. For museums that are usually pulling together multiple sources of funding, having to use different evaluation methods, toolkits and platforms makes this work extremely difficult and time-consuming. As none of the main funders have any interest in evaluating displays and exhibitions, it is unsurprising that these fundamental aspects of museum work are not a priority for staff, who are have little time and no guidance on how to do this well.

⁵¹⁰ ‘Evaluation Guidance’, The National Lottery Heritage Fund, 2021
<<https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/funding/good-practice-guidance/evaluation-guidance>> [accessed 26 February 2022].

⁵¹¹ NLHF ‘Evaluation Guidance’.

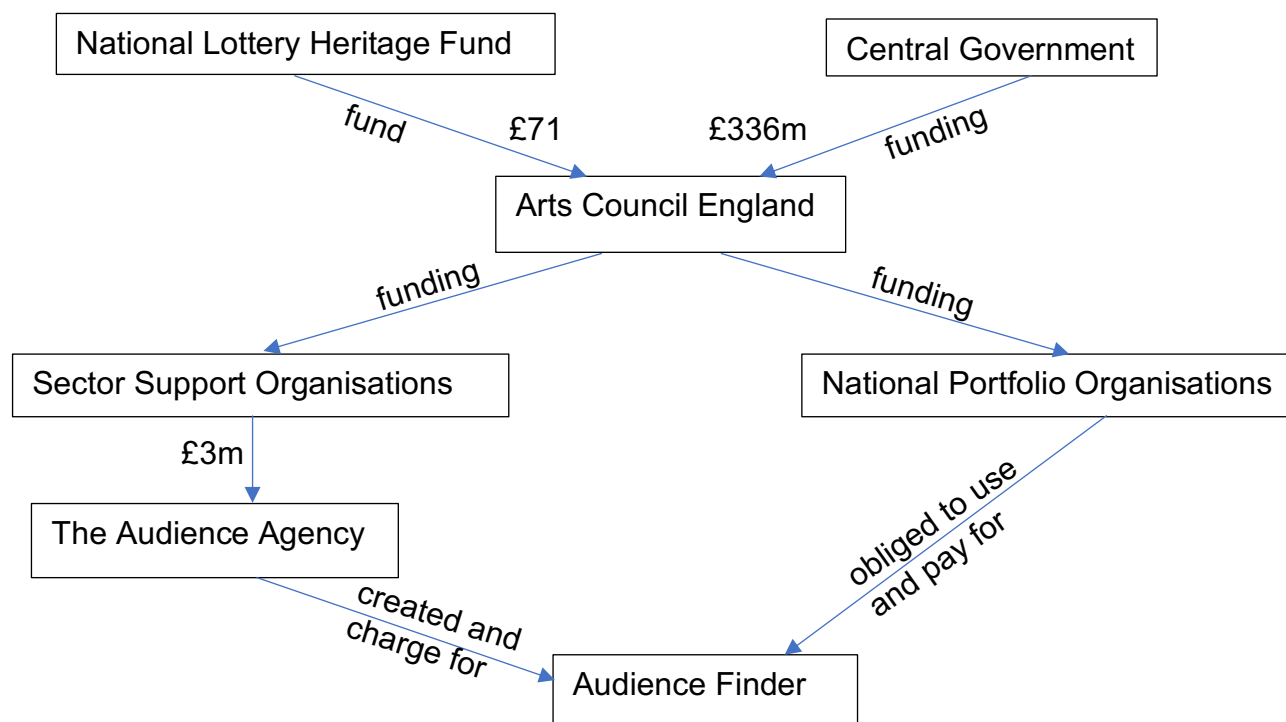


Figure 4.5 Movement of funds between various UK organisations, 2018 to 2023.

4.4 Other sector-specific evaluation and monitoring

Centre for Cultural Value (CCV)

The research body CCV, based at the University of Leeds, is a partnership between the Universities of Liverpool and Sheffield, and Queen Margaret University, Edinburgh, alongside the Audience Agency.⁵¹² They have been funded for five years, ending in January 2025, with £1 million coming from UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council, and £500 000 each from Paul Hamlyn Foundation and the Arts Council. In a blogpost by a staff member of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation, the stated desire of the Centre is to ‘re-frame the discussion’ around evaluation, and to therefore ‘make it more meaningful’.⁵¹³ An early output from CCV was a set of Evaluation Principles, with the aspiration that these would ‘inform how evaluation is carried out and used in the cultural sector’. The 12 principles are organised into four groups, those being that evaluation should be beneficial, robust, people-centred and connected. They were created in consultation with a working group, with the aim being to tackle what they see as ‘a deep-set problem with evaluation in the cultural

⁵¹² ‘About’, Centre for Cultural Value, n.d. <<https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/about/>> [accessed 7 January 2022]

⁵¹³ ‘Embracing Evaluation for the Right Reasons’, Centre for Cultural Value, 2021 <<https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/embracing-evaluation-for-the-right-reasons/>> [accessed 7 January 2022].

sector': that evaluation is not robust, does not generate change in organisations or projects, is not deeply reflective, is of low-value and 'privileged advocacy over rigour'.⁵¹⁴ This desire to create a truly consultative set of evaluation principles has merit, but has so far not translated into meaningful change in museums.

Perhaps this lack of impact is partly due to the make-up of the 40 cultural sector participants in the working group that developed the principles, whose names are available on the CCV website.⁵¹⁵ A study of these 40 people (see figure 4.6) reveals that the largest group (14 people) are consultants or from independent or commercial institutions, with a further 12 representatives of other cultural institutions, such as the Museums Association, Historic England, the Royal Society of Arts and participatory networks. Only four people were from museums, one from a gallery, one from a festival, and one on behalf of a library (Manchester Poetry Library, at Manchester Metropolitan University). Further interrogation of the museum representatives reveals the privileged view of the working group, with all four from large national museums. This set of institutions is not representative of the museum sector in the UK. While Scottish institutions are included in the CCV working group, and an academic from the National University of Ireland, there no Welsh organisations. Two funding bodies are on the working group: one person from the Cultural Development Fund ('a Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport fund administered by Arts Council England'), and another from 'Local Trust' (an organisation responsible for the delivery of 'Big Local, a National Lottery Community Fund-funded programme... across England').⁵¹⁶ The outcomes produced by an unrepresentative snapshot of the sector cannot hope to create standards that will suit everyone.

⁵¹⁴ 'Evaluation Principles', Centre for Cultural Value, n.d. <<https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/our-work/evaluation/evaluation-principles/>> [accessed 26 February 2022]; The E Word, Centre for Cultural Value, n.d. <<https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/the-e-word-why-were-talking-about-evaluation/>> [accessed 26 February 2022].

⁵¹⁵ 'Evaluation Principles Working Group', Centre for Cultural Value, n.d. <<https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/evaluation-principles-working-group/>> [accessed 26 February 2022].

⁵¹⁶ 'Cultural Development Fund: Round Two | Arts Council England' <<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/cultural-development-fund-round-two#section-1>> [accessed 26 February 2022]. 'About', *Local Trust* <<https://localtrust.org.uk/about/>> [accessed 26 February 2022].

CCV Working Group Participants

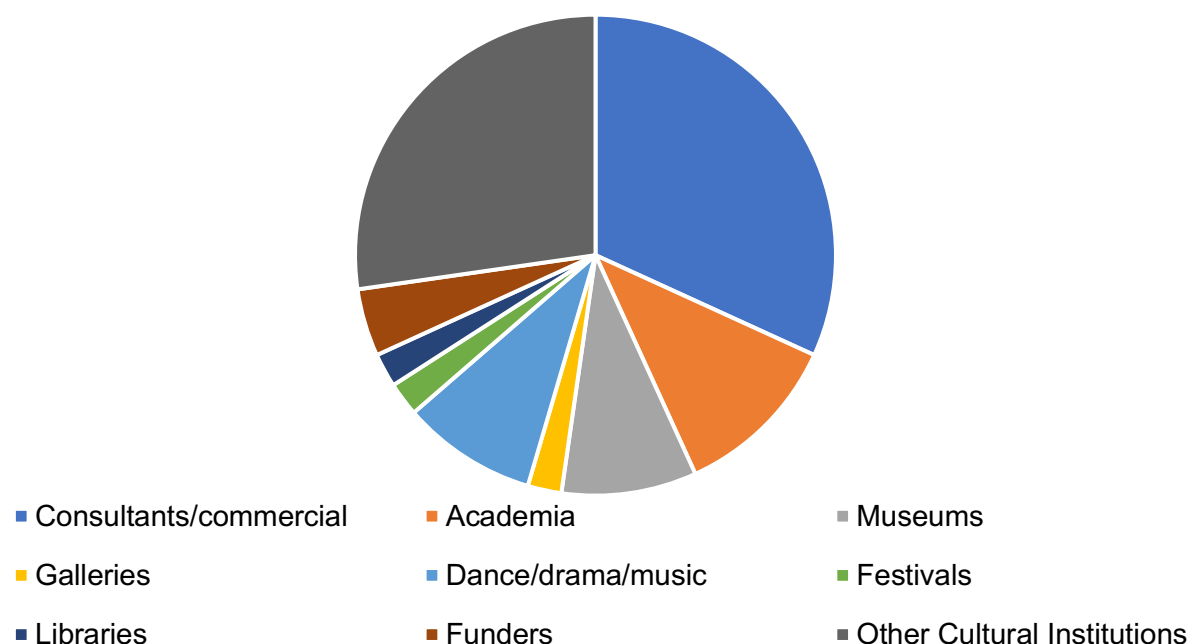


Figure 4.6 Background of the members of the CCV working group.

CCV continue to produce sector reports. Some of their earliest outputs were pandemic-related research, looking at the impact of furlough, theatre participation and a largescale investigation into the impact of COVID-19 ‘on the UK cultural sector and where we go from here’.⁵¹⁷ CCV are positioning themselves as a respected, academic, authoritative, and professional organisation, speaking on behalf of, and educating, cultural practitioners. Their website picks up on this rhetoric: their resources page ‘brings the collective intelligence of the sector together in one place’; their podcast is asking ‘the big questions relating to cultural value in a reflective space’; their raison d’être is ‘to explore the timeliest questions of cultural value’.⁵¹⁸ CCV’s focus for museum evaluation has been on their online FutureLearn course, which I explore further in Chapter 5. Given that they are in the final six months of their funding, their impact on museum evaluation remains remarkably slight.

⁵¹⁷ ‘Culture in Crisis: Impacts of Covid-19 on the UK Cultural Sector and Where We Go from Here.’, ed. by Ben Walmsley, Abigail Gilmore, and others (Centre for Cultural Value, 2022).

⁵¹⁸ ‘Research and Evaluation Practice’, CultureHive, n.d. <<https://www.culturehive.co.uk/research-and-evaluation-practice/>> [accessed 5 March 2022]; ‘Reflecting Value’, Centre for Cultural Value, n.d. <<https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/reflecting-value/>> [accessed 5 March 2022]; ‘Our Work’, Centre for Cultural Value, n.d. <<https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/our-work/>> [accessed 5 March 2022].

Audience segmentation

Audience segmentation is a method used to separate entire audiences into smaller subsets, with each segment having some uniting features. Each organisation creates their own segments, usually detailing these in summative evaluation reports. These can include 'pen portraits' with names and characteristics of each subgroup, and the most effective methods to reach these people. While audience segments are popular with marketing professionals, they have been critiqued by academics as well as satirised by some in the museum community.⁵¹⁹ While not a specific evaluation tool, they are ubiquitous in the sector, especially through the required ACE frameworks, and regularly appear in the summative exhibition evaluation reports of larger museums. The Audience Agency offered segmentation as part of their reports to museums when they held the ACE contract. In 2023, the Illuminate FAQ page on the Arts Council website promised new segments, which would have 'no direct alignment to other classification/segmentation models'.⁵²⁰ As of September 2024, Illuminate audience segmentation remains an ambition for PwC, with a timeline still to be developed.

There are several other segmentation tools in use across the sector. The company Experian aims to 'gather, analyse, combine and process [data] to help people and organisations achieve their goals', including improved understanding of audiences.⁵²¹ Their paid for segmentation tool MOSAIC separates audiences into 15 categories, such as 'Municipal Tenants: Urban renters of social housing facing an array of challenges'.⁵²² Each category is further divided into at least four sub-sections. The Audience Agency uses MOSAIC profiles, as in their report for UCM in 2014, Figure 4.7 shows the results from MAA.⁵²³ The top-level group names, some of which are offensive and judgmental, have changed since this publication ('Claimant Cultures' became 'Municipal Tenants' for example). For MAA, the highest segment was Liberal Opinions (24% of the audience in 2014), but after this, the proportion of the audience in each segment reduces very quickly, with 39% of MAA's audience spread over ten of the categories. The Audience Agency also developed their own

⁵¹⁹ For critique, see Emily Dawson and Eric Jensen, 'Towards A Contextual Turn in Visitor Studies: Evaluating Visitor Segmentation and Identity-Related Motivations', *Visitor Studies*, 14.2 (2011), pp. 127–40; for satire, see Museum of Forward Planning, 'Visit Properly - An Audience Segregation Model for People That Hate Audiences'.

⁵²⁰ 'Illuminate FAQs' [accessed 24 June 2023].

⁵²¹ 'About Experian' Experian UK and Ireland, n.d. <<https://www.experian.co.uk/about-us/>> [accessed 6 February 2022].

⁵²² 'Explanation: Mosaic', The Audience Agency, n.d. <<https://www.theaudienceagency.org/insight/mosaic>> [accessed 6 February 2022].

⁵²³ Pamela Pfrommer and Daniel Cowley, 'Cambridge University Museums Benchmarking 2014 Museum of Archaeology & Anthropology Key Themes Summary' (The Audience Agency, 2015).

segmentation tool, Audience Spectrum, to specifically explore ‘attitudes towards culture’. Audiences are allocated into ten segments based on postcode data, a problematic way to divide people, particularly in a city like Cambridge. There is a considerable amount of information about each group freely available on the Audience Agency website, including a pen portrait for each segment, information about their cultural interests, geographic location in England and ideas for how to engage the group. The Audience Agency continues to offer Audience Spectrum reports, for £250 per report (or £525 including MOSAIC).⁵²⁴

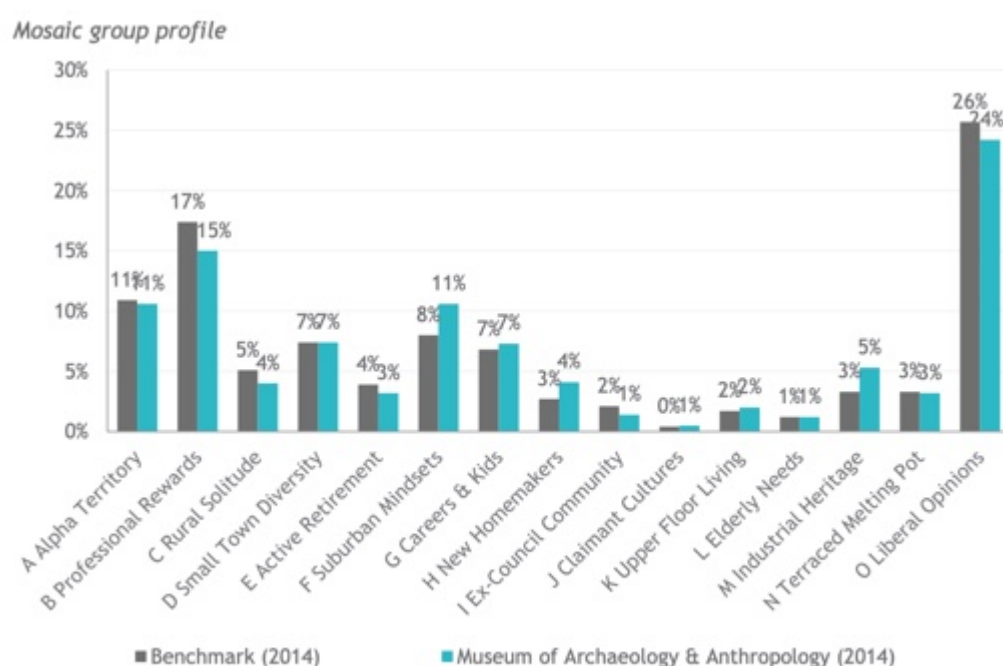


Figure 4.7 MOSAIC group profiles for MAA in 2014.

Consultancy firm Morris Hargreaves McIntyre (MHM) created their own audience segmentation tool, Culture Segments, in 2011. Their desire was to design a ‘system that would resonate, provide insight, show potential, tag records, target, [and] monitor’, which led them to their ‘powerful psychographic segmentation tool’. Rather than relying on postcode data, MHM used ‘people’s deep-seated values and beliefs’ to create their eight segments, by asking a series of ‘Golden Questions’.⁵²⁵ As MHM stated in an earlier document produced with Renaissance North East:

⁵²⁴ ‘Audience Spectrum’, The Audience Agency, n.d. <<https://www.theaudienceagency.org/audience-finder-data-tools/audience-spectrum>> [accessed 6 February 2022]; ‘Audience Spectrum Profiling’, The Audience Agency, n.d. <<https://www.theaudienceagency.org/audience-spectrum/profiling>> [accessed 15 September 2024].

⁵²⁵ Arts Marketing Association, ‘Andrew McIntyre Introduction to Culture Segments’, 2011; ‘Culture Segments’ Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, n.d. <<https://mhminsight.com/culture-segments>> [accessed 5 March 2022].

factors such as age, postcode and media consumption are not defining features in differentiating one museum visitor from another. The main differences between museum visitors tend to be their needs, motivations and behaviour rather than where they live or how old they are.⁵²⁶

MHM have an impressive list of venues that have used Culture Segments, including (in their UK portfolio), the National Trust, the Ashmolean, the Southbank Centre, British Library, British Museum and Historic Royal Palaces. Over 800 museums in the UK are NPOs and are therefore locked into the relationships dictated by the ACE. These organisations are unlikely to have additional money to spend on further audience research, so MHM will primarily be looking for business from non-ACE institutions. While segmentation appears to be a simple way to work out how to target and develop exhibitions, as each organisation creates their own segments they are impossible to compare across systems. With changing funding requirements, data can easily be lost, trapped in the various online systems, and not assisting in exhibition evaluation. Segmentation offers few insights for evaluating permanent museum displays, even though encouraged by funding bodies.

4.5 Conclusion

This aim of this chapter was to determine some of the primary drivers behind museum evaluation in the UK and where permanent displays are positioned within them. While the industry minimum standard of Accreditation has remained relatively static, it does not press for feedback on this aspect of museum work. Meanwhile, there has been a cycle of changes to evaluation and measurement parameters from funders. Government priorities and contracts shift, but frequently return to the concepts of value and quality, without defining either. Some well-respected industry methods (such as the GLOs) become silently terminated and not replaced with anything meaningful; audience data remains in dead systems, without possibility of any long-term comparisons. Frameworks that have been produced or required by funding bodies commonly lack rigour and give no sense of the intellectual arena in which they were created, making them appear simplistic. There is no central repository for evaluation information, freed from the constraints of a funding body. With funders developing, maintaining, and amending their own tools, museum staff struggle to keep on top of the many and varied requirements of the differing bodies. The most evaluation attention has been given to programmes, events and temporary exhibitions, and the techniques developed to assess these are rarely appropriate to use on collections displayed for longer. No funding organisation is specifically asking

⁵²⁶ Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, 'Audience Knowledge Digest: Why People Visit Museums and Galleries, and What Can Be Done to Attract Them' (Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, 2007).

for information about permanent displays, so it is little wonder that there has been scant attention paid to it over the last twenty years.

The findings outlined in this chapter completed my research objective of determining the factors that are influencing current evaluation practice and where permanent displays are positioned. While the demands of funders, both governmental and non-governmental, have been the main impetus for evaluation, the popularity of museums continues to rise. Permanent displays remain the fundamental method of communication with hundreds of thousands of visitors every year. With an already stretched workforce constantly attempting to keep updated on changing priorities, and no one requiring routine exhibition evaluation, skills and knowledge in this area have been weakened through neglect. Evaluation has been further damaged, as staff now feel it is a meaningless chore for funders rather than a core museum practise. With the background knowledge of sector priorities and pressures, and to respond to the gaps in the issues of display evaluation, my research led me to develop robust, practical, and well-researched alternatives. The following chapter examines the development of the Impact Evaluation Resources and training, demonstrating its practical applications, and responding to my inquiry into how the provision of improved resources can increase our understanding of the impact of permanent displays.

Chapter 5

Including the displays: the development of the Impact Evaluation Resources and training

5.1 Introduction

As I discussed in Chapter 3, my research has been characterised by both autoethnography and reflective practice, based on my work as a museum evaluator and educator in the UCM. Autoethnography affords me the opportunity to 'reflect critically upon [my] personal and professional' experiences: something which is of immense value to the practice-based researcher.⁵²⁷ Katz wrote that 'ethnographic methods for collecting data inevitably require losing oneself in the field'.⁵²⁸ Having 'lost' myself in my field for an extended period, it was necessary to develop the analysis of my encounters. Unlike Macdonald's ethnography at the Science Museum, I had no big opening day to mark an end to my ethnographic data collection: there was no 'ceremonial opening' of an exhibition, no 'rite of passage' and none of the 'rituals of cleansing' that she experienced.⁵²⁹ My analysis developed in 'the natural way', slowly and over a long period of time.⁵³⁰ It built upon my sector knowledge and experience, having been involved with museum evaluation for many years, working within the parameters of the guidelines and recommendations from both government and funders discussed in Chapter 4. As these have little reference to museum displays and exhibitions, there is scant support available for venues that want to carefully analyse their permanent public galleries.

A significant pressure on museums is the need for them to demonstrate their worth in society, against the backdrop of less money, fewer staff and potential closure; research by Birkbeck University determined that 467 museums have closed since 2000.⁵³¹ These are reasons why permanent exhibition evaluation has been side-lined but are also why it must be reinvigorated: 'credible evaluation', writes Stephen Weil,

⁵²⁷ Pace, p. 2.

⁵²⁸ Jack Katz, 'On Becoming an Ethnographer', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 48.1 (2019), pp. 16–50 (p. 26).

⁵²⁹ Sharon Macdonald, *Behind the Scenes at The Science Museum*, p. 202.

⁵³⁰ Katz, 'On Becoming an Ethnographer', p. 26.

⁵³¹ Mark Liebenrood, 'New Data on UK Museum Closure 2000–2024: Governance and Region', Mapping Museums Lab, 2024 <<https://mapping-museums.bbk.ac.uk/2024/03/20/new-data-on-uk-museum-closure-2000-2024-governance-and-region/>> [accessed 21 September 2024].

‘will be all the more critical to the museum’s survival’.⁵³² This chapter draws these themes together, beginning with the reflective analysis of my autoethnographic observations, and the results of interviews with staff from across the museums, assisting me in my research objective of understanding what improvements need to be made to evaluation to increase its application to permanent displays. Having listened to the evaluation needs and feelings of my colleagues, attention is turned to resources that are already in existence, and an analysis of fourteen of the most common evaluation courses and toolkits follows. An autoethnographic account of my experiences attending two evaluation courses examines the limitations and issues with these training methods. Finally, drawing on my research and reflections, I will explore the development of the Impact Evaluation Resources and associated training, exploring how they came into existence, and why they are an improvement on current practice in the sector.

5.2 Museum Evaluation: An Autoethnographic Approach

An important aspect of university museums is their remit as places that connect researchers and the public; UCM forms ‘a research infrastructure that is unique to the Cambridge research environment’.⁵³³ As the Head of Public Engagement and Learning based in a university museum, I have found myself approached more and more to assist with evaluating research, either that which was delivered through public programming, or in exhibitions. More recently, I have delivered training for academic and non-academic audiences in evaluating outputs and impact. As outlined in the introduction, impact in universities is often related to the Research Excellence Framework, and has been most succinctly defined by academic impact expert Mark Reed as ‘the good that researchers can do in the world’.⁵³⁴ Taking a slightly broader view, the University of Cambridge suggests that impact is ‘an effect on, change or benefit to the economy, society, culture, public policy or services, health, the environment or quality of life, beyond academia’.⁵³⁵

University museums can play an important role in demonstrating impact. In autumn 2018 a cross-UCM Working Group for Research and Impact was set up, of which I was a member. A small group of staff from this group gave presentations at a

⁵³² Stephen E Weil, *Making Museums Matter* (Washington, D.C. : Smithsonian Institution Press, 2002), p. 60.

⁵³³ ‘Research’ University of Cambridge Museums, n.d. <<https://www.museums.cam.ac.uk/research>> [accessed 7 July 2024].

⁵³⁴ Mark S. Reed, *The Research Impact Handbook* / Mark S. Reed. (Kinnoir, Huntly, Aberdeenshire: Fast Track Impact, 2016), p. 13.

⁵³⁵ Michal Filus, ‘Vice-Chancellor’s Awards’, 2019 <<https://www.research-strategy.admin.cam.ac.uk/impact/vice-chancellors-awards>> [accessed 7 July 2024].

workshop organised by the Cambridge REF team for all University staff in October of that year. My presentation, 'Creative approaches: Interpretative research through the UCM', focussed on exhibition evaluation and the techniques I had employed across different museums: tracking, meaning maps, surveys, drawings, and visual imagery. A second workshop, 'Collaborating with the UCM to enhance the impact of research', took place in March 2019. This was aimed at Cambridge researchers who had 'early-stage ideas that might link to collections and/or expertise' but who had no prior experience with UCM.⁵³⁶ The talks gave practical examples of collaboration that had taken place in the past and were followed by surgeries for academics wanting to gain specific information from museum staff. All 80 spaces for the workshop were taken within two weeks, demonstrating the appetite for such events. As well as presenting in the morning, I also co-facilitated a surgery session, helping academics to understand the huge potential in collections, and thinking about public impact beyond an exhibition.

My overwhelming impression from these workshops was the desire for researchers and academics to work with museums and to create exhibition outputs for their work. Temporary displays were seen as a quick and impactful way of engaging with what they called 'the general public'. A 2013 study by the Museums Association found that public perceptions of museums were generally positive, with museums seen as trusted institutions, central to knowledge creation and places of learning.⁵³⁷ An Ipsos survey in 2021 ranked museum curators joint fourth position in Britain's most trusted professions, the same ranking as teachers.⁵³⁸ These factors were attractive to academic staff, keen to share their research and demonstrate their impact; museums added cachet and status: a stamp of approval for their findings. The workshops were designed to support academics, a group who have been shown to need additional assistance, particularly when recently appointed. A 2003 study in the UK and New Zealand showed that for academics, their 'early experiences... were characterised by the stress of having to continually deal with complex problems without much support and in which work pressures were significant'.⁵³⁹ The courses I helped to

⁵³⁶ 'Collaborating with the University of Cambridge Museums to Enhance the Impact of Research', *Eventbrite*, 2019 <<https://www.eventbrite.co.uk/e/collaborating-with-the-university-of-cambridge-museums-to-enhance-the-impact-of-research-tickets-55025380394>> [accessed 6 January 2024].

⁵³⁷ Museums Association and BritainThinks, 'Public Perceptions of – and Attitudes to – the Purposes of Museums in Society', 2013.

⁵³⁸ 'Ipsos Veracity Index: Trust in the Police Drops for the Second Year in a Row', Ipsos, 2021 <<https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/ipsos-veracity-index-trust-police-drops-second-year-row>> [accessed 21 January 2024].

⁵³⁹ Lin S. Norton, *Action Research in Teaching and Learning: A Practical Guide to Conducting Pedagogical Research in Universities* (Taylor & Francis Group, 2009), p. 24.

deliver showed a definite thirst for training in how museum exhibitions could work in proving impact and provide much-needed support to early career academics.

At the same time, there was a gap in understanding from academic staff about the drivers and pressures on museums. When communicating to one early career researcher that MAA's schedule for temporary exhibitions was booked up for six years, they were shocked, telling me that the next free slot was after the end of the funding. Their surprise increased when I told them it was also after the end of the funding for my post. The precarious and temporary nature of academic contracts is a continuing problem in universities in the UK, with a 2022 study stating that around one third of researchers were on temporary contracts for over ten years.⁵⁴⁰

Researchers were keen to show their impact but were not sure how to approach museums; I spoke to academics who had already written exhibitions into their funding applications, but had not consulted with the museum they wanted to work with. They were dismayed to discover that they could not borrow objects and material at short notice, that they would need to provide information on the environmental conditions of the museum or venue they wanted to display them in, and provide the appropriate insurance cover or indemnity: all standards required for loans by Accreditation.⁵⁴¹

Shortly after these workshops, in summer 2019, as I started the DHeritage, a colleague from the Fitzwilliam Museum and I were seconded part-time to advise on REF case studies that had used museum exhibitions to demonstrate their public impact. Our work was hampered by meagre evaluation results, usually of temporary exhibitions, which had often closed several years prior to the writing of the case study. The exhibition evaluation frequently asked questions that had little reference to the original research, and we found that many of the reports demonstrated the pathway to impact rather than the impact itself. We were left trying to unpick the poorly planned evaluation results of displays that could no longer be seen. The knowledge and skill of how to ask good questions of museum audiences, in a manner that can demonstrate impact, appeared to be a gap for the researchers. As Mark Reed wrote in the Research Impact Handbook:

I think [researchers] are all pretty good at coming up with research questions and setting objectives for the new knowledge and insights we want to derive

⁵⁴⁰ Cecile B. Menard and Sara Shinton, 'The Career Paths of Researchers in Long-Term Employment on Short-Term Contracts: Case Study from a UK University', *Plos One*, 17.9 (2022), p. e0274486 (p. 1).

⁵⁴¹ 'Loans out (Lending Objects) - the Spectrum Standard', Collections Trust, n.d. <<https://collectionstrust.org.uk/resource/loans-out-lending-objects-the-spectrum-standard/>> [accessed 7 July 2024].

from our research. However, most of us have little experience of developing impact goals or identifying objectives relating to the knowledge exchange activities we will use to achieve those impacts.⁵⁴²

As part of the development of our work with Cambridge academics, I co-delivered a session for the University's Engaged Researcher series in November 2019. These workshops, co-ordinated by the Public Engagement team, are open to all 'postgraduate students, researchers and professional staff' and offer the opportunity to gain a training certificate.⁵⁴³ This training again impressed on me the appetite for learning about museums, as well as the large knowledge gap about how museums could support both research and impact. These threads were coming together while I was beginning my doctoral journey. One of my research questions was how to improve the evaluation of permanent displays to demonstrate their impact. The attraction of short-term funding means that temporary displays and public programming have often become the driver of museum work, with permanent exhibitions side-lined and rarely updated. While this remains true, the self-reflective process of the DHeritage revealed to me how this focus has impacted upon academics and researchers who desire to work with museums, who also often see temporary displays and programming as the only ways to demonstrate impact, while dismissing small changes that could be made to permanent galleries. What was needed was a suite of resources that would be relevant to current museum staff, but also give researchers and academics confidence that evaluation could demonstrate impact in a variety of robust ways.

5.3 UCM staff needs

'Evaluation,' writes Judy Diamond, 'is less about data collection than it is about immersion'.⁵⁴⁴ To be evaluative in my approach, I was fully immersed in the environment that I was researching. This was a natural outcome of a professional doctorate, but to solidify my understanding of needs from a museum perspective I spoke to staff from across the UCM as part of a formal interview process. A detailed analysis of who was chosen for interview has been covered in Chapter 3. Eight interviews took place in 2021, with a ninth agreed upon but never achieved. All the staff members were known to me, as I had previously worked in collaboration with them or their collections. The interviews took place online while museums were

⁵⁴² Mark S. Reed, *The Research Impact Handbook*. (Kinnoir, Huntly, Aberdeenshire : Fast Track Impact, 2016, 2016), p. 42.

⁵⁴³ 'Engaged Researcher Training', University of Cambridge, 2013 <<https://www.cam.ac.uk/public-engagement/information-for-staff-and-students/engaged-researcher-training>> [accessed 21 January 2024].

⁵⁴⁴ Diamond, p. 163.

closed to the public due to COVID lockdowns, with each interviewee in the familiar surroundings of their own home. Capturing interview information at that time felt special: staff talked wistfully about the displays and collections, with a deep sense of longing for venues to reopen to the public. A study published in 2022 found ‘the strong emotional connection that museum professionals feel for their sites or collections’ was a common theme, ‘even if for some, it felt wrong to put too much focus on it’ during a global pandemic.⁵⁴⁵ This resonated with the data I was collecting: a year into the pandemic, people were reflective about their own role and the position of their museum in the culture of the city.

This time of self-reflection was revelatory. At least half of my working week over the last twenty years has been spent as a museum educator, speaking to groups of people of various sizes and ages. Museum education has an immediate response, written into the faces of those I am teaching, transmitted through the energy of the group, revealed in the questions at the end of a session. Based on this feedback, I subtly change my teaching, trying out different objects or making new connections between the collection and the lives of those in front of me. Those in other areas of museum work rarely get the chance to stop and reflect in the same way. Exhibition evaluation takes place long after a temporary display has opened, when curators and researchers have usually moved on to the next project. Others have also recognised this pattern in museums. Bernadette Lynch has spearheaded a drive for ‘custom-made reflective practice’, based on her study with a wide variety of staff members about community engagement in 2010.⁵⁴⁶ Lynch identifies short-term funding, with its focus on reporting success, as being a key driver for a lack of reflection, allowing little opportunity for organisation learning: ‘the funding environment thus contributes to a fear of reflection and the perceived ‘insecurity’ of senior management in opening up the discussion of the work’.⁵⁴⁷ Elsewhere, Lynch recognised the ‘urgency’ to create ‘honest, reflective, collaborative practice’ so that staff can work together to create truly inclusive museum practice.⁵⁴⁸ Lockdowns and continued uncertainties around reopening gave a temporary pause to museum work, and allowed all staff the opportunity for reflection. I was able to make the most of this

⁵⁴⁵ Rachel Mackay, ‘An Abrupt and Brutal Audit: An Analysis of the Crisis Management Response of UK Museums and Heritage Attractions to the Covid-19 Pandemic’, *Museum International*, 73.3–4 (2021), pp. 8–19.

⁵⁴⁶ Bernadette T. Lynch, ‘Custom-Made Reflective Practice: Can Museums Realise Their Capabilities in Helping Others Realise Theirs?’, *Museum Management and Curatorship* (1990), 26.5 (2011), pp. 441–58 (p. 443).

⁵⁴⁷ Lynch, p.444.

⁵⁴⁸ Bernadette Lynch, “Good for You, but I Don’t Care!”: Critical Museum Pedagogy in Educational and Curatorial Practice’, in *Contemporary Curating and Museum Education*, ed. by Carmen Mörsch, Angeli Sachs, and Thomas Sieber (transcript Verlag, 2016), pp. 255–68 (p. 265).

with the interviews, probing into staff motivations, encouraging their honesty in the liminal time, and feeling the same strong sadness and grief over not being able to share our spaces with our audiences.

There was an interview schedule, but the conversations we had were wide-ranging. Several times staff apologised for not being able to remember specific details of comments cards, or the location of questionnaires: knowledge that they would have had easily at hand if we were in the museum, but the gaps in their memory another mark of all they had lost over the previous year with COVID. The interviews did cover topics such as current evaluation methods, systems in place for collection and analysis of visitor comments, and future aspirations. Other than general practical information about how evaluation is carried out, there were two main themes which were developed through different conversations: that staff are already the expert in their venue and audience and, perhaps because of this, there was no clear strategy for carrying out exhibition evaluation.

- Staff know their audience and their venue

While acknowledging that they don't do very much evaluation, several of those interviewed made statements about their depth of knowledge about their visitors, with a prevailing attitude that staff already know audiences and their requirements. There were claims about certain text elements or specific areas of the museum being popular, and that specific displays were well loved, but no evidence was given to substantiate these claims. Some senior staff members spent a lot of time working in the galleries, either sitting at a reception desk or giving talks or tours, which led them to believe that they already know the audiences that are currently attending:

I sort of know what they think about this place. You know, but I need them to tell me that.

D1 (Director)⁵⁴⁹

I feel like I know my visitors quite well, because I spend so much time on the front desk talking to them. But I also think that might be a little bit of an illusion. Because obviously, visitors are quite selective in what they tell you.

B1 (Curator)⁵⁵⁰

In addition, Curator B1 specifically referred to demographic results in surveys that had been carried out but disagreed with the data because of 'anecdotal evidence',

⁵⁴⁹ Appendix 3, Transcript D1.

⁵⁵⁰ Appendix 3, Transcript B1.

based on them frequently working in the galleries.⁵⁵¹ Many staff felt that evaluation was often taking place, not in any formal sense but by informally observing people in the galleries, 'chatting' at the reception desk or reading comments books. This is a recognised practice: museum evaluator Randi Korn uses both formal and informal conversations with visitors to guide her thinking around exhibitions. She recognised that the more she spoke to people 'on the floor', she 'began to see and understand our visitors for who they are instead of who we want them to be'.⁵⁵² Informal evaluation was an important element with the staff I interviewed, it being mentioned in every museum:

But there's the anecdotal, evaluation, interpretation, understanding of galleries that comes from watching people in the space that... comes from talking to people on galleries, also actually giving tours to people, or having random conversations that gives us all a sense of how the exhibition or the gallery is working... But that kind of subjective data is hugely important because museums are nothing, if not that.

A1 (Curator)⁵⁵³

We don't really do any formal evaluation of the labels; we don't really have the structures in place to do that... We're very dependent upon just kind of when people chat to us... We often actually seek people's feedback on [test labels] actively. [SJH: So how do you seek the feedback on it?] Just chat to people.

B1 (Curator)⁵⁵⁴

I think also because we're a small team, all of us end up sat on the front desk quite often. And so even if it's not a formal evaluation process, you're watching visitors and how they interact in the space and hearing what questions they ask each other and you. I think it's more kind of at the coalface. I feel like I have a good sense of our visitors, but not necessarily in a way that I could write down in any formal way.

C1 (Curator)⁵⁵⁵

We didn't do a formal evaluation [of labels], but we did talk to people about them... informally [with] visitors in the gallery and got really good feedback. [Staff member] keeps their office door open, and they just talk to people, they

⁵⁵¹ Appendix 3, Transcript B1.

⁵⁵² Korn, 'Redefining the Visitor Experience', p. 17.

⁵⁵³ Appendix 3, Transcript A1.

⁵⁵⁴ Appendix 3, Transcript B1.

⁵⁵⁵ Appendix 3, Transcript C1.

come and chat... And I know I talked to people about what they thought. And when people made comments about them... we thought, 'Oh, yeah, okay'. We shared them with each other.

D1 (Director)⁵⁵⁶

We definitely apply learning from one [exhibition] to the other, but it's very informal... But we know why [exhibitions don't work] just by observing, not in a structured way... There's no structured way of offering thoughts for a visitor...we didn't give them the opportunity to evaluate that.

E1 (Curator)⁵⁵⁷

And we are looking at finding ways of incorporating more... informal ways of collecting data... throughout the galleries as well

E2 (Education Officer)⁵⁵⁸

Staff in all roles were communicating with members of public regularly, and these interactions led them to believe they had good insights into who was visiting and how those visitors behaved. Such institutional knowledge has been recognised as an important factor in creating better and more inclusive museum evaluation: it is easier to create customised evaluation when it is 'grounded in the cultural context' in which it takes place.⁵⁵⁹ And understanding this cultural context can be assisted by staff spending time among visitors. There was also a genuine desire from staff to know more about visitors, especially around more subtle themes like relevance and emotional responses. These active engagements between staff and visitors created additional challenges: the variety of roles and responsibilities for museum professionals was becoming unmanageable and overwhelming. Some curators were caring for collections that covered impossibly wide geographic or subject areas. One of the museums (B) has very few staff; several interviewees had responsibility for high level strategy alongside the day-to-day practical work of keeping a museum open. When evaluation comments came to them about improvements that could be made, staff did not always feel such enhancements were achievable. There was disconnect between things that museum visitors were asking for and the realistic expectations of what museum staff could achieve. This was compounded when the same comments were mentioned, adding to the sense of overwhelm: 'the same

⁵⁵⁶ Appendix 3, Transcript D1.

⁵⁵⁷ Appendix 3, Transcript E1.

⁵⁵⁸ Appendix 3, Transcript E2.

⁵⁵⁹ Alice Anderson and Michelle A. Mileham, 'Welcome to the Museum: Reflecting on Representation & Inclusion in Museum Evaluation', *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 63.4 (2020), pp. 597–603 (p. 601).

things would come up over and over and over as well, which were often things we couldn't deal with' (C1, Curator).⁵⁶⁰

These unrealistic expectations were internal as well. Volunteers and other staff members were hoping for change to be enacted on a timescale that curators felt was not achievable or were asking for things that they could not resolve quickly. This led to visceral negative reactions from curators when passed visitor comments: 'Honestly, the first reaction, the first thought is: ugh' (A1, Curator).⁵⁶¹ These emotional responses were also given by curators when referencing the permanent displays which they had inherited when they began their role. In some instances, they knew the exhibition content was incorrect, with errors in both object choice and in the labelling. This has resulted in strong negative emotional responses from staff to displays, such as them being 'a bunch of labels I didn't write and don't care about in the first place' (B1, Curator).⁵⁶² Museum staff usually know the weak spots in displays. Exposing these to the public and having people potentially comment and critique areas that the 'experts' know are incorrect makes staff feel vulnerable. Staff are stretched very thinly in their work. By not doing evaluation of permanent displays, it avoids revealing the problems that they know are there, but that they do not have the capacity to resolve.

Staff had unrealistic expectations of themselves, of what their knowledge *should* be around evaluation. Museum employees in all roles are expected to have a wide range of knowledge in many subjects as well as their specialism: a key finding in a 2016 sector-wide survey.⁵⁶³ Museum demands are many, and the scope of collections meant that curatorial and front of house colleagues have many responsibilities and a breadth of knowledge. When it came to interpreting visitor comments, there was a lack of time, skill and specialist staff (0.8% of UK museum staff have audience research and evaluation as their main role).⁵⁶⁴ Sometimes staff were removing comments books and cards from galleries because they knew they were not robust evaluation methods, but they were not replaced with any other method of collecting responses, resulting in no outlet for visitors give feedback. Staff would sometimes tell me, with a guilty undertone, that they were going to use a comments book in a temporary or permanent display. These conversations

⁵⁶⁰ Appendix 3, Transcript C1.

⁵⁶¹ Appendix 3, Transcript B1.

⁵⁶² Appendix 3, Transcript B1.

⁵⁶³ BOP Consulting, 'Character Matters: Attitudes, Behaviours and Skills in the UK Museum Workforce', p. 55.

⁵⁶⁴ BOP Consulting and The Museum Consultancy, p. 35.

highlighted to me again that there was a training and knowledge gap, and that currently available resources were not meeting their needs. These needs were broader than just those being faced in Cambridge. A 2024 survey of 54 museums from across the world, carried out by students at Pratt Institute's School of Information in New York and published on the MuseumNext website, found that the vast majority of staff undertaking evaluation are fitting it in alongside the other demands of their roles.⁵⁶⁵ The conclusions of this study also supported my findings of a lack of staff time and skill: 'institutions often lack the time and resources for robust audience research, and employees on research teams likely have multiple responsibilities.'⁵⁶⁶ This demonstrated the need for the IER and associated training generally, but opened up a potential avenue for a specific evaluation resource: that on reflective evaluation with staff. There was deep engagement with my interview process to talk about exhibition evaluation, supported by the results of the Power and Memory staff interviews outlined in Chapter 3. This high level of institutional knowledge and informal evaluation that was already taking place needed to be captured into a resource that could empower staff to use this as a distinct method. For these reasons, I created a specific resource for evaluating exhibitions by talking to staff, giving them a voice in the evaluation process.

- **Insufficient strategy and process**

When I asked staff about the ways in which evaluation was currently taking place, there was a lack of clear strategy, process, and resource for individual museums, with the emphasis returning to the informal data collection processes outlined above. Staff in several museums mentioned the support they received from UCM's central team, especially for the collection of demographic data used in reporting to the various governmental bodies, but they had no plan for their individual venues. The result of this lack of focus was that museum evaluation was usually opportunistic rather than well thought through. D1 (Director) admitted there was no 'systematic approach to evaluation, but... what I'm trying to do is just sort of encourage [staff] to be thinking about that self-reflective and reflective practice'.⁵⁶⁷ This is particularly pertinent in University Museums, who are at the interface of research and impact. The 2024 MuseumNext survey again supports these findings in a broader context,

⁵⁶⁵ Brianna Casas, Katherine Duval, Nicolas Lord, 'Evaluating the Evaluators: Investigating Museum Survey and Research Practices', *MuseumNext*, 2024
<<https://www.museumnext.com/article/investigating-museum-survey-and-research-practices/>>
[accessed 18 August 2024].

⁵⁶⁶ Casas, Duval, and Lord.

⁵⁶⁷ Appendix 3, Transcript D1.

as only 24% of museums felt audience evaluation was an organisational priority (although a further 54% agreed, but with caveats).⁵⁶⁸

The interviewees explained that evaluation was something that happened when there was additional capacity with staff time, or extra money. In practice, there was rarely time or money. Curator A1 recognised this mismatch between desire and means, calling evaluation 'one of the Cinderella aspects of museums... it's not the best resourced and isn't always written into the development of a project'.⁵⁶⁹ A2 expanded that they 'don't have evaluation built into our core programme'.⁵⁷⁰ Most staff talked about wanting to do it better, but audience research often ending up semi-permanently on the 'guilt list' (B1, Curator).⁵⁷¹ C1 expanded on this:

It's something we keep saying we need to do better, and we haven't been able to... It's a resource thing. It's quite an easy thing to drop off when you've got limited resources.

C1 (Curator)⁵⁷²

This lack of overarching strategy could help to explain the reliance on informal evaluation. The enthusiasm of museum staff for their subject matter meant they were keen for visitors to engage deeply with the displays and to have a response, even if that response was a strongly negative one: 'we always talk about exhibitions being provocative. They don't seem to provoke anything' (A1, Curator).⁵⁷³ The Curator at Museum E directly said that 'positive feedback is less useful', although this view was not held by all.⁵⁷⁴ Positive feedback was used to support overstretched staff, reminding them of their purpose at stressful moments:

And every so often we'd get a real gem, which was a really lovely paragraph explaining that they'd come for the day, and... they were so glad that they found us.

D2 (Administrator)⁵⁷⁵

Sometimes I do have a few [comments cards] lying around... You know just as a... morale boosting sort of thing to remind you when there's some shitstorm going on: one person was happy.

⁵⁶⁸ Casas, Duval, and Lord.

⁵⁶⁹ Appendix 3, Transcript A1.

⁵⁷⁰ Appendix 3, Transcript A2.

⁵⁷¹ Appendix 3, Transcript B1.

⁵⁷² Appendix 3, Transcript C1.

⁵⁷³ Appendix 3, Transcript C1.

⁵⁷⁴ Appendix 3, Transcript E1.

⁵⁷⁵ Appendix 3, Transcript D2.

Curator A1 felt that visitor evaluation could be the catalyst between collections-focussed colleagues and front of house staff for 'creative informal conversation'.⁵⁷⁷

None of the museums, however, were using evaluation for very much beyond responding to the direct or short-term requirements of funders. Some staff struggled to see any point in evaluating permanent displays that had very little interpretation; D1 said: 'what is there to evaluate? But obviously, there's everything to evaluate'.⁵⁷⁸ While naming a staff member who was very keen to carry out more evaluation, this director wanted to find a way that was 'lighter touch and more efficient'.⁵⁷⁹

There is an abundance of evaluation materials, courses, frameworks and publications freely available to museum staff to assist with evaluation. Some of these would help D1 to find the 'lighter touch and more efficient' methods. These materials and courses are not being used or referenced by museum staff. There were barriers between the available resources and the professional practice of museum staff, especially when I asked them to reflect on permanent displays. The challenge for my work was how to produce practical frameworks that met the needs of current and upcoming museum staff, and to ensure they responded to the needs that were surfaced through the interviews.

5.4 Comparing evaluation methods

In the last twenty years many toolkits and resources have been produced to assist with evaluation in museums and heritage sites. A summary of the main resources is in Table 5.1, separated into those created by cultural organisations, funders, educational providers and in-person courses. For these to have any credibility with university museums, I felt these should use examples of evaluation of cultural heritage generally as a basic measure, but ideally these should mention exhibitions specifically. Due to the limited literature, I was not expecting to see anything on the evaluation of permanent collections. To reflect the variety with museums, and to increase credibility with some colleagues, I was keen to see examples of both arts and science collections, and ideally a list of further reading or suggestions of additional resources. The final column in the table is a subjective analysis of whether I felt they would be useful and useable by museum professionals or academic

⁵⁷⁶ Appendix 3, Transcript D1.

⁵⁷⁷ Appendix 3, Transcript A1.

⁵⁷⁸ Appendix 3, Transcript D1.

⁵⁷⁹ Appendix 3, Transcript D1.

researchers to practically deliver evaluation. This included whether the suggested methods would produce ‘robust’ evaluation, discussing or promoting reliable ways of data collection that did not rely on opportunistic, unsampled populations. To be robust, I wanted to see reference to how the sample of people was representative of the total audience or whether a variety of evaluation methods were advised to triangulate results. I did not want the only recommendation to be methods that were reliant on self-motivated visitors completing them, such as self-directed surveys or comments books. If a tool considered ethical or similar implications, this would contribute to my considerations of robustness. While this is a subjective measure, my familiarity with both practice and theory, and with the results of the interviews in mind, I feel that I am well-positioned to comment on the resources’ use for producing evaluation for permanent exhibitions.

Of the toolkits I surveyed, those produced by funders seemed to be the least useable in practice. They did not provide enough information for venues to deliver useful evaluation results, being more concerned with overarching frameworks, or persuading venues that evaluation *in itself* was beneficial. Resources from educational organisations were heavily focussed on programming, and when they referred to museums or displays unreliable methods were often used or terminology was applied incorrectly. Perhaps the worst example of this is the *Impact Measuring Toolkit for Museums* from the University of Southampton, which was created with a science centre and has no reference to museums at all. It suggests methods which are versions of comments walls or visible Likert scales, and for four out of the five methods warns that data analysis is ‘time consuming and requires expertise’, finishing with the suggestion that museums should ‘seek guidance from your local university!’.⁵⁸⁰ Many museums have no relationship with a local university, and could find such statements patronising and off-putting, preventing them from working with researchers.

The most practical and useable of all the resources was the evaluation toolkit produced by SHARE Museums East, a museum development organisation supported by funding through the Arts Council until 2024.⁵⁸¹ First published in 2008, an updated version was due to be launched in 2020 with an in-person workshop but this was cancelled due to the pandemic. Written by museum consultant Harriet Foster, the toolkit contains museum case studies and examples throughout, although these are exclusive arts based, with no science collections mentioned. The toolkit

⁵⁸⁰ Shaby, Peleg, and Coombs, p. 8, 10, 14, and 16.

⁵⁸¹ See also Chapter 2 for a discussion of this publication.

emphasises simplicity, but sometimes reverts to simplistic. Particularly disappointing is the 'further resources' section, which consists exclusively of links to websites, mostly to those of large museums (including the V&A and The British Museum), funders (such as ACE and the National Lottery Fund), and sector support organisations (Collections Trust, Association of Independent Museums, the Museums Association). When I checked the 46 URLs in early 2024 just over half (56%) are functioning correctly, almost a quarter (24%) directing to the right website, but not the correct page, and 1 in 5 are broken completely. Only one academic article is suggested: Sherry Arnstein's paper 'A ladder of citizen participation'. The weblink provided, much like the link between the toolkit and the theoretical literature, is also broken.⁵⁸²

⁵⁸² 'Page Not Found' Participatory Methods, n.d.
<<https://www.participatorymethods.org/sites/participatorymethods.org/files/Arnstein%20ladder%201969.pdf>> [accessed 31 July 2022].

Culture organisations								
Resource name and publication date	Publisher and their field	Resource synopsis	Suggested methods	Cultural heritage specific examples?	Exhibition examples?	Arts & science?	Reading list?	Useable for permanent exhibition evaluation?
Making Data Work Ben Walmsley et al. ⁵⁸³ 2022	Centre for Cultural Value Culture	Tagline: 'A scoping survey to develop a mixed-methods evaluation framework for culture' The framework tool they have created (Planning a framework for Evaluation: Embedding a Culture of Learning) is an appendix in this report, but marked as a 'work in progress, prototype draft only'. ⁵⁸⁴	A 'wheel of change', with four outer components: Investments, Activities, Outputs, Outcomes, all leading to the central target of Impacts and Ambitions. Many sources of data are given, but this is more a suggested framework within which to work to maximise impact.	Yes, one. A case study in the main document covers the cultural potential in Bradford.	Yes. Framework includes examples of outcome indicators that refer to exhibitions and displays.	No, arts only.	No.	Yes, to an extent. The framework might be helpful for specific projects, but harder to apply to general exhibitions and displays. The possible evaluation questions are useable and the sources of where to find that data are useful. It is not intended to be a practical guide to data collection, so would need to be used in conjunction with other resources.

⁵⁸³ Ben Walmsley, Louise Comerford Boyes, and others, 'Making Data Work' (Centre for Cultural Value, 2022).

⁵⁸⁴ Walmsley, Comerford Boyes, and others. p.1.

Evaluation Toolkit for Museums ⁵⁸⁵ updated edition 2020	SHARE Museums East Museum development organisation	'A comprehensive look at everything you ever wanted to know about evaluation in museums.' ⁵⁸⁶	Suggests logic models. Comments books, interviews, focus groups, questionnaires , post codes, visitor observation , diaries, visual methods, graffiti walls, mobile responses, social media. Those in bold have longer sections explaining how to practically do them.	Yes.	Yes.	No, arts only.	There is a section of links to external resources - all are weblinks.	Yes, to an extent. It is most relevant to people who already work in museums. The section on data collection is very strong on learning how to ask good questions, and practical help for questionnaires and focus groups. Other evaluation methods are not covered in such depth, and some that are suggested (graffiti walls and emails of complaint, for example) are not robust evaluation methods.

⁵⁸⁵ Foster, *Evaluation Toolkit For Museums*.

⁵⁸⁶ Harriet Foster, *Evaluation Toolkit For Museums* (SHARE Museums East, 2020), p. 2.

Audience Evaluation: Interpretation with insight ⁵⁸⁷ 2017	National Trust Conservation	A framework, case studies and methodology that 'explains how to use evaluation to create really engaging interpretation'. ⁵⁸⁸	An iterative evaluation cycle, from defining the purpose of the evaluation, through planning, collecting evidence, understanding it, and then learning and sharing the conclusions. Practical advice on observation, tracking, vox pops, interviews, peer reviews, focus groups, questionnaires, accompanied visits, embedded/ participatory.	Yes.	Yes, in the methods section.	No, arts only.	General links to a variety of websites in a further resource section. Two academic articles linked, both on observing visitors.	Yes, to an extent. Each technique gets a double page spread of how to do it, which is useful but brief. Asking questions section is helpful and a page on ethics is a good addition.
Identifying the pearls – what data is important for my organisation? Why is all this visitor	Audience Data UK; now on 'Culture Hive', the Arts Marketing Association	A short guide to visitor research and identifying the important data.	Visitor comments book, count of visitors, comments cards, short questionnaires (for whole venue and programme specific), survey	No. No examples given.	No. No examples given, but the focus throughout is on exhibitions and museums.	No. None given.	No. Some links, but they are all dead.	Yes, at a very basic level. This is a step-by-step document to help venues begin the process of evaluating their

⁵⁸⁷ National Trust, Audience Evaluation: Interpretation with insight (2017).

⁵⁸⁸ National Trust, p. 2.

information so important? ⁵⁸⁹ 2012	Resource hub Culture		through local paper, large-scale questionnaires, focus groups, visitor observation.					audiences. There is insufficient information for individual techniques.
Measure What Matters Guide ⁵⁹⁰ no date	Happy Museum Cultural leadership organisation	A resource to help organisations think about 'the impact of museums on emotions, creativity, wellbeing and sustainability'. ⁵⁹¹	Planning is based on Story of Change. Resources are aimed at internal organisational review. For audiences, they use their survey tool LIFE: Learning, Interaction, Feelings and Environment. ⁵⁹² Sentiment tool, Likert scales with physical responses, Embedded Evaluation (labels, mood trees,	Yes.	Not directly. All the case studies involved museums and displays to some extent, but none of them evaluate displays or exhibitions.	Arts and technology case studies on the website.	No.	Yes, to a limited extent. A few of the suggested practical methods could be applied to exhibitions, but some are not robust, and would not work with all audiences.

⁵⁸⁹ Beth Aplin, 'Identifying the Pearls - What Data Is Important for My Organisation? Why Is All This Visitor Information so Important?' (ADUK, 2012).

⁵⁹⁰ 'Measure What Matters Guide' (Happy Museum).

⁵⁹¹ 'Measure What Matters Guide', p. 2.

⁵⁹² Hilary Jennings, 'LIFE Survey', Happy Museum Project, 2016 <<https://happymuseumproject.org/life-survey/>> [accessed 7 January 2024].

			etc), narrative data, observation.					

Funders								
Resource name and publication date	Publisher and their field	Resource synopsis	Suggested methods	Cultural heritage specific examples?	Exhibition examples?	Arts & science?	Reading list?	Useable?
National Lottery Heritage Fund Evaluation guidance ⁵⁹³ 2017	National Lottery Heritage Fund Funder	Information for evaluating projects funded by National Lottery	Logic model to frame evaluation work. Collect data by speaking to audiences in 'appropriate and methodical ways', then 'robustly' analyse it. Surveys, interviews, focus groups, sentiment analysis mentioned, but no support given in how to do these.	Yes, some.	No.	No, arts only.	No.	No. Too brief to be of any use, even if applying for National Lottery Funds.
Communities and Museums as	Paul Hamlyn Foundation	A framework used specifically for the Our Museum Initiative between 2012 and 2016. The	It consists of four outcomes (rooted in local needs; community agency; capability	Yes. All project partners were	Yes. Both the report and the	One museum talks about a	No.	Yes, to a limited extent. It is a suggestion of things to measure

⁵⁹³ 'Evaluation Guidance', The National Lottery Heritage Fund, 2021 <<https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/funding/good-practice-guidance/evaluation-guidance>> [accessed 7 January 2024].

Active Partners ⁵⁹⁴ 2015	Funder	full project report includes recommendations that all museums use these for benchmarking.	building; reflection), each of which has between four and eight indicators of success. Each indicator is proven by examining four types of evidence. No practical methods are suggested.	museums/ galleries.	outcomes include reference to exhibitions.	STEM resource		rather than a means to collect that data.
Partnerships for Learning: a guide to evaluating arts education projects ⁵⁹⁵ 2004	Arts Council England Funder; executive non-departmental public body	Aim of the guide is for those in arts education projects 'to understand evaluation clearly and evaluate effectively'. ⁵⁹⁶	An iterative five stage process, from planning, through evidence collection, data analysis, reflecting on the results to report writing and distribution. An appendix gives minimal information on the suggested methods: comments, performance,	Yes.	No.	No, arts only.	No.	No. The methods appendix does not give enough practical information to use each technique, and some of the suggestions are not evaluative, or not robust.

⁵⁹⁴ John Reeve, 'Communities and Museums as Active Partners: Emerging Learning from the "Our Museum" Initiative', *Museum Worlds*, 3 (2015), p. 187.

⁵⁹⁵ Felicity Woolf, 'Partnerships for Learning: A Guide to Evaluating Arts Education Projects' (Arts Council England, 2004).

⁵⁹⁶ Woolf, p. 4.

			drawing, graffiti walls, interviews, observation, photography, questionnaires, discussion, video, diaries.					

Education providers								
Resource name and publication date	Publisher and their field	Resource synopsis	Suggested methods	Cultural heritage specific examples?	Exhibition examples?	Arts & science?	Reading list?	Useable?
Impact Measuring Toolkit for Museums ⁵⁹⁷ 2023	University of Southampton	A product of participatory action research between University of Southampton and Winchester Science Centre, a toolkit consisting of five 'easy to implement research tools'. ⁵⁹⁸	Likert scale with stickers, audio recordings of visitors, video recordings by a child wearing a GoPro camera, screen displaying a question for written responses, postcards asking what people learned, enjoyed, and felt.	Yes.	No museum exhibition examples. The toolkit was created with a science centre, so examples of science displays.	No, science only.	No.	No. The suggested tools are slightly updated versions of standard evaluation methods such as comments books. The audio and video recordings raise ethical challenges, which is mentioned but not grappled with sufficiently. Background knowledge in discourse or

⁵⁹⁷ Neta Shaby, Ran Peleg, and Ian Coombs, 'Impact Measuring Toolkit for Museums' (University of Southampton, 2023).

⁵⁹⁸ Shaby, Peleg, and Coombs, p. 5.

								multimodal analysis is assumed.
Evaluation Recipes 3: Evaluating Exhibitions and Displays ⁵⁹⁹ No date, but after 2021	University of Oxford Education	Part of a series from the Public Engagement with research team, aimed at 'researchers and engagement facilitators who would like to evaluate a museum exhibition or display'. ⁶⁰⁰	A six-step evaluation process: define objectives, create the questions, design the method, ethics, analyse data, write and share a report. Method used: feedback letters. Alternative suggestions mentioned (interviews, surveys etc) but no guidance.	Yes: based around one case study in the Pitt Rivers Museum.	Yes: a display and video installation.	No, arts only.	Some links given, mostly to other Oxford sites, but also ACE GLOs (dead link) and NCCPE.	No. Limited applicability to other exhibitions. Using the case study as a worked example throughout the resources is helpful to an extent, but additional examples would make it more relevant. Feedback letters will not work for every evaluation situation.
Little Book of Evaluation Tools: <i>Curiosity Carnival</i> case studies ⁶⁰¹ 2017	University of Oxford Education	A guide 'of easy-to-use methods to evaluate the impact of Public Engagement with Research activities' ⁶⁰² , supported by	Resource is organised by activity, with one evaluation method given. Graffiti wall; rating cards; audience participation;	Yes.	No: while the events took place in museums and the Botanic Garden, none of the	Events included both arts and sciences .	Links to Oxford sites, NCCPE and other universities.	No. It would be hard to make these examples work to evaluate museum displays. Some are not very robust methods.

⁵⁹⁹ Annaleise Wood and Lesley Paterson, 'Public Engagement with Research Evaluation Recipes 3: Evaluating Exhibitions and Displays' (University of Oxford).

⁶⁰⁰ Wood and Paterson, p. 2.

⁶⁰¹ Depper and Patterson.

⁶⁰² Depper and Patterson, p. 1.

		examples from European Researchers' Night events. Aimed at those with no experience at evaluating these events.	feedback postcards, texts and emails; observation; rating questions; voting.		evaluations were on displays.			
Evaluation Toolkit ⁶⁰³ 2018	Queen Mary University of London Education	A toolkit for university researchers, or those reviewing research to 'evaluate the design, execution and impact of public engagement with research'. ⁶⁰⁴ The toolkit is in three sections: parts one and two focus on the background and planning of evaluation (with a logic model approach), part three is suggestions of tools to collect	Methods are divided into three groups: methods using facilitators (interviews, focus groups, meetings, video diaries and vox pops), self-response methods (questionnaires, asking questions or quizzes, feedback forms, graffiti walls, post its, voting, postcards), 'other' (counting participants,	No.	No. Exhibitions are mentioned as an output, but not as something to be evaluated.	One worked example covers a dinosaur activity.	No.	Yes, to a limited extent. The methods section contains useful information, but a few suggestions are not robust, and some (tally of visitors) are not evaluative. Some suggestions require a high financial investment, for example an event app or drone photography of an event.

⁶⁰³ 'Evaluation Toolkit', Queen Mary University of London, n.d. <<https://www.qmul.ac.uk/publicengagement/support/evaluation-toolkit/>> [accessed 8 January 2024].

⁶⁰⁴ 'Evaluation Toolkit', Queen Mary University of London.

		data, a couple of pages for each method with a key suggesting the cost, time commitment, and level of knowledge needed. It is illustrated with case studies from Queen Mary University.	sentiment and social media analysis, using an app, visitors taking photos).					

Courses								
Resource name and publication date	Publisher and their field	Resource synopsis	Suggested methods	Cultural heritage specific examples?	Exhibition examples?	Arts & science?	Reading list?	Useable?
Evaluation in the Cultural Sector FutureLearn course ⁶⁰⁵ 2023	Centre for Cultural Value; University of Leeds Research centre Culture Education provider	Online course for those already working in the cultural sector, covering the management and delivery of evaluation.	Surveys, feedback forms, observations, focus groups, data already in use in the organisation (e.g., visitor numbers and postcodes), interviews,	Yes.	No. Exhibitions mentioned in a cursory fashion a couple of times, and one case study includes	No, arts only.	To an extent. A few linked articles and some links to external	Yes, to a limited extent. Helpful for planning and thinking through evaluation, but no detail on the suggested methods.

⁶⁰⁵ 'Evaluation for Arts, Culture, and Heritage – Online Course', FutureLearn, n.d. <<https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/evaluation-for-arts-culture-and-heritage-principles-and-practice>> [accessed 21 January 2024].

			ethnographic methods.		three references to museum projects.		special-ists.	
Inspiration Lab: Creative Evaluation Techniques ⁶⁰⁶ Attended 2024	Heritage Insider Cultural Consultants	An in-person course looking at alternative evaluation techniques for those in the heritage sector.	Placing objects within a room, plasticine modelling, cutting images and words from magazines, 'moody boards', postcard mini boards, cartoon strips, memory jars, spidergrams, instant voting, post-it notes, evaluation cards, polaroids, a 'jar of awesome'.	Yes.	No.	Yes: given verbally from the natural sciences and arts venues.	No	No. Very few of the techniques would work for evaluating exhibitions, either temporary or permanent. Some of the resources used might be challenging in some museums: plasticine/playdoh, scissors and coloured pens would not be permitted in all venues. Methods are not robust. Methods were not all evaluation.

Figure 5.1 Summary of evaluation tools and toolkits.

⁶⁰⁶ 'Heritage Insider', n.d. <<https://www.heritageinsider.co.uk/>> [accessed 9 June 2024].

Very few of the evaluation toolkits deal explicitly with the evaluation of exhibitions, either temporary or permanent. One that does is part of a series created by the University of Oxford: *Evaluating Exhibitions and Displays*.⁶⁰⁷ This resource is subtitled: ‘a recipe for evaluating museum exhibitions and displays’ and is part of a series of three ‘recipes’; the other two examine how to evaluate online citizen science and evaluating performances and events. All are hosted on the University of Oxford’s support website for evaluating public engagement with research.⁶⁰⁸ The 12-page exhibition resource suggests six steps for evaluation, demonstrated throughout with references to the case study of an exhibition in the Pitt Rivers Museum from 2019 to 2021: *Traces of the Past*.⁶⁰⁹ This temporary display was created to commemorate the 1994 Genocide in Rwanda, a particularly weighty subject matter. The aim of the evaluation was to improve future displays, and ‘to explore the outcomes and impacts of the project on museum visitors, the researcher and their research’.⁶¹⁰ Despite these multiple aims, there is only one suggested method of evaluation in the booklet: a feedback letter. This was selected as ‘a creative method to invite museum visitors to share their thoughts and emotional responses’ to the display.⁶¹¹ Visitors wrote their letter on paper, branded with the exhibition’s identity, and could choose whether to write their letter to a museum professional, other visitors, or victim or survivors of the genocide. The final letter could either be displayed for other visitors to read or posted in a feedback box. There are few positive elements in this resource; the section on ethical considerations and how to handle data protection being the best parts. Ultimately, the glossy 12-page resource basically teaches a method of creating a visible comments book. There is little new or innovative about this evaluation ‘recipe’.

5.5 Evaluation training courses

In September 2023, the online platform FutureLearn launched ‘Evaluation for Arts, Culture, and Heritage: Principles and Practice’: a course developed with the Centre for Cultural Value (CCV) and the University of Leeds.⁶¹² FutureLearn is a platform for Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs). The course is in two sections: evaluation

⁶⁰⁷ Wood and Paterson.

⁶⁰⁸ ‘Evaluation Resources for Public Engagement with Research’ University of Oxford, n.d. <<https://researchsupport.admin.ox.ac.uk/innovation/per/evaluation>> [accessed 14 July 2024].

⁶⁰⁹ ‘Traces of the Past’, Pitt Rivers Museum, n.d. <<https://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/event/traces-of-the-past>> [accessed 14 July 2024].

⁶¹⁰ Wood and Paterson, p. 5.

⁶¹¹ Wood and Paterson, p. 10.

⁶¹² ‘Evaluation for Arts, Culture and Heritage: Principles and Practice’, Centre for Cultural Value, n.d. <<https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/evaluation-arts-culture-heritage-online-course/>> [accessed 13 July 2024].

in the cultural sector and putting evaluation into practice. Section one covers definitions, evaluation principles, and frameworks. Section two examines evaluation methods, making an evaluation plan, and communication of the results. Their definition of evaluation is based on that of François Matarasso as ‘a value-based process of calculating worth’.⁶¹³ The course is a mixture of longer-form articles, audio, and videos, punctuated with examples from practitioners, with exercises and reflection questions throughout: techniques which have been proven to improve learner retention in MOOCs.⁶¹⁴ The learner’s progress can be recorded in an accompanying downloadable workbook. While the course is interspersed with interviews and videos, the pool of experts is not very wide. Case study contributors include a representative from the funding body Paul Hamlyn Foundation, the director of the charity Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination, and many freelance evaluators and consultants.⁶¹⁵ Several of the people interviewed are connected to CCV or the University of Leeds. For example, Dr Anni Raw, interviewed for the section on ‘challenges of evaluation in the cultural sector’, is titled on the video as part of the ‘Arts Research & Evaluation Consultancy’ Anni Raw & Associates.⁶¹⁶ Dr Raw also appears on the Leeds University staff list as a Visiting Research Fellow in the School of Politics and International Studies.⁶¹⁷ Another of the freelancers interviewed for the course, Dawn Cameron, was also a host on the CCV podcast for the episode on transparency in evaluation.⁶¹⁸ No museum staff are consulted during the course. The collection of materials used is similarly narrow: one third of the first section of the course is based on CCV’s Evaluation Principles, as previously explored in Chapter 4. The ‘evaluation frameworks’ section, while slim, is among the strongest parts of the course, which includes a short pdf with links to a variety of sector evaluation

⁶¹³ François Matarasso, *Defining Values: Evaluating Arts Programmes*, Social Impact of the Arts; 1 (Comedia, 1996), WorldCat; ‘Defining Cultural Evaluation - Evaluation for Arts, Culture, and Heritage: Principles and Practice - University of Leeds’, FutureLearn, n.d. <<https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/evaluation-for-arts-culture-and-heritage-principles-and-practice/1/steps/1790453>> [accessed 13 July 2024]. Quoted in: ‘Defining Cultural Evaluation’, FutureLearn.

⁶¹⁴ Saman Rizvi and others, ‘Investigating Variation in Learning Processes in a FutureLearn MOOC’, *Journal of Computing in Higher Education*, 32 (2020), pp. 162–81.

⁶¹⁵ ‘About Us’, Cambridge Curiosity and Imagination, n.d. <<https://cambridgecandi.org.uk/about-us>> [accessed 13 July 2024].

⁶¹⁶ ‘The Challenges of Evaluation in the Cultural Sector - Evaluation for Arts, Culture, and Heritage: Principles and Practice - University of Leeds’, FutureLearn, n.d. <<https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/evaluation-for-arts-culture-and-heritage-principles-and-practice/1/steps/1790571>> [accessed 13 July 2024].

⁶¹⁷ University of Leeds, ‘University of Leeds’, n.d. <<https://www.leeds.ac.uk/staffaz>> [accessed 13 July 2024].

⁶¹⁸ ‘S3 Ep 4: Transparency’, Centre for Cultural Value, n.d. <<https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/podcast/s3-ep-4-transparency/>> [accessed 13 July 2024].

models.⁶¹⁹ This would enable the novice evaluator to gain at least an overview of logic models, social return on investment and other terminology.

While there are helpful elements to the FutureLearn course, ultimately it has limited use for colleagues interested in delivering exhibition evaluation, especially for permanent displays. The course is 'limited weekly access', meaning that it can be viewed for free for the duration of the course (two weeks), although the user must wait seven days for the second part of the course to be available.⁶²⁰ It is possible to extend access beyond this time, but there is a financial implication (£39 in July 2024). This presents challenges for researchers who may want to revisit content and articles once their free access expires. The course is aimed at a broad audience, including those working in heritage, freelancers, artists, 'cultural sector senior leader and board members, early career funders and policymakers, students and academics interested in cultural management'.⁶²¹ This broad appeal results in a lack of focus to the material. There are no evaluation illustrations that refer to exhibitions, no examples from museums, and with a focus on arts venues, there is no reference to science subjects. The FutureLearn course would be beneficial for a researcher interested in a solid foundation in planning an evaluation project but does not provide enough practical content to know how to apply the framework to museum displays. Ultimately, it feels like a long pitch for CCV's Evaluation Principles.

The second course I booked onto for comparison was a day of training provided by the consultation company Heritage Insider in February 2024.⁶²² Their 'Creative Evaluation Techniques Inspiration Lab' was promoted on the Visitor Studies JISCMAIL list as an opportunity 'to try out a range of qualitative evaluation tools', of which the organisation used 'over 50 on a day-to-day basis'.⁶²³ Course costs were £195 plus VAT, plus travel to the venue in Bath. Teaching on the day ran from 10.30 to 3pm, with a break for lunch (food was provided). We were greeted by our enthusiastic trainer, who told us there wouldn't be any handouts or paper resources, as the day was about active learning. We were told we would be learning evaluation

⁶¹⁹ Centre for Cultural Value; University of Leeds, 'Evaluation Models Commonly Used in the Cultural Sector' (FutureLearn, 2023).

⁶²⁰ 'How Long Can I Access a Course for Free?', FutureLearn, 2024 <<https://futurelearn.zendesk.com/hc/en-us/articles/115010582788-How-long-can-i-access-a-course-for-free>> [accessed 14 July 2024].

⁶²¹ 'Evaluation for Arts, Culture and Heritage' website.

⁶²² 'Home', Heritage Insider, n.d. <<https://www.heritageinsider.co.uk/>> [accessed 29 March 2024].

⁶²³ Heritage Insider, 'Creative Evaluation Techniques Inspiration Lab Bath 29 February', VSG JISCMAIL, 8 January 2024 <<https://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/cgi-bin/wa-jisc.exe?A2=ind2401&L=VSG&O=D&P=753>> [accessed 29 March 2024].

methods that were 'participative, inclusive and not extractive'.⁶²⁴ The first technique we were introduced to was to place a small plastic dinosaur somewhere in the room to represent how we were feeling at the start of the day. Each of the twenty participants were then invited to tell the room the reason for the location of our toy. The trainer drew a simple graph on the flip chart, titled 'Evaluation tools scattergraph', with the x axis labelled 'depth', and the y axis labelled 'breadth'. The group discussed where on the chart this evaluation method should be plotted, with the trainer suggesting it should be high on breadth but towards the lower end of depth. We were then introduced to 13 'evaluation' methods (summarised in Table 5.1), sometimes working in small groups to create a new technique, or individually to test out a tool. Our portraits were taken with a polaroid camera, and we wrote a single word on them with a Sharpie to describe the day to someone else. We created playdoh models to show our attitude to evaluation, made tiny 'memory jars' in glass containers, illustrated cartoons, created mood boards on postcards and cut words and pictures from magazines to stick onto card, resembling mini evaluation ransom notes. Each method was added to the chart to determine its value and the situations it would be most useful in. Throughout the training the facilitator told us examples of how she had used the evaluation tools with a variety of audiences, including her experience encouraging senior managers to work with plasticine in a strategic board meeting. The session ended with us each adding an encouraging sentence about a participant or the event into a 'jar of awesome' then several of these notes were read out to us. There was not time at the end of the four and a half hours for us to return to our plastic dinosaurs to reposition them to demonstrate how we were feeling at the end of the session. As promised, we left with no written reminders or tools for the evaluation tools that had been introduced.

In 2024, The Arts Council reported that 94% of NPOs included environmental sustainability in their core business strategy; the impacts of evaluation should therefore also be included in sustainability policies.⁶²⁵ The trainer for the course conceded that she had moved from plasticine to playdoh due to concerns about plastics, but sustainability did not seem to be a particularly high priority. My ethnographic field notes record that we were told to take a picture of the products of four techniques (magazine feedback, moody boards, postcard mini boards and cartoon strips) and dispose of the original artwork, which was intended to be a primer for the conversation with the participant. I recorded my instant reaction to this: 'What

⁶²⁴ Ethnographic field notes made during the workshop.

⁶²⁵ Julie's Bicycle and Arts Council England, 'Culture, Climate and Environmental Responsibility: Annual Report 2022 – 23', 2024, p. 15.

a waste of time, effort, and resources. How exclusionary for people creating the work. Why not make something beautiful and with less environmental impact?’⁶²⁶ Heritage Insider maintains a page on their website for their ‘Environmental and Social Policy’, but in September 2024 this remains under construction.⁶²⁷ The profligate use of materials in the evaluation methods taught on this course would have environmental, financial and conservation implications that could put them beyond the capacity for some museums. The use of felt tips for example is not possible in every gallery or museum, to protect the collections, in addition to being a single use plastic.

The definition of evaluation I have been using is that it is a process which allows critical reflection, in a manner that enables change. Most of the methods we were introduced to on the Heritage Insider course might permit critical reflection on behalf of the participant, but rarely in a manner that could produce change. If compared to the FutureLearn definition of evaluation (a value-based process of calculating worth), the tools we left with would not be evaluative. They were not about judging worth or values. The frequent refrain in my ethnographic field notes is: ‘But is it evaluation?’. During the day there was no discussion about ethics, informed consent, or how participants might withdraw from any of the studies. The Heritage Insider course encouraged evaluators to ignore the artistic content, and only use the conversation that arises with the participant as part of the creative process. This dismisses much academic discourse around the benefits of creative methods for research, which can make ‘tacit ideas explicit’.⁶²⁸ Moreover, artistic and visual methods have proven to be an effective method of data collection, not least because ‘drawings and paintings help participants identify feelings and desires that they may not otherwise be able to express through words’.⁶²⁹ When dealing with audiences of varying ages and abilities, as in museums, these benefits could be powerfully harnessed. There is an inevitable difficulty with interpreting the artwork, which can be problematic due to ‘the multiple standpoints they accommodate [which] can be difficult to disentangle’.⁶³⁰ There remains a growing body of literature and case studies from health, education, and zoology (among many others) that prove the benefits of creative evaluation

⁶²⁶ Ethnographic field notes made during the session.

⁶²⁷ ‘Environmental and Social Policy’, Heritage Insider, n.d.
<<https://www.heritageinsider.co.uk/environmental-and-social-policy/>> [accessed 29 September 2024].

⁶²⁸ Lynn Butler-Kisber and Tiiu Poldma, ‘The Power of Visual Approaches in Qualitative Inquiry: The Use of Collage Making and Concept Mapping in Experiential Research’, *Journal of Research Practice*, 6.2 (2010), (p. 2).

⁶²⁹ Kimberly Fraser and Fatima Al Sayah, ‘Arts-Based Methods in Health Research: A Systematic Review of the Literature’, *Arts & Health*, 3 (2011), pp. 110–45 (p. 139).

⁶³⁰ Norma Daykin and Creative and Credible Project Team, ‘Creative and Credible: Creative and Arts Based Evaluation Methods’ (University of the West of England; Willis Newson, 2015), p. 1.

methods in research.⁶³¹ Many of the methods we were introduced to could be ‘audience contributions’ as defined by Nina Simon in *The Participatory Museum*, but these are not intended to be evaluative.⁶³² The Heritage Insider course did not provide the information needed for attendees to practically implement evaluation methods in their own venues with any degree of success, and they certainly could not be used for exhibitions.

A third suite of courses that are well-promoted in the sector are those by Methods for Change (MfC).⁶³³ This is a research and training provider, part of the Institute for Methods Innovation, a ‘a scientific, non-profit institute’ based in the United States.⁶³⁴ MfC frequently promote their courses on the various evaluation JISCmail lists, including those of the National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) and the University Museums Group; they provide online courses, live and self-directed, in a variety of subjects. While not limited to working with museums and cultural sector organisations they are, according to a scrolling banner on their home screen, ‘trusted by’ the Arts Council, the Natural History Museum, NCCPE, the Wellcome Trust, and a variety of universities.⁶³⁵ Unfortunately, during the research period, the live courses on survey design and developing evaluation frameworks were not offered, and the self-directed introductory courses cost €199 for six months access, which I did not have the budget to do. The MfC and Heritage Insider courses are prohibitively expensive for museums, and none of the three courses provide long-lasting access to the materials. For museums with limited budgets, or for researchers newly interested in working with museums, these courses do not provide the long-term support that they need. There was a clear gap here, for training materials that were basic but meaningful, providing support that could be accessed without cost. The UCM Impact Evaluation Resources could provide the assistance that was needed to fill this opening.

⁶³¹ For example: J. L. Oliffe and others, ‘Analyzing Participant Produced Photographs from an Ethnographic Study of Fatherhood and Smoking.’, *Research in Nursing & Health*, 31.5 (2008), pp. 529–39; Jenna Ward and Harriet Shortt, ‘Evaluation in Management Education: A Visual Approach to Drawing out Emotion in Student Learning’, *Management Learning*, 44.5 (2013), pp. 435–52; Kate Howlett and Edgar C. Turner, ‘What Can Drawings Tell Us about Children’s Perceptions of Nature?’, *PloS One*, 18.7 (2023).

⁶³² Nina Simon, *The Participatory Museum* (Museum 2.0, 2010), Chapter 6.

⁶³³ ‘Evaluation Training & Workshops’, Methods for Change, n.d. <<https://methodsforchange.org/>> [accessed 30 August 2024].

⁶³⁴ ‘Home’, Institute For Methods Innovation, n.d. <<https://www.methodsinnovation.org/>> [accessed 30 August 2024].

⁶³⁵ ‘Methods for Change – Evaluation Training & Workshops’.

5.4 The Impact Evaluation Resources

To respond to the needs of both museums and researchers, and capitalising on the esteem that the central UCM team is held in, I created the Impact Evaluation Resources, complemented by a training course (see Appendix 1 for the resources and Appendix 2 for training course PowerPoint slides and notes). As part of our work with researchers, Kate Noble and I created a guide on how to evaluate an exhibition in 2021.⁶³⁶ This covered very basic information on suggested methods, a timeline of when researchers should be working on different elements of their evaluation, and an idea of the number of days it would take for each stage. We co-wrote this in response to unrealistic requests from the academics we were working with at the time. The combination of my observations that there was a lack of evaluation strategy, supported by the staff interviews telling me the same, I expanded on this 'how to' guide to produce a framework that became the 'planning your evaluation' resource. This gives an overview of evaluation methods, inspired by a logic model framework, to explore the inputs, process, outputs, outcomes, advantages, disadvantages, time requirements and recommended museum application of a variety of methods. The environmental consequence of the methods is assessed, as well as the training requirements and the time required for data collection. Another table divides these by activity, with recommendations for exhibitions, events, programming, and digital activity. These are further broken down with suggestions for front end, formative, and summative stages, and which are more appropriate for public/participants or staff. There is then an additional in-depth resource for each recommended method. The IER is designed to give instant support to the busy museum professional, looking for the most suitable method to evaluate their work, providing a clear strategy and supporting reasons for selecting the method. The in-depth resources are designed to respond to specific needs raised during training or interviews or through my own case studies carried out in exhibition evaluation in UCM. The evaluation methods covered in depth are:

- surveys and asking a good question
- visitor observation
- accompanied visits
- reflective evaluation (with staff)
- interviewing
- drawings and visual imagery
- meaning maps

⁶³⁶ Sarah-Jane Harknett and Kate Noble, 'How To: Evaluate an Exhibition' Cambridge University Museums, 2021 <<https://www.museums.cam.ac.uk/blog/how-to-evaluate-an-exhibition/>> [accessed 28 January 2024].

- focus groups and user panels

These resources were designed in a standard format, which consisted of a general introductory statement, a practical ‘how to do it’ section, preliminary advice on the process of analysing the data, a section covering ethics, safety and security, and any cautions and caveats that evaluators should be aware of before using the method. A further reading and resources section includes academic papers which reference the evaluation method, where possible with exhibition examples covering both arts and science collections. The iterative development process of the IER has been explored in Chapter 3.

To support the Impact Evaluation Resources, I developed a modular course, based on the original Engaged Researcher series. I adapted this for the University of Cambridge Research Office, who approached me in 2023 for three evaluation training sessions aimed at research staff embedded in departments, as well as those centrally who would be working on REF 2029. The course also responds to sector needs: the 2016 UK Museum workforce survey recommended that ‘sector bodies or museums should develop a range of new, museum specific short courses aimed at current skills gaps’, and the training I created would help to support the evaluation skills gap identified through the interviews.⁶³⁷ The modular nature means that specific sections can be pulled together to create the most relevant training to audience needs. The appropriate Impact Evaluation Resource can then also be given or emailed to participants after the sessions for them to refer to. In response to audience need identified from talking to researchers, one session covers basic information about museums, the different types of museums in the UK, audience engagement through a range of outputs, and top tips for approaching museums. Having experienced academic staff only suggesting temporary exhibitions, I wanted to demonstrate the wealth of possibilities, opportunities, and audiences that museums work with. Further sessions, appropriate for those already working in museums, examine basic evaluation information, then go into greater depth on specific methods. As far as possible, each method is supported by a UCM case study, drawing on both arts and science collections, and using examples from displays and programming. The Impact Evaluation Resources and course improve markedly upon current sector provision. They are robust and practical, provided without charge to anyone who is interested in them for an indefinite time.

⁶³⁷ BOP Consulting and The Museum Consultancy, p. 9.

5.5 Conclusion

Throughout my research, I have been working towards the creation of methodologically sound, theoretically robust, but practical resources to improve the evaluation of permanent museum displays. In this chapter I have traced the research journey that led to the production of the UCM Impact Evaluation Resources and the accompanying training, to determine the improvements to evaluation that need to be made within the sector. The improvements began by analysing the results of the in-depth interviews I carried out with a variety of members of staff from across the UCM, which are a range of sizes, with different management structures. The interviews and my work with university researchers demonstrated the significant gaps in knowledge and understanding for exhibition evaluation, inside and outside the cultural sector. Although resources have been produced by a variety of funders, cultural and education bodies, they have not achieved prominence; indeed, none of them were mentioned in the staff interviews, despite this body of staff having many decades of experience. Many of the currently available tools have significant gaps, such as an imbalance of arts and science collections, and very few have relevant reading lists. Sector training is expensive and access to it is often time limited.

The Impact Evaluation Resources were written to fill this gap in the sector, responding to the needs of museum professionals, incorporating the perspectives of both audiences and staff, and improving feedback processes. They responded to my research objectives, being written to demonstrate the impact of displays, with each resource including exhibition examples in the further reading where possible. The resources are designed to be freely available, without time limits on access to them. While the accompanying training materials currently depend on me delivering them, the modular nature allows me the opportunity to tailor the course to be of increased relevance to the audience in question. In the conclusions, I will demonstrate how the resources have been used in practical applications in museums, assessing their sector impact these resources, and examining future avenues for museum evaluation research.

Conclusions

How have I improved the evaluation of permanent exhibitions?

6.1 Introduction

My aim has been to increase the impact of museum displays by providing improved evaluation tools. There is a distinct gap in both academic and sector-wide literature around permanent display evaluation, while simultaneously government demands have both increased in number and narrowed in data collected. Few museums have staff trained in evaluation techniques, or the benefits of understanding how displays are visited. To this end, I created the Impact Evaluation Resources and developed an associated training programme, originally for museum staff and volunteers, and researchers linked to the University of Cambridge. Elements of both the Resources and the training have already been used with museum and heritage venues in the East of England. Throughout the research I aimed to answer several questions: what factors are influencing current evaluation practice in UK museums? Where are permanent displays positioned within that? How can the evaluation of permanent displays be improved to demonstrate their impact? In this chapter I examine the extent to which I have been able to answer these questions, and how successful the IER and training have been.

To determine this success, I explore the ways in which the Resources have directly responded to the identified gap in literature: permanent displays. An examination of how the practical outputs have impacted researchers and the sector follows, alongside a discussion of the limitations of the work undertaken to date. The importance of working with staff from across the museum sector is again highlighted, amply demonstrated through the results of several research reports published in 2023 and 2024. Avenues for further research have been identified, while simultaneously acknowledging the lessons learned. Initially, I turn to some achievements of display evaluation in UCM. The Resources have been used to respond to funders of redevelopments of permanent displays, and the evaluation conclusions have demonstrated the impact of gallery improvements for audiences.

6.2 Uses of the Impact Evaluation Resources in museums: implications for future practice

The Resources and training have already been used in UCM to determine the impact of investment from the National Lottery Heritage Fund on visitor behaviour in permanent galleries. The Museum of Zoology was awarded £1.8 million in 2014 to redevelop the museum and to create new displays and interpretation.⁶³⁸ In 2013, a year before they received the funding, I completed a visitor observation project of 104 visitors to the museum, writing an internal report for the Museum.⁶³⁹ The Museum reopened following their redevelopment in June 2018, and in 2022 I trained a team of volunteers to observe visitors, using materials I created and adapted in response to their feedback and questions. These became the first completed Impact Evaluation Resources.⁶⁴⁰ Using the IER, I produced a post-redevelopment tracking report which focussed on visitor behaviour in the permanent displays.⁶⁴¹ The results of this evaluation showed that visitors were spending significantly more time in the galleries post-redevelopment, double the length of time on average (from 7 minutes 29 seconds to 15 minutes 20 seconds). People were, on average, stopping at 66% more cases in the displays (an increase from 12 cases in 2013 to 20 cases in 2022). The average time per stop also increased after the redevelopment, from 19 seconds in 2013 to 27 seconds in 2022. These are significant differences, with visitors demonstrably engaging better with more of the museum's collections and stories. This visitor observation report was used in reporting to the National Lottery Heritage Fund and showed the impact that their investment had to improve visitor engagement with the permanent museum displays. A similar pattern was seen in MAA's cases of Pacific anthropology after they were redisplayed (with funding provided by the National Lottery Heritage Fund and the Wolfson Foundation). Tracking results in 2019 showed a large increase in numbers of visitors stopping at the cases, for a longer time (see Figures 6.1 and 6.2).⁶⁴²

⁶³⁸ 'Wonders of the Animal Kingdom – a New Museum of Zoology', The National Lottery Heritage Fund', 20 March 2014 <<https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/news/wonders-animal-kingdom-new-museum-zoology>> [accessed 26 August 2024].

⁶³⁹ Sarah-Jane Harknett, 'Zoology Tracking Upper Gallery Final Report', July 2013.

⁶⁴⁰ 'Museum of Zoology Reopens Thanks to Mammoth Volunteer Effort! | The National Lottery Heritage Fund', 18 June 2018 <<https://www.heritagefund.org.uk/news/museum-zoology-reopens-thanks-mammoth-volunteer-effort>> [accessed 26 August 2024].

⁶⁴¹ Sarah-Jane Harknett, 'Museum of Zoology Tracking Report', August 2022.

⁶⁴² Sarah-Jane Harknett, 'Evaluation of the Pacific Currents Cases in the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology', 2019.

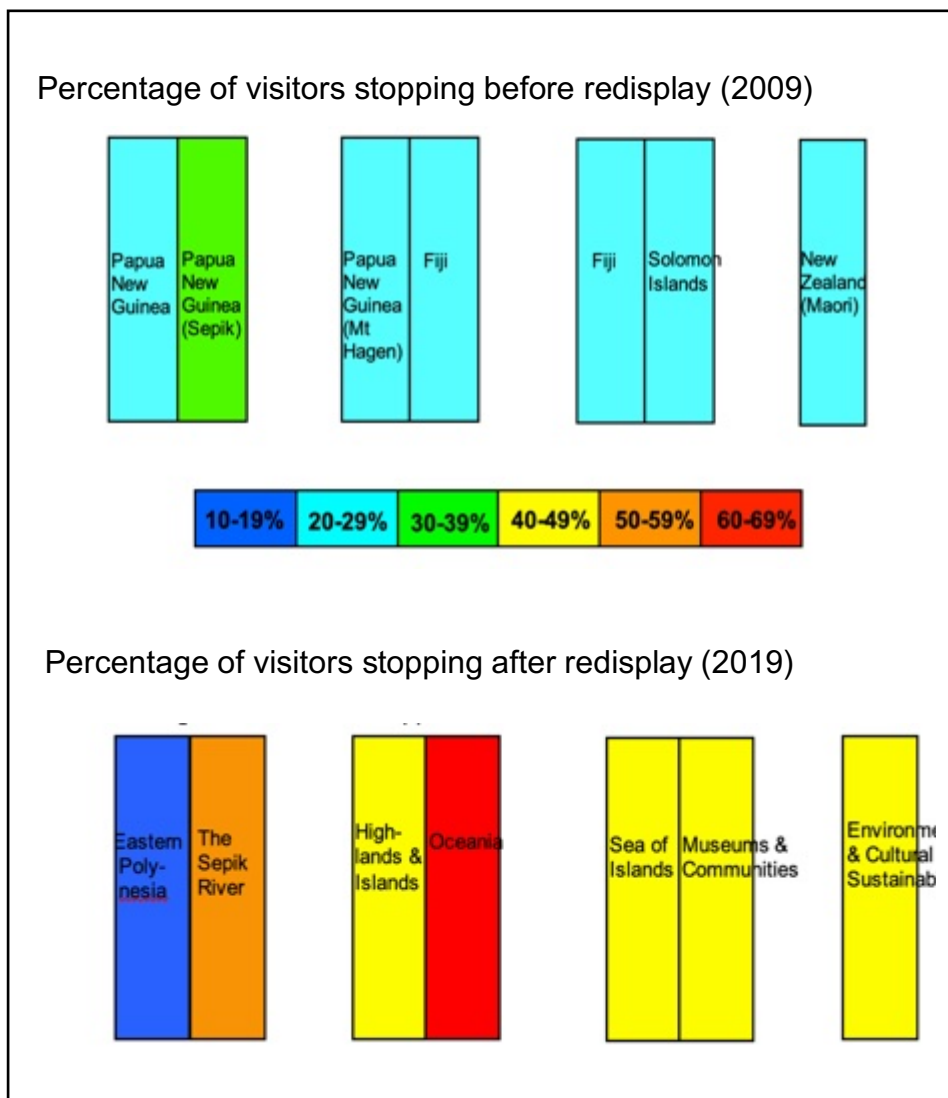


Figure 6.1 Percentage of visitors stopping at the Pacific cases in MAA before and after redevelopment.

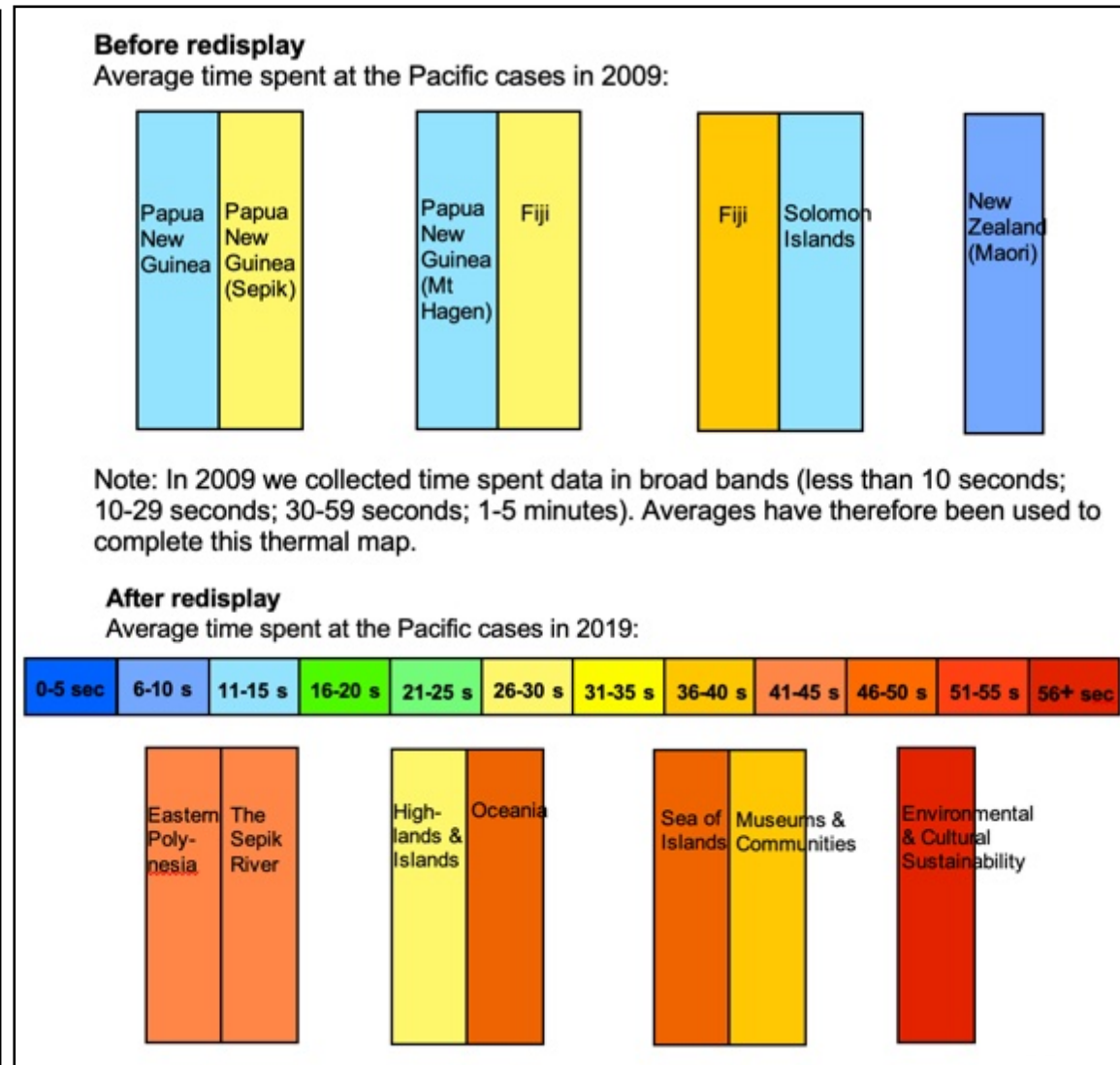


Figure 6.2 Average time spent at the Pacific cases in MAA before and after redevelopment.

Moving forward, one measure of the validity of the IER will be its use without me as the impetus and interpreter of the resources. For the evaluation of a temporary exhibition, the first steps towards this transition took place in 2024. As I planned my exit from my evaluation role in the central UCM team (to work full-time as the Head of Public Engagement and Learning at MAA from April 2024), we were at a crucial moment in the evaluation of the 'Black Atlantic' exhibition at the Fitzwilliam Museum (discussed above in Chapter 3). Working with a colleague, we trained a group of volunteers to undertake visitor observation and meaning mapping with visitors. Although the final evaluation report was co-authored, she carried out the data interpretation and writing up.⁶⁴³ This was an important transitional moment, when the resources began to stand on their own, without my constant input. 'Black Atlantic' was a temporary exhibition and not a permanent display. There is still work to be done to embed the resources, techniques, and methods in the evaluation of permanent displays. In spring 2024, once I had left the central team, visitor observation began in the permanent display spaces of the Whipple Museum of the History of Science: could this be a movement towards the Impact Evaluation Resources impacting on non-temporary exhibitions?

As a product of the IER, I wanted to prove the value of evidence that can be collected from exhibition evaluation. At a similar time the Resources were being completed, University of Hertfordshire Business School lecturer Dr Sue Davies was commissioned by SHARE Museums East to create and launch an online practical resource on Data Driven Museums.⁶⁴⁴ SHARE's intention was to help museums 'understand which data are appropriate to their operations and how to use them better'.⁶⁴⁵ Sue was looking for case studies from museums which demonstrated how quantitative data had been used practically, and approached me following a short presentation I gave on my research at the University of Hertfordshire. I selected a recent project where baseline evaluation data of permanent displays had been used to show the impact of community-created content in galleries. This case study was published in the SHARE report in 2023.

The background to the case study was a project that started during the lockdown of summer 2020, when UCM ran an online version of its Museum Remix programme.⁶⁴⁶ Museum staff from across the consortium created short online videos about a variety

⁶⁴³ Kate Howlett and Sarah-Jane Harknett, "'Black Atlantic: Power, People, Resistance" Evaluation Report', 2024.

⁶⁴⁴ Sue M. Davies, *Data Driven Museums* (SHARE Museums East, 2023).

⁶⁴⁵ Kathy Moore, 'Data Resource Facilitator Brief' (SHARE Museums East, 2022).

⁶⁴⁶ 'Museum Remix', University of Cambridge Museums, n.d.
<<https://www.museums.cam.ac.uk/museumremix>> [accessed 27 August 2024].

of objects, aiming to inspire people to reply with their own creative responses. There was an enormous range of creativity demonstrated from audiences, with spoken word performances, collage, poetry, artwork and even a ballad produced in response to the collections. These were immediately hosted on the UCM 'Explore the Collections' webpage, but there was a desire to promote these once museums reopened to the public, linking the digital work with the physical object that inspired it.⁶⁴⁷ For in-person audiences to access the artworks, we trialled the use of new vinyl labels with QR codes, as well as Near Field Communication (NFC) technology to give access to the relevant artwork. By using Google Analytics and URL builders when making the labels and QR codes, we could track how people accessed the online information, and how long they stayed on the page. Originally our research aim was to determine whether NFC or QR codes were the more popular method of engaging with additional content. As I have been evaluating across UCM since 2012, there was good data from visitor observation in permanent displays prior to the Remix labels being installed. This baseline evaluation could then be used to demonstrate the impact of the community intervention. By comparing the visitor tracking data to the analytics, I found that people engaged with the 'content of a single Remix label for up to 15 times longer than they had previously spent at the entire case'.⁶⁴⁸ When comparing data for one specific display case, visitors spent on average 19 seconds looking at the entire display in the baseline evaluation, however people listened to a community-created label relating to just one object in the case for over 11 minutes.⁶⁴⁹ Due to the wealth of the tracking data built up from displays, I could compare visitor engagement with audio content made by curators to that developed by communities as part of Museum Remix. Again, the Remix labels showed a significant increase in dwell time: from 30-60 seconds in normal gallery tracking to over 5 minutes on average for the new content (when accessed via QR code).⁶⁵⁰ The success of the case study was the ability to compare small, new interventions (vinyl labels) to the permanent display, and this was only realised because of time spent observing visitors before Remix. The case study showed the attraction of alternative and creative interventions, and that visitors enjoyed engaging with content made by people who were not museum staff. These findings were reflected in the 2024 University Museums Group Strategic Impact Report, which

⁶⁴⁷ 'Explore the Collections', University of Cambridge Museums, n.d.
<<https://www.museums.cam.ac.uk/discover>> [accessed 27 August 2024].

⁶⁴⁸ UCM case study in Sue M. Davies, p. 25.

⁶⁴⁹ Sarah-Jane Harknett and Richard White, 'To QR, or NFC, That Is the Question', 1 June 2022
<<https://www.museums.cam.ac.uk/blog/2022/01/06/to-qr-or-nfc-that-is-the-question/>> [accessed 14 January 2024].

⁶⁵⁰ Harknett and White, 'To QR or NFC.'

commented that the ‘collaborative’ approach of university museums encouraged ‘community input with academic expertise to produce new insight’.⁶⁵¹

6.3 Impact on researchers

With this research, I have aimed for a broader cultural change in the heritage sector. Ideally the positionality of the evaluation of permanent displays would be moved from the fringes into the regular daily work of museums. Alongside this ambition, robust evaluation could influence another specific audience: researchers. As suggested above in Chapter 1, the lack of interest in working with permanent displays and smaller museums is more a reflection of limited knowledge of museums and lack of researcher imagination than a reflection of the shortage of opportunities. For these reasons, a section of the training is focussed on the variety and range of museums, collections, and audiences. These aspects of museum work are not well known outside the sector, and so it was important that the professional expertise and experiences of heritage staff were highlighted to researchers seeking to expand their skills. The training has been well-received in Cambridge, particularly by early career researchers, as demonstrated by the evaluation carried out by the University’s Public Engagement team. This showed that participants’ confidence in, and competence for, working with museums improved. They were asked to rank both on a zero to five scale before and after the training: competence improved from an average of 2.66 to 3.25 and confidence from 2.53 to 3.37.⁶⁵² Further research is needed to determine whether the training has resulted in any changes to permanent displays or new research avenues in smaller, regional museums. These will be challenging to measure, but I will continue to champion these outputs for museum connections in all my communications with researchers.

One method of determining the benefit to the sector of the Resources and training could be through the number of museum case studies that achieve four stars in the next round of REF Impact, using robust evaluation methods such as those identified in my research. A 2024 study by the University of Oxford identified 570 case studies in the REF 2021 online database where there was mention of both ‘exhibition’ and ‘museum’.⁶⁵³ According to their research, 13 of these were given four stars. Unfortunately, further assessment of these reveals the work still to be done to

⁶⁵¹ Wafer Hadley, ‘University Museums Strategic Impact Summary Findings from UMG Review.’, 2024, p. 3.

⁶⁵² Public Engagement Team, ‘Engaged Researcher Online Training Evaluation: Working with Museums’, 2020.

⁶⁵³ ‘REF Impact’, University Museums Group, n.d. <<http://universitymuseumsgroup.org/advocacy/ref-impact/>> [accessed 27 August 2024].

encourage researchers to work with permanent displays in a wider selection of museums. Two of the four star case studies (from Durham University and the University of Manchester) had only worked with museums overseas.⁶⁵⁴ One further example (from Queen Mary, University of London) had put on an exhibition at the Nehru Centre in London, which is part of the high commission of India and is not a museum.⁶⁵⁵ Of the 10 remaining case studies, four were with national museums (two for the National Gallery, one with National Museums Liverpool, and one with the V&A). Perhaps of most interest are the two university museums which were part of four-star case studies: an exhibition at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford, which was based on research from the University of Kent, and a further University of Manchester example which worked with both Manchester Art Gallery and Manchester Museum (the latter being a university museum).⁶⁵⁶ This last example is the only case study of a university using the museums that are part of the same institution that gained four stars. Indeed, of the 10 universities that submitted the 13 four-star case studies, seven have museums. The two University of Cambridge highest ranked examples worked with perhaps the smallest museums represented: Peterborough Museum and Guernsey Museum and Art Gallery.⁶⁵⁷ There are many museum and exhibition case studies that did not get the top ranking in the REF, and this is a potential area for further work to determine what the characteristics of the best examples are. Clearly there is a great wealth of untapped museum research potential in the UK. It is not known what the criteria will be for the next round of the REF, currently scheduled for 2029. If all UK museums are to demonstrate the importance of both their collections and their display space, it will be imperative for them to be able to demonstrate their ability to capture good quality evaluation data. Improvements in staff confidence and skills, through the IER and associated training, could be a way to begin this process.

⁶⁵⁴ 'Impact Case Study : Results and Submissions : REF 2021 Durham South Asia', n.d. <<https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/8ace7d86-9add-45ab-bd56-3f11f88ae2c7?page=1>> [accessed 29 August 2024]; 'Impact Case Study : Results and Submissions : REF 2021 Manchester Tibet', n.d. <<https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/76865506-3810-4118-bdff-d032adedee42?page=1>> [accessed 29 August 2024].

⁶⁵⁵ 'About', Nehru Centre London, n.d. <<https://www.nehrucentre.org.uk/about-us/>> [accessed 29 August 2024].

⁶⁵⁶ 'Impact Case Study : Results and Submissions : REF 2021 Manchester', n.d. <<https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/4dc1ba66-d22a-42ef-854c-9e34e6a05d95?page=1>> [accessed 29 August 2024]; 'Impact Case Study : Results and Submissions : REF 2021 Kent Ashmolean', n.d. <<https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/3fa9cd31-de15-43db-a9c3-0838376b993a?page=1>> [accessed 29 August 2024].

⁶⁵⁷ 'Impact Case Study : Results and Submissions : REF 2021 Cambridge Peterborough', n.d. <<https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/32bfa746-fc31-46fd-83c9-829ce802cebd?page=1>> [accessed 29 August 2024]; 'Impact Case Study : Results and Submissions : REF 2021 Cambridge Jersey', n.d. <<https://results2021.ref.ac.uk/impact/7ae5dd6b-0b50-41f4-8195-53c432db127b?page=1>> [accessed 29 August 2024].

6.4 The continued problem of permanent displays: thesis limitations

The impact of the research cannot only be measured by changes that have taken place within Cambridge. As John Falk commented in 2000, it is essential that museum impact should be contextualised 'within the larger framework of whole communities and whole lives. It is increasingly important to pan the camera back in space and time'.⁶⁵⁸ While it is not possible to 'pan the camera' to the future, some attention should be given to impacts that might be possible beyond the very limited sphere in which I have been positioned. To date the IER has had little impact beyond my own championing and promotion of it and the training. Partly this is the lack of promotion that has been put into endorsing the Resources. During the research period, the IER and additional reading were sent out after training sessions to interested researchers. To promote the resources further, they are due to be hosted in the blog section of the UCM website, as individual pages alongside a downloadable version. Due to significant staff changes and shifting internal institutional priorities, only one of the resources is online as of September 2024.⁶⁵⁹ I continue to advocate for all Resources being added to the UCM blog. Once it is online, it should be shared with key sector organisations, beginning with the Collections Trust Accreditation website. As stated in Chapter 4, their 'assessing user needs' section, supporting the relevant section of Accreditation guidelines, provides only one link, to a resource on search engine optimisation.⁶⁶⁰ Museums need more practical support in a greater number of areas than this provides, which the IER responds to. Another group to approach with the resources will be the University Museums Group, whose members remain at the intersection of contemporary research and public engagement. With judicious use of online analytics, it should be possible to determine the routes that are taken to get to the Resources, the number of downloads and other important information. By promoting the IER through these channels, it can be seen whether it is hitting the target audiences. Number of page hits and downloads will give raw data, but some measure of success for the IER with museum staff should be established.

⁶⁵⁸ John H. Falk, 'Assessing the Impact of Museums', *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 43.1 (2000), pp. 5–7 (p. 6).

⁶⁵⁹ 'How To: Accompanied Visits', Cambridge University Museums', 2024
<<https://www.museums.cam.ac.uk/blog/resources/how-to-accompanied-visits/>> [accessed 29 September 2024].

⁶⁶⁰ 'Assessing User Needs – Collections Trust'.

In their seminal work *The Basics of Qualitative Research*, Strauss and Corbin wrote that 'it is entirely possible to complete a grounded theory study, or any study, yet not produce findings that are significant'.⁶⁶¹ While acknowledging that the research underpinning this DHeritage took place at a very particular time, in a specific place, and under peculiar circumstances, the findings have been significant. The period of lockdowns and the impact of COVID altered the way I could work with both museums and their audiences. The reflective writing up process included processing the huge upheaval that occurred during the pandemic and the depth to which this altered my trajectory. The pragmatic decisions made during the research reflect the need for real-world evaluation in museums. New research avenues, and alternative ways to disseminate results ultimately improved the practical outputs. The years of lockdown uncertainties locate my research in an even more specific time than perhaps might be usual. This does not render the conclusions invalid but provides important context when analysing the Resources. The use of the IER, and continued requests for the training by the University's Engaged Researcher series for the 2024-5 programme, is testament to their practical application. Indeed, in 2023-4, the Engaged Researcher team requested a new training session to be added to my evaluation training portfolio: Advanced Evaluation of Public Engagement.⁶⁶² This surgery session is designed to assist researchers who have attended basic evaluation training but who have specific questions or are planning a more challenging project. One session was delivered in May 2024, with another booked for December 2024. While this is not promoted as being exhibition or display specific, I draw on the Resources and framework to deliver the session and send the relevant elements of the IER to researchers.

6.5 Suggestions for future research

As it was primarily university museums that were collaborators in the creation of the IER, further research will need to be undertaken with other types of museums to determine the applicability beyond this group. Trialling the resources with independent museums, which make up over half of museums in the UK, will be of utmost importance to prove its worth within the sector.⁶⁶³ Independent museums are those that are 'owned by registered charities and other independent bodies or trusts',

⁶⁶¹ Juliet M. Corbin, and Anselm Strauss, *Basics of Qualitative Research : Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, Fourth edition. (Thousand Oaks : SAGE Publications, Inc, 2014), p. 256.

⁶⁶² 'Engaged Researcher Online - Advanced Evaluation of Public Engagement - Tue 17 Dec 2024', University of Cambridge Training, n.d. <<https://www.training.cam.ac.uk/event/5307082>> [accessed 28 August 2024].

⁶⁶³ 'About AIM', AIM - Association of Independent Museums, n.d. <<https://aim-museums.co.uk/about-aim/>> [accessed 26 August 2024].

and there is a great deal of pressure on them to generate income.⁶⁶⁴ Also facing a financial squeeze are local authority-reliant museums, which are 31% of accredited museums in England.⁶⁶⁵ A report published in January 2024 into public investment in museums found swingeing cuts on museum funding from local authorities over the last 15 years: ‘total expenditure on museums and galleries decreased by 16% in cash terms and 36.7% in real terms, from £286.45 million (2009-10) to £241.01 million (2022-23)’.⁶⁶⁶ As pressures on all museums increase, these are amplified for local authority-reliant and independent museums. Indeed, the whole heritage sector is affected; a 2023 survey of members of The Heritage Alliance found that 81% reported ‘significant concern’ over funding.⁶⁶⁷ Income generation is a priority for many venues, and can be achieved through fundraising, grant applications and charitable routes, but admission fees are frequently considered as one of the first methods of bringing in money. Despite the sector challenges, visitors continue to come to museums, especially in comparison to other cultural sector experiences. The 2023-2024 Department for Culture, Media and Sport Participation Survey found that museum and gallery engagement saw the largest increase in the sector, up 10% compared to 2022-3.⁶⁶⁸ With this combination of an increase in attendances and the financial pressure of income generation, creating the best possible experience for visitors should be a high concern for museums. One method of determining visitor experience is through evaluation, and the IER could help to provide the evidence venues need to demonstrate this.

UCM is also facing financial pressures. While all the museums are currently free to visit (at least in part), during the research period the Fitzwilliam Museum started a ‘pay what you can’ model for entry to temporary exhibitions, with the suggestion that this is the beginning of the process of collecting ‘useful data and insight’ as they develop their exhibition programmes ‘to be appealing, accessible and sustainable’.⁶⁶⁹ Presumably this includes financial sustainability. Kettle’s Yard also introduced an admission charge in 2023, on a different model to the Fitzwilliam. The £10.50

⁶⁶⁴ ‘FAQs’, Museums Association, n.d. <<https://www.museumsassociation.org/about/faqs/>> [accessed 26 August 2024].

⁶⁶⁵ DC Research and Wavehill, ‘Research to Understand the Levels of Public Investment in Museums. Final Report’, 2024, p. 3.

⁶⁶⁶ DC Research and Wavehill, p. 3.

⁶⁶⁷ The Heritage Alliance, ‘On the Brink: Heritage in the Cost of Living Crisis’, 2024, p. 4.

⁶⁶⁸ ‘Headline Findings for the Participation Survey (May 2023 to March 2024)’, GOV.UK, n.d. <<https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/participation-survey-2023-24-annual-publication/headline-findings-for-the-participation-survey-may-2023-to-march-2024>> [accessed 26 August 2024].

⁶⁶⁹ ‘Pay What You Wish’, The Fitzwilliam Museum, n.d. <<https://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/support-us/pay-what-you-wish>> [accessed 17 August 2024].

admission fee covers the permanent displays of the house, while access to the temporary exhibition space remains free.⁶⁷⁰

In 2023 the University collection in Norwich, the Sainsbury Centre, became ‘the first museum in the UK to introduce a Pay What You Can ticketing system for the entire museum.’⁶⁷¹ Executive Director Jago Cooper was quoted in *The Art Newspaper* as saying that visitors ‘like the empowerment’ of this model, adding: ‘sometimes permanent collections can remain staid while temporary exhibitions, where all the excitement happens, are behind a paywall.’⁶⁷² This statement unfortunately exemplifies everything I would wish to counter with both my research and the IER: that the temporary exhibitions are where ‘the excitement’ happens. Disappointingly, this quote came after the ‘relaunch’ of the centre, including new interventions in the permanent displays. Not everyone is quite so neglectful of the permanent displays. In her December 2023 review of the rehang of the European Art at the Metropolitan Museum of Modern Art in the *Financial Times*, the author concludes that ‘the permanent collection is like your family: just because it will be there waiting for us whenever we come back is no reason to take it for granted’.⁶⁷³ Good evaluation data could help to determine whether visitors find permanent displays ‘staid’ or are taking them for granted. This is clearly an area where the IER could provide essential assistance to venues both large and small.

There is no doubt that the introduction of admission charges will continue to be a crucial issue for museums. As with other parts of the country, in the eastern region the financial situation has hit museums hard. While Kettle’s Yard and the Sainsbury Centre were introducing their paid models, Wisbech and Fenland Museum also initiated an admission fee ‘for the first time in 100 years’.⁶⁷⁴ A note of caution was added in the 2024 report on public funding in museums, as it warned that ‘the introduction of admission charges was not a panacea for the financial challenges facing museums,’ and that such fees could limit audience development.⁶⁷⁵ New and creative payment models will continue to be introduced into the sector, and this will

⁶⁷⁰ ‘Plan Your Visit to Kettle’s Yard’, Kettle’s Yard, n.d. <<https://www.kettlesyard.cam.ac.uk/plan-your-visit/>> [accessed 28 August 2024].

⁶⁷¹ ‘Visit Us, Opening Times, Facilities’, Sainsbury Centre, n.d. <<https://www.sainsburycentre.ac.uk/visit-us/>> [accessed 28 August 2024].

⁶⁷² ‘Previously Free, Some UK Museums Are Starting to Charge as Cost of Living Crisis Bites’, *The Art Newspaper - International Art News and Events*, 13 June 2023 <<https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2023/06/13/previously-free-some-uk-museums-starting-to-charge-as-cost-of-living-crisis-bites>> [accessed 28 August 2024].

⁶⁷³ Ariella Budick, ‘A Dazzling Rehang for the Ages’, *Financial Times*, 9 December 2023, section Arts.

⁶⁷⁴ ‘Previously Free, Some UK Museums Are Starting to Charge as Cost of Living Crisis Bites’.

⁶⁷⁵ DC Research and Wavehill, p. 42.

require responsive evaluation techniques to ensure that results remain consistent and robust. This is an area that requires further research and testing, by using the IER in venues and temporary exhibitions that have an admission charge. Within Cambridge, an interesting comparative study could be made between the permanent displays at Kettle's Yard and the Fitzwilliam Museum, using a variety of evaluation methods in spaces with different payment models and recording any effect on visitor behaviour. Ideally, these could be compared with non-university venues to ensure the Resources are effective in a variety of scenarios. UCM has a commitment to assisting museums in the region and the IER could partially fulfil this.

Alongside testing the IER, the research revealed the deep and pressing need to speak to more staff in museums as an evaluation method. As determined in Chapter 2, staff are commonly an overlooked audience, and as outlined in Chapter 5, the process of interviewing staff was particularly illuminating, changing my evaluation practice. The workforce within the sector is stretched and stressed, with 'more than one in four heritage workers now reporting that they feel uncomfortably stressed on most days'.⁶⁷⁶ Additionally, research by the Group for Education in Museums in 2024 found there has also been 'an over reliance on external project-based funding for roles and programmes,' which has again contributed to staff stress and limited career progression opportunities.⁶⁷⁷ As 70% of organisations say that they will now give greater emphasis to staff wellbeing, consulting staff as part of an evaluation focus could positively contribute to this aim.⁶⁷⁸ For exhibitions, this could take place in both the formative and summative stages when preparing new temporary and permanent displays. Summative evaluation soliciting staff views of current displays could also provide areas of synergy between departments. The research interviews with curatorial staff revealed their frustrations and feelings of guilt over problems in permanent displays. These views were often shared by learning and members of front of house teams, but the impression from public-facing staff was that curators were happy with the exhibitions or were wilfully ignoring issues. By conducting staff evaluation, these areas of overlap could be exposed, and joint dynamic approaches to sympathetic resolution could possibly be achieved.

Another area for future research with staff would be to determine whether staff in non-university museums similarly lack both time and experience in carrying out robust evaluation. Many have assumed there is a gap, such as in the SHARE Data

⁶⁷⁶ The Heritage Alliance, p. 22.

⁶⁷⁷ Kara Wescombe Blackman, 'Museum Learning Research 2024' (GEM, 2024), p. 8.

⁶⁷⁸ The Heritage Alliance, p. 22.

Driven Museums report, where it is stated that ‘a lack of personnel, skill gaps and time pressures are real barriers’, but there are no supporting references that identify these beyond anecdotal.⁶⁷⁹ If this is a recognisable gap then the IER and training could be of enormous benefit to all venues. This needs to be tested and the IER may need adapting to be of the most assistance to a greater number of needs. The flourishing of toolkits and courses implies that there is a skills gap, but the lack of literature or surveys on staff competencies means there is further work to do here. There is the potential for this research to have important repercussions more widely. Case studies in Australia and New Zealand have found that ‘audience research appeared to be a driver for cultural change in that it is seen to increase visitor orientation (centeredness) within the institution.’⁶⁸⁰ A repositioning and reconsideration of evaluation could have significant impact on the heritage sector.

6.6 What would I do differently if I were starting now? Lessons learned

If the research were beginning now, I would focus on fewer evaluation methods, and work on embedding them fully into a research project on permanent displays. Each evaluation method could have an entire dissertation dedicated to exploring their use in evaluation. More recently there have been studies using methods such as visitor observation to examine specific types of display (such as McDowall’s doctoral thesis on prehistoric exhibitions, on which I was third supervisor).⁶⁸¹ The examples in this chapter which successfully used the IER have mostly concentrated on visitor observation, surveys and meaning maps. The MuseumNext research in 2024 showed that surveys (online and in person), interviews and observational studies were the most common evaluation methods used in museums, although the graph they provide gives no indication on what proportion of museums are using them.⁶⁸² Given this new information, I would spend more time on meaning maps and creative methods, advocating for their use in permanent displays. With some robust practical examples arising from the research, these methods could prove to be particularly useful for demonstrating impact, as well as being innovative for audiences. ‘Survey fatigue’, the ‘over-exposure to the survey process’, is a recognised phenomenon that even online survey platforms such as Qualtrics are now offering suggestions on

⁶⁷⁹ Sue M. Davies, p. 8.

⁶⁸⁰ Eva M. Reussner, ‘Best Practices in Audience Research and Evaluation: Case Studies of Australian and New Zealand Museums’, 2004, p. 20.

⁶⁸¹ Felicity A. McDowall, “‘Lost in Temporal Translation and Entombed in Static Isolation’: A Comprehensive Visual and Visitor-Based Analysis of the Presentation of Prehistory in Museum Displays across England” (Durham University) 2020.

⁶⁸² Casas, Duval, and Lord.

overcoming.⁶⁸³ Even observational and other ethnographic techniques are becoming more familiar and therefore could be subject to some level of weariness.⁶⁸⁴ By offering training and real-world examples using alternative evaluation methods visitors could become more engaged in the evaluation process, perhaps even enjoying it in a way that does not commonly happen with surveys.

This DHeritage research only looked at physical visitors, but the pandemic ‘accelerated the digitalization of museums and galleries, rapidly popularizing online exhibitions’.⁶⁸⁵ This swift pivot produced a lot of content, but of variable quality. One study on lockdown online exhibitions in the UK concluded that while there had been some value in what had been produced, there were still fundamental questions that remained:

What is the value of the online exhibition? What should it do and not do? How is it different to a physical exhibition? How do audiences behave in online spaces? What do they expect? Future research into this area, evaluating how online exhibitions serve audiences, is thus needed.⁶⁸⁶

These questions have still to be answered. There are very few guidelines or case studies on how to successfully evaluate online museum exhibitions, despite promises in 2022 from the Museums Association that they would be producing a free online course on ‘digital usability evaluation’.⁶⁸⁷ The British Museum, the Natural History Museum and the Digital Culture Network websites provide no case study examples or practical resources on the evaluation of online outputs. This gap has certainly been exacerbated by the pandemic but is one that now must be tackled as a matter of urgency. If the research were beginning in 2024, the evaluation of online exhibitions could have been the focus for a suite of resources. There remains a question over whether these exhibitions would be considered ‘permanent’. Recent cyber-attacks such as those affecting the British Library and collections management software company Gallery Systems (which left many American museums without

⁶⁸³ Adrian Field, ‘Survey Fatigue and the Tragedy of the Commons: Are We Undermining Our Evaluation Practice?’, *Evaluation Matters—He Take Tō Te Aromatawai*, 6 (2020), pp. 1–11 (p. 2); Jack Davies, ‘Sending Too Many Surveys? How to Avoid Survey Fatigue’, *Qualtrics*, 2019 <<https://www.qualtrics.com/blog/avoiding-survey-fatigue/>> [accessed 29 August 2024].

⁶⁸⁴ See, for example, Sarah Neal and others, ‘“You Can’t Move in Hackney without Bumping into an Anthropologist”: Why Certain Places Attract Research Attention’, *Qualitative Research*, 16.5 (2016), pp. 491–507.

⁶⁸⁵ Shih-Chieh Chen and Yu-Hsuan Lee, ‘Research on Usability Evaluation of Online Exhibition Applications’, in *Human-Computer Interaction*, ed. by Masaaki Kurosu and Ayako Hashizume (Springer Nature Switzerland, 2023), pp. 347–62 (p. 347).

⁶⁸⁶ Ellie King and others, ‘Digital Responses of UK Museum Exhibitions to the COVID-19 Crisis, March – June 2020’, *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 64.3 (2021), pp. 487–504 (p. 500).

⁶⁸⁷ Cultural Associates Oxford and One Further, ‘Digital Impact in Museums & Galleries’ (Museums Association; Art Fund, 2022), p. 10.

online catalogues in early 2024) show the vulnerability of online outputs.⁶⁸⁸ Such issues should provide additional impetus to evaluate online exhibitions expeditiously and thoroughly.

6.7 Conclusion

For this DHeritage I have ascertained the multiple factors and pressures that are influencing current evaluation practice in the UK, especially those relating to funders and the whims of governmental bodies. The limitations of evaluation within museums, particularly in relation to staff skills and time that is available have been laid out. After thoroughly examining the toolkits and methods that are being used on the ground in museums exhibition evaluation, and following in-depth interviews with colleagues, the Impact Evaluation Resources and training materials were created. These have had some success in improving exhibition evaluation, but have not yet fully achieved their intentions, particularly with respect to permanent displays. There are early signs that display evaluation is becoming more deeply embedded in practice in Cambridge, and therefore I will continue to improve the IER and deliver training to researchers and museum staff. New questions have been raised, and avenues for further research have been opened.

As Falk suggested 24 years ago: ‘the path to documenting impact has no end; it will need to be one of continuous effort.’⁶⁸⁹ Museums are well-practised in continuous effort. Their future is always uncertain. There will never be sufficient staffing or funding for museum ambitions. Museums *must* improve their exhibition evaluation and data collection skills if they are to survive in financial, emotional, and existential terms. My hope is that the Impact Evaluation Resources help all museums, large or small, volunteer-run or staffed, independent or university-owned, cramped or vast, heaving with visitors or empty for the majority of the day, to prove their worth and inspire future generations. Maybe there is even now a small child staring slightly wistfully at a large boot perpetually caught in a mantrap, and perhaps they are also inspired to consider a future in museums, or even the future of museums. That can be the impact of permanent displays.

⁶⁸⁸ Daniel Cassady, ‘Hundreds of Online Museum Collections Suffer in Cyber Attack’, *ARTnews.Com*, 5 January 2024 <<https://www.artnews.com/art-news/news/cyber-attack-museums-gallery-systems-1234692222/>> [accessed 29 August 2024]; ‘Cyber Incident Update: Information & FAQ’s’, The British Library, n.d. <<https://www.bl.uk/cyber-incident/>> [accessed 29 August 2024].

⁶⁸⁹ John H. Falk, ‘Assessing the Impact of Museums’, p. 7.

Appendix 1:

Impact Evaluation Resources

Planning your evaluation

Sarah-Jane Harknett

Museums are increasingly being asked to prove our value to society in robust ways. In the University of Cambridge Museums, we believe that evaluation is strongest and at its most effective when we use the most appropriate methods for both the audience and output. Some of our evaluation and audience development work continues throughout the year, sometimes we do more intensive evaluation. We use proportionate methods, which are based on what the project is, the timescale and timeline, audiences (both existing and potential), the budget, measures of success, and the change the evaluation can bring. Through all our work, we want to make sure museums and galleries are still spaces to be enjoyed, we don't want our visitors to feel that they are being studied. We usually carry out evaluation at different times in the life of a project:

Front end: this is the evaluation that happens before a project starts, perhaps testing what an audience knows about a topic, their attitude towards something or getting baseline data. It might take place before an audience is finalised, when we are working out who the activity should be aimed at.

Formative: this is ongoing testing and evaluation that takes place before something is finished. Perhaps we have had the initial idea and we want to do some user testing before we decide on the final version, for example, testing exhibition interactives.

Summative: this evaluation takes place at the end of the work, when nothing can be changed, but when you are trying to see what the impact of the final product has been on the intended audiences, whether the work met the original aims and objectives. This is the most common method of evaluation in museums.

The tools and methods you use will change depending on the audiences you are working with and what you are evaluating. You will probably want to choose two or more methods to evaluate the activity. This is called triangulation and should improve the validity of claims that you draw from your evaluation data. At the end of this resource is additional information about different evaluation methods, looking at their advantages, disadvantages, time needed, inputs and outputs. Here are some suggestions of different ways to evaluate either staff or participants for various museum activities:

Exhibitions	Public/Participants	Staff
Front end	Focus groups User panel	Focus groups Feedback survey
Formative	Focus groups Interviews User panel	Focus groups Interviews
Summative	Feedback survey Visitor observation Interviews	Feedback survey Interviews Reflective journalling

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Events	Public/Participants	Staff
Front end	Focus groups User panel	Focus groups Feedback survey
Formative	Focus groups Interviews User panel	Focus groups Interviews
Summative	Feedback survey Visitor observation Interviews	Feedback survey Interviews Reflective journalling

Programming	Public/Participants	Staff
Front end	Focus groups User panel	Focus groups Feedback survey
Formative	Focus groups Interviews User panel	Focus groups Interviews
Summative	Feedback survey Visitor observation Interviews	Feedback survey Interviews Reflective journalling

Digital activity	Public/Participants	Staff
Front end	Focus groups User panel	Focus groups Feedback survey
Formative	Focus groups Interviews User panel	Focus groups Interviews
Summative	Feedback survey Visitor observation Interviews	Feedback survey Interviews Reflective journalling

Once you have decided on the methods that you are going to use, you will need to plan out your timeline. Below is an example timeline for an exhibition where the evaluator is planning to use surveys and visitor observation with members of the public:

Example Exhibition Evaluation Timeline		Days
The earlier the better.	Plan evaluation, create timetable, design evaluation tools (write survey, create visitor observation sheet)	5
Exhibition opens. Data collection phase.	Surveys	5
	Visitor observation	10
After exhibition closes	Data analysis and reporting	15
Total		35

Impact Evaluation Resources

Further reading and other resources

- Judy Diamond, *Practical Evaluation Guide: tools for museums and other informal educational settings*, AltaMira Press, 1999.

If you are looking for an easy-to-read, museum-relevant guide to evaluation, this is an excellent introduction. Judy covers planning, selecting people for the evaluation, observation, interviews, questionnaires, presenting and analysing data and writing the report. She uses museum examples throughout, mainly from science collections. There is further recommended reading section at the end. The book is showing its age a little, but it is still an excellent starting point for a simple overview.

- Barry Lord, Gail Dexter Lord, Maria Piacente *The Manual of Museum Exhibitions*, AltaMira Press, 2002.

There are a few versions of this available (cheaper copies of the earlier versions are available second hand online), but the chapter on evaluation with sections by Duncan Grewcock and Barbara Soren is well-worth a read to gain a helpful overview of exhibition evaluation.

- National Co-ordinating Centre for Public Engagement (NCCPE) website, especially the guide to 'Using a logic model to develop your strategy':
<https://www.publicengagement.ac.uk/resources/guide/using-logic-model-develop-your-strategy>

To plan your evaluation, you might decide to use a logic model. Some funders are now asking for these as part of your application. If you are new to planning with logic models, this guide by Mary-Clare Hallsworth will walk you through the process step-by step. There is a worked example, which although not museum-relevant is broad enough to still be useful.

- Case studies on the websites of The British Museum, The Natural History Museum, and University of Cambridge Museums.

One of the most useful ways to learn about evaluation is to examine case studies from other museums to see what works, what you like and what you think it not so useful. The British Museum has a 'visitor research and evaluation' section on their website, with mostly summative exhibition evaluation reports, usually written by consultants. The Natural History Museum's website has an 'audience research and insight' page, with downloadable pdfs of literature reviews and some more specific reports on activities and events. Some of these are over ten years old, and at the moment the page doesn't appear to be updated regularly. The UCM Collections in Action website includes a section on resources, where evaluation support can be found. The blog also is regularly updated with evaluation reports.

- Ben Gammon and Jo Graham, 'Putting value back into evaluation', *Visitor Studies Today!* Volume 1, 1998, pp 6-8.

This short article looks the barriers that organisations (in this case, The Science Museum) face around embedding evaluation into what they do. The authors provide some practical ideas of things that audience advocates can do to bring all museum staff on the evaluation journey. A thought-provoking read.

Suggested Evaluation Methods

Activity	Inputs	Process	Outputs (Action/item to achieve outcome)	Outcomes (What will it achieve; the difference that is made)	Advantages	Disadvantages	Time requirements (high/med/low)	Recommended applications
Feedback Survey UCM Evaluation Resource available	Paper survey questionnaires designed to collect demographic data and responses specific to the exhibition, event, or programme	- Paper surveys positioned for maximum audience impact/attention or handed directly to participants - Survey data entered by staff/volunteers if paper-based	- Qualitative and quantitative evidence relevant to the evaluation aims - Demographic audience data	Improved understanding of impact	- If handed out, can use a sampling strategy - Can collect both qualitative and quantitative data - User Familiarity - Large scale data collection is possible	- Transcribing data is time consuming - Cannot check meaning of responses - User over-familiarity might lead to low response rate - Requires literacy skills - Environmental implications with paper-based methods	Staff/volunteer training: Low Data collection: Medium Analysis: Medium	- Exhibitions - Events with defined audience - Front end, formative and summative - Formal and informal learning
	Digital survey questionnaires designed to collect demographic data and responses specific to the exhibition, event, or programme	- Audience/ participants given link to digital survey or use a tablet loaded with the survey - Responses entered as part of the questionnaire process: no additional input			- Can collect both qualitative and quantitative data - User Familiarity	- Harder to impose a sampling strategy - Lower response rates - Cannot check meaning of responses - User Familiarity	Staff/volunteer training: Low Data collection: Medium Analysis: Medium	

		needed from staff/volunteers						
Activity	Inputs	Process	Outputs	Outcomes	Advantages	Disadvantages	Time requirements	Recommended applications
Visitor Tracking and Observation UCM Evaluation Resource available	Information about audience behaviour in the exhibition, how long they spend looking at the exhibits, displays interpretation and interactives.	- Trained evaluators (staff or volunteers) recruited to carry out visitor tracking surveys - Managed by a staff member - Volunteers will complete visitor tracking surveys - Data uploaded and interpreted	Qualitative and quantitative evidence relevant to the evaluation aims	- Improved understanding of how visitors engage with exhibition content - Improved understanding of how to make exhibitions more impactful	- Can get an idea of how a display space is being used practically - Can impose sampling strategy - Can observe the behaviour of different audiences - No literacy or language skills required	- Don't know why people are stopping/engaging - Need clear ethical statement - Environmental implications with paper-based methods	Staff/volunteer training: Medium Data collection: High Analysis: High	- Permanent displays - Temporary exhibitions - Static events - Formative or summative
Accompanied Visits UCM Evaluation Resource available	Questions and talking points designed to prompt conversations	- Liaison with participants to arrange a suitable time and date - Evaluator accompanies the participants and will note and record their responses to the different exhibits as they walk around, providing a detail account of individual experiences and noting any changes in thinking or attitude.	- Qualitative evidence relevant to the evaluation aims - Transcriptions and records of conversations and interactions	- An understanding of how participants engage with exhibition content - Feedback and observations from individuals or small groups	- Opportunity to see a natural visit - Immediate feedback - Can use a sampling strategy - Can get in depth feedback - Can use with specific audiences - Can look at specific aspects of exhibitions/event	- Small sample size - Could be biased if a member of staff or volunteer accompanies the group	Staff/volunteer training: Med Data collection: High Analysis: High	- Permanent displays - Temporary exhibitions - Events - Programmes aimed at specific audiences - Formative and summative

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		The evaluator will try not to influence the visit, allowing the visitors to have as natural an experience as possible						
Activity	Inputs	Process	Outputs	Outcomes	Advantages	Disadvantages	Time requirements	Recommended applications
Ticketing numbers	Numbers of people attending	Actual number of attendees to an event, exhibition or programme is recorded	Quantitative data on attendees	Improved understanding of periods visitors are most likely to visit	- Simple - Quick - Cheap - No literacy or language skills required	Very limited information	Staff/volunteer training: Low Data collection: Low Analysis: Low	Almost everything with an audience - Exhibitions - Events - Activities with specified audience - Activities for an undefined audience - Summative - Formal and informal learning
Activity	Inputs	Process	Outputs	Outcomes	Advantages	Disadvantages	Time requirements	Recommended applications
Reflective journaling UCM Evaluation Resource available	Information held in reflective journals, either physical or digital	Participants record their thoughts, sometimes responding to prompts, over the life of a project	- Qualitative evidence relevant to evaluation aims - Long form, reflective text	- Retrospective identification of issues and successes in projects - Deeper understanding of	Longitudinal data over the course of a project, from instigation to completion and beyond	- Relies heavily on participant remembering to complete - No standard questions might mean important	Staff/volunteer training: Low Data collection: Medium Analysis:	- Long-term projects - Adults - Participatory programmes - Community engagement

				process and change	- Rich data which can respond to project alterations - Good at capturing processes as well as outcomes - Can be used by both project organisers and audience	information is lost Requires literacy skills	High	- Activities with specified audiences - Evolving projects - Formative and summative
Interviews UCM Evaluation Resource available	Questions designed to collect responses specific to the exhibition, event, or programme being evaluated	- Interviewees are approached for convenient time slots - Interview takes place, responses recorded	Qualitative data relevant to evaluation and project aims	- Improved understanding of project - In depth understanding	- Can get in depth feedback - Possible to repeat interview process for longitudinal studies - With suitable permissions, can use method with children - Does not require literacy skills - Can use a sampling strategy	- Requires language skills from both interviewer and interviewee - Need skilled interviewer to reduce bias and elicit responses - Transcription is time consuming - Can provide a large body of evidence, which can be time-consuming to analyse	Staff/volunteer training: Med Data collection: High Analysis: High	- Long-term projects - Short-term projects - Evolving projects - Exhibition process - Front end, formative and summative - Exhibition (summative) - Formal and informal learning
Activity	Inputs	Process	Outputs	Outcomes	Advantages	Disadvantages	Time requirements	Recommended applications
Creative outputs	Drawings or other creative content (collage,	Participants asked to produce their own creative response to a provocation.	Analysis of the creative content; qualitative data	Impact of an engagement, especially from groups that may	Does not always need literacy skills	- Can be difficult to interpret - Environmental implications	Staff/volunteer training: Medium	- Formative and summative - Participatory programmes

Impact Evaluation Resources



UCM Evaluation Resource available	photographs, artworks, etc)	They may be asked supporting questions or to provide a commentary		struggle with other evaluation methods	- Can engage a wide range of audiences - Can be used for long-term projects	with paper-based methods	Data collection: Medium Analysis: High	- Community engagement - Activities with specified audience - Work with children and young people - Permanent and temporary exhibitions - Events - Formal and informal learning
Meaning maps UCM Evaluation Resource available	Words, drawings, or other creative content in response to a theme word, phrase, or image	- Participants given paper with central theme and asked to write or draw their responses - They may be asked to talk about or elaborate upon their responses - The same meaning map can be used before and after an intervention, using different coloured pens	- Analysis of the creative content; qualitative data - Comparison of responses before and after an intervention	Impact of a specific engagement on a particular theme	- When used before and after an experience can be used to measure changes - Younger audiences have some familiarity with technique - Responses can be written or drawn	- Can be difficult to interpret - Environmental implications with paper-based methods	Staff/volunteer training: Medium Data collection: Medium Analysis: High	- Summative - Permanent and temporary exhibitions - Work with children and young people - Formal and informal learning
Activity	Inputs	Process	Outputs	Outcomes	Advantages	Disadvantages	Time requirements	Recommended applications
Focus groups UCM Evaluation Resource available	The experiences of a group of people brought together to discuss a specific aspect of museum practice.	- Group of people brought together to discuss a topic. - Participants identified and recruited, ideally	- Qualitative data - Responses of a group of small people	- In depth data about a specific topic - Improved understanding of project	Good to find out opinions of specific audiences	- Requires skilled facilitators - Some voices may still dominate	Staff/volunteer training: High Data collection: Med	- Long-term projects - Evolving projects - Exhibition process

		with some common ground between them. They may be users or non-users. Facilitated conversation session, usually using prompts on the subject in question		Contributions from more than one person	- Can clarify points with the group - Depth of information - Can be planned to not require literacy skills	- Transcription is time consuming - Requires good language skills from participants - Can provide a large body of evidence, which can be time-consuming to analyse - Care is needed when recruiting and during the focus group to ensure the process is equitable - Recruitment can be difficult and time-consuming	Analysis: High	- Best for front end and formative - Community groups - Children and young people - Families
Activity	Inputs	Process	Outputs	Outcomes	Advantages	Disadvantages	Time requirements	Recommended applications
User panel UCM Evaluation Resource available	The experiences of a group of people brought together over a period of time to discuss a specific aspect of museum practice.	- Group of people from current audiences brought together to discuss issues - Group will be called upon frequently and regularly	- Qualitative data - Responses of a group of small people over longer period of time	Improved understanding of participant views and feelings	- Can get in-depth feedback over longer period of time - Opportunity to create good relationships with panel and the communities they represent	- Might become stale, an audience echo chamber - Can provide a large body of evidence, which can be time-consuming to analyse - Requires skilled facilitators	Staff/volunteer training: High Data collection: High Analysis: High	- Long-term projects - Evolving projects - Exhibition process - Front end, formative and summative - Community groups - Family groups - Young people

					• Can clarify points • Good way to test out specific outputs (marketing materials, text, etc)	• Requires good language skills from participants • Care is needed when recruiting and during the focus group to ensure the process is equitable • Recruitment can be difficult and time-consuming – even more so than with focus groups		
Activity	Inputs	Process	Outputs	Outcomes	Advantages	Disadvantages	Time requirements	Recommended applications
Comments books/ post-it notes	• Short (usually written) responses from members of the public	• Printed comments cards or notebooks and writing implements available (or can be digital) • Prompt questions can be used	• Generally, provides qualitative data • Possible to get responses from all participants	• Feedback on a specific event, exhibition, programme, or intervention	• Adaptable and open method • No special equipment needed • Can ask for drawings or other feedback • Little staff time required to implement	• No standard questions • Environmental implications with paper-based methods • No sampling strategy • Need regular monitoring • Potential for high volume of off-topic content • Prompt question should	Staff/volunteer training: Low Data collection: Low to Med Analysis: Med to High	• Permanent displays • Temporary exhibitions • Events • Programmes aimed at specific audiences • Summative • Formal and informal learning

						be carefully chosen • Requires literacy skills • Often people who feel the most strongly (positive or negative) who complete		
Activity	Inputs	Process	Outputs	Outcomes	Advantages	Disadvantages	Time requirements	Recommended applications
Analysis and Reporting	• Outputs of all data collection strands • Comparison to previous reports and tracking studies • Records of data collection and exhibition information	• Content analysis of outputs, uncovering key themes and patterns in relation to aims • Description of the results and development of conclusions and implications • Develop clear action and learning points • Produce and circulate full report	• Full written report and executive summary	• Evaluation findings enhance understanding of impact and inform reporting and future planning	• Opportunity to disseminate information to stakeholders and decision makers	• Requires adequate time allocated to it	Staff/volunteer training: Low-High Data collection: Low-High Analysis: Low-High	• All applications • All audiences

Surveys and Asking Questions

Sarah-Jane Harknett

Surveys or questionnaires are probably the most used method of evaluation. They are flexible, quick to create, cheap to deliver, can be paper-based, digital or both, and a careful combination of questions can give you useful qualitative and quantitative evidence as well as demographic data about the audience. Surveys can provide evaluation data for a large exhibition, one case or a single object. A survey is often completed without input or intervention from an evaluator and so are limited to a predetermined set of questions.

How to do it

- Write your questions.

For demographic questions, check what is standard in your field or nationally recognised. For example, you might want to align your age categories with those used by Arts Council England or use the guidance from Stonewall on sexual orientation and gender identity. Only ask for demographic information that is relevant and that you can use in your analysis. Don't chose categories that are too big, this often happens in age categories, for example try to avoid using catch all ages such as '65+'.

Use a variety of questions: open-ended, closed, free text, rating scales, etc. See the Ben Gammon document in the Further Reading section for a helpful guide to different sorts of questions. There is disagreement in the literature over whether you should have scale questions with an odd or even number of points. A scale with an odd number (1 to 5 for example) gives respondents the opportunity to give a neutral response by putting themselves in the middle, a scale with even numbers (such as 1 to 10) forces people to have an opinion one way or the other, however marginally. All closed and scale questions should include an option for don't know, no opinion, not applicable, or prefer not to say

	The lowest level I would find acceptable is									The level I ideally want is									I feel the level currently provided is									
	Low High									Low High									Low High									
10) Making electronic resources accessible from my home or office	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	☐
11) Quiet space for individual work	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	☐
12) Staff who instil confidence in users	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	☐
13) Adequate opening hours	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	☐

Figure 1: Example survey questions with odd number scale bars. It is not immediately obvious how to respond to each question: how many people will complete all 12 parts?

(particularly if you are asking for potentially sensitive information).

Don't ask more than one thing in each question. It is very easy to add clauses to questions that make them difficult to answer, or difficult to analyse. In Figure 1 the first question asks about accessing electronic resources, but the answer might be different for the home or the office. To avoid confusing the respondent and the final report, these should be two separate questions. Don't have too many questions: the more questions you ask, the more likely the participant is to leave the survey. Use questions with free text responses cautiously. People will quickly get tired of writing longer answers and you will not get better data with a

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greater number of questions. It should be possible to answer your question almost immediately. Try not to ask people for information that they do not have at the time or that they will need to gather from elsewhere. Don't ask people to respond on behalf of someone else, for example don't ask teachers to tell you what the students thought.

- Only ask questions that are relevant to your evaluation study.

This is especially important with demographic questions, which can appear invasive. Think carefully about how you will analyse and use the results of each question in your survey: you should have a clear reason to include it. Remember to ask some questions that allow for negative feedback.

- Balance the positive and negative questions.

Getting negative feedback from your evaluation participants can sometimes be difficult. In UCM, we have found that asking people to suggest three improvements to an exhibition, or to be specific in their criticism has given us the best results. If you have a series of questions where you are asking people to rate on a scale, you could consider whether some of these are positive, and some are negative. Sometimes respondents can end up giving the same response to each question without thinking, so switching the way you ask questions might help them slow down. Pilot your survey to make sure the questions are clear. See the UCL Museum Wellbeing Measures Toolkit (in Further Reading) for their 'Umbrellas' that use both positive and negative terms for the participant to rate on a scale of 1 to 5.

- Order your questions.

Put your questions in a sensible order: group them so that you take the person on a logical journey through the questionnaire. Some experts recommend putting demographic questions at the beginning of the survey, to ease people in gently. Others suggest you end with demographic questions, so that if people are tired, they have something easy and quick to end on. You could order the questions in the order of your event or exhibition if appropriate. In general, it is recommended that a survey moves from general questions to more specific ones, or from questions that are easy to answer at the beginning, with ones that require more thought or are more emotionally charged towards the end. Think about who the survey audience is and order your questionnaire appropriately.

- Check the design and logic.

If your survey is on paper it should be easy to read with numbered questions. Follow all the usual rules for creating an accessible print document: don't have sentences or questions that break over a page, don't hyphenate words over different lines, align text on the left text rather than centred or justified. Most digital survey software will allow you to add logic, so questions can be skipped if particular answers are given. Used carefully, this can help to avoid tiring your respondent by only giving them relevant questions, but don't use it as a way to have a long survey.

- Pilot the whole survey and/or individual questions.

Testing out your questions with a small sample of your intended audience is a crucial (but often overlooked) step. The more you test and refine your questions, the better your results will be and the more robust your data set. Piloting allows you to iron out ambiguities in wording, to check the survey logic and to avoid misunderstandings. Most of the time you

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will have no opportunity to ask follow-up questions as part of the survey process, so checking your questionnaire thoroughly increases your chances of getting reliable results. Piloting your survey should also be a chance for you to check that respondents understand multiple-choice answers in the same way, and that everyone fits into a category. It can be helpful to time people as they complete the survey. This will help you to approach your audience in the data collection phase, as you can genuinely tell them how long it will take.

- Collect the data.

Unless the audience you are evaluating is very small, you will need to survey a sample of the population. Work out how you will be sampling the audience and ensure you are not excluding anyone. You don't want to end up relying only on motivated people to fill your survey in. This will give you plenty of people who either loved or hated the experience you are evaluating, but not many of the people in the middle. Think carefully before offering incentives: you don't want to create a bias in the respondents your survey appeals to, and you shouldn't offer anything related to your venue.

You need to directly ask the audience you are evaluating. Don't ask people to speak on behalf of someone else, for example one person to do the survey to represent the group they visit with. If you are approaching people in person to fill in the survey, think about where you will be positioned, how you will present yourself and what you will say. Write a script so that all evaluators are using the same prompts.

Ethics, safety, and security

All relevant museum and evaluation staff should be fully briefed on the evaluation project before it begins, especially if you are using a sampling strategy. There will probably be no reason for you to collect identifiable data as part of a survey, but your questions should maintain respondents' anonymity. See the GDPR template on the Practical Evaluation Tips website (in Further Reading) for an idea of how to collect the necessary permissions.

Anyone evaluating visitors should be ready to explain what they are doing and why. For a survey, the person asking the questions should know what is going to happen to the results and how quickly a report might be available. Information sheets for participants should be provided either physically, or as part of an online survey. If someone responding to the survey decides they would like to withdraw from the study, delete or destroy their survey. Online surveys should have the details of someone who can be contacted for any queries and should clarify when in the process participants can withdraw their participation. Decide in advance how you will handle any surveys which are not fully completed: will you use the responses that have been given or remove the survey if the participant does not reach the end?

What to do with the data

If you have collected the data on paper, this will need to be transcribed into a spreadsheet. You can then create simple charts or graphs. Digital survey software will be able to do a lot of the analysis for you, usually creating charts or graphs automatically.

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You will need to analyse free text questions separately. Immerse yourself in the answers by reading the responses to each question through several times before starting to draw conclusions. Look for repeating themes, words or emotions, or patterns in responses. Think about ways that you can back up the themes that you come up with from a questionnaire with other evaluation methods.

Spend some time working out the format for your final report. How can you present the data in the most effective way possible? Remember your report has an audience, so communicate your conclusions in a way that is understandable and persuasive. This could be through different types of graphs, images, using colour or infographics.



Figure 2: A very simple infographic from the [UCM blog](#), summarising UCM visitor figures April to September 2022

Cautions and caveats

A questionnaire is not a magic bullet for all your evaluation needs. They rely on people having good skills in the language the survey is written in. Depending on the distribution method, they can have a very low return rate, leading you to draw conclusions based on a tiny proportion of the audience. They are often the first method people turn to when evaluating, but your audience might be experiencing a level of ‘survey fatigue’. Use questionnaires with care.

Surveys should include a mixture of questions to give you both quantitative and qualitative responses. Your final results should be standardised and comparable, within the population you are studying or before and after an experience. You should ensure you include enough free text questions so that you can dig into responses, but not so many that it is overwhelming. If people are filling in the survey without an evaluator, you may end up with incomplete surveys and you have no opportunity for follow up.

You can end up with a lot of data. This can be good but can also leave you with a lot of analysis to do (and transcription if you are collecting questionnaires on paper). Be realistic about what you will have time to do and don’t ask more questions than you will have time to go through. Don’t ask questions that are unnecessary. Before you ask people to complete your survey, check that each question has earned its place in your questionnaire. Will the

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response be helpful? Are you inviting people to complain or comment on things that you have no control over? Is that important?

Avoid leading questions. Don't assume that everyone is as excited about the specific area you evaluating as you are. There can be a tendency to really drill down into responses in areas that people might have no knowledge or opinion. A questionnaire should not feel like a test, and you don't always need to ask 'why?'.

When writing your report, avoid putting together too many groups of responses for questions with a scale. For example, it is better to avoid putting together all the 'satisfied' and 'very satisfied' answers into one general positive category. If your scale only has five points, there could be quite some difference between these two answers.

Further reading and other resources

- Ben Gammon, *Effective Questionnaires for All: A Step by Step Recipe for Successful Questionnaires*, Science Museum, 2001.

While not an academic article, this is a short, practical guide to the process of writing a questionnaire that will get you results. Parts of the document are showing their age (it is unlikely you will be sending out postal questionnaires, for example, and the further reading list is very short), but it is an easy read from an author with years of experience of successful survey design. This document is an excellent starting place for you to think through your survey, especially if you are evaluating a museum or exhibition.

- Caroline Jarrett, *Surveys That Work: A Practical Guide for Designing and Running Better Surveys*, Rosenfeld Media, 2021.

This book is a clear and accessible guide to help with all your survey needs. Working logically, it takes you through your survey goals, sampling, how to write a good question and build that into a questionnaire, and what to do with the data, concluding with a helpful list of further reading. Highly recommended.

- Felicity A. McDowall, 'Lost in Temporal Translation: A Visual and Visitor-Based Evaluation of Prehistory Displays', *Antiquity*, 97.393, 2023, pp. 707-25.

A thorough investigation into visitor evaluation of museum displays, focussing on prehistory in UK museums. McDowall uses visitor observation alongside questionnaires delivered both before and after visitors look at the displays. She presents her analysis of the data using word clouds, graphs, and infographics.

- British Museum Visitor Research and Evaluation website:

<https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/projects/visitor-research-and-evaluation>

A large UK museum that dedicates a lot of resource to evaluating audiences, this webpage contains a summary of the British Museum's aims for evaluation. The 'Outputs' section includes some example exhibition evaluation reports (although the most recent is from 2019). These rely heavily on surveys, which are usually delivered by an evaluator, through a kiosk in the exhibition or online. Some are based on very small sample sizes (for example the report for *I Am Ashurbanipal: king of the world, king of Assyria* is based on 197 surveys,

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from over 139 000 visits). Note the use of graphs, images, and tables to present the information.

- Practical Evaluation Resources: <https://www.practicalevaluation.tips>

This website was the outcome of collaboration between university researchers Kate Noble and Eric Jensen, with an emphasis on evaluation with children and young people. The resources section includes helpful downloads, including templates for GDPR consent, questionnaires for teachers, young people and families and a suggested survey for the evaluation of longer-term projects. The logic model template is useful if you are at an early stage of your project as it can help you think through the evaluation process.

- Sarah Jenkins, Dr Jenny Lisk and Aaron Broadley, *Natural Sciences Collections Association Subject Specialist Network Report: The Popularity of Museum Galleries*, Jenesys Associates Ltd, 2013.

A report for a Subject Specialist Network, persuasively using data collected in 10 museums with mixed subject matter, to measure the popularity of different types of galleries and the reasons visitors chose to visit them. Over 500 visitors were surveyed and over 250 interviewed, using questions that were tailored to each venue. Results are presented in simple graphs, tables, and utilising direct quotes in visitors' own words. Both the survey itself (particularly the demographic questions), and the presentation methods are showing their age, but it does a reasonable job at unpicking the data to match up the preferences of different demographic groups.

- Linda J Thomson and Helen J Chatterjee, *UCL Museum Wellbeing Measures Toolkit*, UCL, 2013.

A practical toolkit for evaluating wellbeing activities, tested in museums, but applicable more broadly. The resource was developed following an AHRC-funded series of workshops across the UK and includes two questionnaires (a long and a short version) and a set of 'Wellbeing Measures Umbrellas'. These are brightly coloured figures, with either a positive or negative word associated with a five-point scale. An analysis section takes the reader through creating some basic measures for reporting.

Visitor Observation

Sarah-Jane Harknett

There are many ways of evaluating museums, galleries, displays and visitors. One useful method of working out what people are naturally doing in a gallery space is timing and tracking through observation. When we track visitors, we are trying to unobtrusively observe where they are stopping, how long they stop for and any other relevant behaviour (such as discussing, photographing etc). Visitor observation can give both qualitative and quantitative evidence.

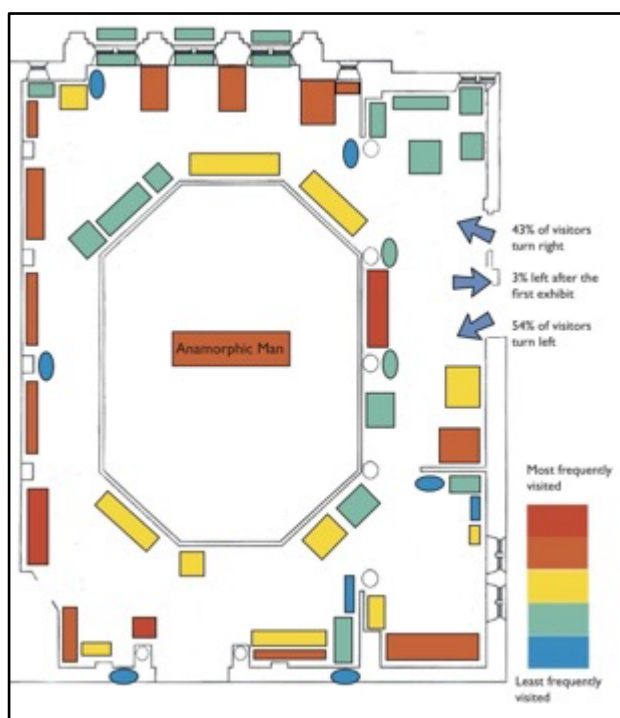


Figure 1: Sample Thermal Map

Museums can use this evaluation to change a current display, or when they plan future exhibitions. Observing museum visitors without the addition of other evaluation methods cannot distinguish between a long time spent at an element due to engaged interest, or because of deep confusion. For this reason, it is most useful to use tracking alongside other forms of evaluation such as questionnaires, interviews or focus groups. Using multiple evaluation methods is called triangulating your data. These can help the museum to further explore the results of visitor observation.

If we combine the results from many visitor trackings, we can create 'thermal maps' like the one shown in Figure 1. This shows which parts of the gallery visitors stopped at, which objects, cases or text were popular and which parts were ignored. We can also use the data to see what route visitors took through a gallery and the average time spent. Other thermal maps could be made showing which cases encouraged people to stop for a longer period of time. The results give an idea of how an exhibition space is being used.



Figure 2: Visitor observation training

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How to do it

Tracking forms and gallery plans should be tailored for each space to be tracked. Those doing the tracking should be familiar with these notes and should be quick and accurate at recording information.

Key: ○ Text ▨ Large print labels

T: Tracker location when tracking commenced; X: stop, time noted in seconds; (X) : non case stop; C: calls others over; CA: called away by others

Date: Tracker initials: Time started: Time out: Total time:

Under 16 16 - 24 25 - 34 35 - 44 45 - 54 55 - 64 65 - 74 75+

Social grouping: Individual Pair Group (3+) School group

Notes:

Figure 3 Example tracking form

The person doing the tracking will fill in one plan per person tracked, following only one person at a time. The start and end point(s) should be decided and used to time the total visit. This could be the entrance to the gallery, or the area immediately next to a case or interactive.

The tracker will need to choose where to stand when they start the evaluation. They should mark this point on the tracking form, for example with a T. The observer may need to rotate around several different starting points to avoid unduly influencing visitors. Depending on the gallery, the tracker might need to move around to find out where visitors are stopping, or they might be able to stay in one area to take several observations.

The total time spent in the observation space should be noted on the tracking form. This could be from writing down the times the visitor starts and ends their visit, or by timing the length of the visit alongside timing each stop. It should not be calculated by adding up the stops.

Usually, we are interested in all the different elements of the area under observation. An element could be a case, a text panel, a single object in or out of case, an interactive exhibit, a computer, a book, etc. Mark down every time a visitor engages with an element. A 'stop' can be defined in lots of ways. In UCM we have defined a stop as the visitor both stopping and looking at an element. If the person you are tracking walks past a case, glancing at it without pausing, it is not recorded as a stop.

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For every stop, mark the sheet with an X and add the amount of time the visitor stops for. Use a timer to accurately time each stop and write the time in seconds on the form. You might use a stopwatch, the timer on a phone or other device. The X should mark the element that is being looked at rather than the exact position of the visitor when they stop: X marks the stop, not necessarily the precise spot. Arrows could be added to the plan to clearly show which element is being looked at. Each individual element that is stopped at should have one time (you should never have one stop marked with arrows to three different cases but a single time).

If the visitor has stopped, but is not looking at an element, mark it as a non-case stop: an X in a circle. If there is time and it will be useful, add notes to the tracking sheet, for example 'looking at phone'. Other behaviour should also be noted on the tracking form using shorthand codes. For example, the study might be recording which elements are photographed, discussed, interacted with. Use the simple codes on the tracking form (e.g., P, D, I) to quickly record this. For movement between elements, use arrows to indicate the direction the visitor is moving. See the completed tracking sheet in Figure 4.

At the end of each tracking, the volunteer should carefully check the tracking sheet. Each stop should be at an individual element, with a single time per element. It should be completely clear which element the visitor was engaging with. Record broad demographic information at the end of the tracking. Age will be an estimate only, it's just to try and get an even spread of ages.

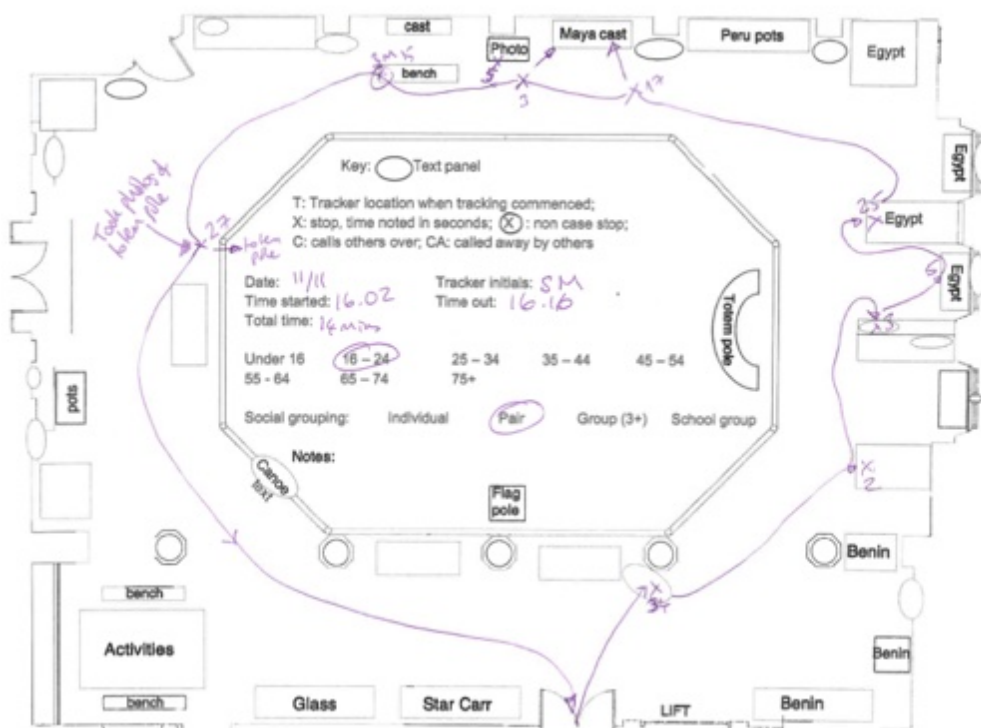


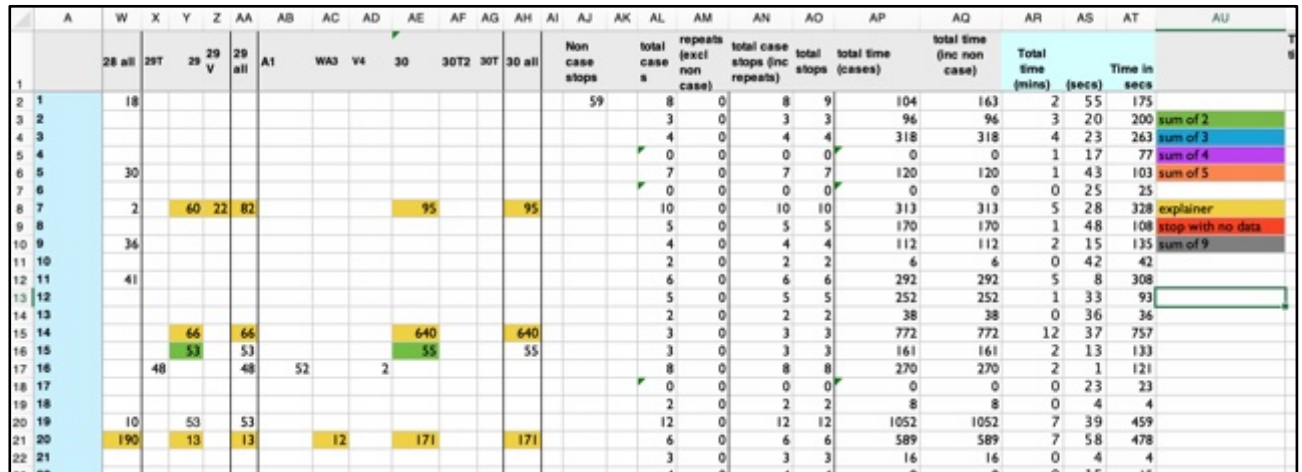
Figure 4
Completed tracking form

Once you have completed a tracking study, you should use the sampling strategy for your project to select the next person for tracking. This could be the third person through the door once the tracking has finished or could be the next person if the venue is quite quiet. In

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order to maintain focus and concentration, a session for visitor observation should be no longer than 2 hours. Depending on the venue, in 2 hours between 1 and 20 tracking studies could be completed. Try to ensure tracking sessions are evenly spaced over the venue opening times, covering weekends, holidays, school term times etc.

How to analyse the data



	A	W	X	Y	Z	AA	AB	AC	AD	AE	AF	AG	AH	AI	AJ	AK	AL	AM	AN	AO	AP	AQ	AR	AS	AT	AU
1		28 all	29T	29	29 V	29 all	A1	WA3	V4	30	30T2	30T	30 all	Non case stops	total case stops	repeats (excl non case)	total case stops (inc repeats)	total stops	total time (cases)	total time (inc non case)	total time (inc non case)	Total time (mins)	(secs)	Time in secs		
2	1	18												59	8	0	8	9	104	163	2	55	175			
3	2														3	0	3	3	96	96	3	20	200	sum of 2		
4	3														4	0	4	4	318	318	4	23	263	sum of 3		
5	4														0	0	0	0	0	0	1	17	77	sum of 4		
6	5														7	0	7	7	120	120	1	43	103	sum of 5		
7	6														0	0	0	0	0	0	0	25	25			
8	7	2		60	22	82				95			95		10	0	10	10	313	313	5	28	328	explainer		
9	8														5	0	5	5	170	170	1	48	108	stop with no data		
10	9	36													4	0	4	4	112	112	2	15	135	sum of 9		
11	10														2	0	2	2	6	6	0	42	42			
12	11	41													6	0	6	6	292	292	5	8	308			
13	12														5	0	5	5	252	252	1	33	93			
14	13														2	0	2	2	38	38	0	36	36			
15	14			66		66				640			640		3	0	3	3	772	772	12	37	757			
16	15			53		53				55			55		3	0	3	3	161	161	2	13	133			
17	16		48			48	52		2						8	0	8	8	270	270	2	1	121			
18	17														0	0	0	0	0	0	0	23	23			
19	18														2	0	2	2	8	8	0	4	4			
20	19		10		53	53									12	0	12	12	1052	1052	7	39	459			
21	20		190		13	13		12		171			171		6	0	6	6	589	589	7	58	478			
22	21														3	0	3	3	16	16	0	4	4			

Figure 5 Sample spreadsheet with tracking data

You will need to analyse the data. The simplest way is to create a spreadsheet and enter the data into it. In Figure 5, the display elements have been numbered and are the column headers. Each tracking sheet is also numbered and entered in a row. The time spent at each element is added to the relevant column. Plenty of time should be given to entering and interpreting the data.

Various calculations can be performed using the data. For example, average time spent in the gallery by person or by element. Multiple trackings can be used to create thermal plans (such as Figure 1). Different plans could be created for average number of stops or average time spent per element, or focussing on particular element types (interactives, 2D artworks, artefacts, etc). The total time spent in the gallery, and the total time spent looking at text may be useful calculations for creating more engaging exhibitions if the same space is to be used.

Ethics, safety, and security

We are interested in what visitors would naturally do in the observation space, so we do not ask permission before the visit begins. It would be unethical not to give people notice of the evaluation and the option to withdraw from the study. Each gallery being studied should have a sign prominently posted. The sign should read something like:

“We are currently evaluating our displays in this gallery. The information we are gathering will be used to improve future exhibitions.”

The sign should be put up in the tracking area before the evaluation session begins.

All relevant museum staff should be fully briefed on the evaluation project before it begins. If gallery attendants are present, they should be informed each time that tracking is taking place. Evaluators should introduce themselves to visitor services staff before they start

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tracking and should remain within sight of another member of staff or museum volunteer at all times. The venue may request that the evaluator wear a badge, lanyard, or other identification. Your organisation or the venue may require you to submit an ethics application.

Anyone evaluating visitors should be ready to explain what they are doing if they are approached, either by the person they are tracking, or any other visitor. If someone would like to withdraw from the study, the tracking sheet should be removed and disposed of. A note should be made that there has been a withdrawal.

With most tracking studies, the evaluator has no contact with the visitor, but if the evaluation is to be carried out with children, young people or vulnerable adults, the venue's ethics procedure should be carefully followed. The evaluator should stop tracking immediately in case of emergency and evacuate according to venue directions.

People who are tracking visitors should always remain in public areas. They should not follow visitors into toilets or private gallery areas and should be vigilant on uneven floors. Trackers should take extra care when evaluating gallery space that includes stairs, they should not stop or be distracted while they use staircases. Hazards like these should be marked on the tracking sheet.

Cautions and caveats

Observation is helpful to show visitor flow and circulation, but it has limitations. You can see what visitors are doing but the data doesn't always tell you why they are doing it. Is a visitor reading a text panel for five minutes because they find it engaging, or because they do not understand it? This evaluation technique works best when it is one of several that you are using so that you triangulate your data. It also works well when you use the results to give direction to other evaluation methods you use. For example, if your observation shows a particular area is being looked at in depth, interviews, meaning maps or surveys might help you determine why and what visitors are learning.

When you present the observation results, make sure it is obvious in your report when there are calculations that are based on very few visitors. It is very easy to draw conclusions about people spending a long average time looking at an exhibition element, but it might only be based on a handful of visitors. Take lots of photographs of the area that is being observed, from as many angles as possible. Include photos of individual elements as well as wider gallery shots. It can become very difficult to analyse results after an exhibition closes if you do not have good images from a visitor perspective.

Further reading and other resources

- Beverly Serrell. 'Paying Attention: The Duration and Allocation of Visitors' Time in Museum Exhibitions' *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 40.2, 1997, pp. 108-25 and 'Paying More Attention to Paying Attention', *Center for Advancement of Informal Science Education*, 2010.

Serrell's 1997 paper was a seminal work in the field of visitor evaluation through tracking, which she updated in 2010. The 1997 paper gives an outline of her motivations, and the

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summaries of evaluation in over 100 North American exhibitions in order to find common visitor behaviour. Serrell's attempts to create generalisations about museum visiting (the Diligent Visitor and Sweep Rate indices) are less successful, but both articles are a good introduction to the method and potential ways of presenting results.

- Steven S. Yalowitz and Kerry Bronnenkant. 'Timing and Tracking: Unlocking Visitor Behavior', *Visitor Studies*, 12.1, 2009, pp. 47-64.

A very practical introduction to timing and tracking. The section on technology is very much of its time, but the paper goes into more depth on how to record and report tracking data. The worked example is of an exhibition about sharks which was on display in an aquarium in 2006.

- Paco Underhill. *Why We Buy: The Science of Shopping*, Simon & Schuster, New York. 2008.

While not directly about evaluating museum visitors, this accessible read about shopping theory will introduce some of the main themes that have been more generally applied to observing users.

A couple of papers using technological methods to observe or record visitor behaviour:

- Dirk vom Lehn, 'Embodying Experience: A video-based examination of visitors' conduct and interaction in museums', *European Journal of Marketing*, Vol 40 No 11/12, 2006, pp. 1340-1359.

Vom Lehn uses video recording in two London museums, an art gallery, and a science centre. Note additional ethical considerations if video recording takes place.

- Claudio Martella, Armando Miraglia, Jeana Frost, Marco Cattani, Maarten van Steen. 'Visualizing, Clustering, and Predicting the Behavior of Museum Visitors', *Special Issue IEEE International Conference on Pervasive Computing and Communications (PerCom)*, 38, 2016, pp. 430-43.

The results of a study involving 180 visitors to an art gallery while wearing proximity sensors.

Accompanied Visits

Sarah-Jane Harknett

For accompanied visits, an evaluator joins the participants for their experience in the museum, programme, or event. Unlike visitor observation, with accompanied visits the participants know that they are part of an evaluation. This method is especially useful when a specific audience is targeted, using a small sample of that audience. It gives immediate, in-depth feedback on a fairly natural visit experience.

How to run accompanied visits

Planning for accompanied visits can be time consuming, but the more thoughtfully carried out this process is, the better the results. Careful consideration should be given to the intended audience of the intervention that will be evaluated. This will help you to know who should be targeted for the accompanied visits. Recruit carefully using your preferred method. You might, for example, use snowball sampling: where members of your target audience suggest other people for an accompanied visit. Think about where the audience is and go to them to recruit. Have all necessary paperwork, including internal ethical frameworks, information sheets and any permission forms (for photographs of people or artworks) ready in advance. See the checklist at the end of this resource.

Carefully schedule the time that the accompanied visit will happen. This will depend on the availability of the participants and evaluator, the time of the event, public transport, etc. Try to be as flexible as possible. Will you cover the costs of transport and refreshments? For some audiences, this will be essential to encourage them to take part. Each accompanied visit could take several hours. Factor in time at the end of an event for an interview to discuss the visit.

The person doing the evaluation should not be someone who contributed to the event or programme that is being evaluated. Their role is primarily to observe and document. Spend some time deciding how the data will be collected during the visit. You could use voice recorders and the evaluator could take field notes during and after the experience. Test out any technology before you use it and make sure it is compatible with the group and the environment you are evaluating.

Successful accompanied visits will depend on good communication between the evaluator and the participants. Everyone should know where and when they will meet and introduce participants and evaluator if they don't know each other. You might want to provide name



Figure 1: Accompanied visit at Cambridge University Botanic Garden

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badges for evaluators. The participants should be clear on the format for the accompanied visit and how long it might take.

Before the visit, determine how the evaluator will treat the people being evaluated. Will they be a silent partner on the visit, observing the interactions and making notes? Will they ask questions throughout the experience to clarify what is happening? If they are asked questions from the person or people they are accompanying, how will they respond? They might be asked about the contents of a display, questions of orientation or where the loos are. How will the evaluator deal with these scenarios? Will they say that they don't know, and try to determine from the participants how they will find out? Or will they be an active participant? Is it important to your study that they maintain neutrality? The people being evaluated should receive no special treatment in the venue because of the presence of the evaluator, even if the evaluator is known to the venue. You might decide that it would be helpful to do a pre-visit interview with the participants, either immediately before the accompanied visit or at an earlier time. This could help you to frame the questions and observations you will make during the accompanied visit.

If you are going to time the visit, determine what you are timing. Will you just time the entrance and exit? Time at specific displays? What will you do when someone goes to the loo or the café? You might want to create a sample timing sheet so that key times can be filled in quickly. How will you record the times? Test out any technology well before the evaluation starts.

The evaluator might have specific questions to ask at various points during the experience. It can help to write a script for these, with questions and further prompts. The evaluator should record what prompts they use and when. What other notes will the evaluator take? Will they be writing down what visitors are saying and doing? Are the participants getting bored/cold/wet? Are they frustrated? What are different members of the group doing? If you are evaluating a group, decide what you will do if the group splits up. Who will you follow? Ensure the evaluator notes where the members of the group go.

Notes should be made carefully but subtly. Evaluators need to be thorough and consistent in their recording. Provide as much guidance and standardisation in advance as you can. If the people being evaluated are discussing things which are not relevant, the evaluator might want to take a note of this as well, for example "discussed tomorrow's dinner for 10 minutes". You will probably want to use a shorthand for referring to the group members during the visit. Sort this out at the beginning and write down who is who so that the notes can be transcribed properly.

Plan carefully how the evaluation will end, and what that end point is. Will you complete the evaluation when the people you are accompanying have finished looking around the venue? Will the evaluator just leave, or will there be another way to conclude the visit? You might want to have a summary interview. If so, this could be facilitated by the same accompanying evaluator, or could involve someone else. Write the interview schedule and find a suitable location. The interview could take place immediately after the event, or it could be some time afterwards: decide which you will do and try to keep this consistent for each participant you interview.

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After the accompanied visit, the evaluator should write down their final notes and impressions. They should read through their notes to check that they have captured everything and clean up anything that looks confusing. All notes and recordings should be transcribed as soon as possible.

What to do with the data

Data collected from accompanied visits need lots of time allocated for analysis. You can look through your notes for themes and categories that crop up frequently. Look at what causes moments of frustration or joy. Were there regular times that visitors were confused or not sure what to do? If you are still in contact with the audience that you were working with, you could discuss the results with them and see whether your conclusions are accurate. Compare the results that you get to other methods of evaluation.

Ethics, safety, and security

This method requires careful planning so that everything is handled ethically and safely. Participants should be given information about the evaluation when they are recruited. Your organisation or the venue you are working with might require you to submit an ethics application, so check well in advance. Familiarise yourself, and strictly adhere to, any relevant institutional lone working policies and guidance on Disclosure and Barring Service checks. Participants should be made aware of how and when they can withdraw from the evaluation.

Accompanying evaluators should be well-briefed and given contact phone numbers of the co-ordinating staff and the venue. Depending on where and how the study takes place, you may want to schedule regular check-ins with staff who are taking part in an accompanied visit. The evaluator should have all relevant paperwork, technology, notebooks, pens, and briefing notes. They need to feel confident, and to be clear on how to handle situations and questions. They should also know what to do and who to contact in case of emergency or any problems.

You will need to carefully consider whether the venue needs to know the accompanied visit is taking place or not. There could be good reasons for not telling them. The evaluator or group may already be known to the venue, but if you would like to make sure the group is neither advantaged nor disadvantaged by this relationship, relevant staff in the venue should be briefed in advance.

Cautions and caveats

While accompanied visits try to be as natural as possible, the presence of an evaluator will change the way the audience behaves. This should be acknowledged in reports and the steps that have been taken to keep the experience neutral should be clarified. This evaluation method is time consuming, so will usually only be done with a small number of people. This could be a very small sample size, so take care when drawing conclusions.

Evaluators should always ensure their personal safety, in accordance with your organisation or the venue's policies and procedures. They should remain in public spaces, within sight of

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other people. They should not accompany participants into toilets, private vehicles, or other areas. The evaluation needs to be carefully risk assessed for the specific activity that will be carried out.

Further reading and other resources

- Emily Dawson “‘Not Designed for Us’: How Science Museums and Science Centers Socially Exclude Low-Income, Minority Ethnic Groups’, *Science Education*, 98.6, 2014, pp. 981-1008.

An enlightening paper which uses focus groups, interviews and accompanied visits to look at how specific audiences use (or don’t use) science centres. Dawson uses quotes from group members throughout to support her conclusions.

- Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, Theano Moussouri, Emma Hawthorne, Rowena Riley, *Visitors’ Interpretive Strategies at Wolverhampton Art Gallery*, 2006.

This in-depth evaluation at Wolverhampton Art Gallery consisted of 18 accompanied visits with adults who were visiting on their own. The report covers the steps the team took to collect the data, as well as the displays that were on view at the time. The team collected a great deal of demographic information, not all of which may be necessary for your evaluation. The longest section of the report (chapter 6) attempts to use the reflections on the accompanied visits to determine the strategies used by visitors when they interpret art.

- Abigail Hackett, ‘Zigging and Zooming All over the Place: Young Children’s Meaning Making and Movement in the Museum’, *Journal of Early Childhood Literacy*, 14.1, 2014, pp. 5-27.

The results of research with young children in an English museum with mixed collections, there is a strong theoretical framework in this paper. The section outlining the study clearly explains the participants and methods of data collection. Quotes from the author’s field notes are included to illustrate her findings.

- Janne Flora and Astrid Oberborbeck Andersen, ‘Taking note: a kaleidoscopic view on two, or three, modes of fieldnoting’, *Qualitative Research*, Vol. 19:5, 2019, pp. 540-559.

While this article is not directly about accompanied visits, it usefully explores field notes taken by two different researchers, presented alongside GPS data. Reading this paper may help you to decide about what notes to take and how, as well as showing how different people might record the same experience.

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Accompanied Visits Checklist

Ethics and paperwork

- Do you need to submit an ethics application to your organisation or the host venue?
- Have you written guidance for participants?
- Do you have permission forms for participants if you are photographing people or their artwork?
- Who will do the accompanied visit?
- Have you written guidance for evaluators?
- What will the role of the evaluator be? How will they deal with questions and activities?
- Do your evaluators need Disclosure and Barring Service checks?
- Do you have a risk assessment in place?

Audience Recruitment

- Who is the intended audience?
- Who in your intended audience will you recruit?
- How will you recruit?
- Will you be paying travel expenses?
- Will you be providing refreshments?
- Will you be recompensing participants?
- Will you do a pre-visit interview? If so, where, and when?

The Visit

- Can your participants get to and access the venue?
- Can your evaluator get to and access the venue?
- Does the participant know when and where they will meet the evaluator?
- Does the evaluator know who the participants are and how to connect to and contact them?
- Does the evaluator have contact details for the venue and co-ordinating staff?
- Does the evaluator know what to do in case of emergency or evacuation?
- Will the evaluator need a name badge?
- How will the evaluator collect data during the visit?
- Do you have a shorthand planned to refer to different group members?
- Does all the technology work in every part of the venue? Do you need to connect to venue wifi and are all the passwords available?
- Is the evaluator clear on their role?
- Does the evaluator need a script for questions and prompts?
- Do you need to schedule check ins with the evaluator and another member of staff?

The End of the Visit

- Will someone be conducting a post-visit interview? If so, who will it be? Where will they do it? When will they do it?
- Will there be time and space for the evaluator to write down their thoughts and impressions immediately after the visit?
- How will the evaluator get the notes to the co-ordinating staff?
- Will you be returning to the participants to talk about your findings?

Reflective Evaluation (with staff)

Sarah-Jane Harknett

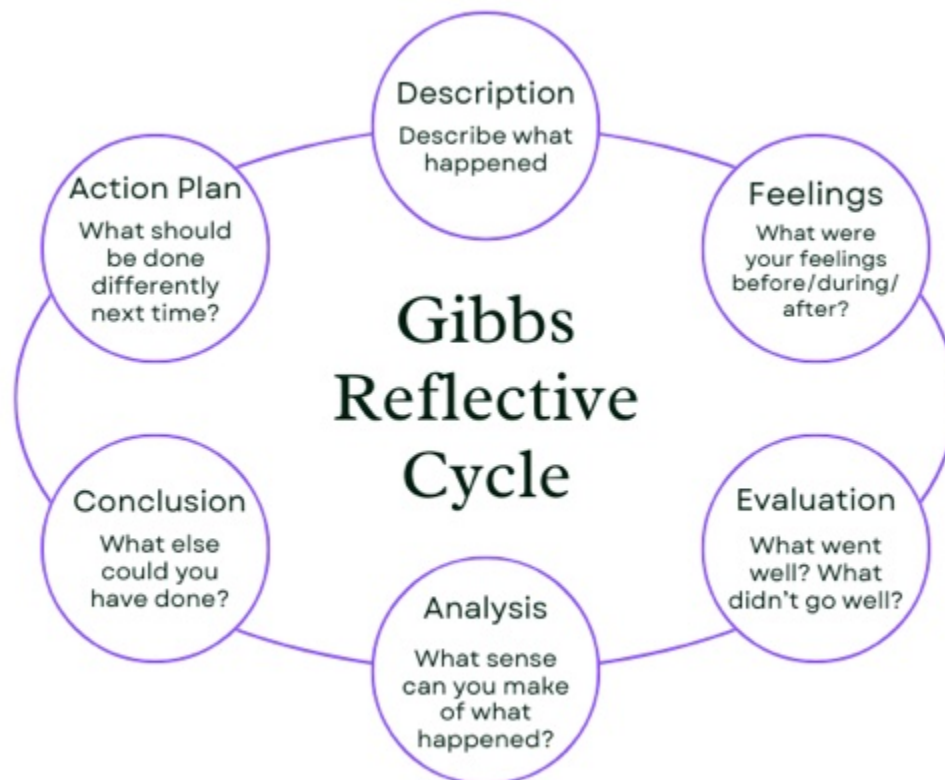
Museum evaluation often focuses on visitors or participants. The method covered in this resource is designed to get rich feedback from the people leading a programme, curating an exhibition, or delivering an event, who are an audience that are often missing in evaluation. Reflecting on museum work can empower staff, helping them to improve their practice, and give them the opportunity to feedback on projects and programmes. Reflection is a moment to think about what has taken place. This can become reflective practice when it is carried out in a more systematic fashion, taking note of responses, and learning from them. Reflecting on experiences in a guided way can be an effective method of evaluation, it can help make sense of what has happened, improve future effectiveness, and give a deeper understanding of processes (not just outcomes). This can be a useful method for projects that take place over a long period of time, you can trace the course of the work you are evaluating, from instigation to completion and beyond. It can also be responsive to changes in work, giving you moment by moment data which could be lost, especially if only summative methods are used.

How to do it

- Decide on the overarching framework that you will work within

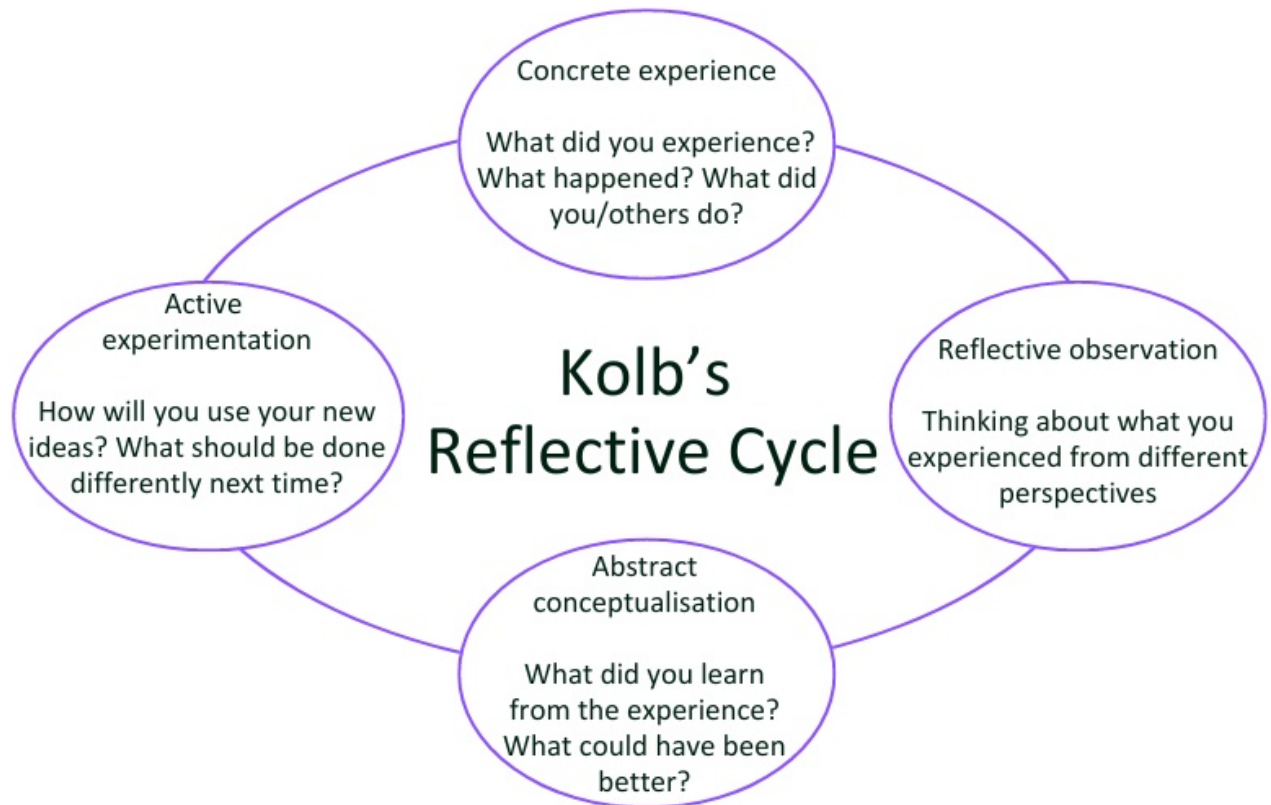
There are a few different frameworks that might help you to create the best processes for your evaluation (see references in the Further Reading section below).

The Gibbs reflective cycle breaks reflection down into six steps:



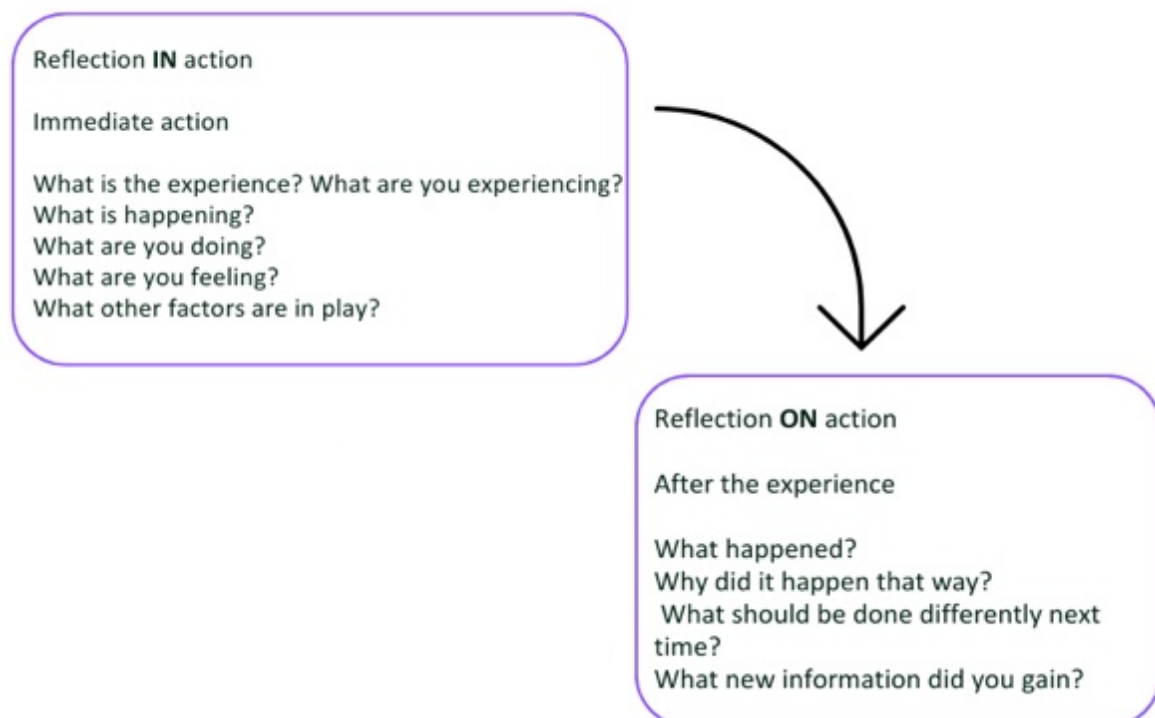
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The Kolb reflective cycle is four steps:



And Schön is just two:

Schön's Reflective Model



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- Decide on the questions you will ask and how you will ask them

Once you have thought about the framework you will work within, decide on the questions you will ask as part of the evaluation. There is a list of possible questions later in this resource. Don't try to have too many questions at each stage; you could choose to ask a couple of specific questions and a couple of bigger picture questions. Select the questions that are appropriate to the framework, your project, and the people doing the reflecting. How will people respond? Will you give each person a physical notebook, access to an online document, or via a webform or online survey? There is a sample feedback sheet based on the Gibbs Reflective Cycle at the end of this resource that you might want to adapt. Will people answer the questions on their own, or will you do this as a group discussion activity, or a mixture of the two? Decide how often you will reflect on the project you are evaluating. There is a delicate balance here: you want to ask regularly, but not so often people get tired of responding and the quality of their reflection and answers drops. Are there specific moments that would work? For example, key phases of the exhibition or programme. How will you end well? You will probably want to do a reflection immediately the project finishes, but another session a little while afterwards can be beneficial, when the dust has settled, and people have a bit of distance from the emotions (and exhaustion!). Although we are recommending this to evaluate with staff, you might decide to also use some of the same reflective questions with an external group or audience.

- Collect the data.

The time spent in planning should mean your data collection period runs smoothly.

How to analyse the data

As with many qualitative evaluation techniques with free text responses, reflective journalling can result in a lot of long form text, but having clear project or programme aims gives you something to compare your results to. The data can be difficult to analyse, so allow plenty of time to do this. You will need to familiarise yourself with what people have written, and then you could look for repeating patterns or themes. If people are answering the same questions throughout the project, or there is more than one person reflecting, look for subtle changes or any differences as the project continues. It can be easy to use reflective journaling to support conclusions that are not present in the results. You can avoid this by using several evaluation techniques with the different audiences that are involved.

Ethics, safety, and security

It is very important that the people who are reflecting know what will happen to what they write and who will have access to it. Reflective feedback could be kept for the sole use of the person who is responding, or it could be part of more formal evaluation processes. Provide clear written information to participants on how you will look after their data. Be aware of how this might affect what people write and how open they are. If you are promising anonymity, ensure that you can uphold this. It is more than likely that you will need to do more than simply removing participant names: the museum world is quite small, job titles can be very specific, and it can be fairly easy to identify people with a quick internet search.

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Think carefully about how you will support participants in reflective practice. The process might bring up strong emotions or difficult feelings in relation to the experience that is being evaluated. How can you help staff that are left with negative feelings, especially when they are thinking about projects that have been hard emotionally or when things did not go as well as they hoped? This is important to plan for when people are completing reflective journals on their own, but it can also affect an individual who is responsible for analysing all the data and might also feel emotionally impacted by what has been written. Find information of relevant support networks or provide participants with the contact details of people or other organisations that might be able to help.

Cautions and caveats

Reflective practice does rely heavily on the motivation of the participants, so might not be suitable for everyone or for every project. It also depends on the participants remembering to do the evaluation, although you might be able to automate the process to some degree with online data collection and delayed email prompts. As there are no standard questions, it is possible that important information could be lost. Even if you use the same questions for all participants throughout the project, there will probably still be quite a lot of variation in the quality and depth of reflection. Think about how you will recognise this in your reporting. As with most evaluation, reflective journaling works best when it is part of a variety of methods you are using rather than the only one.

Further reading and other resources

References for frameworks:

- Graham Gibbs, *Learning by Doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods*. Further Education Unit, Oxford Polytechnic. 1988.
- David Kolb, *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. FT Press. 1984.
- Donald A. Schön, *The Reflective Turn: Case Studies in and on Educational Practice*. Teachers College Press, 1991.

Museum-related resources:

- Claire Bowen, How to develop a reflective practice, *Thinking Museum*
<https://thinkingmuseum.com/2021/11/17/how-to-develop-a-reflective-practice/>

This article, also available as a podcast (episode 29 on The Art Engager podcast) is a useful background introduction to reflective practice, providing some practical suggestions about how to do it. Many of the podcast episodes cover ways for learning and visitor services staff to continue to reflect on their work and its implications.

- Barbara J. Soren, 'Museum experiences that change visitors', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 24:3, 2009, pp. 233-251.

A thoughtful article examining whether a museum visit can meaningfully impact visitors, through two case studies. The first, at the Royal Ontario Museum in Canada, explicitly uses reflective journals with audiences, but Soren's own reflective practice is present throughout, for example in the table of 'triggers for transformational experiences' created through her teaching.

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- Marjoleine van der Meij, Jacqueline Broerse and Frank Kupper, 'RRI & science museums; prototyping an exhibit for reflection on emerging and potentially controversial research and innovation', *Journal of Science Communication*, 16:4, 2017, pp. 1-24.

The authors of this paper were trying to create a display in that would help visitors to reflect on responsible research and innovation in science (the RRI in the title). They worked with NEMO Science Museum in the Netherlands, testing different exhibitions and interviewing children and their parents to see what they understood by what they saw. There is a helpful analysis section, and the notes on the facilitation of the sessions could also be of use to other museum professionals.

- Neta Shaby, Ran Peleg, Ian Coombs, 'Participatory Research with Museum Practitioners: A reflection on the process', *Research in Science Education* 54, 2024, pp 891-908.

A paper combining reflective practice and participatory research methods, the authors analyse the process of working with staff at Winchester Science Centre to create an evaluation toolkit. The details about how they apply a framework are helpful as is the section about how reflection worked as part of the research. There are many quotes from (named) members of staff, which is complemented by a final paragraph on ethical considerations.

- Bernadette T. Lynch, 'Custom-made reflective practice: can museums realise their capabilities in helping others realise theirs?' *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 26:5, 2011, pp. 441-458.

Bernadette Lynch has spent many years encouraging reflective practice in museums. This paper is the conclusions of her work examining the impact of 12 community engagement projects in museums and galleries funded by the Paul Hamlyn Foundation. She argues powerfully for the inclusion of review and reflection on what museums do and who they do it for. Bernadette includes a variety of sources to support her deductions: the analysis of policy documents sits alongside quotes and images from participatory drama that staff were involved with.

Non-museum resource:

- The University of Edinburgh Reflection Toolkit: <https://www.ed.ac.uk/reflection>
A helpful website containing toolkits for those wanting to know more about reflection, and for those who will facilitate reflective workshops. Excellent further reading list if you want to dig further into the literature.

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Sample prompt questions

This is not an exhaustive list of questions. Neither is it a list to exhaust yourself with by going through them all. Select a few questions to answer at each stage.

At any point in the evaluated work:

Who... [Was involved? Wasn't there that should have been? Spoke most? Who might you need to draw in?]

What... [did you do? Happened? Will you change for the next step?]

When... [will you meet next? Will you contact the participants?]

Where... [will you take the project next? Will you meet next?]

How... [are you feeling about the project? Will you change what you're doing?]

Before the work starts:

Why are you doing this?

What are you most looking forward to?

What worries you about it?

What skills do you think you will learn?

What do you personally bring to this?

What will your role be?

Who do you think will come/be involved/be interested in the outcome? Who might be excluded?

During the project:

What happened today?

How are you feeling about the work?

Were there any memorable moments for you?

Did something happen, or did someone say something, that surprised or inspired you?

Were there any 'ah-ha!' moments for you or that you observed in any of the participants?

Who came today?

Who didn't come? Do you want to change that? If so, how could you do that?

What was my contribution today? What did I do too much of? What did I do too little of?

Summative prompts:

What did you enjoy most about being involved?

What did you find satisfying?

What did you find the least enjoyable?

What did you find frustrating or annoying?

What did you learn? What is your main takeaway?

If we were about to start the work again, what three things would you do to improve it?

What advice would you give yourself?

What might you do differently as a result of the work? What might you stop doing? What might you start doing?

Who came? Who didn't come?

How do you feel about the work now?

What was the most valuable part of the work?

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Gibbs Reflective Cycle Feedback Sheet

Description [Describe what happened]

Feelings

What were your feelings before the activity?

What were you feeling during the activity?

How did you feel after it?

Evaluation

What went well?

What did not go well?

Analysis

What assumptions have you been making?

What sense can you make of what happened?

Conclusions

What else could you have done?

Action Plan

What should be done differently next time?

What would that need?

Interviews

Sarah-Jane Harknett

Alongside surveys, interviews are one of the most common methods of evaluating museum experiences and exhibitions. Interviewing people gives you the opportunity to dig deeper into responses than you can with a questionnaire, to find out motivations and probe the interviewees answers. You can get rich feedback and will often get more emotional responses, stories, or memories. Interviews can be used at any evaluation stage of your exhibition, project, or programme. You might use interviews to find out what your target audience thinks about a topic before you start the research for an exhibition (front end evaluation), or you could use them with staff or participants through the life of a project, or as a summative evaluation method to determine audience ideas once a display is open. Interviewing people is a skill, you might need to develop your listening abilities to become a good interviewer. Interviews can be carried out with just one person, or you could choose to interview a group of people; they can happen in person, or online. As with most evaluation, interviews works best when they are part of a variety of methods you are using to find out about your activity. Interviews can be helpful when you have already got some evaluation information, but you want to find out more about people's opinions, feelings, or knowledge.

How to do it

- Decide what you want to find out

Plan your evaluation carefully so that you have clear aims and objectives. This will help guide the rest of your preparation and make your data collection stronger and more focussed.

- Who will you interview? How many interviews do you need?

Will you be interviewing everyone who took part in an event or project? Or a sample? If you are taking a sample, do you want them to be representative of the whole group? Sometimes you will need to use 'snowball sampling', where you ask one person to recommend other people to be interviewed. There are lots of different sampling methods, chose the one that works best for your project and fits with your evaluation plan that you wrote in the previous step. Consider whether you should be paying your interviewees for their time, don't take them for granted. Your budget may also influence the number of people you can interview.

- Plan your interviews

You might want to write out a detailed list of the interview questions, or you could decide on more open themes to discuss. Sometimes you will want to have more of a conversational style, where the interviewee also leads discussions. At this point in your planning, work out what style of interview you are interested in doing. If you are writing an interview schedule, try not to ask leading questions, keep them neutral and easy to understand. Don't ask more questions than you need, have a reason to ask each one.

- Pilot your questions and recording method

If you have written interview questions, test them out to ensure they are clear and are giving you the information that you hope for. Piloting will help you to check that other

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people understand the questions in the way you intend. It will also give you an idea of how long the interview might take and whether you can trim some of the questions. You will probably want to record the answers that the interviewee is giving you. You could use your phone, although be mindful of the ethics of having information on personal devices. Digital audio recorders might be a better investment. Some websites offer both recording and transcription, usually with a limited free version. Use the time that you are piloting your questions as an opportunity to check any recording system you intend to use so that you are familiar with it and confident it gives you the results you need. Try to pilot your interviews in the same location that you will do them in, so that you know that audio can be picked up clearly by the system you are using.

- Recruit your interviewees

Follow the sampling strategy you decided on if you are using one. Be honest with people when you recruit them, tell them what they are getting involved in and why you are doing it. This is good practice, but also helps to build that relationship of trust. Let people know the practical information: where do they need to be and when? Send out information sheets so that participants know what will happen to their personal information and data.

- Prepare any physical prompts

You could use images, museum objects or documents as props or prompts in the interviews. For some audiences these will help you to open up the conversation. Prepare anything you are going to use and store them somewhere easy to access. If the interviews will take place off-site, don't try to take too much.



Figure 1: interviews do not have to be intimidating to be useful

- Prepare the location

Where will you carry out the interviews? You might not have a choice about this, but you could select a venue that is relevant to the topic you are interviewing people about, or somewhere where you will not be interrupted or distracted. You could interview people online, if you do this then send out links in plenty of time and be in the meeting room ready to welcome the interviewee. If possible, use the online platform that they prefer and feel comfortable using. See the 'Ethics, safety and security' section below for some important things to consider for interview locations.

- Carry out the interviews

Explain the format of the interview, how long it will take, whether what they say is anonymous and confidential, how to get in touch with you after the interview and what you will do with the information they provide. You should give this information in a format that

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works for the participant, which will probably be in writing. When you begin, you will need to establish rapport with your interviewee, but don't go over the top. Don't mislead the person or promise something that you are not going to follow up. Do let them know how they can contact you after the interview has finished. Ask your questions one at a time and wait for the interviewee to respond. Don't be afraid of leaving silence, especially if you are interviewing someone online. You might need to direct a conversation back to your topics, but remember that your interviewee is the expert, they might be heading to a really important point that you have not considered.

You might find it helpful to take your own notes during the interview, even if you are recording the audio. You could jot down topics you want to return to, areas that need clarification or things that you don't understand, and then return to these at a moment that doesn't interrupt the flow of the speaker. Check that your recording system (and the back-up) are working every now and then during the interview. Do keep nodding and don't let the notetaking make it look like you are not listening. You want your interviewee to feel comfortable and confident that you are interested in what they are saying.

- Create a transcript and back everything up

Once your interview is finished, you need to create a transcript. Some online recording websites will provide an AI-generated transcript, but you will need to check that this is accurate. If you are not using automatic transcription, allow plenty of time to write this from your recordings. Name the files carefully so that you can find things easily. If you write your interview up very soon after it has happened, you could add things that you observed or noted down that were not captured in the recording, for example any nonverbal behaviour that might be significant: when they leaned forward, stood up, facial expressions etc.



Figure 2: an interview taking place in Borneo in the 1960s or 1970s. MAA collections DG.102008.PAO

How to analyse the data

As with many qualitative evaluation techniques with free text responses, interviews can result in a lot of long form text. Your evaluation should have clear aims, so that you know what data you are collecting and why; this will help you to analyse your data. The results can still be difficult interpret, and you can have hours of work to transcribe and analyse, so leave plenty of time to do this. You will need to familiarise yourself with what people have said, and then you could look for repeating patterns or themes. If you are speaking to

several people on the same topic, look for changes between people and see if you understand what is happening. Check the conclusions you draw from interviews against the

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results from the other evaluation techniques you are using. Resource in the 'Further reading' section below have more information on analysing your interview data.

Ethics, safety, and security

Your organisation or venue may require you to submit an ethics application in advance. Even if they don't, spend some time thinking about all the ethical implications of your interviews. If you are interviewing children, young people, or vulnerable adults, you should think carefully about the ethics of this. For all interviews, only collect relevant personal data and have a clear strategy on what you will do with it. Prepare an information sheet for the interviewee that states what will happen to their personal data and the interview, how the interview is being recorded, how those recordings will be stored and for how long, and who will be able to access them. You could conduct interviews in the museum space, or they could be off-site. Another person should always know where the interviewer is, when they will return, and they should have a check in at the end of the interview. When you are interviewing, stay aware of your surroundings and always keep your personal safety in mind. You need to find the balance between conducting the interview somewhere that is private enough for the interviewee to feel comfortable and can speak freely but is also safe for everyone. If the participant will be able to see quotes or the transcript before you publish, tell them, but don't make promises that you will not be able to keep. If you have guaranteed anonymity, the quotes you publish should be truly anonymous, participants should not be identifiable with a quick internet search with the details you give.

Cautions and caveats

Be aware that some of your questions might provoke strong emotions or difficult feelings in the interviewee. This can happen even if you don't think your questions are supposed to provoke emotional responses. Piloting your questions before your data collection interviews will certainly help, but you might still be surprised at the direction an interview can take. Plan how you will help your interviewee if they do get emotional. How will you support and keep safe both interviewees and the interviewer? Are there any support networks that you can direct people to?

Further reading and other resources

This resource has only scratched the surface of interviews for evaluation. A couple of non-museum publications that you might find helpful are:

- Steinar Kvale *Doing interviews*, Sage Publications, 2007.

An academic look at qualitative research interviews, this publication covers the process from ethics, how to carry out the interview, transcription, analysing and reporting. Useful if you are thinking about publishing the results of your interviews.

- Annette Lareau, *Listening to People*, University of Chicago Press, 2021.

A very practical guide to interviewing and observing people, with chapters on writing your notes, analysing the data, and writing up. The text is broken up with suggestions, lists of dos and don'ts and quotes from Annette's work. An easy read that will help you to think through the process and make you a better interviewer.

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Museum examples:

- Louise Archer, Emily Dawson, Amy Seakins and Billy Wong, 'Disorientating, fun or meaningful? Disadvantaged families' experiences of a science museum visit.' *Cultural Studies of Science Education*. Vol 11:4, 2016, pp. 917-939.

A paper which combines interviews and visitor observation with 10 parents and 10 children from an inner-city school in London who visited the Science Museum. They spoke to the group both before and after their visit and observed them on their visit. There is quite a lot of theory in this paper, but the voices of the participants create a strong argument.

- Jennifer Bergevin, 'Narrative of Transformation: Stories of impact from activist museums', in *Museum Activism*, edited by Robert R. Janes and Richard Sandell, Routledge, 2019, pp 348-358.

In this book chapter, the author discusses a longitudinal study where they interviewed museum visitors in the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool and the Center for Civil and Human Rights in the United States. The interviews happened immediately after their visit, with a follow up six months later. The author was interested in whether their time in the museum had inspired or changed the visitors, and whether that was something that affected their actions later. There are lots of long quotes from individuals to support the arguments.

- Sue M. Davies, 'The co-production of temporary museum exhibitions', *Museum Management and Curatorship*, 25:3, 2010, pp. 305-321.

Here the interviews are carried out with museum staff rather than visitors. Sue was interested in the development of temporary exhibitions, so alongside visiting them, she interviewed the people that produced them in 20 museums. This paper is a contrast to the others here, as it does not use supportive participant quotes, but the argument has been created from the interview data.

Drawings and Creative Outputs

Sarah-Jane Harknett

For some audiences, responding in a creative way can be a meaningful way to evaluate an exhibition, experience, or event. Participants might draw, take photographs, create collages, or use other artforms to respond to stimuli from the exhibition or display they have visited or after engaging with a particular piece of research. Participants will often use their own experiences or perspectives as part of their creativity. Using drawing and visual imagery can be useful for groups which might struggle to respond in other ways, especially with written or word-based evaluation methods, but creative techniques can also be used alongside more traditional evaluation methods.

Visual methods can be used as a standalone evaluation, or to measure change, such as before and after a museum visit, intervention, or experience. The evaluation through drawing or visual imagery might be part of the activity, embedding it in the event itself. For example, you might want to get children's perspectives on an exhibition, so you ask them to respond creatively to what they see (see Figure 1 for an example). Alternatively, gaining a particular artistic skill might be an outcome in itself. You could even use it in a summative way by replacing your feedback form with a comic strip at the end of an event.

The first child was around 6 years old. I had stuck some of the pictures on the tent. I took her over to look at them and asked if she thought the pictures seemed happy or sad. She thought they looked sad because they were 'fuzzy' and not colourful. I asked her if she would like to make a picture that had the same feeling. She chose a picture of a child about to get a vaccination, who looked scared and sad. She enjoyed adding things to the picture to change it, the tracing paper made it look 'fuzzy' like the photos.



Figure 1: Evaluator's field notes and collage made by a workshop participant responding to an exhibition of photographs

How to do it

Write clear instructions for what you would like participants to do, and carefully brief all evaluators so they are confident on their role, and how much assistance they are to give. You might want to give participants a very specific remit, with titles, hints, and a topic, or you might prefer to give broader opportunities for reflection. Ensure the task is directly related to your evaluation aims. Your prompt should not be leading or introducing bias; if possible, pilot your prompts in advance, ideally with your intended audience. If you are

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repeating the same exercise before and after an intervention there should be no other influences on learning (for example, if you are measuring before and after a museum visit, there should be no taught sessions in school on the same topic). If the drawing takes place in an environment without evaluators, in a school classroom prior to a visit for example, the instructions should be followed directly so that teachers do not add comments or guide the students.

If you are asking participants to draw something, you might want to add a space for them to label it or add a sentence or two about what they have drawn. The evaluator could ask questions about the drawing as well, or the drawing might be used as the catalyst for an interview. Asking clarifying questions can be useful so that you fully understand what has been drawn; note down what you ask and the participant's responses. Encourage participants to contribute *something*, even if they tell you they are not artistic or cannot draw. Children and young people may prefer either drawing or writing, they rarely want to do much of both. You may want to ask the facilitator or another evaluator to take field notes during and after the process to capture as much information as you can.

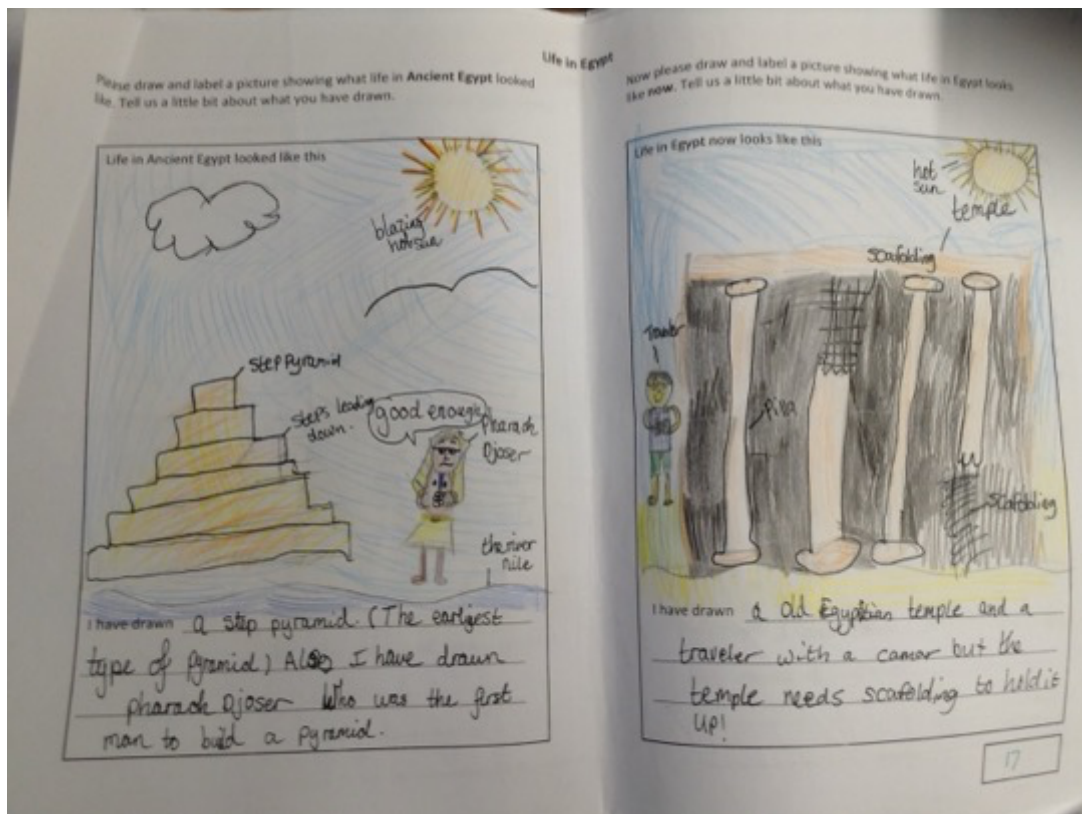


Figure 2: Children's drawings before they visited a museum to look at Egyptian displays. The prompts were 'Life in Ancient Egypt looked like this' and 'Life in Egypt now looks like this'.

If the evaluation is embedded in the task, the activity still needs to be engaging for the audience. It is easy to focus so much on the information or results that you want to get out of it that you lose sight of making it interesting for the participants. Get all the paperwork ready in advance of your event, make sure it is simple and quick to complete and that it is clear to the audience that you are gathering evaluation data. Gather all the materials that you need. Creative evaluation can be resource heavy, sometimes with lots of paper

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printouts, materials, or equipment. Consider the environmental impact and amend things accordingly if possible. If participants will take their work away with them, work out how you will capture their creation, either through taking photos or some other way.

Ethics, safety, and security

All relevant staff should be fully briefed on the evaluation project before it begins. As this is a method which is often used with children, young people or vulnerable adults, the venue's ethics procedure should be carefully followed. Consent forms and information sheets should include consent for retaining or taking photos of creative work, as well as pictures of people (if relevant). Formal consent should be provided by parents or guardians if young people are the evaluation participants, but children should also be asked if they are happy to take part. No personal information should be visible in the photographs, check artworks carefully before taking a picture.

What to do with the data

You will need to leave a lot of time for analysis. Creative evaluation methods can quickly give you a lot of data that can be hard to interpret. A significant number of responses can be created if participants are being evaluated before and after an exhibition, event, or other intervention. Depending on the number of drawings you have, you might need to analyse a sample of them rather than all of them, in which case choose a suitable sampling strategy. It is helpful to match up the before/after responses of individuals, so that you can analyse change for each person, rather than relying solely on group responses.

You could start by looking at specific elements, artefacts, or information that you are focussing on evaluating. You could look at how many times these appear in drawings, either individually or where they are in relation to other parts of the drawing. Simple analysis could then look at the proportion of drawings that include those items. For an example of a study using this methodology, see the Howlett and Turner paper in the further reading section below. Another method of analysing the data is to create a simple scoring system, where you give the whole picture a score based on how accurate it is, or what learning is visible. For example, your scale might be:

0 = an irrelevant drawing, or if doing before/after visit drawings: evidence of negative learning

1 = one or two relevant items; minimal positive learning

2 = many relevant items; demonstrable positive learning

3 = a detailed drawing with relevant items; significant positive learning

For an example of a study using this methodology, see the Jensen paper in the further reading section below.

Write your report, clearly laying out your method, the audience you worked with, the prompts you used and how you completed your analysis.

Cautions and caveats

As with all evaluation, your results will be best when you have spent plenty of time thinking carefully about what you want to find out and who the target audience is. Asking participants to respond creatively might be unsuccessful if you have not planned carefully,

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and (as far as is possible) piloted first. Thinking through both what you want to know and the audience you are working with will help you to successfully adapt your evaluation for the relevant age, experience, and ability. You might need to provide alternative ways to evaluate alongside drawing and creative methods: can people use words creatively, for example.

Think through how your evaluation conclusions are going to be robust. Will you have another evaluator check a sample of your analysis so that you are both interpreting pictures in the same way or on the same scale? Include all of this in your final report.

Drawings can be excellent illustrations in your final report or in presentations about the evaluation. You do need to have the correct permissions in place to use the pictures and be careful that the individuals in the audience you evaluated cannot be identified from what you are showing. You should decide from the beginning what you will do with the physical outputs. If your study included before and after drawings, you might have a lot of pieces of paper to scan or store. Check your venue's requirements for retention.

Further reading and other resources

- Kate Howlett and Edgar C. Turner, 'What Can Drawings Tell Us about Children's Perceptions of Nature?', *PloS One*, 18.7, 2023.

This paper is based on research with primary school children from 12 schools in England. It involved the analysis of over 400 drawings that responded to the prompt: 'Please draw and label a picture of your garden or local park showing the animals you think live there. Tell us a little bit about what you have drawn below'. The drawings were analysed by listing the words and phrases used for animals and plants, then checking for items that were *not* included in each drawing. A helpful discussion draws out conclusions from the data. The drawing worksheet that was used and the information sheet that was sent out to participants are included in the appendices.

- Eric Jensen, 'Evaluating Children's Conservation Biology Learning at the Zoo', *Conservation Biology*, 28.4, 2014, pp. 1004-11.

In this paper Jensen was seeking to measure young people's learning around the topic of conservation biology following their visit to London Zoo. School pupils were asked to complete an evaluation form before and after their visit, responding to the prompt: 'Please draw your favorite wildlife habitat and all the plants and animals that live there. (Please put names or labels on everything)'. A three-point coding scale was used for the drawings, from negative development in learning (1 point), through no development (2 points) to positive development (3 points). The online version of the paper includes the evaluation questionnaires that were used for primary and secondary students before and after the visit.

- Kerri Kearney and Adrienne Hyle, 'Drawing out Emotions: The Use of Participant-Produced Drawings in Qualitative Inquiry', *Qualitative Research*, 4, 2004, pp. 361-82.

While this paper does not refer to museums or exhibitions, it introduces an alternative way of using drawings for evaluation, specifically with adults. In the research project, participants were asked to make two drawings on the theme of change. These images were

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used as the stimulus for discussion in an unstructured interview several weeks later, with participants describing what they had drawn and what it meant. The paper includes some basic analysis of using drawing to promote discussion in interviews.

- Tamara Kisovar-Ivanda, 'Thematic Analysis of the Children's Drawings on Museum Visit: Adaptation of the Kuhn's Method', *World Journal of Education*, 4, 2014, pp. 60-67.

A paper that specifically looks at the drawings that primary school children produce while in a museum, with a case study in Croatia. There is a good discussion of the history of using children's drawings, and a section on the methods used for the research, but it is light on analysis of the pictures themselves.

Meaning Maps

Sarah-Jane Harknett

Meaning maps are a method of finding out a person's thoughts, feelings and ideas around a central theme or topic. Completing a meaning map can be non-linear, compared to a more didactic approach such as a formal questionnaire. Ideas can be linked on the page, joined with other concepts, and completed in any order. They can be successfully used with people of any age, including young children and groups. This method does require some literacy skills. They are an effective method to get individualised responses and work particularly well when used before and after an intervention (such an exhibition, taught session, or event). If used immediately after the intervention, meaning maps will only be finding out short-term changes, but they can also be used over a longer period of time. As it is a very flexible method, it can result in a lot of data to analyse. This should be factored in before deciding whether this is an appropriate method to use.

How to do it

- Decide on central theme. Pilot it.

What is your central evaluation question about? What is the main theme of the exhibition or event that you are evaluating? Will you use one word, a phrase, or an image? It is usually helpful to pilot your meaning map with a small group of people who are like the population you will be sampling. You could run this pilot with two or three different central ideas and then compare the results. Which central concept needed a lot of explanation? Did one of the themes achieve a broad range of responses or did people stop coming up with ideas very quickly?

- Decide on a sampling strategy.

Who will you ask? Will your sample be stratified or random? What is your target number of completed meaning maps? In UCM, we aim for 20 to 30 meaning maps for exhibition evaluation.

- Decide what demographic information will be relevant to collect

What is necessary for you to know when you are analysing the results? Don't ask for demographic information that you do not need.

- Evaluate.

Approach the person before they engage with the exhibition/intervention/event. Introduce the project and its purpose. Ask if they would be happy to take part in pre- and post-event evaluation. If consent forms are being used, get them completed at this point, and give the participant an information sheet telling them what data is being collected, what will happen to it and how they can withdraw should they want to. Include the contact information for a member of staff.

Show a completed meaning map on a different topic and talk it through. If you are happy for people to draw pictures in response to the theme rather than writing words, say that in the introduction. The meaning map you show people should have at least two initial ideas,

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preferably with some more branching words. Don't use one that has so many things on it that it might seem intimidating. Avoid showing or saying anything that might prime the visitor on the theme you are exploring.

Give them the blank meaning map to complete. If multiple people are carrying out the evaluation, it might be helpful for the sheet to have a space for the evaluator to add their initials. Ask the visitor to add their knowledge, opinion, thoughts, ideas, beliefs, experiences, facts, images, memories, etc: whatever comes to mind when they think of the target phrase. Reassure them that this is not a test! If they don't have very much to write that is fine. Sometimes people can worry about putting the 'right' thing, so encourage them to put down whatever comes to mind. Participants might ask whether their knowledge is correct before they put it on the sheet. Ask them to put their thoughts down anyway, and again remind them this is not a test. Ask any prompt or clarifying questions about things they have written or handwriting that you cannot read. You might want to write a script for the introduction and prompt questions so that it is the same for each person. The evaluator can add their clarifications or prompts onto the map but should use a different colour ink.

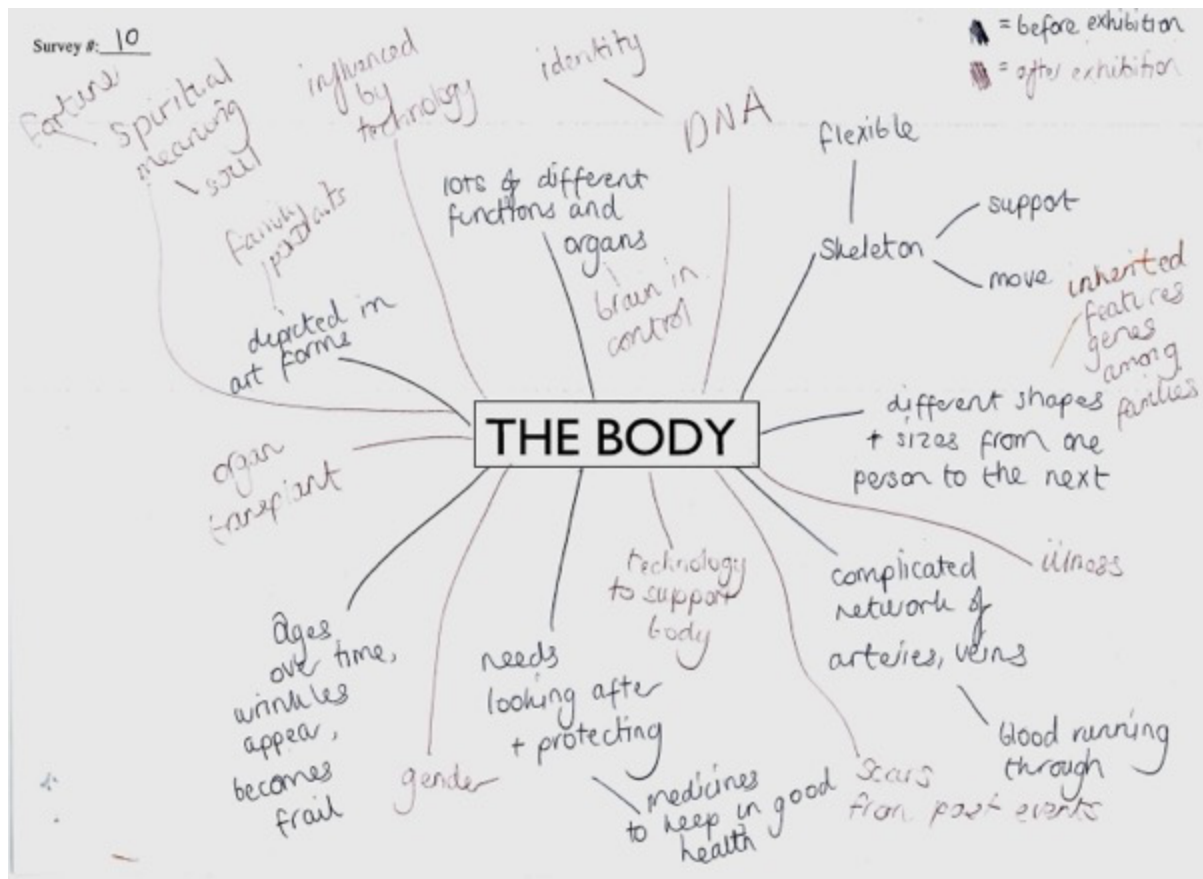


Figure 1. Sample meaning map on the theme of 'The Body' showing visitor responses before and after visiting an exhibition

Take the completed meaning map. Ask the participant to include their initials or date and month of birth or some other means of identifying them. Give them the demographic survey to complete. Don't let them take the meaning map into the exhibition or event with them. Explain that you will return it afterwards. People that take the meaning map with them might write on it before the end. After the intervention, give them back the same sheet they

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filled in before, but with a different coloured pen. Ask them to add additional thoughts, ideas, feelings, or to explain anything that was already on the meaning map. Leave them to do this without intervention. When they have finished, ask any clarifying questions that you need to, again adding these to the map or your notes in another colour ink. Make sure you have plenty of different pens with you.

How to analyse the data

In the analysis phase, the evaluator looks at the words used, and the structure of these words on the page. An initial step would be to simply list all words used both before and after the experience; these could be made into a word cloud or graphs. By counting and comparing the number of words insights might be gained into the range of knowledge and vocabulary about the theme.

A deeper analysis can then be carried out on the words and phrases. Are there any common themes that come from looking at the ideas on the meaning maps? Are there patterns? Again, at its simplest this could just be a count of the number of different themes or concepts each person mentions before and after their visit.

You might want to see whether visitors have mentioned specific exhibition elements in their responses. Can you link what they say to objects, cases, or text panels in an exhibition? Which are most frequently mentioned? Can you compare this to any visitor observation that has taken place?

Are there signs that particular types of learning have happened? Has there been a change in attitude or an emotional response? Don't ignore any items that you think might be off topic for the theme or contents of the exhibition. These can sometimes give you an insight into what knowledge or understanding visitors are bringing to or taking away from their experience.

You could look at the number and range of words that are put next to the central theme, and those that are one, two or three branches further out. In the example above on the theme of 'The Body', before the exhibition visit the visitor wrote the first level phrase 'depicted in art forms'. Afterwards, they added a new level to insert 'family portraits'. These additional layers might imply an enhanced depth to their understanding. If your sample size is big enough, you might be able to draw conclusions about specific demographic groups by matching the patterns and theme.

Ethics, safety, and security

All relevant museum staff should be fully briefed on the evaluation project before it begins. If gallery attendants are present in the area that visitors will be asked to complete meaning maps, they should be informed each time evaluation is taking place. Evaluators should always introduce themselves to visitor services staff before they begin their session and should always remain within sight of another member of staff or museum volunteer. The venue may request that the evaluator wear a badge, lanyard, or other identification. Your organisation or the venue may require you to submit an ethics application in advance.

Anyone evaluating visitors should be ready to explain what they are doing to any member of

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the public. If a visitor would like to withdraw from the study, the meaning map should be removed and disposed of. A note should be made that someone has withdrawn from the study. No personal details should be collected from (or given to) members of the public. If the evaluation is to be carried out with children, young people or vulnerable adults, the venue's ethics procedure should be carefully followed. The evaluator should follow venue requirements in case of emergency.

Cautions and caveats

Meaning maps can be hard to analyse. They often become the highly personalised responses of an individual, so connections they make might not be immediately obvious to an outsider. An evaluator talking through what is written on the sheet can add a great deal of value to a study, so if it is possible for you to do this, it is recommended. The analysis itself can become highly personalised as well. How will you ensure your conclusions are robust? Can more than one evaluator look through and check the findings?

The importance of piloting the central theme cannot be underestimated. The better this is tested, the better your results can be, making sure they are useful and meaningful. This can take a lot of time; collecting the data can also be time consuming. If the exhibition or event you are evaluating is constrained by time, don't leave it too late before you start collecting responses.

Further reading and other resources

- Tony Buzan, *Use Both Sides of Your Brain*, E. P. Dutton & Co., 1976; Tony Buzan *The Mind Map Book*, BBC Books. 1993.

The original texts describing mind maps.

- John H. Falk, Theano Moussouri, and Douglas Coulson, 'The Effect of Visitors' Agendas on Museum Learning', *Curator: The Museum Journal*, 41.2, 1998, pp. 107-20.

This paper is among the first to use meaning maps in a museum context. It positions the evaluation process within the constructivist approach to measuring museum learning and uses information from meaning maps alongside an assessment of the motivation of the museum visit. The case study is of adult visitors to an exhibition (Geology, Gems and Minerals) in the Smithsonian Institution's National Museum of Natural History in the United States. The meaning maps were used as part of an interview and visitors were also observed in the exhibition. It uses large sample sizes. Some discussion of the analysis of the meaning maps, mostly in comparison to visitor motivation.

- Anthony Lelliott, 'Using Personal Meaning Mapping to Gather Data on School Visits' in *Researching Mobile Learning*, edited by Giasemi Vavoula, Norbert Pachler and Agnes Kukulska-Hulme, Oxford, 2009, pp. 205-20.

A practical step-by-step guide to meaning maps, and a case study with 12- to 14-year-olds who visited either a planetarium or a radio telescope visitor centre in South Africa. A good summary of how meaning maps were used and analysed alongside interviews.

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- Eugene Judson, 'Learning about bones at a science museum: examining the alternate hypotheses of ceiling effect and prior knowledge', *Instructional Science*, 40.6, 2012, pp. 957-973.

A paper looking at measuring learning in a science museum context, comparing meaning mapping to other pre-assessment tests of prior knowledge. There were 38 participants in the evaluation, aged 9 to 12 years old. The paper includes images of meaning maps and has a brief discussion on the methods used to analyse the data.

- P.S. Meier, 'Mind-Mapping: A Tool for Eliciting and Representing Knowledge Held by Diverse Informants', *Social Research UPDATE. Department of Sociology, University of Surrey*, 52, 2007.

A short, practical update from the University of Surrey on a slightly different use of meaning maps: as communication within a multi-disciplinary team and as the stimulus for discussions with the team and external stakeholders.

Focus Groups and User Panels

Sarah-Jane Harknett

Focus groups and user panels bring together small groups of people to discuss specific topics, usually as part of a facilitated conversation. A focus group generally consists of people with some common thread between them for a session, which could be about an aspect of museum practice, or an output, such as an exhibition, display, object, or piece of text. The participants could be current or potential museum visitors or part of a particular group you have contact with. A user panel usually consists of multiple sessions, made up of a group of people from the target audience you are aiming at. User panels require more commitment from the participants as they are held over a longer period of time, meeting frequently and regularly.

As these are flexible, qualitative methods, both user panels and focus groups can generate a lot of data. The time it will take to analyse this should be considered before deciding whether they are an appropriate evaluation method for you to use. The depth of investigation and interrogation that both focus groups and user panels afford give a rare opportunity to delve deeper into people's motivations, thoughts, and emotions. They are a good way to find out the opinions of specific audiences and (unlike a questionnaire) give the opportunity to ask additional questions and clarify responses. Both techniques require a skilled facilitator.

How to do it

- Plan.

The more time you can commit to planning, the better your results will be. Carefully think through everything that will be needed for successful sessions. Who will facilitate? Do you have someone internally who has the skill set to do this, or do you need to bring in someone else, such as a freelance facilitator? Think about the number of sessions you will need and the location where you will hold them; if you don't already have a budget allocated for this work, you might need to think about getting some funding for your project.

Consider how you will recruit the participants and how the people that you include are representative of the audience(s) you are interested in. How many people would you like to talk to? Focus groups work best when you have between 6 and 12 people. What sampling strategy will you use to recruit your participants? Ideally there will be some common ground between them; they could all be users or non-users of your venue or programme, or a mixture if there is another link between them. If you will be compensating people for their time or paying travel expenses, get payment processes and paperwork organised before you recruit. Remember that not everyone has a bank account, and some people find paperwork and forms both difficult and stressful.

Plan the session(s). Work out a timetable for each session, with key questions and a list of discussion points. Allow space in your schedule for things not to plan! Also allow time for people to get to know each other, especially if you are planning a user group that will go on for several months. How will you collect feedback from everyone, including people who

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might be less confident in speaking out in a group? You could ask participants to make notes during the session that you collect at the end. What will happen if not everyone in the group has strong literacy skills? Think about ways to break up the time to keep energy levels high. Refreshments are always welcome, or a comfort break if the sessions are online. What strategies will the facilitator use to prevent one or two voices from dominating discussions? Pilot the questions you are planning to ask.

Select your venue. Will the user group meet in the same place each week? Will the group work best in a neutral venue or in your museum? Would an online group be better for the research you are doing? The venue needs to be easy to get to and accessible for your participants. Plan for the main content of your session to last an hour or two but allow time at the beginning and end to help participants to arrive and settle in. Try to make an end point to the session; participants sometimes want to stay and chat, but the facilitators should try to avoid this if possible. If you are evaluating an exhibition, work out which specific area of the display you are evaluating for each session. You need to try to focus discussions on that limited area and allow the group time to see it and reflect.

- Recruit.

Your careful planning should help your recruitment to be more straightforward. You might need to recruit more people than you want to come in case there are some dropouts. Send out participant information sheets, consent forms, payment information, and details about where your session(s) will be held. Recruitment can be time consuming and difficult: allow plenty of time for this step.

You might choose to have a general call out and ask participants to apply to be part of the group. If you do this, decide in advance what your selection criteria will be and how the application process will work. The application method you use needs to be ethical, equitable, accessible, and appropriate to the audience you intend to work with. Tell participants in your promotional materials what the level of commitment will be: how many sessions will you expect people to attend and for how long? You could ask the participants to commit to a particular length of time, for example quarterly meetings for a calendar year, or one meeting a term for an academic year. This allows all parties to have an opportunity to reassess how things are going and their involvement. Plan the data, opinions, or information that you need to collect from applicants at the recruitment stage, but don't ask for too much. How will you store people's data securely? If you are delivering user



Figure 1: a user group of students

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groups over a long period of time, spend some time planning what your procedure will be for people that drop out.

- Deliver the focus group or user sessions.

Put into place all the planning when delivering the session(s). Your well-briefed facilitator will lead the discussions, using the pre-arranged prompts, questions, or objects. If other staff members will attend the session(s), brief them on what their role will be. Anyone who was directly involved in whatever you are discussing should have a very clear idea of what they are to say or contribute: for example, if the exhibition curator attends, they should be told what their role in the group is and how much they should talk. Be prepared to stop a member of staff if necessary. It might also be preferable to not invite people closely involved in whatever are evaluating to the focus group.

Decide how you will collect data from the focus group or panel. Recording them would give you a lot of data to transcribe and analyse. Another member of staff might be used as a note taker. They may find it helpful to create a diagram of who is in which position around the table or room. If participants make written notes or take part in an activity, gather these, and take photographs of any outputs. You could ask participants or facilitators to reflect on their experiences afterwards through a survey or reflective journal. Once the participants have left, the facilitator and other staff members present should take half an hour to debrief and discuss how the session went. Take notes or record this section, as this can be very valuable information.

- Think about how to end well.

As focus and user groups are about creating trusting relationships, you should put some thought into how you will end the session(s), so that you leave things on a good footing with the participants or the communities they represent. You might want to do some follow up analysis with your groups, either through surveys or reflective journaling. If you have involved groups in exhibition evaluation, they should be thanked appropriately in text, publications, or within the display space.

How to analyse the data

Both focus groups and user groups will generally result in qualitative data, which can be very time-consuming to analyse. The method of data analysis you chose should work with the data you have collected. For example, you might ask participants to fill in a survey as part of the session, as well as the open-ended questions for discussion. These will need different approaches for the analysis. If you have recorded the session, don't expect to be able to produce full, in-depth, reports detailing every aspect of what happened in the group. You might not be able to produce a full transcript. It is often better to analyse the conversations in a broader way, looking for recurring themes or emotions from participants, any conclusions that are drawn, or recommendations that come from the group. Your report could be a general summary of the session or sessions, outlining the topics covered, rather than a comprehensive analysis of every aspect of the conversation. Acknowledge in your final report any difficulties you faced with recruitment and any biases that may have been introduced from the participants. Remember to include the reflections of the facilitators.

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Ethics, safety, and security

As with most evaluation, good planning is crucial so that everything is handled ethically and safely. Your organisation or the venue you are working with might require you to submit an ethics application, so check well in advance. Participant information sheets and consent forms should be clear and honest on the level of commitment required and when the group will end or be reviewed. As with all evaluation methods, participants should be made aware of what will happen with the information they provide as well as how and when they can withdraw from the evaluation. It can be hard to maintain confidentiality with focus groups, so have a plan for how you will keep information about participants, and who contributed specific comments, secure or if you will attribute them. As discussions continue, people in the group might say more than they wish to, but it can be harder for them to revoke consent in a group situation, so plan how you might handle an approach from a participant. If you have time, and it is an important part of your research, you might be able to check top level conclusions with the group participants at the end of the session.

Carefully consider how to keep all participants and staff safe, both in terms of discussion topics, and the venue you use. There should never be need for two people to be alone, whether this is two participants, or a participant and a facilitator. Write a risk assessment and abide by the venue's ethics procedure. Special consideration should be given if focus or user groups are to be carried out with children, young people, or vulnerable adults, and this will require careful planning and additional risk assessment.

Cautions and caveats

It is possible to run your own focus groups, but hard. As an evaluation method, they are strongly dependent on the skills and communication style of the facilitator. If you are running the group, you might need to develop your skills as a facilitator and interviewer first. You could try to join a focus group as a participant before leading them: this can be helpful for you to see how it works, what you think goes well and how you might improve when you are leading. You should not facilitate for a focus group or user panel on anything you've been involved with. Any staff member attending sessions should be fully briefed to know what their role is, and when they should contribute. The facilitator needs to know how to handle the personalities that attend, any inherent power dynamics or previous friendships. Groups that have prominent community leaders may lead other participants to defer to them and their opinions. When you are balancing the range of participants that you would like to attend, try to avoid potential clashes that may disrupt the discussions.

Both user and focus groups require strong, usually verbal, communication skills from the participants, so they may not be suitable for all audiences that you are working with. The facilitator will need to be aware that these methods can sometimes lead to 'groupthink': when everyone reaches a conclusion, but it may not be well thought through. If a user group is meeting over a long period of time, it might become a bit of an 'echo chamber' or it can get stale. Focus and user groups use small numbers of people; beware of making sweeping generalisations based on the results of your discussions. They work well when you use them alongside other evaluation methods.

Further reading and other resources

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- David L. Morgan, *The Focus Group Guidebook*, SAGE Publications, 1998; Richard A. Krueger, *Analyzing and Reporting Focus Group Results*, SAGE Publications, 1997.

These two short books, both SAGE publications, give a broad but practical overview of how to do focus groups and analyse the results. Sections on technology are showing their age, but there is still plenty of helpful information, with little focus on focus groups for marketing (which texts often assume as the primary purpose). Morgan's text is supported by frequent case studies. Krueger's chapter on 'Advice for First-Timers' and Morgan's on 'Ethical Issues' are both valuable reading.

- Emily Dawson, 'Reimagining Publics and (Non) Participation: Exploring Exclusion from Science Communication through the Experiences of Low-Income, Minority Ethnic Groups.', *Public Understanding of Science*, 27.7, 2018, pp. 772-786.

An enlightening paper which uses focus groups, interviews and accompanied visits to look at how specific audiences use (or don't use) science centres. Dawson uses quotes from group members throughout, talking sensitively about the audiences she works with for her focus groups.

- Damian Tissier and Samir Singh Nathoo, *Black and Minority Ethnic Engagement with London's museums*, Strategic Urban Futures, 2004.

A downloadable summative report of some research in London with non-visitors from black and minority ethnic communities, through street surveys and focus groups. The conclusions of the report are interesting, the section on focus groups gives some basic information about how they were held, but there is no detail on the questions that were used to generate discussion, and it is very narrative-heavy.

- Caroline Reed, *Running a Revisiting Collections focus group*. Museums, Libraries and Archives Council and The Collections Trust (no date).

A thorough and thoughtful (downloadable) resource, originally developed for a series of focus groups getting information about museum and archive collections from communities. There are sections on practicalities of running focus groups, how to collect information and running the session. There are several suggested ways of working with the collections and how to gather responses from the participants. There are suggested forms for adapting to your situation and even ideas for the structure of the session.

Appendix 2:

Impact Evaluation Training Course Materials

Exhibition Evaluation

To questionnaires...
and beyond

Sarah-Jane Harknett

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Three sessions:

- Museum and evaluation basics
- The UCM evaluation framework
How to ask a good question;
Questionnaires;
Interviews
- Some creative evaluation methods



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Museum & evaluation basics

- The UCM
- Different types of museums
- What we do

Break

- Evaluation basics



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Different types of museums for example:

- University
- Local Authority
- Independent
- English Heritage
/National Trust
- National



We don't know how many museums there are in the UK, probably around 2500. UCM are university museums, so a lot of what we do is focussed on the University and research. Increasingly in the UK HE sector, collections are being thought of as part of research infrastructure. Many different types of museum, funded by variety of bodies, often pulling together different funding streams.

- Local authority

Museums that are part of their local authority, for example, will receive some of their budget from the council they are situated within. Often the main civic museum. Often varied collections, sometimes quite eclectic! They have pressures and priorities of local authority they are within. Often have targets for income generation, numbers of schools, etc. Staff might have less time to research the collections, but they are usually highly knowledgeable, with excellent local links, and strong community connections. Unlike a library, a museum is not a statutory body for a local authority. They **must** provide a library service, but do not have to provide a museum (budget cuts have severely affected libraries, who also rely heavily on volunteers).

- Independent

These museums are owned by independent bodies or charities. Usually rely on the income from visitor admission, grants, donations, pulling together funding from many sources. They (like lots of museums) look for avenues for income generation. Some historic houses and castles are independently owned and managed. Sometimes particularly strong on a specific subject. Many are driven by enthusiastic and extremely knowledgeable group of volunteers.

The image is the Museum of Cambridge, an independent museum.

- Historic properties and the heritage sites of English Heritage/CADW/Historic Scotland/Northern Ireland Environment agency and the National Trust

Part of national organisations. Lots of central admin, central support. Often responding to national initiatives across the group. Often rely on volunteers in public areas.

- National museums

Receive their core funding from the government of each nation. Highly specialist staff, often researching with collections and audiences. For example: National Museums of Wales and Scotland; National Waterways Museum.

- Regimental Museums

Military museums. Often have lots of support from people who have connections to that regiment. Very good for family history.

- Historic Royal Palaces

These are the palaces without living residents.

All types different quirks, problems, or advantages! Some pressures are common across all, to varying degrees. Almost all rely on volunteers to help whether in collections, front of house, curatorial, events.

Some jargon busting:

Some jargon busting...

Accreditation

Designation

ACE (Arts Council England)

NPO (National Portfolio Organisation)

National Lottery Heritage Fund (HLF)



Image: Talk at the Polar Museum

- Accreditation

UK industry standard, national scheme, must ensure 'sustainable, focused and trusted'; 'manage collections properly, engage with visitors, and governed appropriately' (ACE website).

Must meet nationally agreed standards, including governance, collections care, documentation, public engagement; reapply every five years. Demonstrates commitment to managing collections effectively for enjoyment and benefit of all. One of the first questions on many grants and funding applications.

Basically, Accreditation is like OFSTED for museums. Within the sector, losing accreditation is big deal. It can happen; in 2014 Northampton Borough Council sold an Egyptian statue for £16 million to fund an extension to the museum and art gallery. Because they sold part of their collection, the council lost their accreditation status. Meant that Northampton Museum and Art Gallery and Abington Park Museum, also run by the council, no longer accredited. Made the BBC news. In December 2022, they regained accredited status. This whole story is a lesson in evaluation. The council said that a survey had shown that 51% of Northampton were

in favour of selling the statue. The survey didn't include the option of keeping it. There are **163** Accredited museums in the East of England, with the highest proportion of "micro-museums" (defined as receiving fewer than 10,000 visitors a year) in the country (51%). All eight University of Cambridge museums are Accredited.

- Designation.

Designation Scheme: for non-national museums, collections and archives that hold 'pre-eminent collections of national and international importance' (ACE website). In Cambridge: Five of the eight University museums are Designated (the entire holdings of: the Fitzwilliam Museum, MAA, Sedgwick Museum of Earth Sciences, Whipple Museum of the History of Science, Zoology Museum). Designated collections also held at CU Library (special collections), Churchill Archives Centre, Old Library Collections at St John's College, and Herbarium at the Botanic Garden (from May 2022).

- ACE: Arts Council England

The 'national development agency for creativity and culture' (ACE website). Arm's length government body, funded by the DCMS. ACE distributes funding from government and NLHF. Oversee accreditation and designation schemes.

- NPO

ACE created network of National Portfolio Organisations (NPO). c. 1000 organisations across the country: theatres, opera, orchestras, dance organisations, and museums and galleries. UCM is an NPO. NPOs can access additional funding, inevitably accompanied by ongoing administration and reporting.

- National Lottery Heritage Fund

Sometimes, incorrectly, abbreviated to HLF. In their words: 'largest dedicated grant funder of the UK's heritage' (NLHF website). A very significant body in the heritage world.



Who we are: The UCM consortium

Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology

Botanic Garden

Museum of Classical Archaeology

The Fitzwilliam Museum

Kettle's Yard

The Polar Museum

Sedgwick Museum of Earth Sciences

Whipple Museum of the History of Science

Museum of Zoology



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8 Accredited University Museums
and Botanic Garden within
a square mile in the City

Internationally important
collections, including
five Designated collections

Several million objects,
collections spanning arts and
sciences



Centres of Research

<https://www.museums.cam.ac.uk/index.php/research>



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Research



The University of Cambridge holds exceptional museums and collections reflecting Cambridge's position as one of the world's leading universities.

The University collections form a research infrastructure that is unique to the Cambridge research environment. In the following pages you can find out more about research at each institution, as well as the under-researched areas of the collections that would provide the ideal focus for new collaborative projects. Choose a collection profile below to find out more.



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University
teaching and
learning

Widening
participation

Working in
partnership



The University's role in society

The University's relationship with society

- the contribution which the University can make to society through the pursuit, dissemination, and application of knowledge
- the place of the University within the broader academic and local community
- opportunities for innovative partnerships with business, charitable foundations, and healthcare
- concern for sustainability and the relationship with the environment





International
relationships &
networks

Diversity, equality &
inclusivity



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Raising aspirations and Public engagement

Accessible design
and content

Targeted programming

Working in partnership
with experts and
participants



Museums and learning



Some things to consider when working with museums

- Don't assume instant access to audiences
- We are professionals too
- Speak to us as early as possible
- We are more than just exhibitions
- We like it best when work is a two-way process
- We don't just speak to children
(but we do also speak to children)



- Don't assume instant access.

You might know that you or researchers you work with are excellent communicators, but we don't know that. We have professional reputation, relationships that have been built up over many years, and some of us have been burned by putting people up for things that have then brought in complaints, or not been as good as we hoped. We might give you smaller jobs and audiences to start with while we work out your strengths. Don't take it personally.

- We're professionals

Working in museums takes a lot of dedication, qualifications. Sector not well-paid, people often volunteer before they get a paid role, or when they have a job, they usually end up donating many hours to the institution that employs them. Staff are spread thinly: ask almost any museum professional if they have ever cleaned the toilets (or area of the museum that has been used as a toilet), you might be surprised at range of people who say yes. Very often staff are doing multiple roles at the same time because there are those minimum standards that must happen! Plus exhibitions, teaching, holiday activities, evaluation, etc. We do it because we love it, love our collections. But we are professionals. The days of walking into a museum and getting instant access to our audiences or collections are long gone. There might be paperwork involved in what you ask us for. Some of that paperwork and procedure might take a long time. Remember earlier we talked about accreditation

being UK industry standards? Sometimes we have restrictions about what we can and cannot do. We often have people asking to borrow our objects for events or off-site display. That might be possible, but there is a procedure: you need to make a formal request, that has to go to our museum committee. Our standard loan request is minimum 12 months before the opening of your exhibition. We require certain environmental conditions: light levels, temperature and humidity should be controlled, and we might need you to have documentation of that before we can put your request forward. Check carefully before you ask to borrow material. We are professionals, often with lots of training and experience, but we are often part-time, spread very thinly (for example my teaching remit in MAA is basically from preschool to postgraduate level).

- Speak to us early

Work to long timescale sometimes. Often people come to us to put on an exhibition: MAA temporary exhibition schedule full for at least the next five years. People say this is beyond their funding: often our plans are beyond our funding! Can plan a long way ahead, if you have limited amount of time, talk to us early. Public programming can have a shorter timescale, so could be somewhere for your research if time is tight.

- More than exhibitions

Don't just suggest temporary display about specific aspect of research. Lots of ways research might help us or link to what we're doing, groups we work with. You can have more impact by changing one label in a permanent display, or by updating catalogue records with your research, especially now many UCM collections are online. We are not unique, getting more common in the sector. If you want your research to have impact, we can help you think about ways to evaluate to give you the information you need. Sometimes a big temporary exhibition, however attractive it seems, is not going to be the best way.

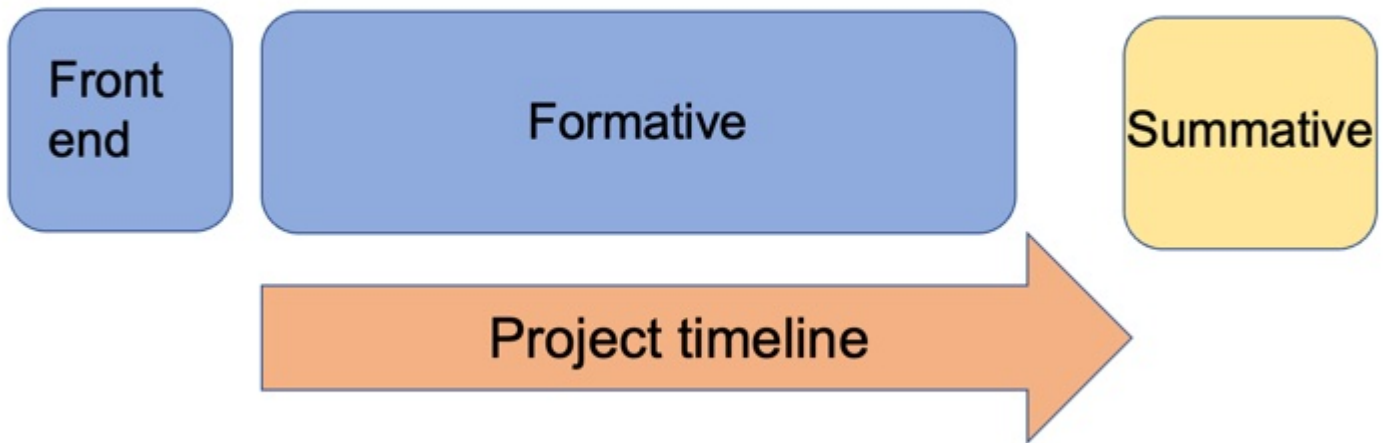
- We like research to be two-way

Not just about what researchers can bring to the museum, also what we can help with. We've invested time building partnerships with community groups, groups with needs, strategic relationships with schools and FE establishments. We might know an ideal audience for your research, might not be who you expect. Researchers might come with research that adds to knowledge of collections, and desire to spread that to the public. There might be potential for joint working. Our audiences think the University works together and communicates well. We're working on it! It's a good idea to link up with other organisations, and museums could help you.

- Not just children. But we reach children

Education work involves students of all ages, but not just children/young people. Work with people at every life stage, onsite and online. Blog posts reach academics and museum practitioners all over world. Don't pigeonhole us!

The evaluation timeline



Ideally this should be the timeline of evaluation against your project. Moving from front end to formative to summative, with your project running alongside.

Front end: evaluation before you start, e.g., testing audience knowledge or attitudes. Or before have finalised audience, working out who activity is best aimed at; eg, UCM asked audiences whether felt it was the responsibility of the museums to respond to the legacies of enslavement and empire. 80% of our audience in the summer of 2021 thought it was. Only 13% were negative about us doing the work. Important to do research at start of project. Used results to help prepare exhibitions, knowing had support of audiences gave us confidence, encouraged staff training (if the public want us to do this work, staff need to be ready to talk about it); helped us navigate complex training we provided (couldn't just say it was traditional audiences that aren't interested in the work, actually they do; we provided more layered training). Results affected our programming: knew there was appetite and interest in talking about legacies of enslavement and empire, could allocate budget accordingly, not create unnecessary expenses. Results meant we were careful with ethics, e.g., working with communities. Evaluation made us more responsible internally.

Formative: ongoing testing and evaluation, the things that happen before something is finished. Maybe have had initial idea and want to do user testing before get to final version. E.g., might want to evaluate new exhibition interactive, or test draft of a new museum resource for teachers before go to print. UCM example: staff survey every summer for 2021-23 around staff training programme for legacies of enslavement and empire. Looked at confidence levels, barriers, etc, tailored training programmes to meet need. By doing formative evaluation, found training wasn't hitting some

groups, e.g., some visitor services teams, some volunteers. Adjusted training, timings, how promoted to make sure it was a better fit.

Summative: takes place at end of work, when nothing can be changed, but are trying to see impact of final product on the intended audiences, whether the work met the original aims and objectives. Most common evaluation method, especially in museums. Could be post-event survey, exhibition comment book. Can do summative evaluation weeks or months after an event, if are interested in researching long-term impacts. Often summative evaluation is a minor panic towards the end of an exhibition, when suddenly need to prove what you've done to funders, have neither time nor budget to do anything more than a survey.

How do we know

Because of way museums are funded, have done lots of visitor evaluation. Regular surveys, have good idea of the demographics of who does (and who doesn't) visit each museum. Useful data, particularly if researchers are interested in working with a specific audience. NPOs have access to funding from ACE. Must report on demographics of general visitors, by PwC. Can tell you numbers, but also how people travel, how far come, group size, motivations for visit, visited café/shop, etc. Alongside broader audience evaluation, also carefully evaluate events, displays, teaching: targeted programmes. We think about who are working with and outcomes want to achieve. UCM are developing new ways to measure impact and engagement: from heat maps of exhibitions to find out what visitors look at, research questions in our audience surveys exploring contemporary issues e.g., impacts of environmental change. Use knowledge of audiences and the activity to work out best evaluation method.

How can all this help researchers or other people looking to work with museums?

- Might want to target particular audience; museum could help find them, focussing on specific postcodes, age groups, or other demographics.
- Could be important information for funding applications, or for end of project summary.
- Might be that museums can add specific questions to their survey: UCM has had research questions in last couple of general surveys.
- Can explore impact of objects/displays on different audiences or demographic groups.
- If we know areas of museum that are popular then we know where we might want to target audiences, e.g., do people mention object/display in the evaluation? Is that the place to put research?

Evaluation Basics: Sampling

Sampling

How many surveys do I need to get?

Depends who you ask.

Total number of visitors (per year/event)	Sample required for 5% margin of error	Sample required for 8% margin of error	Sample required for 10% margin of error
> 5,000	357	146	94
1,000	278	131	88
500	218	116	81

Group	Minimum # of responses	Confidence interval with 15% margin of error	Audience (eligible respondents)
2	100	90% confidence with 10% margin of error	100
3	200	90% confidence with 7% margin of error	200
4	300	90% confidence with 6% margin of error	400
5	400	90% confidence interval with 5% margin of error	600
6	500	90% confidence interval with 4% margin of error	800
7	1000	90% confidence interval with ~3% margin of error	1,000

IN GENERAL: The right sample is better than a large sample

In general, right sample is better than a large sample. We can get a bit bogged down in the number of responses that we need and forget that we need to collect the data. Once you've chosen your evaluation method, work out the number of people. You will probably be looking at either census or sample. Think about the size of total population it is possible to ask, everyone who comes to exhibition, or all people in a workshop. Might be times when it's possible and preferable to ask everyone: this is a 'census'. For example, if activity is with a small group you could ask all to do the evaluation.

More likely sampling the population. Trying to avoid bias that happens when ask people to take part in evaluation. Can happen in lots of ways. Sometimes whoever is doing the evaluation is more likely to ask friendly people, or look like them, or look like they might agree. To avoid this, find ways to take a sample. Several different ways to do it, what sort of sampling you will be using. Main types are random, systematic, stratified, snowball or quota sampling.

Random sampling: complete chance; everyone has an equal opportunity to be included in the evaluation. If truly random then will be representative of the audience, nobody will be favoured or more likely to take part. Could use a random number generator to generate your population that will be included in the evaluation. In practice, hard system: some people in the population might be very hard to access or won't want to take part.

Systematic sampling: Use a system for selecting people who will take part in the evaluation, e.g., every 5th person. Works if the whole population is in a random order, not always appropriate. E.g., an activity with 200, you want to talk to 40. Need to ask every 5th person to take part ($200/40=5$). Don't have to start at 0! You might want to let some people come in, then count the 5th person. E.g., if the interval is 5, start with the second person, then the 7th person, then the 12th, every fifth person after that.

Stratified sampling: Before you start collecting data, work out which groups (strata) are interested in, organise the population into the groups, then sample randomly within the groups. Usually used with relative proportions in the sample, e.g., interested in non-users/users of a museum, the population is 200 people, and you again want to speak to 40 of them. Of the 200 people, 150 are visitors to the museum, and 50 are non-visitors. If you were using stratified sampling, your 40 people in the evaluation would include 30 visitors and 10 non-visitors. Useful when want to make sure rarer groups are represented.

Snowball sampling: Helpful if you are trying to evaluate with a closed group of people, or for audiences hard to get in to. If you can get one person to agree, you can ask them for recommendations of others. More often used for interviewing than other evaluation methods.

Quota sampling: Trying to hit a target number, for example 15 people in each of your predetermined age groups. Tricky one, at first sight appears random, but usually isn't. Often used by market researchers, you might have started a survey that after few questions get told your segment of population already well represented.

Finally, the one that often ends up being used (not a recommendation) **convenience sampling:** who is it convenient to get to do the evaluation? E.g., who picks the tag off the poster.

Some questions to think through your sampling method:

Why have you chosen it?

What bias might you have introduced by using it?

How will you ensure your sampling strategy doesn't lead you to ask people that are like you, or that you think are most likely to agree to answer?

What will you do when people refuse?

Evaluation: some things to think about

What are you doing? Who is it for?

What do you want to find out?

Can you measure this? How?

What do you want to do with the results?

Some final tips.

- What are you doing? Who is the intended audience?

Sound obvious, but often are missing when planning evaluation. Think carefully about programme, event, or activity you're evaluating. Who is it for? You must have a well-defined audience. 'General audience' or 'general public' is not well-defined, means you haven't thought your activity through. Who will find it the most satisfying? Who will engage with it? Can you test it on your target audience? When you've carefully defined your audience and worked out your activity you can choose the most appropriate evaluation methods.

- What do you want to find out?

What is the main aim of your activity? What do you want your intended audience to leave with? Not just thinking about facts and knowledge, but it could be. They might leave with an emotional response or a new skill. What outcomes are you measuring? How will someone be different because of the exhibition or workshop? What will have changed when they leave?

- Can you measure this change? How?

How can you measure it **meaningfully**? Getting information **from that person**. Don't ask them to respond on behalf of others. Don't ask one person to speak for group, eg, don't ask teacher what students thought about the activity. Ask students, as well as teacher. How can you measure the change accurately? Can you ask before the activity and again afterwards to see change or development? What would you see if your intended outcome had been achieved? Who will you ask? Everyone? A sample? Who will you sample? What evaluation method will you use to measure the

change? The tools and methods you use will depend on the audiences you are working with and what are evaluating. You will probably want two or more methods. This is called triangulation, should improve the validity of claims that you make from your evaluation.

Finally:

- What do you want to do with the results?

Think about reporting method and communicating your findings. What you are going to do with the results should help you to think through what data you collect and how collect it.

Appendix 3:

Transcripts of Interviews

A1 (curator) Interview Transcript

Sarah-Jane So this meeting is being recorded. And thank you very much for taking the time to speak to me. Oh, I have to be professional now as well.

A1 Oh, sorry, should I be professional too?

Sarah-Jane No, no, you don't have to be. It's just me. And this is what I find really difficult because I'm talking to people that I know. And it's just very weird. And you know what I'm like, so that's the problem isn't it?

A1 Yeah, sorry.

Sarah-Jane Could you start by telling me a little bit about your current role and what it involves, please?

A1 [cut for anonymity] I am involved in all sorts of things across the museum from admin and senior and middle management through to researching collections, organising research and collections, preparing for exhibitions, teaching, and really, at the moment, trying to develop strategies for the development of collections or development of activity around the collections. So kind of a little bit of everything. But my main role, I think, is to learn an awful lot, very quickly about things that I don't really know about, and to try to transfer that knowledge into something that's vaguely accessible to other humans, before I become really knowledgeable about it, and therefore I can't transmit it.

Sarah-Jane Perfect. Thank you. And can you tell me a little bit about the museum?

A1 I can. [cut for anonymity] And there's a very, very small space in which collections are displayed, we exhibit about 0.7% of the collection. And I think everyone involved in the museum, because it's quite a quite a sort of loose confederation of interests, I think, has different priorities and emphasis, which can be both hugely problematic, but I think, really quite productive or interesting. And a lot of our work within the [museum] is focused on, on engaging with the pre- and post- acquisition histories of objects and the relationship, the relationships and the relevance of those collections. So trying to do a lot of collaborative work to sort of understand and make accessible collections.

Sarah-Jane Thank you. And then about the displays and the exhibitions. Can you tell me a little bit about how, how many there are, how they work, how the exhibition process happens?

A1 Sure, well, there's, there's sort of two strands. There's the permanent gallery for transcript purposes, those are air quotes around permanent, and there are other

display spaces in the museum. [cut for anonymity] So there are special exhibitions too. Those are exhibitions that are really driven from within the museum, focusing on the collections in the museum, usually resulting from research coordinated by, and exhibitions curated by, members of the museum team, usually curators, but, but from across the museum team. And in addition to that, there's numerous little interventions and you know, small case displays that happen throughout the year. So really quite busy. I think in terms of the time spent, probably special exhibitions, definitely special exhibitions, are the overwhelming focus of activity and permanent galleries, so called, certainly receive a little bit less attention.

Sarah-Jane Can we loop back to evaluation, and can you tell me how it's carried out? And who's responsible for it?

A1 I think the, I suppose the formal evaluation is really carried out by by our learning team, particularly [the education officer]. I think to a great extent that's focused on, I think several years ago that really focused on the main permanent galleries, there's been a lot of work on, on special exhibitions as well, I think. While it would be nice to be able to have, or why it would be important to have summative evaluations, an evaluation of completed exhibitions during you know, for every show, I think time and resources just don't match and it's often it's one of the Cinderella aspects of museums really isn't it, it's not the best resourced and isn't always written into the development of a project and I feel that's something that we lack. I think in addition to that, though, currently the [internal working group] is doing a lot of work, particularly on what I would call fixing galleries. Which is absolutely essential, but potentially not quite as aspirational as we would want. But you know, it's setting the baseline, making sure that the galleries are fit for purpose and accessible to all users trying to remove, you know, physical and intellectual barriers. And I think that's really key. But in addition, I think, and this is much more intangible and much more hard to define. But there's the sort of anecdotal evaluation, interpretation, understanding of galleries that comes from watching people in the space that comes from talking to people on galleries, also actually giving tours to people, or having random conversations that gives us all a sense of how the exhibition or the gallery is working. I think there's potential there for that to be drawn together a little bit, because we all know little bits about how galleries work. And I think those are entirely subjective. But that kind of subjective data is hugely important, because museums are nothing, if not that.

Sarah-Jane Thank you, I wanted to say that I am not here to judge the things that you say. I know that this is really hard, because you're talking to me, and but you know, it's okay to be critical of stuff that has happened, this is an objective, look at things that have happened. So I say to everybody that I talk to is that I'm asking about evaluation, but I'm not trying to say that I know how to do it best or that I do best practice, because I know that I don't do best practice in the museum I work in at all, by any stretch of imagination. But the point of the course is that it's practice based, so that whatever comes out at the end has to actually work in practice. And that's what I find interesting about it. So there's no judgement. Evaluation that does happen, or the informal evaluation that happens, what happens to the results of that, how is it processed?

A1 Yeah, I think because it's generated in people's heads, it probably stays there, and transfers into assumptions that are either acted upon or not acted upon, in

subsequent exhibitions. And I think it's something I've only started to really try to conceptualise and build a framework around in my head fairly recently, you know, sort of formalised, accessible, actionable data is one thing. But it may be even a bit of a tip of the iceberg, actually, because museums are inhabited spaces, and they're inhabited by the people that work in them. I think this might extend to people within the museum; me, for example, interpreting, thinking, evaluating a gallery, subconsciously, perhaps, on the basis of the way I read a gallery, or my friends read a gallery, or the way people seem to respond to a gallery when I'm talking them through it, which, on one level is completely useless, because they're not responding to the gallery, they're responding to me responding to the gallery for them. But actually, that's also another aspect about how galleries are lived. And I think, for me, one of the things that we don't talk about enough within the museum certainly curatorially and collectionsy, and maybe across the museum, although those conversations get difficult when we're, when there's lots of us, is, what the galleries do, what we want them to do, what people do in them and what they're for, so the extent to which galleries are mediated spaces by us, which for a special exhibition may only be you know, 50 tours that I give over the course of a year, which isn't massive, right? Certainly in comparison to the number of hours that a museum is open over the year. What makes it hard to action or deal with is it's basically re-enforcing or, or indeed, sometimes generating very personal conceptions of what the galleries are, which is everything from favourite objects, to there's too much text, or from curators there's not enough text in, in this space.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, that's really helpful. Thank you. And then how, kind of practically, what evaluation methods are there in place in the museum? So how can you get feedback from people?

A1 Sure. Well, I think, probably the old standard, and the most sort of plug it in and leave it approach in museums historically, probably continues to be the visitors book, which is entirely self-selecting, and is basically something that you can collect at the end of the show, or peruse when a show is up, or that may happen a bit less. And I suppose that's usually in my experience, at least, especially recently, that's the source of the nice little quotes that you want from people to put in your impact case study. Right? I know we've had conversations about this before, and I'm still unsure as to what... Visitors books, I don't think do much now, but that's partly because I think I don't know how to use them. And I don't think they work on their own. But I'm interested in how that fits within the sort of constellation of different ways of getting feedback. My understanding of the more organised and formal stuff that the [museum] team is doing is that there's visitor tracking, which I think gives a fantastic way of understanding how galleries or exhibitions are used. And, you know, which bits are most visited, how long people stay there, and parts of the exhibition visited and time spent, etc, which produced these very useful and very accessible at least, sort of heat maps of, of galleries. I think that feels much more helpful, and I'm just thinking on my feet, that feels much more helpful for permanent galleries than for temporary exhibitions, partly because on some level, it changes afterwards. And you don't have the opportunity to redo that. I think in addition to that, of course, there's the interviews, questionnaires and sort of guided conversations with people that, that to some extent feels like the gold standard, I think evaluation works best when it's sort of ethnographic, when it is that sort of cross between the data collection, like data points, numbers, and colour coding, and the informal conversations that we

have in galleries all the time. I think that that that's when it blends together, but I know from my own research that museums are difficult places to grab people to have conversations in, that that's not what they're for, that's not what they've come to the museum for. I want to go to the museum to have a chat with someone about the exhibition. Not necessarily that way, you know, so I think that that's part of it. The one aspect I think which we don't really have a handle on as an institution maybe is an overall strategy for how we evaluate special exhibitions. And that's both formative, we've experimented and I think it's fair to say that the learning team has found some resistance from curators in terms of formative evaluation, we've had hugely successful focus groups where we develop certain sections of an exhibition, but again, I think the resources don't feel like they're there, both on the curatorial side and the evaluation interpretation side, and indeed, on the audience side, to be able to do a lot of that. And that really has helped both devise exhibitions, test whether objects or content works, test text, really helps write text sometimes. And testing where titles work, for example, I think that's really, really helpful. What I think we lack is a link between that and the summative evaluation that can provide a narrative of the exhibition and how it was. Because I'm struck that we write about how exhibitions work, and a curator's thoughts on how an exhibition worked are probably the least reliable, but also thinking about how that can feed into exhibition development, or exhibition theorising later. It seems that that's not, for probably very obvious practical reasons, as joined up as it could be?

Sarah-Jane That's really interesting. And so when that evaluation happens, however it is, whether it's a comments book, or whether, it's I think you mentioned tracking, but how is that kind of fed back to you? How do you hear about those comments that were written or that tracking that happened? How do you get responses from those methods?

A1 I think it's difficult because the big shows that I've been involved in recently, we either weren't able to, or we didn't bother to, provide the resources for that to happen properly. And so I think that must be absolutely essential going forward. I think for me some of the most successful evaluations of our exhibits have been, I think I'm thinking back to [name of exhibition], which is a horrifyingly long time ago, plus indeed the permanent galleries and that fed through formal reports or presentations. It's striking, though, that the point at which those are presented, becomes quite... I think it's partly something about our museum practice, or maybe it's something about museum practice generally, but they usually come too late. Right? They come when the show's up, and for a special exhibition, you're not going to change that. Partly because you don't want to, but usually because there's no time and no money, and the [person] isn't available to do whatever and you've spent your budget, but so often it will come late. but what I find most useful is seeing it when I'm developing an exhibition. So rather than having formative evaluation for the exhibition that I'm developing, what I have is summative evaluation from previous shows that helps me develop the next one. And that's often in conversations with a combination of looking at the data that is presented, but also conversations with front of house as well and saying, 'okay, look, I want to put this there. What are all the problems that that's going to raise just in terms of visuality, sightlines, navigation and the experience it, but also, things like security and just ease for everyone else?' So I would love us to be in a situation where there was a certain amount of evaluation as standard. And that could be supported from within the museum. And that there was a clear

workflow, both for the people carrying out the evaluation, but the people that need to hear the evaluation as well, in terms of how that gets incorporated. This is very much up to the curator of a particular exhibition, but we did introduce debriefs for exhibitions, the ideal was that there would be one a few weeks after a show goes up and then another one. I mean, if it's really long, then at the halfway point, but probably safest to do one when the show has just gone up another when the show comes down. Maybe that's the focus where a debrief document can be produced with some of it. This is how it worked internally from the exhibition team. And this is how it worked for the people that seem to be engaging with it. But yeah, not sure if this is going in the direction you hope, but

Sarah-Jane No, no, this is all fantastic. And then thinking about the permanent displays, and what methods are there at the moment for kind of visitor feedback?

A1 I can't remember when the last evaluation of the gallery was produced. I feel it's been a while, and sorry, I'm being completely myopic here and talking about the [specific gallery] partly because that's what I'm thinking about mostly at the moment. But I think, in addition to that, in heat maps and write ups, other kind of formal evaluation, I think what happens most is feedback often on little slips of paper from front of house staff. And that can be everything from 'there's a typo in this label', or 'this is looking a bit shoddy', or 'someone had a problem with this', or 'there's a bug in that', you know, literally. Or indeed through the audits that are carried out of the galleries by the access group, and we're currently working through [alarm sounds] sorry, that's a reminder about my vaccine, just to make this topical. I think what we don't get is a sort of critical, creative informal conversation with front of house about what's interesting, what doesn't seem to be interesting, what is creating flashpoints? what people might seem to be struggling with, or what kind of questions do you get asked every day apart from where are the toilets, apart from [what size is the iconic object], you know that and stuff like that. And I think I think that results partly from a perceived distance from curators, and between curators and front of house, a perceived disinterest, because we always seem to be focusing on something else or just are absent or but also, I think, from the fact that we are preoccupied by lots of other things other than the permanent gallery, and I think have struggled, this is something we've been talking about a lot in the last month, we've struggled to care about and love our permanent galleries, frankly. whenever we talk about updates to the permanent galleries and permanent galleries being permanent galleries, living and being developed, it's always about fixing, it's always about sorting out issues within the galleries. We care about and we're passionate about, and we spend time and creative energy and all sorts of stuff, on special exhibitions. That's where the research focus goes. But the permanent galleries... nothing, really. And I know that from my point of view, I don't think coherently about or look at creatively, the permanent displays and haven't done probably since about 2008, which feels horrible.

Sarah-Jane And is that mostly down to the kind of special exhibition pressure? Other pressures?

A1 Yeah I mean, for me, so when in 2008, 2009, we were doing [a display], but also working with students on [another] display. And that was very much motivated by there being a PhD student who had done [research on the display topic]. And having

students there, and the occasion to work on a display. And that, I think, worked really well and is very, is very dated now, but, but I think that was a real investment of time and energy, treating a small case within the gallery as, as an exhibition. Back then, throughout the 2000s, I think we basically re-did one case every year or two. And there was a sort of rolling sense that that that was working. Created a lot of visual inconsistencies, but I don't think that's necessarily awful. And after that [there were specific internal reasons why no displays were refreshed]. But then we go into a breakneck process, sequence of special exhibitions and other projects that just draw our attention from the galleries, the galleries become that stereotypical thing for curators, which is a space that curators walk through as fast as possible. And I actually never thought the museum was going to be that, actually, and it's sort of, it's funny, looking back at the process now as I talk about it. I'm thinking of those critical and anecdotal museum publications in the late 90s and early 2000s that complained that that's just what museum exhibitions were. And I thought, yeah, it doesn't feel like [this museum] is that, that's what's lovely about it, but we are that now. And I think that's, that's a bit of a shame. So, yeah.

Sarah-Jane So when you said about getting these slips of paper from front of house being one of the main ways that stuff comes fed back to you. And when that happens, what is your sort of mental process with these things?

A1 Honestly, the first reaction, the first thought is: ugh. And partly, I'll be honest, because it's a little bit of paper, and my desk is a mess of little bits of paper, and it will just go on it and it'll disappear. I mean, if it was in an email or even a spreadsheet, or dare I say, even a Team's document, that will be another thing, right? And often, it's almost always something that I cannot solve. And if it is something that I can solve, then it's not something I can solve quickly, right. And therefore, I think, it sounds like I'm making an argument for having a structure where we can deal with gallery fixes. And we should, and that's developing. But at the same time, what I'm saying is that we should be investing energy into more than just fixing the galleries. So I think it is really important both for the people that are making these comments and passing those comments along, and for us who are receiving them, that they can go somewhere. And they can be in a, let's be honest, it needs to be digital way, right now, because no one's in the same space. But even when we were in the same space, we weren't in the same space. And I think it needs to be trackable, and referable back to, I don't want to push this through something like the access group, but it's, I mean, it's basically keeping a visitors book which could be a spreadsheet or a Word doc or something that is: 'notice this', that can be referred back to every now and then, if it's particularly urgent that can be flagged, but also, I would hope that if we're to be serious about updating galleries and treating permanent galleries as lived and living spaces, which they must be. And that's partly conditioned by the fact that objects shouldn't be on permanent display, especially some more vulnerable objects shouldn't be there that long and they need to be changed over, there should be a sort of every six months at least, looking towards doing a little bit in the galleries to sort of keep it maintained. Working on that schedule would seem to be the moment to say okay, and while we're here, there's a couple of things that people have pointed out, that might create a bit of space for 'let's take a look at the 120 words about [topic]', for example, if only it was just 120 words, and deal with that while we're here. Plus, also, I think because the museum works best when we're responsive, and a little bit spontaneous. And being able to

keep things in our mind, you know, that if we start having conversations with someone, an incoming student who's working on [topic], for example, we should have a word, because that's a little bit tired, wouldn't it be great to do something, or that gallery, that case was just done a year ago, but maybe it's worth thinking about what the next phase would be? Or what's missing from that? I mean, I had a fantastic exchange with a fairly new member of staff about [specific objects]. I'd actually asked her to review a caption for me that I'm rewriting. And that got into a whole conversation, and she basically put together a display of [specific objects], five or six things that are just awesome in the collection. And I need to be able to file that away, I need to be able to think 'Okay, at some point, we're going to inject this into the gallery. How's that going to work?' How can you have a stable platform on which to be spontaneous? It's a lot easier to be spontaneous and responsive when you can go to a library and say, Yeah, I'll have that. We'll take that spontaneous bit and do it in there, rather than just thinking, what can we do? Because I think, I'm sorry, this is really sort of the stream of conscience, but I think the other issue is about authorship. Temporary exhibitions, we are the authors of you know, there is

Sarah-Jane Really sorry, it's my front door.

A1 Okay.

Sarah-Jane Sorry, it's books.

A1 That's all right. Good in fact.

Sarah-Jane authorship...

A1 Yeah, I think for a special exhibition a team of us will be the authors of something, we have the creative control of that, we've got the authority and the responsibility over that gallery. Particularly for [a specific part of the museum]. The authorship of that, as a gallery, dated to about 1989, and there's no one at the museum who's responsible for that. And that's not just about the individual little bits of text. It's about what the different cases are, how its ordered, and also what kind of case. You sort of feel that you've got a responsibility to respect a framework that has been developed, that you didn't have any control over, and that you wouldn't really do yourself. And therefore, it becomes about chipping away and, you know, is it moving the deckchairs around the Titanic? Maybe not. But it's just about moving stuff around, where you sort of feel that wouldn't it be great if we did something else? And then it's easier to do interventions in the gallery space, where artists or other people are coming in and doing; new artworks being inserted in the gallery that feel that intervention-y as opposed to programme-y, or the [specific] project that happened last year, or a million years ago, I can't remember which, and that basically re-engages and very visually and obviously re-engages with the gallery and enlivens it. I think that it also feels to me that we haven't had as much of that in the galleries as we used to. So actually, all of the strategies we have for enlivening the galleries are very much focused on the special exhibitions, which potentially don't need it.

Sarah-Jane Is there a general visitor comment book still?

A1 No, don't think so. If there is, the last sight I had of a visitor comment book, was basically an exercise book on the front desk. And it didn't feel like something you want to write in. Right? I think there's there's the materiality of visitors book slash comments boxes, which are hugely important, I think. Ideally, I'd like to see a comments box for little bits of paper that you can put in a box, as well as what feels like a nice guest book, that is something that you actually write in, and that you think about because, any of those responses you need to be both sufficiently bothered by or impressed by what you're commenting on to comment. You also need to be either sufficiently trusting that the institution is going to listen to you or treat it appropriately, or sufficiently angry that you don't care and you just really want to make a point. And therefore, visitors books and graffiti are potentially the same thing, justifiably. But whatever data you're capturing that way is always going to be, as I said earlier, self-selecting but I think it needs to look like a good thing. It needs to look like a nice thing. And often a frankly scrappy exercise book sitting on the reception desk doesn't look like the kind of thing that is, it needs to look like a ledger, I think or feel like a ledger you know, but obviously I know that special exhibition visitors books have been treated like visitors books of the entire gallery or the entire museum. I think placement of these is something that needs to be thought about because obviously there's no surfaces anymore because we've got perspex screens up. So where does that go? I don't know.

Sarah-Jane How would you feel about a something like this in [the museum]?

A1 Great, really positive. It's the kind of thing that wherever we have tables, maybe it makes sense to have that there, I'm finding a balance between something that feels like the volume of record, and something that is a bit more sort of accessible or low pressure to make your comment on, and that also is thoroughly domesticated. And, you know, there's a phrase, there's a word or a phrase that I'm looking for which I can't find, but there are opportunities to make your comment throughout the gallery. I mean to some extent, this could be, it's the kind of stuff people have talked about for ages, it could be, you know, a wall with postcards on it, it could be, could be a dry wipe marker board, it could be a chalkboard, it could be all sorts of stuff, or maybe just a book or a box where you can put bits of paper in, because I think those are often nice when they're authored, but actually, the authorship doesn't really matter. It's just another way of collecting impressions. Because sometimes impressions are absolutely critical. Some of the things that I've picked up from visitors' books have been, you know, if more, if people are saying this is really nice, that tells you nothing, but it actually to you, that's good. And so many people about the [specific exhibition] that we did a few years ago, and people said, you know, it was really peaceful. It's was like well okay, that doesn't reflect on the content of the exhibition necessarily, or maybe it does, but it's the vibe that the show has given off, and it's the impact that it's had on people. And I think that that's good. Would people write down 'Oh, it was really busy and hectic', or would people 'it felt really bitty', or I don't know.

Sarah-Jane But an exhibition being peaceful is hard to measure any other way [Yeah] than someone writing in a visitor's book, like how would you? There's no, there's no generic learning outcome for 'feels peaceful'.

A1 Yeah. Should there be?

Sarah-Jane I mean, there are there are things about positive and negative emotions. But how do you measure that other than through someone saying, 'it feels peaceful?' [Yeah.] And so can you think of any changes that you've made in response to audience evaluation?

A1 Is it worrying that I really can't? I have, I'm just not sure that I have. I mean, I think, on different levels. In terms of formative evaluation, yes, absolutely, I think, for both [specific display] and particularly for the [specific case]. It was absolutely led by the responses and the focus groups that we did. And I struggled with that, which is absolutely the right response, you know, you should be struggling with that, actually that's the real test. And it's not necessarily comfortable for, for some people, but, and I remember getting cross and frustrated, but sometimes having to express something differently means that you throw out the previous 10 drafts, because the spontaneous one was the one that was most effective. I also remember that there were, there were objects that we had thought were absolute shoe-ins for the intro case, that actually from the focus group work just didn't work at all. And that was really surprising. I don't feel that you can do that all the time. But I do feel that we could do it a bit more. And I do feel that it would be good to do that really quite early in an exhibition. You know, I mean, I'm thinking that I remember when we did [specific exhibition], and the curatorial team was thinking about one juxtaposition, that was the one that was in all of our heads. And I think it would have been interesting. I think we did trial that quite a lot, because it was on every PowerPoint, you know, that that we did, but actually having a conversation with a fairly non representative, slapdash group of museum users, or non-museum users would have been really interesting there, at the beginning of a project. This is where we're going, where does that take you? And then they'd be repeating it with perhaps the same one, that you stubbornly decided to keep in there, which is fine, as long as you're working with the responses you get. But I mean, I suppose we could go on and on about that kind of stuff. But most recently, I think some of the... again, it's the permanent galleries, I think we have known for quite a while that the text was dodgy, there's some offensive terms there. There's some just inaccurate, and there's some just boring bits, I think it reached critical density last year, and finally took that on to redo the text, I think I'd been, and that was quite enlightening, for me, it's taken a very, very long time to basically redo captions for pre-existing galleries and pre-existing cases, and objects that haven't changed. And I think it's partly taken a long time, because I didn't choose that, this is not the case I would have done. And therefore there's probably a combination of lack of knowledge, and also fundamental disinterest and irritation with the choice. But I have to improve it somehow. And so I think that's taken an awful long time. But it's also been very interesting to me in terms of thinking about, and I'm not there yet, thinking about how we might do that in the future, and also thinking about the kind of stuff that we ask grassroots groups to do, you know, come in and rewrite the label. It's really hard. It's really hard to do that, but when you haven't chosen it. And I think, just as I'm saying this, it actually makes me really question the focus groups, as well, you know, that what you're doing is you're offering someone something that is sort of pre-curated to some extent, saying 'does this work?'. 'Copy edit my text for me' effectively. Which is a challenge, but...

Sarah-Jane Thank you. Yes. So the changes that were made, and you're just saying about the critical mass that happened, and was that around, more around the sort of offensive labelling and things? Is that what you're thinking of there?

A1 Yeah, so there was a troubling caption. And as a troubling caption, I don't think I could get my head around it. Also it was [specific collection], and I don't work on [specific collection]. I don't know enough about [specific collection] to actually know anything or say anything. But I think for the longest time, it was just that it was a gallery text issue. And when I started looking at it, and looking at the catalogue records and documentation around it, the questions changed. It became 'Why the hell is that [object] even here? Why does it say this?' and going back you could see how that caption had emerged by a combination of you know, the offensive note that had been written, or just the weird, offensive and inaccurate and 'what the hell is going on?' note, that was written on a catalogue card 100 years ago. And the negligence or disinterest that has allowed that to become a caption in a gallery. And yet that photo had been reproduced time and time and time again, in books, and I still don't understand. And then actually there was a slightly more offensive or worrying thing about [the object] that had been written out. There was so much there and actually that is probably illustrative of what I've been talking about, the fact that if we see it as fixes, it's only ever going to be fixing things and tidying up. If we see these as really interesting conceptual, political, ethical, cultural questions or research questions, then we can actually get excited about it and do it. And there'll be a nice blog post about it. [Specific member of staff] has been talking about the [specific object with the contentious label] for a long time. And I don't know what my blind spot was there. I don't know why I didn't think that it required urgent action. And I think it was because of the gallery. I think it was because of the lack of love I've had for the gallery, or just the very great sense in which we didn't feel that we could do anything with the gallery. And I think the process of rewriting that text panel, but also all of the captions, which is about 350 captions, I think. On the one hand, those are done now, not done in the sense that we don't have to worry about them anymore. But actually, from a very silly practical point of view, they're legible. You will be able to see the captions when we put them in next week. That, and read them and can be confronted by them, but also, we've got the InDesign files, where you can just say, 'I don't like that', 'someone's complained about this' or I want to change an object, you just change that one thing and you reprint it, that actually the practicalities of being able to rotate gallery text or gallery objects must be there, as well. And I wonder if the [contentious label] would have been, I mean, I'm sure it would have been replaced eventually, because [member of staff] would have resorted to physical violence after years of campaigning for it, but I think it added ammunition alongside the at best, highly ambiguous language in some of the other text, some of the other cases. Okay, let's just do this. Also, I think the important thing for us, and this is a change in museums, generally, I think, and certainly, in our approach, or my approach over the last few years, has been that it actually really doesn't matter if you get it right. You're not going to get it perfect. This is it, just get something up there. And do it by degrees, do it incrementally, you know, the text that you put up will be better than the last text that was there. And maybe in six months, you'll do better. You know, or maybe in six months, there'll be a whole lot of people, a lot of students that have suggested their own captions, and then you'll just put those in, you know that it could be anything. So I think not stressing about it, not seeing it as a massive monolith that we can't engage with has been the big lesson for me.

Sarah-Jane What would you really like to know about visitors?

A1 [Pause] I think I'd actually like to get more critique about our displays, and about our activities actually. I had this conversation with [an exhibition] years ago as well, where I was putting together an exhibition that was intended to be open, and was intending to be part of this more open, responsive, decolonial project that the museum should be involved in. Where I wanted to get positive, negative, critical feedback about certain things, I wanted to challenge, I wanted to provoke. We always talk about exhibitions being provocative. They don't seem to provoke anything. And actually I assumed that there were going to be some reviews coming in or comments coming in, that slammed the exhibition, because I could see the flaws, I could see the holes, I could see the partiality as we were talking about complex and troubling periods [topics], talking about the museums and legacy and the museum's complicity in a lot of that. And the fact that a lot of these things are still there. I expected it to be utterly savaged. And there was nothing. You know, that actually, I want to have either a sensation, like an impression: 'this is quite a peaceful place', more comments saying, 'this place makes me really angry', or 'I'm uncomfortable about this', or 'I think you got that totally wrong' or something. That feels like an unrealistic set of expectations and I don't know why it's unrealistic, but I feel that's asking a lot of people. But I know how I and most of my friends and family and anyone I know feel about exhibitions that we go into, people have thoughts and feelings. That is very clear. And I wonder why A Why don't they come across? Or B how we can potentially get them across?

Sarah-Jane Do you ever leave comments when you've had thoughts and feelings in an exhibition?

A1 [pause] No, because I very rarely go to big blockbuster shows. I'm not aware of ever having seen a comments section at the [Big London Museum] or whatever. Yeah. And ridiculously I'd never thought about that.

Sarah-Jane It's not ridiculous.

A1 But I'm wondering how, and that's not to say that they aren't there. Maybe they are. Maybe they aren't. But it's interesting that I don't sort of see that. And I wonder how you make 'we want to hear from you' visible?

Sarah-Jane Yeah.

A1 In in a gallery space or elsewhere?

Sarah-Jane Ask me in four years time.

A1 That'll be great. Yeah.

Sarah-Jane So anything else that you want to know about the visitors? Or from the visitors?

A1 No, apart from being hugely critical, I want people to reflect critically on the galleries and on the exhibition. The other is much more emotional, I think I want to know how they feel in the place, especially now, because that feels like it should be our baseline. Because that impacts on anything else that we do in the museum. I mean, if people are thinking it's a really hard and difficult space, then that's fine, we can work with that or we can work against it. If people are thinking it's a fun place and yeah, it's great, that's fine. If people are bored out of their minds, then getting the impressions is one thing but also to some extent that has to be quite specific as well you know, it has to be targeted on a bit of display, it's fine to know that people felt nice and peaceful in the [specific exhibition]. But how do you replicate that if you want to?

Sarah-Jane Yeah. Yeah.

A1 I don't know if any of this is being helpful?

Sarah-Jane Oh, super helpful, super helpful. I've got one last question, unless anything else that you've suddenly thought 'I wish I'd said that' and you haven't, which is whether in [the museum you work in] or in any other museum that you visited, or any venue that you visited, you've ever seen an evaluation method that you thought, 'Oh, my goodness, that was really fun. And I really enjoyed giving my feedback at that point.' This is like the museum geekery question in that some people have instantly responded and then sent me photographs, and some people haven't. And either is fine! It's just that sometimes people love evaluation walls, and will then take pictures of it, and send me them. But it's fine. If you haven't just if you have any ideas of things that you've seen that have worked really well.

A1 Yeah, I think I mean, evaluation walls feel great. Actually, I think and I can't think of specific examples, partly because I can't remember the last time I was in a museum apart from my own. But I think, yeah, it was, there was that show at the Tate. And I can't remember who, Tate Modern. I can't remember who it was, but the artist was Scandinavian slash Icelandic artist slash activist who did a show there a few years ago. And I'll try to get a better reference for that, too. The guy that did all the different coloured shadows of people, quite a lot of people. It was very, very instagrammable. But I think they had something that was very collage-ey at the end, that whether it did actually allow for feedback, I don't know. But what I liked about that was that there were you know, there were construction toys that people could play with. There were things that they could move around. And there was a sort of noticeboard along one wall that was a sort of thread with lots of AV in it. And I think what I loved about that was the play, right? And giving people the opportunity to, but not requiring them to, actually be creative. I feel that it might be much easier to play around with stuff, than have to give a serious answer to a serious question. And I'm going to walk you to another sort of example, which is the blackboard that is in our kitchen. It's becoming a space for, the surface, for doodles, or whatever. And I think, and to some extent, that that's what a visitor's book can be, or that that's what these walls can be. I mean, graffiti is an essential outlet, right? You know, and maybe a wall or a blackboard or something can do that work. Let people inscribe themselves in the museum in the same way a visitor book can. But it doesn't feel that prescriptive, and it can be sort of multimedia or whatever. Maybe it's just because I'm an old fart, I don't think tweeting does the same thing. Maybe there's something

that's both virtue signalling, and I think it's absolutely fine to signal virtue, I think that's a good thing, but in terms of representing the kind of museum I want us to be, if there's a space for that, then it's not closing down the comments at the end of an article right? It's making that visible somehow. So yeah, it's the blackboard and walls. [Specific museum example]. It's about the accumulation, it's about the structuring there. And if you go to go to a place that people have already intervened on, you will feel able to intervene yourself.

Sarah-Jane Amazing. Thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it. If there's anything that you thought, 'Oh, I should have said this', or that 'I you know, misspoke about that.' There's an opportunity now. Or if not, then I might just contact you if I have gaps as well, if that's okay.

A1 I think we should definitely find a way to pick up this conversation later. Hopefully, we'll have the chance. This has really helped me think a lot about stuff.

Sarah-Jane Oh it's been super useful.

A1 I think I mean, next, and if this would be useful for the PhD or anything else as well, can I interview you at some point? Because I think that genuinely might work for both of us.

Sarah-Jane I'd love that. It's been, what has been really interesting is, there's been so many times when I've thought, oh, but I want to talk about that. And no, this is your opportunity to speak and me just to listen. And it's so amazing just to sit here and listen and make notes on stuff that you're talking about without me jumping in and giving an example. It's very good for me.

A1 It's clearly something I need to do as well. That could be my homework. I'm treating this like a therapy session. What I contract to do at some point to put together a possibly serious, possibly slightly snarky questionnaire for you I think.

A2 (visitor services) Interview Transcript

Sarah-Jane Could you possibly tell me a little bit about your current role and what it involves?

A2 My current role is the [job title] at the [museum]. It's a very broad role. [cut for anonymity] I'm a first aider, I'm also a fire warden, checking alarms, things like that. That's one aspect. Another aspect, [the museum] is accessible in many ways, in terms of physical access, but there are also issues with accessibility in terms of reaching a non-academic audience, which is something that also I'm kind of working on a lot all the time, I would say because it's obviously a teaching institution, it's part of the university, so there is, you know, sometimes a little bit of a... can't think of a word that doesn't sound too battle-like, but you know there's a, something that we have to manage within the museum. How much, how much more detail do you need?

Sarah-Jane That's great. That's super, thank you. So, the displays that are on display, are they, you said that there was a temporary exhibition space, but then the permanent spaces, are they old are they have they been redeveloped recently?

A2 [Specific gallery detail about the age of the galleries] but it's been piecemeal, so it tends to be things are addressed when the money becomes available, so different curators apply for grants and with their grants, they then can do whatever. So for example, two, three years, three years ago, one curator was able to secure funding to upgrade the [specific cases]. So they're looking pretty good.

Sarah-Jane Brilliant. Thank you. Could you tell me a little bit how evaluation is carried out in your institution please?

A2 Not enough I would say. Evaluation is not carried out at a core level it tends to be... we don't have evaluation built into our core programme, it's fair to say and which we would like to address and hope to address. What we are better at is reporting, which I don't know if it's really the same thing. But we can, we can through our diary system, look at specific figures, we can look at whether people are adults or children, we don't break down our visitor information very much more than that, we can look at schools, we can look at self-directed visits, we can look at... we don't do a lot of demographic-based evaluation, we did participate for a short time in a visitor questionnaire that the UCM were running, but that seems to have... I think I suppose COVID has put a bit of an end to it. That was quite interesting, and did provide slightly more in-depth, demographic information about people coming to see us, even in exhibitions themselves unless our curators specifically asks for or provides some sort of evaluation tool, it's not something that [the museum] would automatically build in to anything. Yeah.

Sarah-Jane What would be useful for you to know about visitors?

A2 So in a slightly unofficial way, we do get some bits and pieces from UCM, but because it's not a core value in terms of programming or planning, it's something that we do fairly unofficially, in terms of the public facing roles in the museum. For example, we are able to get information about where people like to spend the

longest time, what their movements around the museum look like, all that's been super useful actually and would, if it were built in to core level would be able to inform people planning out, the way that we have to manage the volunteers, so all of that stuff from the front desk, ideally, don't have too many people in that space, because it's not very big. And when things lift, there will be less pressure, possibly, hopefully, maybe, there's going to be a lot of managing expectations. And actually at the front desk, that's what people are doing in a way you know, that actually, literally managing the expectations of the volunteers, the customers, you know, the visitors. And it's a lot. It's a lot to do. But I know that it's something that in terms of customer feedback, it is something that we particularly really find useful and so I think probably if there was a way that we could do it formally then have a formal data collection evaluation type system in place, that didn't put too much pressure on the front desk, everyone would be happy to do it. So many, like stipulations! If it was exactly what we wanted, then fine.

Sarah-Jane This is really super useful. Thank you so much. I have one more question. But I also wanted to leave it open for you if there's anything that you really want to get off your chest or to talk about with evaluation. But so I'll ask my last question, to give you a bit of thinking time. But, and, again, this is one where some people have gone straight away, aah, yes, I saw this thing, or people have been like, why are you asking me this you strange evaluation geek. But have you got any examples of evaluation techniques that you've seen where you've thought that was really great? Or my goodness, why did they bother? That was totally rubbish.

A2 I think the short questionnaires we had in the [specific museum space] which volunteers were doing. Not doing! They were encouraging visitors to do. That was good. In terms of physically doing it, in terms of what they showed and how that data was used? I don't know. Because we didn't see the end results of that. Do you mean the actual doing it, the method?

Sarah-Jane Yeah, yeah. Or things that you've thought... It doesn't even have to be in your venue. It could be I don't know, somewhere, another art gallery that you went to, and you saw something really creative? And you thought, I really want to contribute to that?

A2 Not really. [Sarah-Jane: that's fine!] Not really, I don't think get out much. The quick things I guess. I'll tell you what I didn't like. I'll tell you something I didn't like: those smiley faces that the bigger, Tate, Tate Britain and Tate Modern had them for a while and some other places where you could just hit a smiley face on your way out. [Sarah-Jane: Yeah.] Or was it airports? I don't know, someone had them, they're rubbish. They're silly. I don't think they're very good. It's like a smiley face, a non-smiley face and an angry face, as you press the button that most reflects how you felt about your visit. Not very good. I don't mind a quick visitor survey. You know, if it's very, if it's quick, you know, when you've bought a ticket through someone who then says "Would you mind?" They're okay, but nothing more than five minutes. Less than five. Nothing more than about three minutes, probably. I think that's all.

Sarah-Jane Thank you. That's, I mean, some people, who will remain anonymous, some people have sent me photographs of evaluation things they liked afterwards. Is

there anything else that you would like to say, or that you think it's important for me to know about evaluation [in your venue]?

A2 Only that I do believe quite strongly that it should be something that we have as a core strategy tool. I don't think it's something at the moment that we do as a museum, collectively, it's not something that's, mind you nor's any sort of consultation, same thing, we should have more consultation at the beginning and more evaluation at the end, I think it would really inform our practice, in terms of, from top to bottom as well, not just the visitor experience, but actually, the whole experience, about everybody in the museum and that's not something that we do. I think it could only be beneficial. It depends how people respond doesn't it? If people are not going to do anything with that information then it's less useful. You'd hope they would. Actually, the way we could persuade people is that just by explaining how what an important tool it is, in terms of funding. Surely, you know, all funding applications require a level of evaluation afterwards. So I don't know how people are doing that. I think they're doing it and not telling us.

Sarah-Jane Anything else that you wanted to me to take note of?

A2 Don't think so, just that we would support that, I think. That would be something that we would support and we understand that we are quite, probably in terms of visitors anyway, we would be the people who could help most with that. And I don't, you know, we want people to have a good time. We want people to have an experience, a positive experience with us. If that helps, and, you know, we can improve that by having a more formal sort of way of engaging with them to find out how it's been, what they expect. And that's got to be a good thing. Yeah.

Sarah-Jane Thank you very much. Indeed. That was really super helpful. And if I've got anything else is it all right, if I speak to you again?

A2 Yeah.

Sarah-Jane Thank you. And if there's anything else that you think of, then you know my email, just get in touch.

B1 (Curator) Interview transcript

Sarah-Jane Yeah, it's really weird, isn't it? Anyway, um, thank you so much. It's really nice to speak to you. How are you? How's life?

B1 Yeah, I'm OK, look I'm in the museum. Well, I mean, it doesn't look like a museum, but this is this is the museum. You just can't see the mess.

Sarah-Jane Yes! Careful camera positions.

B1 Yeah, yeah. You know, we're just getting ready for reopening

Sarah-Jane How's it going?

B1 I have so much to do this time. Yeah, it's just weird bitty things like updating the risk assessment. And then making sure that everyone else knows how it has been updated, which would be really easy to forget, because I know everything. But this morning I've trained a new front of house person. Well, she's someone who's coming back to us if she's needed, like COVID training. I'm not sure I'm going to remember everything.

Sarah-Jane It's a little bit easier, isn't it? Every time we've got a bit better at it.

B1 Isn't it! Whereas last summer, it was just really stressful because everything felt so unknown, it felt like so much responsibility too: what if I haven't done the cleaning well enough, then someone gets sick? There's muggins here that does the cleaning every day, plays around with my little squirt bottles.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, is a lot of is a lot of responsibility. And not ever, not what any of us really signed up for.

B1 No. It feels fine. But I think it's also just really easy for people to be quite flippant about it and be like, oh, well don't spend that much time thinking about it, it'll be fine. But they're not the ones that have to do it all.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, absolutely.

B1 It was a slog, last summer.

Sarah-Jane It really must have been

B1 I did a lot of printing and laminating of posters. I had a little laminating station on the floor. And one day when I had so many to do, and I had done pe with Joe Wicks the day before, and I hurt so much, I couldn't get up and down. It was not what I wanted.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, I mean, there's another skill for the CV that you didn't expect, was it, intensive laminating?

B1 Every time I did a trip around the building, and checked things, I was like, aaah, that's another one that I need. Because you don't have to make sure the whole

building was using standard. Yeah, that's the joy of being an embedded museum, isn't it?

Sarah-Jane Isn't it just. Would you be able to tell me a little bit about your current role and other than laminating what it involves, please?

B1 Okay, so I am curator, which, you know, being a University Museum, and being embedded, means many different things, we think, to many different people. So I guess my role kind of encompasses both traditional curation, but also museum management. [some details cut for anonymity] And collections management too and exhibitions management. I'm an expert, no, not an expert, that's wrong. I have many skills in many different areas. Some of them I'm better at than others.

Sarah-Jane I'm just wondering what you do with the rest of the week, once these little tasks are over? There's so little to your job!

B1 I'm pretty much the only person in. Then COVID hit. I mean, at the moment is still very unclear, isn't it? What no rules in June means, I'm really confused about what it will mean. And everyone seems to think it means no ticketing. And then I think well, but track and trace is still going to be there, so we're still going to have those responsibilities, aren't we?

Sarah-Jane That's great. Thank you. Could you tell me a little bit about the museum, now, as well, please.

B1 We are one of eight University museums and collections that together make the University of Cambridge museums, the UCM, rolls off the tongue there. And we get national portfolio organisation funding from Arts Council England as a collective, but we a small museum. So, we are very heavily embedded in our faculty, all of our visitors have to come in through university buildings, there are lots of barriers to access there, which you might think are then being made worse by ticketing, but ticketing actually seems to have given us a boost, all tickets [in other museums] are gone, so people come to us instead. [Specific collections details cut for anonymity]

Sarah-Jane Wow. And then what about the exhibitions and display spaces. And if you could say a little bit about temporary exhibitions as well, that would be really great.

B1 So, we have a purpose-built gallery that was built when we moved into this building. And it is purpose built in the sense that it was designed to display our collection, but not in the sense that it would meet kind of modern museum standards. So we don't have any environmental controls or temperature controls or anything like that. That means lots of challenges. So we have a set-up which allows us to [set up the collection in a sensible way]. Now, it also means that in many ways, our display hasn't really moved with the directions that research might have moved in, in many ways, this kind of [display order] is really useful, it's really helpful, it's really helpful for our students too, but it is grounded in kind of the types of ideas that you might find in a traditional textbook. When I first started, I really wanted to move stuff around. And now I just think 'Oh my God, it's like a jigsaw puzzle that would just collapse', scares the hell out of me. And also, because the building, because the structure is designed

very specifically for the layout that we have. So we can't, it would be like a jigsaw puzzle that collapsed if we tried to move it around. And we would lose all of these benefits that, while they are slightly dated, I think empower a visitor in ways that most museum collections don't. Does that make sense? I think it's really empowering for a visitor to know that as they walk through, they don't even need to know they're doing it, but they will see those types of changes and make those links without even consciously thinking about it. So you know, as much as I'm aware of the problems, I also would defend the structure quite strongly.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, that's fascinating. I hadn't realized

B1 oh, I didn't say anything about temporary exhibitions

Sarah-Jane If you just have anything on that.

B1 So these days, we host two or three temporary exhibitions a year. They represent quite a heavy workload, even though in many ways, they're way less labour intensive than say, exhibitions at [other UCMs] would be, because we're always working with external partners, and they do the bulk of the work behind it. They're usually wall mounted, but not always. And there's also the odd research exhibition that allows us to showcase research in the faculty at the moment. And that represents slightly different challenges, I think. So, we work with artists, and we didn't have a separate space for them to display their work so they're always creating a dialogue between the [collections on display]. So they're always hung in and around the [collection], and to varying degrees, some more successfully than others, they aim to create a dialogue between the two, although I think in practice, an organiser actually has to deliberately work quite hard to make that dialogue work. Because one of the challenges of a temporary exhibition in our space is that we have a lot of competing narratives already. It's a very busy space, because it's got a lot of [objects] packed in, in the true tradition. And every one of our objects has a relatively detailed label, we never have a label that is just a name. And so a temporary exhibition is really competing for attention. And it's also a really different space for many of these artists to be working in than they used to be. One of the things that we started pushing really hard is making sure that artists or exhibition organisers understand who our audiences are, and what they need and expect from an exhibition so that they're not left out in the cold. And things like the vast majority of our visitors actually won't be coming specifically to see the exhibition, it will be a pleasant surprise, which means that they won't necessarily stop and realise there's an introductory panel. We can talk more later, if you want about the types of changes we've introduced to try and help with this. And it mainly involves interpretation and labels. So they might happen on it as they're going around. And actually, one of the things I've also become really aware of was, it always seems to me it's really obvious what's part of a temporary exhibition, but actually, for a lot of visitors, it's not. They don't know where the dividing line is between [an object] that is part of the permanent collection, and a panel or an image or a photograph or something that's up on the wall. So actually, we have to work quite hard to help them with that. And making artists or exhibition organisers understand that. And understand that actually, I think also, museum visitors want and need something quite different than like a white gallery, white box type, type visitor, they expect a little bit more from the labels. And they are also, they're kind of calling out for explanation. And that's tricky when you're working with

contemporary artists who, who often, you know, they don't want to limit what their works mean. And so there's this balancing act, working with them to make sure that they're getting what they need out of an exhibition, because it has to work for them. But also that we're getting what we need. And sometimes it's more successful than other times.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, and it definitely sounds just as much work as doing all of doing it all in house.

B1 I reckon it is about six weeks of work per exhibition. But then I'm not, you know, I'm not doing what [other named UCM curators are] doing. I'm not doing lots of research, I'm not getting in, well, there are loans, but most of the time, it's only from one person. And that makes it a lot easier. Exhibitions that have multiple artists are logistical challenge, it's a lot more work. And also things like the paperwork involved. Very often artists aren't actually used to that because they're not used to Collections Trust forms, and, and needing to have paperwork or needing to supply you know, consent, so nothing comes in ever with a condition report, I have to do condition reports after it, usually after an exhibition has gone up, it will very rarely happen before it's up on the wall. You know, things like that, ticking my boxes and making sure that I'm insured. I think people underestimate that as well, actually.

Sarah-Jane And so have, have temporary displays been a thing for a long time at [museum name]?

B1 We've done them for a long time, but they've jumped up under my, since I've been here. So now exhibitions get agreed by the committee. And we don't just say yes to everything. But there is a little bit more discernment in kind of thinking about what will work and what is maybe worth putting the effort and energy into, it's a slightly more competitive process than it used to be. But also, we're not putting huge amounts of money in, most of it is in-kind. And actually I spent a lot of time feeling really guilty about how little money we put in. But you're right, I should put more value on my time and energy and not feel so bad about it. I've always felt like, you know, artists are, because they have to pay for all the costs themselves in terms of, because we don't have a technician. So, I prefer to insist on a professional technician. Then, I mean, there's me, too, I'm clambering amongst the [collection] putting things up, but we also have to, because they're always being mounted in amongst the [collection], we have particular [object] that have definitely been nudged out of place, and that we've got problems with, and that's from exhibitions going up. So it's a bit of a balancing act there because it's a challenging space to hang in.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, yeah, it really is. So other than those kind of nudges, then the permanent displays have, they stayed pretty much the same for a while.

B1 So the permanent displays were redone, I think in about 2009. And before that we didn't have any text on the labels. And they were mostly written by my predecessor. And I'm not huge fan of the labels. And when I first came here, I thought why don't we rewrite them all? And then there was lots of weird pressure from people that said, Oh, well, they're really helpful for the students (I'm not sure they are). And then I sort of gradually came to realise that rewriting labels is quite a task that you shouldn't really undertake on your own. And it's basically a redesign,

you want to be quite... So it's become something that's actually a little bit scary. Does that make sense? I've become, I have a tendency to disown the current labels. And actually, I mean, when we did [a UCM project] it was a really rude awakening to me A) that I was responsible for them, but B) also that I had never read them. So I didn't know what they said, because they're not my source of information. And all I knew was I didn't like them. And the one's that I did read I thought were either boring or said the wrong things or weren't terribly helpful. And so when we did [a UCM project], and we were called up on some of the content, and I was really I'm not proud of it, I was really defensive. And I'm really grateful to them for pushing me on it, because it was important. But that was a really rude awakening. But actually I didn't write these things, but I am responsible for them. And I can't just kind of be 'huh, I don't care, it's not my problem', or 'it's not my fault'. We are aware of problems with them. And on my guilt list is that some of them, I do need to start rewriting them. But we're also aware that what we don't have is a hierarchy of labels. And I think there was an intention to do that. And it never happened. But also think it was kind of backwards, that actually your hierarchy planning needs to happen from the start, you don't just write all your individual object labels. So we like a wordy label, we do like a wordy label. A lot of our labels have way too much text on them. I can get one actually, I'm going to swipe one.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, if that's alright actually, that would be nice.

B1 Okay, so this is, this will be fun, let's dissect why B1 doesn't like the labels. So I mean, they do have their own hierarchy, right, because they've got like a title and then a subtitle. And that's quite nice, then they have quite a lot of text. And like I said, we like a wordy label, I'm on board with a word label, I just don't like these words. And then at the bottom, in text that is not accessible, it's far too small, all of our text is far too small, that's on my guilt list too, there are many things on my guilt list. So then there's information, I don't know why we've got information about the size of the object, particularly because the size measurements in our catalogue are not reliable. That date there is when it came into the collection. So that's a complication. Because the collection predated our foundation. So it won't tell you the age of the [object], it will only tell you if we knew when it came into our collection. So that's a slight complication, but if you're pulling your information out of your catalogues, this isn't what they did though, because our catalogues don't hold that information at this point, the new style catalogue will hold this. But if we were pulling that information out, that is the date we would have because it would be our source date. And then that's the museum number crushed down into the corner there. And then, then there's the fun coloured band down the side, which I think actually was an ingenious solution that made perfect sense, but makes no sense to visitors. So this tells you [specific collection information]. But how do you know that? How do you know that? Well, it used to be that there was a panel that when you first came in, in really really tiny writing told you that and also give you a list of terms that you might not otherwise understand. Because that's the best place to do it on one panel that you can't carry with you in really small writing and you might not have realised was there. So we actually replaced that with a leaflet that basically did the same things in B1 speak. So we now have that as a leaflet that we can encourage people to take. So they won't be quite so lost. So it was an ingenious solution. It was just the wrong solution, you know? And then what else do we have? We do have the odd interpretations panel although I'm going to pull them all down really soon because [senior staff member]

hates them, so they're going to come down really soon. Hang on, hang on. Let's go into the gallery. And you can see one of those. And again, these were things I had never really read. I hadn't paid any attention to them. And they're all, they all look really homemade. So they're no bigger than you can print on, on a regular printer. And look at that, on backing board too. And there's a lot of text on them. And so that makes them actually quite small. And again, with no hierarchy. But also there's one that talks about [collection specific information]. And then one day someone asked me, 'where's this [object] that it makes reference to?' And I was like, hang on a sec, I looked at it, and I thought no wonder you don't know where it is, because it's all the way down the gallery, but it doesn't tell you that on this label, it doesn't tell you where to find it at all, so no wonder you're confused. So there are lots of problems, basically, with these two. And then in addition to that, cos why not have more problems. And then, then also, we have accessibility issues, it, because we've got so much stuff on the walls, and a lot of it is really high, it isn't always terribly clear where something's label is. It can be very difficult for visitors to identify where that tiny little label is. So for instance, up there, can, hang on, no no no, yup, [points camera towards specific object on display] that's recently rehung, look at that beautiful shelf, doesn't it look wonderful? And its label is right here, but you will first encounter it all the way at the end, there. So that's really, I have had visitors have a go at me and tell me there is no label, and I'm like no, I promise there is one. It's just not what you think it should be. And then we have labels that are really low. So we get complaints about that, too, which is totally understandable. But we're quite limited in where our labels can go, because they're all on bases. So you know, if you can't get down to here or your eyesight isn't perfect. So we did try and fix that, we have large text versions and they sit in each bay. It's not ideal because you have to identify where they are in each bay, but we do our damndest. But again, I mean, they're alphabetically organised by the title, and they are the exact text or, it took so long it took months. I learned a lot about the limits of volunteers doing this. But people get really angry that they can't identify, they will insist to me that a label is not in there, and they are not organised in any sensible way, they are. They're alphabetical, it's really, they really are. They're not organised stupidly by object number or anything. So these are all sorts of challenges. And then we've got trails, sorry, I'm just banging on at you. So then we've got the [collection specific] trail, which is really exciting for us, because it was the first time that we had tried something like that, really. And we did it in two days, really didn't spend a lot of time on it. But we worked bloody hard, and it is a hand trail, so we spend money on it, I think it's on it's fourth or fifth reprint now, so people have a little hand trail that they can carry around and take away. But it became really clear when we were doing it that it was so limiting how much text you could do. So we also introduced little panels, and we just did them, they're just A4 sheets and various forms of display. So it was all on the cheap, that didn't cost much. And we could do it fast too, which is really important when you're a little museum, [UCM colleague] used to describe us as the leaky tugboat of the UCM. So we can zip around really fast when we're not bailing out the bottom of the boat. And that was really important for us, because it was the first time we'd really spent money on investing in something. And also we learned a lot from that. So having the labels in gave the trail a visibility and a sense of place, that it wouldn't have otherwise had. And that has been really, really important both for those visitors for whom those are totally new ideas, but also for those visitors who feel seen by that, but to see, to see that kind of take up space. And that was intended to be a temporary thing in 2018. And we just never took it down. Because it was so popular, and people loved it. And

there was just not a reason to take it down. So what we're doing now is, the intention, we always wanted to keep adding more trails. And some of them might focus on telling the stories that we're not telling and others might focus on sort of more, you know, picking apart [the specific display style] or something like that. And it's just really hard. And it just got really difficult. So now what we're actually doing is we're working on, on, working on thinking about race. We're doing that within the UCM framework thing on multi vocality, I can't remember what it's called, diversifying the museum voice, so we've tried really hard to do it within that. So we've got a student panel that met for the first time last week and they're going to be working with us to write some of the panels also advising on the content. But also, we're properly spending on it this time, so this time, it's going to be proper big panels, there's going to be copyrighted images that we have to pay for on it, that, they're going to be massive. And obviously the hand trail, because I think that's really important that people have something I can take away. And that is tangible. I don't know, I think especially for these things where people need to feel seen and feel safe, that tangible thing that you can take away actually is really valuable. We'll probably turn them into a little booklet or something so that people can still use them if they want. But then the hand trail will take on greater significance, I think when that happens. And hopefully there'll be there are other elements here, too. But we're not there yet. Hopefully, October that'll be done, I'll go for October. There's the most, in many ways it's like the most ambitious thing we've done. Because when you're a small museum, as soon as you start involving more people, things get so much more complicated. And there's such a risk that you will let people down. But also it's really hard to account for the level of energy and work and whether you're going to have enough time to maintain that when one of the challenges of being a small museum, I think, is that suddenly something becomes a big issue, and you have to devote a month to fixing it, and you didn't know it was going to crop up, because there's no one you can delegate it to, right. So, well, sorry, I'm just moaning.

Sarah-Jane Thank you,

B1 Is that helpful? Have I just babbled at you?

Sarah-Jane Super helpful. Now, I'd like to talk a little bit about evaluation. And I would like to point out that I'm not here to judge what you're doing or not doing. You know, I love evaluation. And I work for a museum where we don't do very much, because it's that same thing that I'm stretched on one side that I can't do it in my own venue. So this is not about me sitting here in judgement over what you're saying, so pleased to be honest. But I just wondered how evaluation is currently carried out at the museum.

B1 We don't really do any formal evaluation of the labels, we don't really have the structures in place to do that. We do obviously have the audience surveys from the UCM, although that doesn't nudge people to talk about labels and the majority of comments from that probably won't talk about the labels. So we're very dependent upon just kind of when people chat to us, which will either be because they really love something or it'll be because they really hate it, and they hold you personally responsible. And this is one of those weird things where the fact that I'm sitting on the front desk can be both a blessing and a curse, because they won't think that they're speaking to the person who's responsible. And very often they are, and then

that triggers my guilt. And so yeah, it's, it's tricky. I think that to have, I think, a formal evaluation process would be really daunting, actually, how we would manage that, particularly in a context where we don't have gallery staff, so we don't really have the opportunity to kind of, our only opportunity for speaking to people is on the front desk. And while it's lovely to have had those processes that take me off the front desk, what that also does is take me away from those visitors that were talking to me about this type of thing. So the large text labels were actually introduced because someone moaned at me something chronic, that's really unfair, someone made a very valid point that our labels were not very accessible, and asked me if I was going to do anything about it, to which I responded, "No, probably not because I don't have the budget to do anything about it". But I felt so guilty about it that I ruminated on it and made volunteers make me large text labels. And while they are not a perfect solution, they are better than nothing.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, that's amazing. So do you, do you have a comments book or when people have these things do they write them down or do you just take it in?

B1 Mainly it's verbal, we do have a visitor book. You can imagine, you get a varied type of comment. Obviously, it's not there at the moment because they haven't been able to have it out. And their comments, they vary. But they usually just actually, the vast majority of people don't write a comment. They don't write anything helpful. They just write where they're from, which it is helpful, because then you when you can demonstrate international visitors and stuff like that, that is really useful. We get some nice penis drawings. We don't get that many that are sort of actionable comments on the labels, probably because we're not actively seeking them out. I don't think that's what people think of a visitor...I mean people do use the visitor book to complain about stuff. But they're very much in the minority. And I don't think that's what most people think the visitor book is for.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, I'm really interested in visitor books, just in general, because I think they're a fascinating thing, it's yours at the front desk?

B1 It is, it's not on the front desk, it is sort of opposite the front desk, would be under normal circumstances. So people do have that little bit of distance, I mean, you can always tell when you're going to get something fruity when it's a group of teenagers doing it, you know, and I really love the ones from kids. So we've got a really brilliant one that we sometimes use on the front page of our website, or we did when we could have this type of thing on the website, that says [visitor comment on the collection] in kids writing, that gets bigger as it goes, it's brilliant, love it. So that's fantastic. But most comments, so I guess comments mainly come in the form of questions, right, so when people come and ask you and one of our advantages on our front desk is that everyone that works for front desk, either has basically has a PhD or a degree in [the museum subject] or is working towards one. So that's one of our big advantages. And so you can kind of dive quite deep, sometimes you dive a bit too deep into people's questions, you can see them kind of glazing over, the one woman once told me off, and she's like, but I wanted to yes or no, and I was like, there's not a yes or no answer to this. And really, I don't want to know that. Well, I'm sorry, but... shades of grey, and you're still here talking to me, so I think it's work. And then people are quite specific in what they ask. Sometimes someone will ask really specific questions about specific objects and sometimes you have to get up

and go look at that label to unpick exactly what it is. What do we usually get? I think we're actually quite funny because we're, if you look at our audience survey data, we skew really young, and it's because of all the students that come through. But we also, you know, from sort of more anecdotal evidence, we skew really old in the sense that we have a kind of dedicated following of people that have been coming back for quite a long time. And there's a certain type of visitor who is usually of a certain age who really likes the wordy label, they will spend a really long time reading lots of them. And I think those visitors for whom those labels don't work are the ones that we don't hear from. So actually, do you want to see what we have, a practice, a test case for a new design of label? Do you want to see what it looks like? Shall I wander down? Is that helpful? Because we often actually seek people's feedback on that actively.

Sarah-Jane OK, yeah, that would be really useful.

B1 And partly show a fix

Sarah-Jane So how do you seek the feedback on that?

B1 Just chat to people.

Sarah-Jane Okay.

B1 There was a lot of debate about the font, and we probably will stick with part of the font and probably won't use it throughout. But there was a lot of debate about whether it really works for dyslexic people. I think it does. Everyone says it's really clear, I tend to nobble people. Text, the actual words might not be so clear, because we like a wordy label with long words. So that one has quite a different design with the new branding, which the idea is it should get rolled out to everything but life is hard, like I said. It has the title at the top and the sub title, but then it has more information. Then more of a hierarchy within the text so that you could just read the bit at the top and not read any further. So we still got quite a bit of text. But also this one was quite deliberately split into two columns to break it down and make it a bit easier to read, also you'll actually fit more words in, always aiming for more words here. So not every label would be that big. But my ideal would be

Sarah-Jane One moment. Sorry, I'm having some work done outside. And there was an important question about bricks.

B1 Very important. Hard work, isn't it when you have to stuff done to the house. Always questions. Yeah, so my ideal would be that every label would have at least the top bit of information. [Sarah-Jane: Yeah.] [UCM colleague] keeps sending me this visitor comment that came, since we made the visitor audiences survey thing electronic through the ticketing, someone said that we really should be working on a policy for returning everything because it's clearly all stolen. So that poor person, sometimes you just miss people. And it's really sad, because now actually, one of the advantages of speaking to everyone is that everyone gets that [information] leaflet that says. So that's really sad.

Sarah-Jane So you're speaking to people about that kind of text panel in order to get some feedback. [B1: Yeah] that's really good. And so other comments, like that comments book, either the comments that are written down, or the ones that are spoken to you, kind of what happens, you said that you've made that change with the large print labels. But does the comments book get looked at?

B1 Yeah, so I look at it. Um, I mean, I think with all these things. It depends on what energy I have at the time. And I think also, it's a balancing act, isn't it? Because I can say, is quite daunting, the idea of rewriting labels. And I'm really aware that that label that was flagged up to us from [the UCM project], we haven't actually changed the wording of. And I have definitely been toying, I think one of the things that bothers me or worries me about particularly rewriting labels, because perhaps the phrasing in it is not appropriate, or would no longer be considered the best phrasing, or even as potentially offensive, is that if you just switch it out, then there's a lack of transparency about that. We had been toying with kind of maybe some kind of visible thing, inviting people to tell us what they thought of the labels, and then acting on that. And that would have been with post it notes, which obviously COVID has put an end to, I don't know whether that is something that the new director would go for, actually. I feel like, particularly if we're going to rewrite labels, because the text is not appropriate anymore, there should be a visibility element to that. And we shouldn't just use it to cover it up and hide it, does that make sense? That makes me sort of very uneasy, I think, also, actually, then you get to kind of bring people along with you a bit. But as you know the biggest challenge of any of the labels is going to be trying to rewrite them when the text count is so low, and you're trying to communicate so many ideas, and it's always going to be now there are also so many more ideas that that we need to consider because what are the stories that we haven't been telling, and do we dislodge the stories that we did tell that are very dry and traditional historical stories? What do we, where do we put the gains and where do we put the losses basically. I think there's a lot of thinking that go in to that and also, it might just be me doing that. That would be bad.

Sarah-Jane Do you get comments on any other elements of the museum?

B1 It's too hot. Yeah. Too hot.

Sarah-Jane Are these verbal ones that are given to you, or again are these written down?

B1 Verbal, again, in reviews, in the book. Everywhere. What else do we get? Our museum is always one that you're either going to get, or it's going to feel like a disappointment. And definitely those barriers to access, they continue through the museum because, I mean, we are a University Museum. So we favour those lengthy labels, we favour providing quite a lot of information. I think being informative and rigorous is quite important to us. And I would normally say up to date in terms of research, I'm not really sure that's the case with our labels anymore. And those create more exclusions in some ways. So again, in that [UCM project], there was a very strong feeling that our labels themselves were exclusionary in the way that they were written, that they assumed too much knowledge. And that's a tricky one, isn't it? Because then you're also balancing that with the fact that label fatigue is real, and most people probably aren't really engaging as much with the labels as maybe we

assume that they are. And so that's where the new, that new label design was trying to tackle some of that. And I do think you have to give people an opportunity to only read one paragraph or only read the top bit and decide because, you know, none of us read all the labels, do we? I mean I never do that.

Sarah-Jane You've made quite a lot of changes already in response to visitor feedback, though.

B1 I mean, we try. They're quite modest changes. I mean, the other one that we're aware of, too, is that it's nice if you know you're walking around [specific museum topic], and we do try to communicate that. So as you walk in, there's an arrow, there would normally be an arrow with a figure pointing one way to this way to start with [a museum theme], that way to start with the [another museum theme], my predecessor actually hated that he thought people went the wrong way around, they went round backwards. And I just think 'do you want, I don't really care' but now I care, because you've got to follow the one way system.

Sarah-Jane What would you really like to know about your visitors? Oh, hang on, there might be another question, one moment. I'm really sorry.

B1 Don't apologise. I think the weird thing is, I feel like I know my visitors quite well, because I spend so much time on the front desk talking to them. But I also think that might be a little bit of an illusion. Because obviously, visitors are quite selective in what they tell you and even if you ask their feedback, so I mean, doing the audience surveys was always really tricky for us. [Sarah-Jane: Yeah.] And I think it was me that would get 90% of them. and you can't help, you are quite selective in who you ask, because you're only going to ask people that you think are actually going to agree to fill it in, so you're tending to ask the people you've already chatted to anyway. But then also, I was always really aware, they have to fill it in right in front of us and there's an influencing element there, isn't there? So I think we probably managed to weed out negative responses, not deliberately, but just in a way that we wouldn't have done when it was done by volunteers. And I don't know how we fix that because, you know, the time pressures to get them. And most of my team found it almost impossible to get people to fill them in. So it was mainly me, so I noticed a massive drop off when I stopped sitting on the front desk as well. And I spent my life saying can you please get audience surveys, everyone needs to get one in every shift, matter of pride, we need to beat the other museums. But there's a really massive part of me that says I don't want to hear the criticism because I feel like there are so many demands on my time and there's, sometimes it just feels really impossible. It's really horrible when someone is complaining about something you feel that you can't do anything about. And I've mentioned guilt quite a lot already because I do have a guilt list; there are lots of things that activate guilt in me, and then that can make me defensive or it can make me want to bury my head in the sand. So there's a part of me that I don't want to know I just don't, I only want to know about the things I can do something about. Maybe future B1 will be able to do more things, but today's B1 needs to get this risk assessment done or, so it's tricky, isn't it? Because I don't have lots of people that share that with.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, definitely, yeah.

B1 Is that a helpful answer to that question? I dunno.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, totally because again, that's the practicalities of it. It is you delivering the evaluation and responding to the evaluation. And you know, doing all of those things all comes in a really busy, busy schedule.

B1 And of course, actually, and then it's not just that is it, there's obviously the online catalogue of the information on the website. [Goes into specific example of an object on the website that was heavily criticised] And at the time, our director was on leave. So the director who's standing in said, "ahh, I don't feel that strongly about it. Just write back to him and say you'll review it when you do a website review." And then of course, we didn't do a website review. And so then he got back in touch when the other director had come back. And he said, "I'm going to put in print that you're rubbish, and you suck", and so then [the director] was like, "Well, why don't you change it B1? Why didn't you just do what he asked for?" So I had to write back and make it all nice. And I still didn't change it. I have done now. But I haven't written what he said, because I don't think I fully agree with it and I've written something that in many ways, I think is a much, much better page, and is much more informative, with lots of links. [SJ: Yeah, yeah.] Again that's where you've got to balance things. Because as a university museum too I don't think our responsibility is to just rubber stamp. [SJ: Yeah, yeah.] And the best interpretation that we can offer is where we are more able to flag up some of those challenges.

Sarah-Jane I'm really sorry, I've one question left. Sorry, concrete now.

B1 The problem of having building work done is that decision making always seems to come in really fast, and you're on the spot just like that? Yeah, you can't really reflect on them, even though you've known they they're coming. They've always felt really far off until they're now.

Sarah-Jane I'm sorry. You were saying how many things there are. {B1 laughs} I guess my, my final, and our time is coming to an end, and I don't want to impose upon you any longer, you've been super generous. Thank you so much, but

B1 Is it because I've run on?

Sarah-Jane No, no. It's really good. And I was wondering if you'd seen any evaluation techniques, not just in your museum, but anywhere, that you have thought have worked particularly well? Or that you've thought were particularly poor? And this is one of those questions where some people instantly are: 'Oh, yes, I saw this evaluation thing and here are some photographs' and then they will email me and other people are: 'no, what are you what are you talking about? Why would I have thought that this questionnaire or this you know, post it note board was particularly effective?'

B1 I don't think you see evaluation very often beyond kind of little... so [another UCM] I see have little postcards now that you can fill in. And obviously now when you go to the UCMs, oh you did before, you saw people doing audience surveys, but they're all quite general, aren't they? But there is one case study online that I've always liked, this is post its, it's bloody post its, where, and I could find the blog

actually, a museum in America, instead of just writing a new label for an object, they put the object, it was, I think it was a wasps' nest, they put it in the middle of the gallery, and they asked people to write on post it notes what they wanted to know about this object, and through that they identified that most people didn't know it was a wasps' nest. And the questions that people wanted to know answers to were not the ones that we would have assumed. And they used that to write their interpretation and it resulted in a label that was very, very different. They emphasised different things than they would have done if it had just been the curators communicating what they thought was most important. And that has always, I don't know, it's just a really powerful case study, to me that actually what people's assumptions on what they bring to an object is not always what those of us working behind the scenes think of. And what we're trying to communicate is not always what is most important to our visitors, even just on those basic levels of knowledge and understanding, being able to identify an object without reading the label. But also, I suppose it's really low cost and really easy. Anyone could do it, yes, it would take a bloody long time, if you did that for every single object in your gallery, you know, because you'd need it up for at least a month, you could probably only do one at a time. Okay, your labels'd never be done would they. But I don't know, I just think it's really powerful. And also, because I've always thought that as a curator, your role is to foster and create relationships between people and objects. And often when we write labels we do that in really one-sided way, because it's just us didactically talking to people and telling them what we think is most important, or worse for me, you know, leaving them a bunch of labels I didn't write and don't care about in the first place. [Laughs] But, and you know, for us, I think that we would say a lot of our interpretation comes in when we get to have those conversations with people, when we get to fill in the gaps that the labels can't do, because no label is going to do everything anyway. And we do try to really exploit mercilessly that level of knowledge that we have on offer, we actually have little things, that we have them for multiple reasons. But we have a little panel, a little thing that we put out. So mine will say B1 curator, well it says Dr. actually, but you know, and every one of us has one. And then the graduates have one that says graduate researcher, it does not say PhD student, because people will react differently when they class them as a student. And they also react to museum differently when they think, because people often come in and assume we're just staffed by students when I, before I had kids, and I looked old, I used to get a lot: "are you a student here?" "Do you just work here volunteering?" and that type of thing. And so we use that a lot to kind of both encourage people to take us seriously but also to engage with us and to trust us, right.

Sarah-Jane But that sounds like another change that you've made in response to audience feedback,

B1 It was more response to just annoyance. But yes, in response to the way that it was unconscious feedback, wasn't it, because it wasn't something that people were articulating actively to us. But we wanted to reshape the way that they engaged with us, and the way that we were able to engage with them. So we tried to do that with the thing on the front desk.

Sarah-Jane Was that something that the other people said to you, "aggh, this thing happened again!"

B1 No it was more me getting annoyed at being called a student. It was me, I got sick of it.

Sarah-Jane It feels like the leaky tugboat thing is definitely true here, that there are loads of things that you have done in response to what people are saying and partly that's because you are sitting there at the front desk and get to witness it.

B1 Yeah, and I actually, I know, this probably would sound weird to most curators, but I don't think I want to entirely come off the front desk, it is a massive tug on my time, especially now because you're constantly interrupting, you've got to engage with every single person whereas before you had to kind of do this balancing act between 'Do they really want to engage with me or not?' But now, of course, it's much harder to have these long standing conversations because someone can't very easily just walk back to me because they're going to bugger my one way system. I didn't just swear on here [laughs]. So, and I really feel that, and we can't talk to people on the way out anymore, because they go out through a different door. So sometimes they wave at me, but I can't really do much more than that. But then when you do get those conversations, so there's this guy that started coming in, he will come in for three hours, he stays for ages, he reads every single label, and I was like, 'who is he?' I still don't know, he came to ask me about an object. It's one that doesn't have a label, because I've never written a label for it, got a few of those too, they're on the guilt list. Many guilt lists. And I was chatting to him about it. And he, so he was asking me about the date, and I'd literally just updated the catalogue entry, so I told him and he's like, 'really? That seems very early to me.' And then we had a disagreement of interpretation because he said, 'Oh, well, it represents such and such.' And I said, 'oh, I'm not sure.' And I felt really bad about it. So I went away. And I looked up exactly the references that I had found it in, and I found he could get them online. I gave them to him. And then we talked more. And he said, 'Well, you know, we would both, we disagree on whether this is a specific story or not. But we would both agree this is narrative, right? And this is really early narrative.' And I was like 'yeah yeah, yeah, I just, I'm not sure you can be sure it's [specific object], I just don't understand that.' And actually it was really lovely and it only happened, partly because I felt guilty [laughs]. But you know, because I was able, I had the command of my catalogue and the resources to be able to look up information for him, that it was really clear, he would really appreciate and then I could chase him around the gallery and give it to him and talk to him more. Does that make sense? I get to build, I guess and partly it is a relationship relating to interpretation with my visitors in ways that I don't think everyone gets, you know?

Sarah-Jane Yeah, no, it's really special.

B1 Yeah. Some people call it that! [Laughs]

Sarah-Jane It's time consuming.

B1 Yeah. But it does pay off.

Sarah-Jane Yeah. Well, thank you so much for your time. And if it's alright, with you, I might have further questions. And if you don't want me coming back to you. Would it be possible for me to see your comments book at some time?

B1 Yeah, yeah, of course.

Sarah-Jane I would absolutely love

B1 Here's a couple of old ones. Oh no, these are blank ones. Oh, no, here's one.

Sarah-Jane Wow. Yeah. If I could come and have a little analysis of it!

B1 Oh there's one in Greek there. Look at that. [SJ: Wow.] Yeah, yeah, yeah, of course. And I've got old ones there. They're funny stories about visitor books. When I first started, I thought, where's the visitor book, where's the visitor book? And eventually, I established well, we didn't have a visitor book and I was like, but we did! Back when I was a PhD student, and I worked in the museum, we did. And it was this long running battle between my predecessor and our previous education person, she would put it out every day, he would hide it, she would put it out every day, he would hide because he didn't want it. And then when she left I found the visitor book. We did have a visitor book. When she left, he hid it, in a little storeroom behind my office. It's really hard to find good visitor books, as well, John Lewis, get them from John Lewis. It's really difficult to find ones with the right blocks in. So a visitor book was always really quite important to me. I don't know why. I fought really hard just to try and find one and then get a new one.

Sarah-Jane When you were a student, and you were there, did you look at the visitor's book?

B1 No, I don't remember. But the battle over the visitor book might have post-dated me sitting on the desk. I mean, I did. In those days, we were so much quieter because I used to work Saturdays. And there would only be three visitors on a Saturday in three hours, or sometimes none. The only person would be the person that came from the library to chat to me. We're very different museum these days. Saturday is now our busiest day, that's a massive change. It was a different world, back then, it was a different museum, it was a different space, it was a different feel. I mean, I'd like to think that's me, but you know [laughs].

Sarah-Jane Amazing, Thank you so much. That was really, really

B1 It is helpful? Is it actually useful?

Sarah-Jane Totally, totally, thank you very much. And I will be in touch. If not, then

B1 I just babbled at you

Sarah-Jane No, it's been good. Hope the reopening goes well.

B1 Ah, it'll be fine.

Sarah-Jane And I'll book a ticket and come along and not write in the visitor book.

B1 Well it's not there, so you can't. But you can do the visitor survey, the audience survey, we only get select bits of that information, don't we, so that's a bit, I feel quite detached from the audience survey. Yeah.

Sarah-Jane And now it's going through the ticketing system, at least that the response rate is quite high, isn't it?

B1 Yeah. Yeah, I think so. Yeah. Yeah. We just don't see it. I mean, I should log in more to the Audience Agency thing, then it just puts in things age groups and stuff. And that always feels a bit abstract.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, agreed. Right. Thank you so much. Have a good rest of day.

B1 You too. Thank you.

C1 (Curator) Interview Transcript

Sarah-Jane Thank you very much for agreeing to speak to me. This all feels very formal. And it's really hard because I have to speak to people that I already know. And then I have to pretend to be professional. And then I think "all of these people already know me." So...

C1 I won't mention your potato

Sarah-Jane They're used to me as well. So, just to reiterate, this has just been recorded for transcription, and you are free to withdraw at any point, if you would like to, you know, rage quit out of zoom. Could you tell me a little bit about your current role and what it involves please?

C1 Yup, so I am museum curator at the [museum name]. And curator is one of those opaque terms because it means different things to different people in different places. In my current context, it's a small museum. So I'm a bit of a jack of all trades. So I manage the museum team. So that means that I'm sort of at the top of that structure, doing strategic thinking, at the moment, that's largely around things like COVID recovery, and making sure we can get visitors back into the building in a safe and secure way. Right down to I answered an inquiry that somebody sent us in the mail this morning. So I do a little bit of everything. What I don't do as much as I perhaps would like to and have done in previous roles is kind of the hands-on curating, the physical rehousing of objects or labelling new things that come in, for instance. So, I just don't do quite as much of that stuff. But I do do exhibition development, thinking about the more strategic collections development, and yeah, sort of strategies rather than sitting and doing cataloguing myself, I might come up with a plan for how we focus our cataloguing activity.

Sarah-Jane Amazing. And you mentioned in that exhibitions, and can you tell me a little bit about exhibitions at the museum and what the displays are like and how exhibitions work?

C1 Yep, we've got our temporary exhibition space. And we vary what's in that space two to three times a year, depending on what kind of markers we have in the calendar to hit and capacity, as well. So the exhibition that's up at the moment that was put up this time last year, which has been seen by a grand total, it's something like 289 people, because of COVID, so that one's going to stay up for a little while longer. But then we've got a kind of pipeline of exhibitions that we know we want to honour. And generally, we try and do a mixture of things. So we try and make sure that we're doing some art exhibitions, we've got an art collection, and we also support artists in residence. We try and make sure some of them are more scientific and technological in content. And then we try and do some that are more sort of broadly historical. So we've got those kinds of collections, but we tend to think about them a bit differently today. So yeah, we're quite an interesting collection because we're constrained, but disciplinarily, that's not even really word, in terms of the disciplinary aspect, we do art, science, everything in between, which gives us a really broad scope. I think one outcome of our current closure period is that we've had a bit more time to just think about what we want. And I think in the future, we'll be less reactive and more strategic in what we put in exhibitions. So at the moment,

in fact, when I first arrived, the way it would work is I would sit in my office minding my own business, and someone would turn up my door and tell me, I want to do an exhibition on this and I'd go 'err'. And it seems that before my time, people would just kind of come in and drop that on the table, and the curator would go, "alright, let's have a look at the calendar, we'll fit it in." And I decided to move away from that. So I brought in a form because paperwork solves everything. But just to kind of formalise it. Yeah. And so we started having an annual meeting where we would look at everything that come in that year, and then we would make a selection out of that. But the bit that's missing is the bit where we 'go, hey, we've got really good stuff here already. Let's put that in the mix.' So I think this enforced break has helped us to be a bit more thoughtful about that. So I think we'll be doing that a bit more and responding to things like, you know, Black Lives Matter and decolonization these kind of issues are so prevalent in our discourse, but they haven't made it out into the museum yet, in a major way. I mean, they have a little bit. And then the other thing that we're thinking about is, our museum was refurbished a while ago, so starting to think about targeting refreshes around the museum space as well.

Sarah-Jane Excellent, thank you. And so that was that's interesting that you're thinking about kind of doing the refurbishment, so is that going to be light touch stuff? Do you think? Or more bigger? More bigger, good sentence.

C1 I think a lot of that depends on budget, actually, and staff capacity, because we're such a small team. And permanent displays just require more time and resource. The bits that we want to focus on. The [specific section] has always made me a little bit sad, maybe don't put that in your report. But the [specific section] is not up to date, it's 10 years out of date. And [subject] moves on quite quickly. So that area. And there's a politics bit near there as well, which is also a bit out of date. So those I think can be relatively light touch. I mean, there's a spectrum if we, if someone gave me 50,000 pounds to spend on refurbishing those areas, I could do it very easily. I don't know anyone who's going to do that. So I think it's going to have to pragmatically be light touch. And then the other area that we're hoping to refurb, linked with a research project we've got live at the moment, is our [specific section]. Which I wasn't part of the conversations at all when they installed it. And I get the sense that it was a real step change to [specific museum theme] in the way that they have been. It was a massive change from how it had been previously. In the light of today's decolonization type conversations and BLM and all of those things, it looks really out of touch. And I think that's just a cultural shift largely. And I think maybe the museum is a bit behind the curve, because it was already sort of travelling quite a long way to get to where it got to. But I really think we need to make... to break down some of the hierarchies that are in place. So for example, we've got a showcase about [specific theme]. At the top of the showcase, which could be read as the top of your interpretation hierarchy, there's a series of portraits of white males with their names and with a biography. So it's those kinds of things that I think we want to tackle because we're just out of date, really. So yeah, and again, I could spend 10s of 1000s pounds - probably won't be able to so... yeah, I think that one's a bit more of a, an intellectual update, whereas I think the science content is just, it's taking the same framework but updating individual pieces of content. I think the [general museum theme] is much more of a broad approach that we'd like to take.

Sarah-Jane But it's really exciting times, really kind of making a difference in that as well. Fantastic. So I've got a little bit about evaluation, I just want to preface this by saying this is not a judgement discussion at all. You know, I love evaluation, I work at a museum where we don't do very much evaluation. So I'm not here to pass judgement on what is happening. But just to kind of get a feel for what is or isn't happening. So absence of evidence is also important. But I just wondering what evaluation is carried out at the moment in your institution?

C1 Yeah. So I mean, at the kind of counting level, we do quite a lot of counting of people, we're quite good at numbers, which is sort of useful, I think, is probably about as much as you can say about that. We do post events, sort of very light touch surveys, which are, particularly for getting people to do them in person, which obviously hasn't happened for a while, but it's kind of tick boxes, "what did you actually attend? What did you like? What didn't you like? Thanks very much." So not terribly focused, but it gives people an opportunity to, to self-define if there's something that they, that particularly stood out for them. Again, sort of helpful. We, we obviously do the UCM exit surveys that you know about as well, from time to time. We have tried, and I think it's fair to say failed a couple of times, to do more focused pieces of work. So we have had a museum studies student from Leicester who, in the brief I put, because I don't know if you use the Leicester system, but you kind of send a brief and then students apply to that brief. And the brief I put out was that we'd like to carry out the exit surveys, as per the UCM, but add two or three questions that were specifically around, and this won't surprise you at all, visitor attitudes to climate and the environment, particularly in the context of [this] museum, but also more generally. And the reasons that failed are largely because it's a skilled activity. And the people that we were working with didn't yet have the required skill level. So there were some exit surveys carried out, but then the analysis that came from them was so superficial as to be not very helpful. But it's very hard to then take someone else's research and kind of understand what they've done. So I think what we'd like to do is try that again, at some point. I think climate and environmental stuff still is a focus for us, where we'd like to do some proper sort of baseline research. I'm not sure exit surveys are necessarily the best way either, but we've got, how many staff did I just tell you? Four, five at the moment? Yeah, there aren't many of us. So I think, you know, something, we keep saying we need to do better, and we haven't been able to and, you know, it's a resource thing. It's quite an easy thing to drop off when you've got limited resources. So, it has.

Sarah-Jane And then in the exhibitions, have you done anything in the either permanent or temporary exhibitions?

C1 Not a great deal, no. I'm trying to think if we've done anything properly meaningful since your hotspots work. So I think one thing we did evaluate quite thoroughly was, we did a co-curation project with some teenagers where they co-curated an exhibition. And we worked with them to evaluate before, during, and after the process. So it's not an evaluation of the exhibition so much as in evaluation of their activity. So we did that in a few different ways. I mean, some of it was kind of surveying, we did it in collaboration with the Widening Participation folks. So they had very long, slightly intense surveys that they wanted students to fill in. Throughout, we did sort of make a mind map, build on the mind map and photographed at the different stages, type activities. And we also wanted to measure

sort of professional skills. So each day, we got them to fill in post-it notes where they wrote down what skills they thought they'd learned that day, or that they used. And so we kind of over the course of the week we built at this board where they added post it notes each days, and we used a different colour each day so we could get a sense of how it was growing. So we've done that kind of activity as well, which has probably been more successful than our visitor evaluation, I think.

Sarah-Jane that's lovely. Do you have comments book or comments cards anywhere in the museum?

C1 We did. And then we removed it because it didn't achieve anything apart from gathering graffiti.

Sarah-Jane So was that something that was on display for other people to look at as well?

C1 Yeah, it was sort of by our reception desk. And you know, you'd have the slightly scrawled 'Hi!', picture of a willy, and then a few people saying, 'gosh, wasn't it very moving to see [specific museum display]?' or whatever. So yeah, it was a real mixture of things. But it just felt a little bit embarrassing sometimes to have it out on display when we weren't able to moderate it in any meaningful way. And did we want to moderate it? Because also, it was kind of going from there into our archives, so it was being kept as this representative sample of something. But yeah, also had pictures of willies in it.

Sarah-Jane Sounds very familiar.

C1 Yeah.

Sarah-Jane So how long did it did it last?

C1 In the end? It had been there before I arrived. It didn't last long after I arrived. I don't know.

Sarah-Jane Can I come and see it?

C1 Probably, once we reopen our archives. Although we'd have to redact it, because I think it asked for people's names and addresses. So, yeah, there's probably quite an involved job for our archivist to actually make it available.

Sarah-Jane I have a bit of a fascination around comments books.

C1 Yeah?

Sarah-Jane Because they're often used. And I don't know about you, but if I go into like a historic church, I'll often end up just looking at the comments books, because they're, they're interesting. And

C1 Do you fill it in yourself, then?

Sarah-Jane Yeah, usually?

C1 Okay

Sarah-Jane So you don't have anything like that anymore? No kind of general...

C1 What we do, so our front of house is, we have, had pre-COVID, had volunteers on the front desk on weekdays and they had a book where they could note down visitor comments which, I think we might have retired that as well on the basis that they were writing it down for us. But we needed a prompt to actually go and have a look at it and we often didn't, until it, like the moment had passed. So I think we changed that system. But no, not really.

Sarah-Jane No, that's fine. So, they wrote down stuff. And then did they ever say that there's something in there? Or was it just the supposition was that you would look at it.

C1 Occasionally, they would say there's something in there. And you know, in the nature of sort of volunteer comments, because it also be the occasional slightly bored volunteer who would just write a list of everything they thought was a bit rubbish about the museum. So it was quite a funny mixture of things in there. And the same things would come up over and over and over as well, which were often things we couldn't deal with. So yeah.

Sarah-Jane Yeah. So is it anyone's, is it part of anyone's job that evaluation is part of it? Or is it just something that is picked up by different people?

C1 I'm trying to remember now. Our collections' assistant might have a line in their role description. We definitely discussed putting it in there. But that would be a very much a kind of delivery level rather than a strategic thinking level. Strategic thinking-wise it would sit with me. But I don't think it's in my role description in any formal way.

Sarah-Jane No, that's fine. And then in...

C1 Actually our education folks, do it as standard as part of their, so like the kind of exit interviews, not exit interviews, exit surveys, after events, and counting the numbers that's all something that they do as part of their role. Again, I don't know if it's written in but because it's Arts Council funded, they sort of have to do it.

Sarah-Jane Thank you. Then thinking about any changes that you know that have been made in response to audience evaluation, and that can be from [this museum] or anywhere else that you've worked or been or seen any kind of changes, positive or negative, that have been an idea in response to audience feedback.

C1 Well, to talk about before I worked at [this museum], I used to work at [large London Museum] where they have a whole team of people, I mean what luxury, who are thinking about audiences and audience research was absolutely embedded in several of the projects I worked on. So you would do your formative evaluation and then particularly around things like digital displays, you would go through design

phases, P1, P2, P3, P standing for prototype, and at each prototype stage, it would be evaluated somehow. So P1 typically would be very concept-y, it might be like printouts on a bit of paper saying something like this, what do you think and that would get often tested with visitors in the museum. So, kind of tap on the shoulder a likely looking family or whatever your target audience is, and just say "can we show you something? What do you think?" And then that would feed back into the design process. And then P2 would be a much more finished version, but not quite all the edges knocked off. And again, we'd often do that with audience testing. And then P3 is much more, it's pretty much finished, we're doing the robustness testing, we're going to mash all the buttons and see if we can break it. So we often wouldn't have audiences at that point, because they couldn't really influence the outcome. And then after you've done all that, once you've got it installed, they would do their summative and see how everything works together or test particular questions. And then that would come out with the lessons learned document that would then feed into future design briefs. So yeah, I have worked somewhere where it was extremely integrated. And I kind of came to [this museum] going "Yeah, we should do... Oh, there's four of us." So, I mean, we've still tried to do a little bit particularly with our co-curation projects, part of the benefit of working with a co-curation group that you've identified as being co-curators who also represent your audience, is that it's, it's sort of an evaluation process at the same time, because if they get it, and they're designing it for themselves to some extent, then it is also... if they're representative of that audience, then you're kind of hitting that mark in that way. That's, I've said that in a very uncritical way, it's clearly more problematic than that. But, you know, it's part of the ambition is that you identify a target audience, and if you can do a co-production of some sort with them, then they're influencing, even if it's not a sort, strictly audience, evaluation-type process. In [this museum], though, what have we done? I mean, I, you know, things like Twilight, we often get a kind of "what was our feedback last year? Let's not do it like that again" type level of evaluation. So yeah, it does influence what we do. But yeah, but bit less integrated than in a place where you have a whole nice team of people.

Sarah-Jane Yeah. And how was that, was, like quite an intense process? Was it a useful process to go through?

C1 I think so. I mean, it's, it's always a process of negotiation, isn't it? Because it was, I'm trying to think what a good example is, maybe some of the stuff we did with teachers, we were trying to develop stuff for teachers. And so we got a focus group of teachers together, and said, "Okay, tell us what you want." And they come out with this amazing wish list of stuff. And then you'd give it to them, and you see what happened, and they didn't really use it. So then you do it the other way around, and you'd observe what teachers do, and you provide things that would help. And they make use of that. Great. Okay, so that works. And then you go to another group of teachers say, "Hey, we did this thing." And this is what they gave me: "Oh, yeah, that's nice. But what I really want is a pair of, like, you know, augmented reality goggles", and you're "Well, yeah, I mean, you say that..." So, you know, you have that sort of thing about who really holds the knowledge about an audience? Is it the audience themselves? Or is it the curators? Or is it your audience research specialists? Who are... Or in the case of a digital product, is it the digital designers? They all bring different sets of knowledge to that table, and there isn't a right answer, which is why we have to continuously evaluate because every time we try something

a bit different, and it's never perfect. So yeah, it's quite intense. I think the projects I worked on where it was most integrated, were big sort of flagship projects. And you know, there's a lot of pressure on so. Google Web Lab with Google. That was very, very, very digital. So there was a lot of technical testing, but quite a lot of audience testing too. [Named Gallery] was the [Large London Museum's] flagship project of its day. Had, I can't remember how many millions of pounds worth of budget there was, building work in there as well, but millions of pounds. We want to do it right.

Sarah-Jane Yeah. So yeah. Yeah. Amazing. And then, what would be useful for you to know about people that are visiting?

C1 Gosh, in what context?

Sarah-Jane Thinking about probably more about permanent displays? And what would you like to know about those people that are coming in to look at the museum?

C1 I think we have a pretty good sense of the people that are coming in. What I really want to know about is the people who are not coming in. We have quite a niche audience, well we sort of service two audiences particularly. One is quite a niche audience who knows a little bit about [the theme of the museum] already and is already bought into and invested in that. The other audience is families who are looking for a fun day out, and maybe there's a third that's a bit smaller, which is a kind of museum-bagging audience who happens to be on a long weekend at Cambridge and trying to tick off as many cultural highlights as they can, who, then perhaps it almost doesn't really matter, as long as they have a nice experience, I don't know that they're that bothered what it is really. So those, those are the two: the kind of niche audience and the family audience, I think, I think we have a reasonably good sense of what their expectations are, and how we do or don't manage to meet those needs. So I think it's more the subject specific stuff, I'd really like to know how our visitors think about environmental change, I'd really like to know, particularly in the light of some of the kind of social politics of the moment, how people think about other people. And sort of on my long term wishlist is a [project of specific relevance to the museum's collection] Is there even an awareness among our typical audiences that that's a bit of a strange thing to do, and not a particularly respectful thing to do. I think it's more those kind of subject specific things that I'm interested in, rather than demographic information per se, which tends to be what we collect. It's useful, it definitely helps with that audience segmentation job. But it doesn't... knowing that 30 year olds are or aren't coming doesn't help me decide how to redisplay [the collection], particularly.

Sarah-Jane And you said, you sort of know what the expectations of those visitors that are coming? And is that, has that been through the UCM surveys, or is that through other means?

C1 A bit of both of those. I think also because we're a small team, all of us end up sat on the front desk quite often. And so even if it's not a formal evaluation process, you're watching visitors and how they interact in the space and hearing what questions they ask each other and you. So I think it's more kind of at the coalface. I

feel like I have a good sense of our visitors, but not necessarily in a way that I could write down in any formal way.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, I think that sitting on the front desk thing makes a big difference, doesn't it? It's informal observation of what is happening, it's always interesting.

C1 Yeah. We did a really interesting thing, when I worked at the [Large London Museum], where the audience research team would recruit a bunch of families, and then you would just follow them around, they would be given, you know, an envelope with I don't know, 10, 11, or 30 pounds or whatever, so that they could spend during their visit if they wanted to. And you had to be part of the visit, and not really say anything. And if they couldn't find the loo, you just kind of went, "Oh, you can't find the loo!" And just watching how they navigated or failed to navigate the space and how long they spent with your exhibits. And it was so valuable. But yeah, I guess I get that in a kind of microcosm, because I can see the back of the museum here, from sitting at the front. So you can get a good idea of how long people are spending and if they're missing bits.

Sarah-Jane And so those, kind of general visitors that are coming in, I think we've sort of touched on it. Do you... Is there any... do you encourage them to leave feedback anywhere? Are you kind of asking for reviews or asking for them to comment in the museum? Or not?

C1 No, we're not. Occasionally we'll do a follow up after an online thing. And occasionally, we'll have comment cards, but no, not... not Other than that, really.

Sarah-Jane And so you talked a bit about the... I feel like we've covered a lot of this... the the, you spoke about evaluation at the [Large London Museum] and how that fitted into the exhibition process, but not so much at the [museum you are at now]. Would that be true to say, that in the exhibition process, other than that sort of informal stuff with those co-curation...?

C1 Yeah, I think so. I suppose we in a way, we replace that thing at the [Large London Museum] where you hang out in a side room and invite people in with our tea breaks, because we'll, you know, do a little mock-up of a label and we'll take you up to tea and coffee, which is quite nice informal space and just ask people what they think. But that is very clearly a particular audience whose feedback we're getting. And there are two reasons for doing it. One of them is because it helps people say "well, I can't read that it's too small." And the other is that it for our internal comms and politics, it makes them feel engaged and involved. So yeah, I think that's a different thing. But it does, it does influence what we do. We have changed our decisions based on that or sometimes we've gone up with two or three things, and you know which of these do you think works? But yeah, that's not quite audience-based evaluation.

Sarah-Jane Well, it's an audience, isn't it?

C1 Yeah, it is. But I'm not sure it's necessarily the audience... I'm trying to think if we've ever identified that group of people, group of people as our target audience for anything, and yet, they're the ones that we're testing things with. So yeah, I guess

also, like our education and outreach team do spend a bit of time pretending to be 8 year olds. So you know, "you're good at this, put yourselves in the shoes of a teenager. What do you think?" That's clearly flawed as well. But you know, some people are just better than others about getting particular audiences.

Sarah-Jane And then finally, just any examples that you have seen, and they don't have to be museum examples, but any evaluation techniques that you've thought, "Ah, that was really interesting", or "why on earth did they bother to do that?"

C1 Well, I think we've all done terrible surveys from time to time. I've probably written a fair few. I think some of the more kind of storyboard-y type activities, I'm trying to think where I've done it, but I've definitely, so like I was a facilitated discussion for a research project the other day, and they've made this sandpit thing: you've probably been involved in them. And it's sort of horrific, particularly when your colleagues are all academics who are picking apart the concept. But on the other hand, I can see where they're going with it, and I think giving people a prop to discuss around can be quite useful. But yeah, I've definitely seen it done well, I'm just trying to think where I've seen it done well. But I think essentially, evaluating people when they don't really know that's what you're doing often results in more relaxed and more honest feedback. So yeah, my group of academic colleagues may have been pulling apart the implications of this particular sandpit, but in the process, they were sharing quite a lot of information about what they thought the project should be. So yeah, yeah. But then as an evaluator, I don't know. It can be quite hard to disentangle multiple strands there, so yeah.

Sarah-Jane Marvellous. Is there is an ambition to, to kind of, do you think that you've got it about right at the moment, the level of what you want? Or are you thinking are there are gaps that we need to fill?

C1 There are gaps that we'd like to fill, which are the particular ones I've talked about. I mean, I'd really like to see a bit more cross-UCM evaluation, that a bit goes beyond the demography stuff. And it's more subject specific. I mean, we've got this big legacies and enslavement programme running at the moment, I think we've got a good sense of what our academic colleagues want. At the other end of the spectrum, there's a lot of angst about it in the more right-wing areas of the press, where do our visitors fit in that? And don't we need to know the answer to that before we embark on major projects? I mean, there's the expense If nothing else, you don't want to be throwing money away. But yeah, who are we doing it for? And have we really got a good sense of how challenged they want to be and what their basic level of knowledge is. I went to, is it called the Black History Museum, the Smithsonian Museum anyway, the Museum of the African American, I think it's called. And I was quite struck by my own lack of knowledge about some of the basic history of transatlantic slavery. And, you know, do we need to be providing that as well to our audiences in order for them to engage with some of these more complex issues? Can we even get into the more complex issues? So I think that's a cross-UCM project that's live at the moment. And I would really like to see some solid audience research around that. And I think the other thing that I would really like to see, maybe it's coming from a [Large London Museum] background, but a bit more interdisciplinary audience research. I've been involved in quite a lot of science engagement audience research, would have once upon a time be in science literacy,

but isn't anymore, thankfully. How does that map on to more humanities-type collections? Yeah, I don't know quite what I'm getting at there. But I think we're a little bit siloed in our disciplines sometimes.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, and particularly for your collection, which sort of has things in common with so many other places. Thank you very much. Indeed. That's all of my questions, unless you've got anything else that you wanted to add.

C1 Don't think so; I feel like I've monologue quite a lot at you

Sarah-Jane No, thanks it was amazing. Thank you so much.

[Four minutes of discussion about doctoral programmes]

C1 I had a sort of light bulb that I wish hadn't gone off the other day when I say, Oh, so when we do audience research, should we be getting ethics approval from our department? Because I've never done that? Oh!

Sarah-Jane it's a really good question. Because most of what we do, we don't have; I've never been asked for ethics clearance for anything that I do in the museum. But now, I think so there's a few things that I'm doing on my UCM hours where I have to get ethics approval. One of them went through really quickly and the other one I submitted in January and I'm still waiting for ethics approval on so I harass every now and then, but I was like I just need to... it's more interviews and I just need to get on and do it. But I can't until they say yes. So I don't know whether things will change.

C1 Yeah, no, we had a postdoc who was like "I'd love to come and sit in on your decolonization meetings, be an observer. It's a bit like an ethnography. And then I'd like to publish something." And we just got into this like massive tangle of "Oh, but you're a postdoc here. And that's not your project" and also, who and what their students are. Yep. So yeah, I just have never thought about it before. But I've asked this. There's all sorts of ethics things and maybe I should have one.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, I don't know. And it's different when you're a student. So I have to do so much more ethics clearance for stuff that I do for Hertfordshire than I've ever done for my actual job. But I think there's a problem here, isn't there?

C1 Yeah. It's a bit weird.

Sarah-Jane Amazing. Well, I don't want to take up any more of your afternoon that I need to have a lovely week off next week. And thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it.

C1 You're welcome. Take care. Bye.

D1 (Director) Interview Transcript

Sarah-Jane Yes, it's all very formal. Thank you very much for having a chat with me D1 and I wondered if you could start by telling me a bit about your current role and what it involves.

D1 So I am the director of the [museum], which, well involves a lot of things, as it does a museum of this size. So it's around strategic leadership [specific museum hierarchy]. So my job is to run the museum, not anything else. So that's what I do. And that's involves managing staff, setting strategy, managing resources, and also then our interaction with our host department and the outside world.

Sarah-Jane So not very much, then really it sounds.

D1 Finished it by about Tuesday afternoon.

Sarah-Jane And well, thank you for meeting me after your working week!

D1 That's alright!

Sarah-Jane And I was wondering about how evaluation is currently carried out, that can be either event evaluation or museum and exhibits. And by the way, this is completely non-judgmental. I'm not here to say how awful it is because, you know, in my own museum, we don't necessarily do masses. It's not a judgmental thing. It's just a snapshot of where you're at.

D1 So we think, well, it's interesting, because obviously, we haven't done anything for a year, or much really so in that sort of context, but also, I suppose there's a bigger picture is that what I have tried to do with the new strategic approach to what the museum does is encourage us all to be more reflective and evidence-based. And to ask that question: how do we know? And what's the impact and things. So that's, I suppose the context is that I am trying to encourage and I think my staff do know the value of evaluation. But I suppose I'm trying to place it at the heart of what we do, and how we measure our own success. And, for example, and again, this is whether it's counts specifically as visitor evaluation, but, for example, we had, for the first time, we had a, what we call a wash-up meeting after one of the exhibitions, to reflect on it and wrote a document that was a bit of a warts and all what worked, what didn't. And I think that that seems to be quite well received, but there wasn't much visitor evaluation in that, to be honest, I wish there had been, but that would be the place to sort of say, "Well, this is what our visitors know", this might be our visitor numbers, qualitative, quantitative review, how did that exhibition work for the public? But also, how did it work for us? And how did it work for the researchers that were the co-curators of it? So that sort of culture, I'm trying to ease that in. I think in terms of evaluation, I think the evaluation reports that you've done in the past, I think have been really, really useful, really key pieces of strategic evidence. And I've referred back to them several times when we were looking at the strategic plan, because they provide... it's not really a snapshot, but they provide that, they're robust pieces of work, that give us a clear, that help us step beyond the anecdotal and the rather sort of, you know, the sort of half-baked evaluation, that sometimes happens for practical and reasonable reasons, you think, "oh, okay, we asked people what they thought,

we forgot to remind them they could say they don't like it as well as they as 'what did you like about it?'" So I think what that isn't really at the moment, is there isn't a systematic approach to evaluation, but I think what I'm trying to do is just sort of encourage people to be thinking about that self-reflective and reflective practice of which qualitative quantitative evaluation, I think is key.

Sarah-Jane And so when you've done qualitative or quantitative in the past, is there anything that you have done, I mean is it kind of comments books, is it visitor cards? Is it any particular way?

D1 In the [museum] there are comments cards, they're nice little designed comments cards with a nice little bubble on them. You may have seen them, but I think it says on them, haven't got any here, 'what did you like about your visit today?' It is a prompt: 'What do you like about it? Any suggestions?' So leaving open either way, and they are left out and people write on them. And they can also put, I think they join a mailing list or they sometimes put an email... And then boxes to put in them. I don't think we make the most of them. I think, I think one of our front of house staff, she types them all into a spreadsheet, and [another staff member] looks at them. I don't think we look at them systematically. I don't think we actively or systematically use them. But I do know that, say that one of the things that that [visitor services staff member] uses, if they have a member of the public who's got quite a complicated and long, complaint stroke comment, it's like 'put it on one of them, please'. Which is a useful thing, sometimes if you've got a queue of people in the shop, you can't... But whether it really addresses that, I don't know. So we do get some good and useful feedback. And some nice, often, there's just little pictures of [the collection]. But it's quite unstructured and untargeted and unfocused, it feels to me.

Sarah-Jane And so they're not supervised at all, at any point in that process? Or is there someone that gives them out? Or is the box by a person?

D1 Not really, see, I there are locations in the gallery, and I don't know where they are now, because of course, I think we've taken a load of stuff off display anyway. So they are probably not any at the moment. I know that there were several locations around the gallery where they were, and there was some in the shop. And I think we haven't really thought; they're not very prominent. And you know how the layout in our museum is, going into shop is an active choice and an intimidating choice for some people. And you know, you can come in and you can come in this nice enclosed Coronavirus space now, you get added risk as well. And so you might see them on the counter. But again, you know, you've got to sort of write on the counter under the view of the shop person, there's not necessarily, you've got to be quite confident to take them off and write on them privately if you wanted to write something complainy or anonymous, which I suppose is sort of helpful for avoiding, for reducing the number of swear words that the foreign language students write on them. But it's not really, we can't pretend that it's giving us a proper snapshot of what people think.

Sarah-Jane As I said, no judgement. And then so they get typed, are they all typed up? Or are they edited at that point?

D1 I think they are all typed up. And I could look that up. Actually, I'm fairly sure they all are. I don't know if it's just a scribble or a picture I don't know what [name of visitor services staff member] does. I think they are logged, actually for the numbers of them. And I can have a quick look later if that's helpful. I'm sorry, I should have done that before, it's being the luxury of being in my my office, so I can actually get onto the server without having to wrestle with a VPN.

Sarah-Jane Oh, yes, of course. I forgotten that delight, of not having to VPN in all the time. I think D2 has sent me a spreadsheet of some cards.

D1 Okay, that's the one. Yeah.

Sarah-Jane So I guess it must have been those. Yeah. And then is that just sort of filed somewhere on a server? Is that in a drawer?

D1 I feel a bit mean, because I don't know exactly. I mean, sometimes, D2 will come and say to me, we had a really nice comment, or you ought to respond to this.

Sarah-Jane Yeah.

D1 So if there's something that she feels that either, that either needs a response that she doesn't feel able to, or it's more appropriate, or genuinely, there's something really nice. She's very good at picking it out and saying, look at this, isn't this nice? And that's why I'm looking round here, because sometimes I do have a few lying around. I can't see any at the moment.

Sarah-Jane So yeah, that's great.

D1 You know just as a sort of morale boosting sort of thing to remind you when there's some shitstorm going on. One person was happy.

Sarah-Jane Anecdota, that's what we want.

D1 Anecdota [Laughs]. Yes exactly.

Sarah-Jane And so you will respond to those that need a response, are those mostly the negative ones that you feel the need to respond to?

D1 Yeah, I mean, I have to say it's usual... I think D2 must reply to any negative ones, because I can't remember replying to any negative ones. Recently. Well, there haven't been many, of course. But yes, I mean, if there was one, absolutely. If it's a straightforward one, D2 would do it, unless she felt it needed a directorial name on it. We would do that. Yeah, absolutely. So it is a, I suppose, is it a sort of safety net? You know, if you have somebody who clearly is really pissed off, you have a way of capturing that really pissed off-ness.

Sarah-Jane Yeah. Yeah. And, and so kind of any other sort of evaluation things that you've used in the galleries at any point?

D1 So obviously the UCM stuff was very useful for us, the UCM visitor, what do we call it? I can't remember.

Sarah-Jane I know what you mean. But yes, I... Yes. Yes. The ipads; the Audience Agency

D1 Yes. So obviously, it was qualitative, quantitative stuff, you know, for me, the narratives were really, really helpful. Reading what people said. So that was really useful. I know, it's quite hard. And it's quite stressy for the staff and blah, blah. But it involves quite a lot of input to get that information out to people. I've done it as you know, I'm sure you have and stuff. So that was useful, I think, but in a broad sense about getting, gauging visitor sentiment, for exhibitions and stuff. I mean, we don't have big, huge exhibitions, our exhibitions are quite small and modest. We don't have a plan for even evaluating them really. And I think we probably should, even if it's something quite basic, like comments, I am quite keen to experiment with things in that sort of setting something like a post-it board or comments board or something. Because I think that's quite an easy way to focus. You know, what did you, and to give the researchers some feedback too.

Sarah-Jane Yeah

D1 You've got an exhibition, which really is only... I can reach all of it. But so you don't want to take the evaluation away from that spot. But if you had something where people could put a little response

Sarah-Jane Yeah

D1 You know, and I, so I'm quite interested in that sort of thing, really.

Sarah-Jane And so would you be thinking about that for the sort of researcher-led, non-permanent display bit?

D1 Yeah, I think so. Because I think it would be useful to them, it'd be useful for us in terms of both process and in terms and also the research outputs.

Sarah-Jane Yeah.

D1 Recognising that you're not going to get loads and loads of feedback. But still, it's nice to and I think nice to give people the option.

Sarah-Jane Yeah.

D1 To sort of engage.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, definitely. And so when you said that you were trying to place evaluation and that data bit at the heart of what you do is, you're looking ahead, ideally?

D1 Yeah. And so that would be another thing so that when we plan the next exhibition, we can understand A) what people might have thought about it from a

whole different set of sources. But also, how might we also then continue that? I mean, that, the [specific museum display] one was one in which [named staff member] and [named staff member], who was the project assistant, did some, and I don't know if he talked to you about that, some pre-project evaluation, they did some testbed. Yeah, no, it's really, really nice stuff. It was really, really challenging. Because the researcher, I mean, you know, because [named staff member] really stuck with it very carefully, quietly, the researcher really didn't want to know what people wanted to think, what they thought. So [named staff members] basically went out in the gallery with a sort of early prototype of an interactive, which essentially it was [an interactive based on museum's themes], and they went and talked to visitors and found out what words they knew and what things they were interested in. And I think the researchers found it really, really challenging, because, of course, it wasn't what they were expecting. The members of the public didn't really want to know about [some of the subject specialist knowledge]. They wanted to know, the human stories, which made a big difference, and that input, that really helped us with the imagery and, they wanted to know human stories, they wanted really quite basic things like is it [simple subject specific question]? And you and I know those things are really helpful. It's good to remind researchers that not everybody sort of grows up knowing about [in depth subject specific knowledge].

Sarah-Jane Yes, yes. And so did they take that on board? Did they change things in response?

D1 They did, they did, but it was hard. And I think, you know, [named staff member] is quite philosophical about it. I think it was quite, it was hard. And it delayed things a lot. And I think there was quite a lot of resistance and a bit that's partly I think, it was a big project team, it was a big research team working on it. And I think [named staff member] and [the project assistant] were quite isolated little voices in that. They're like, why are we doing this? Why don't they want to know what the public think? We think we should be putting in this. So again, that's part of that trying to just shift the culture and I'd hope that if we did it again it might be a bit easier.

Sarah-Jane And so would most of your exhibitions be alongside researchers? Is that how it works?

D1 We haven't got a lot of exhibition space to be honest.

Sarah-Jane Yeah.

D1 So I think, post COVID [named staff member] and I have been thinking about that, about what we do and what resources we've got available, because it costs quite a lot of money. And that's been found from research grants. But it's also quite hard to plan. If you say, 'well, we're going to have one a year'. But they depend on people getting research grants, I mean, that doesn't necessarily work, right? So sorry, because this isn't necessarily where you're going. But I'm not sure what the best way, whether we actually need a much lighter touch approach to researcher exhibitions, something that we can turn around in six weeks? And say, 'right, we'll have this up, we'll have it up for three months.' And then it's something much quicker and lighter touch.

Sarah-Jane And is the impetus coming from the researchers or from the museum team or public or all of them?

D1 The impetus, what to do exhibitions or to make them different?

Sarah-Jane Yeah.

D1 There's quite a lot of impetus coming from researchers, but most of them haven't really got a really good understanding of what's involved, what the budget is, how much work it is, that they might have to listen to the visitors. And some are very supportive of that, some not so and I think, again, it's sort of actually in a way, that's quite a lot, a slog for [named staff member]. And I just think, oh, if we could do something a bit lighter touch. I mean, he's doing some really nice work around some templates, so that we can say to researchers, okay, so if you've got this much budget, and this much time, you could do X, Y, Z, if you've got some extra money, you can get a big interactive, and you could get a bit of video. And so a bit of a shopping list.

Sarah-Jane Yeah.

D1 But I just wonder if we need just a slightly lighter touch thing that these big, clunky, expensive exhibitions are not the way to promote research that well, that if we could get a model down where you could do an exhibition for a few 100 quid actually, a few 100 quid, and I don't know, three weeks of [named staff member's] time spread over six weeks or something.

Sarah-Jane And so then on the permanent displays, permanent obviously, in inverted commas there. So the non-changing displays or not changing as frequently displays, that would just be incorporated into the general museum evaluation. Is that correct?

D1 Yes, I mean, it's an interesting thing, because you know our displays, they don't really have any interpretation. And so it's sort of, in some ways, it's like, what is there to evaluate? But obviously, there's everything's to evaluate. So, yeah, I don't really know what the answer to that is.

Sarah-Jane No, that's fine

D1 Yeah. There isn't a specific evaluation programme for them, asking people to tell us about why 400 small [objects] in a case works for them or not, without a label works for them or not. I do miss the small [objects] in a case mind, as I've just said that, I thought, ooh, I'd like to go down and have a look at them.

Sarah-Jane So you gave a really good example about changes that have been made in response to audience evaluation with that display. Do you have any other examples of things that you've tweaked or changed? It can be minor or entire displays.

D1 Oh, no. Well, so the other thing is that when we were nominated for family friendly museum, it was, again, that was a big impetus to do a bit more stuff. And

[named staff member] worked on a project, that he wanted to do but it's some little drop-in bits of family interpretation, I don't know if you've seen them, but they're just little, little panels with maybe three sentences on them and a bit of a cartoon.

Sarah-Jane Oh, nice.

D1 So that when you've got a case full of [objects], but no label, there's something that says, you know, this is a [Object type] from wherever. And he did half a dozen of those, as part of our family friendly thing. And we didn't do a formal evaluation, but we did talk to people about them. And we did, sort of informally, ask people in the gallery, visitors in the gallery and got really good feedback. And so he's done some more on the back of that. I think [named staff member] is very good at, he keeps his office door open, and he just talks to people, they come and chat to him. And he's sort of he's got, he just, generally the project just sort of evolved through him talking to people.

Sarah-Jane That's lovely. Yeah.

D1 Oh, yeah. I mean, really, it's really really is.

Sarah-Jane Yeah. And then you said he did some evaluation around that with them up, so then you've got more, is that right?

D1 Yeah, yeah, exactly. I don't think it was a formal evaluation. But I know that he was talking to people. And I know I talked to people about what they thought of them. And when people made comments about them, we thought, 'Oh, yeah! Okay!' We shared them with each other. And yes, what it meant is that he did some more. On the basic level, it's like, oh, yeah, these are popular: let's make more! Yeah. I don't think it perhaps shifted for, how he does them and stuff, I'm not sure.

Sarah-Jane Yeah. Feels like I might have to have a chat with [named staff member], if that's okay?

D1 Yeah, yeah. Yeah. He's a bit under pressure at the moment, but I think it'd be good.

Sarah-Jane It doesn't have to be right now. Further down the line, you know, once we're all reopen, and the pressures off then.

D1 Yeah, but it would be good, because I think I think [named staff member] has got, is really keen to be evaluating more, and to sort of build that in. And I think, in a way, talking to you will help him to, perhaps, think about how we can do that.

Sarah-Jane And do a bit of experimentation together? And what would be useful for you to know about or from the people that are coming into the museum?

D1 Okay, so I think this is, in some ways, I sort of know what they think about this place. You know, I mean, but I need them to tell me that. I know that there is very little interpretation, it's really quite difficult to find information out if you're bringing a child who loves [museum theme] in, it's hard to find what, I know that. But in a way,

evaluation can tell us that, in their own words, to reinforce that. So that's what I would like. I'd like to understand if the words that we are putting into the gallery are working, both how we communicate things, but also what we're communicating, because obviously we're talking about you know, stuff around diversifying the museum voice we'd like to do, [named staff member] is working on putting a label in about one of our LGBTQ stories, and goes effectively into the permanent exhibition, because that's how we are, we're just make it and stuff it in, there you go. And I'd like to sort of get a feeling for how, how people respond to these sort of insertions.

Sarah-Jane Yeah.

D1 Interventions or whatever. Because I also think we could keep going putting lots and lots in which are good, but there comes a point where we have to be a bit more organized, strategic about it, or we just become like an exhibition of post-it notes, almost.

Sarah-Jane Yeah. Yeah. Yes, that is something that we're also working around with the various QR-code driven labels.

D1 Yeah, exactly. That's all sort of part of this. And it's good. I want to, I really want to see those different things in there. And they're all good models. And you think, Oh, yeah, so we could see how that worked: we could do six more like that! And then all of a sudden, the museum is thick with really unstrategic...

Sarah-Jane Yes, yes.

D1 things, which I mean, it's good if you've been a regular visitor for years, and you've stuck it out, despite the fact there's no labels and you come in, and then suddenly, there's like two sentences that you understand, I mean, that's brilliant. But if you're, well, hopefully, but if you're coming expecting something more comprehensible and all you get is a sort of random selection of labels I d..., yeah, no.

Sarah-Jane So you want to know what they think about, in their own words, and whether the words are working and some of these diverse labelling things? Is there anything else that you think it would be useful to know about them or what they think about you?

D1 So one of the things I'm really interested in is relevance. That's in our strategic plan, it's about are the things that we're telling people, are they relevant? You know, are they things that they care about? And I suppose I'm really conscious of not just wanting to talk to [museum theme] enthusiasts. I'm interested in talking to people who don't think they're interested in [the museum theme]. So if there's stories that we can tell, and those might be stories about history, or they might be stories about climate change, or they might be stor..., or you know, anything, but it's about catching people out because "ha ha! You thought you didn't like [museum objects], but haha! They're really relevant to your life." [Laughs]

Sarah-Jane I love it! I love it! That's what you want those "nobody expects the [museum theme] inquisition" memes.

D1 Exactly. I think this partly might be how I characterise it, bored mother bringing [museum theme] obsessed small child, you see.

Sarah-Jane Yeah.

D1 Like, 'oh, yes, I'll take you to the [museum theme] museum'. And what I really want is that, and I suppose mother just because I, you know, a parent, what I want is for that mother to come in and say, 'actually, this is really interesting'. You know, 'I'm really interested in...' I don't know, 'carbon footprint', or 'I'm really interested in history', or 'I'm really interested in design', I don't know. And sort of, and they see something for them. How can you find out what those, you know, I can speculate on what's relevant. But how do I find out what is relevant?

Sarah-Jane Yeah.

D1 And of course, everybody's different. But it's just I think I'd like to explore that. To get people.

Sarah-Jane And so when you were talking about [named staff member] and the process that he went through, is that a formalised thing? Do you think 'oh yes, we'll do some formative, we'll do some summative'? Or does it depend on the project?

D1 Well, so that that was the first time they'd done that. And so that was the first exhibition that had happened in my watch, if you like. And so I think, hopefully, [named staff member] felt it, that he felt a bit empowered to do that. I think because I think previously, the director was "evaluation?! pff!" you know "testbeds? Pre-? Urgh". So that was the first time it had happened. And, of course, it's a shame now that we've now had a big gap and we can't follow it up with the next one. But I also, as I say, I think it's been a real time for reflection, I don't think we'll be spending big amounts of money on things anymore. I think we're better working in a different way. So I suspect, you know, is there a model where we could have some quite light touch pre-project evaluation, testbed a bit, put something in, and that be sort of quite free, it's quite low key. And so I suppose it's a more experimental approach. Do we feel confident to do that? And can we, do we feel confident about communicating to our research peers, that this is how we do things, that you're not going to get the [Large London Museum] permanent displays recreated in honour of your research. Because your research grant is not enough money more than anything else.

Sarah-Jane Yeah. Yes, always. And so would it mostly be part of [named staff member's] role to do the evaluation either formative or summative?

D1 I think it probably would. Yes, I think he would. Yeah. I suppose I'm also thinking what we haven't talked, yes in terms of exhibitions. Yeah, I think it probably would be. But I suppose what I'm, what's wearing in my mind is actually, is that something that front of house should be doing or getting involved in? So I'm just sort of putting that into my mind.

Sarah-Jane Yeah. And is there any relationship between those visitor card comments and the [named staff member] role? Is that something that's sort of separated out?

D1 Again, I don't think it gets separated. I think those those cards are traditionally fairly amorphously sort of general comments, nobody's specifically saying 'what did you think about that red and yellow interactive over there?' And I suppose we haven't got any there but if we put some next to it, we might get feedback on it, but we haven't been that targeted. Which is unfortunate, because that's why I'm sort of thinking a post-it wall or something would be a great way just to say, 'what did you think about the exhibition?'

Sarah-Jane So that would be looking forward, that would be, this sort of more reflective space somewhere? And so you said post-its, and I can't remember what the other one you said was?

D1 I don't know. Was it a whiteboard or something like that?

Sarah-Jane Yeah, I think so. And so would you be looking for specific information or just another general?

D1 I suppose, I don't know. And I, you know, [named staff member] might just cringe when I said this, I don't know. I think it's about it's asking a couple of, when those, I think those things work better, certainly, one's I've seen when you've got a question or two to respond to, you know, and it might be 'Tell us about your experience of this'. But you know, obviously an example 'Tell us about your experience of [specific museum theme]', that's not really going to, but it could be 'Tell us about your experience of [relatable museum theme]' which are part of that, you know, if they're using [relatable museum theme] data. So it could be about 'what's your response to it?' But also, it could be, I suppose what you liked, but I don't know that that's, does that ever get us anywhere? Does it just make us feel good?

Sarah-Jane Or not? As the case may be?

D1 Yes or not: 'I didn't like any of it.' Or, you know, 'it was all shit'. Yeah, I don't know. I think it's better having a question that responds that, perhaps might be putting the science in its social cultural context, which is exactly what relevance is.

Sarah-Jane So is that, [spoke over D1] sorry.

D1 Yeah, I suppose I'm now trying to translate that into the previous exhibition was these [specific museum objects], these sort of slightly mysterious [objects]. And I'm trying to think, 'Oh, my God, if we tried to do some sort of light touch evaluation, around relevance, for that, what on earth, you know, how are these weird, obscure [objects] relevant to your life?' But of course, they do tell a story. But yeah, mmm, so I think my system might be slightly flawed.

Sarah-Jane No, not at all. It's, it's useful to think about these things, isn't it?

D1 But, actually, is there something about when you're planning an exhibition, you plan in your evaluation and you say, what's the question that we want to be able to ask people at the end? And we, so not only can we create the evaluation thing, but also you're thinking, okay, what's the function of this exhibition? Is it to make people

think about [this specific museum theme]? Or is it about, this [objects in the] exhibition, is it about thinking about what it's like doing fieldwork in a remote part of [the world], where you can't collect [objects], you just have to scan them? You know, is it something about that? Which was also another focus, so I suppose, thinking about those questions, what might be those questions, those hypothetical questions could be a good way of sort of focusing in on what an exhibition does. You know 'what does [named collector] mean to you?' [Chuckles]

Sarah-Jane You don't want me to answer that now, do you?

D1 No. I do actually. No, no, no, no; on a post it please.

Sarah-Jane Is that something that you've seen done well somewhere else?

D1 I've seen it done well, I've seen it done badly, I'm sure you have too, yes. I'm trying to think of good examples. I think I've seen a good one at Wellcome. Good few years ago, actually, I think probably, that was maybe at least 15, 10, 15 years ago. When they first did that health, you know, as you go, there's a thing about health isn't there, with some artists' interventions, and I remember spending a long time reading a wall there, that people had written all sorts of things. And people have written responses to others' post-it notes and stuff. And I think it was maybe just some broad questions about 'what does health mean to you?' or something like that. But then it had also been, it was a whole wall, it had been seeded with some printouts of news items as well. So people were..., there was one, I seem to remember, there was one about yoga that people were ranting on about, and it's just like, oh, okay, so somebody just put in some slightly sort of controversial, interesting stimuli, but people were saying interesting things, because the exhibition had been interesting, it had thrown up some interesting things. Everybody's got a thought on health. And there's some stuff about, so and so died of, my great aunt died of this blahdy blah. And there's some quite difficult stuff, but there's also some: 'I've been trying to get fit, lose weight for years' or something. Anyhow, so that stayed with me. And there's another one from a long time ago, maybe they have more of an impact, because they were the first ones I'd seen, but there was an exhibition at the women's library, when it was still in wherever it was. And I'm trying to think, and that would have been before [their child] was born, so it's probably 20 years ago. And it was an exhibition, including a load of handbags, including Margaret Thatcher's handbag, I think. I can't remember much more about it. But again, they were asking people about their thoughts about handbags. And women of course, about our handbags, and there's just lots of really lovely stuff and a bit of confessional stuff and you know, it's a joy to read as well as to contribute to.

Sarah-Jane And did you write anything on either of those?

D1 I think I did, I think, I'm not sure if it's the handbag one, I did contribute to the women's library one. I can't remember what I wrote.

Sarah-Jane Yeah.

D1 You sort of want to be part of these things.

Sarah-Jane Yeah.

D1 And I think that I'd like to get to that stage where we can be stimulating thinking in that way.

Sarah-Jane Nice. That's great. There's a couple of really good examples that have clearly, well, stayed with you for a long time, then.

D1 Well, isn't it funny, because I'm sure I've seen loads since but those are the ones that when you asked me they were immediately the ones, I can picture them both.

Sarah-Jane Yeah.

D1 And I think maybe it was because they were relatively novel then.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, they both sound quite simple, though, in their design.

D1 Yes, yes. Really simple. I mean, I think there's often ones that are fairly mediocre. And also, then there's a grey area between, you and your child do a drawing, and you stick it up on the wall. And that's, I mean, that's not evaluation, but it's that sort of contributory thing. I'm trying to remember too, there was also, at Manchester Museum, Dave Gelsthorpe did an amazing climate change exhibition, it was all black and white and I don't know if that, I mean, I might be able to dig out the photos of it. And it was all about, it was quite early on about climate because Manchester are cool and they do things that are cutting edge and Avant Garde, before the rest of us University museums grind into action, and discover diversity and other modern things like that. And it was really striking design in all black and white. And I can't now remember what the question was. But at the end of the exhibition, there was a really cool black wall and a white wall. And you could, you've got a black sticker and a white sticker, I can't quite remember why. And you stuck them on it. And it was part of a sort of voting with your feet, sort of thing. And so I remember him tweeting pictures of it, how the wall had been black, and then it was almost all completely white by the end of it, because people have been.., there was a sort of it was a responsive message about climate change, or, you come out of the exhibition, and you feel like you want to make change, stick your sticker here sort of thing. And because that was just, there was no words involved, it was just visually: ooof.

Sarah-Jane Yeah.

D1 So is that evaluation? I don't know, because perhaps it's also just about eliciting a response. But it was very clever and very striking.

Sarah-Jane Yeah. No, that's really useful. That's all of my questions, unless there is anything else that you have forgotten that you would like to add in now. Or if there's anything that you think are, you know, gaps in what we're evaluating that you would like, SJ, you should look at this.

D1 No, I mean, it makes me want to go back and look at examples again, it really does. And sort of what stayed with me, it makes me think, those response walls, are

they naff or are they good? You know, some will work, and some won't, and how do you make that work? And can you get any sort of quantitative information off them? I suppose I like the idea of coming into a museum and there being a place where dialogue is clearly visually happening. It's that message of saying, we care what you think, obviously, we'll take your post-it down, if we don't like or if you write something rude. [Laughs] You know, that even if no people don't want to contribute, that sets a tone, that there's a dialogue and that people are listened to. And I suppose it's about thinking, have we got the mechanism to make sure that we can listen to what those things are and incorporate that back into our planning? And I think for [this museum] we are sort of quite at the beginning of that journey really, beginning of incorporating it into the planning, but also beginning of thinking about how we can gather that what people think stuff.

Sarah-Jane Amazing.

D1 I mean, interestingly, as a sort of parallel the project that I've got up [in a departmental building] at the moment, which is designation development funding called [name of project], I don't know it's one of those names, if you've worked with the arts council for long enough you think they like, and it's basically, it's funding to help us, it's essentially a furniture budget and staffing budget. But also what I did is I've built into it a load of evaluation which is talking to potential users of the building about what they want to see in it, you know, asking them what sort of table they want. Not quite but a bit like that, do you know what I mean, a bit sort of actually, do you want a workspace with a [subject specific equipment] or a camera setup? Or do you just want a decent laptop? Or do you want any, none of those things, you just want a big table, I mean, it's a sort of quite a basic thing. So I mean, of course, that, again, has been completely scuppered by the pandemic, you know, that should have been taken, that that was basically the job for this year, and then now we'd be acting on it. So now we've got to try and think, but it is sort of thinking about how do I assess what sort of quality of experience people have when they come as research visitors or students? And [a second named member of staff] is taking on a bit of, she's taking on some extra hours to coordinate that project. And when she's back from leave, I'm going to talk with her a bit about that actually, she and I have talked about that, sort of ensuring a quality of the visit. And again, that sort of is what we can offer in this research centre, is it what people want? You know, hopefully, we can provide the [objects] that they want. But is it also, you know, actually, do they want to, you know, do they want access to the kitchen? Or do they want access to a computer or to a camera or something? So I suppose I'm thinking about how do we best do that? I mean, I think it's informal conversations, it's just pestering people. And one of the things I was doing before the pandemic struck is just taking all the people I could think of on tours around it and talking to them in little groups, and then scribbling down at the end, what things they said.

Sarah-Jane Focus groups!

D1 oh, that's right... But I'm just sort of saying that's part of what we're trying to do is that practice sort of thing.

Sarah-Jane No, I think that's really, really interesting, particularly as a sort of non-exhibition space. It's a different way of thinking about, so do you think these are things that it is important for university museums, in particular to be thinking about?

D1 Yeah, because it's a particular bit of, it's a particular function of what we do. And I suppose this links back to me trying to rehabilitate the [museum] within the department. We had an external review, before I started. [details and conclusions of external review cut for anonymity]

Sarah-Jane Yeah.

D1 And so if I can create a place where the basic level researcher can come and sort of have a proper dialogue and feel like they're well looked after. I think it's just shifting that dynamic a bit.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, yeah yeah. And making that culture of evaluation happen for everything.

D1 Yeah. And I suppose actually, what it's making me think of is, I would hope that we would do that informally. But actually, is there almost like the other way, is there something like about having a comments book as well, almost going back the other way, that they might want to write in or sort of a daybook or something?

Sarah-Jane Yeah.

D1 That that might, you know, because, and just to sort of say, 'oh, be nice to know what you think' even if they end up writing, the sort of trite, the stuff that people write in comments books. I don't know. I, yeah. I'll have a chat with [second named staff member]. But yeah, I'd be interested if you've got any thoughts about that or if anyone else is doing that?

Sarah-Jane Uh, yeah, I don't know. But one interesting thing to look back on as well, you know, as a historical document, when somebody goes off and creates their career, and there you've got their comments from when they came and looked at your collection.

D1 Well [another UCM], see, I don't know that we have, we might have one, but I know [another UCM] have got a daybook where they log all researchers and they write in, they sign in and stuff and I think we may do I just haven't seen it in action. But I suppose just creating something that is just lying around when they're having their coffee. And they could scribble something in it. And yes, it could just be it could be a positive comment or it could be a sketch of [an object] they found or I don't know. I don't know, just creating those spaces. Maybe it's a post-it note board who knows. [Laughs] That was quite beautiful. Quite a beautiful idea for researchers as well that for whatever stage of their career they're at, they're basically all being treated to this same: we want to know what you think about this as a researcher. Yeah, definitely. Definitely. Yeah, absolutely. How does it feel for you? Was it a scary space to come as a new researcher? Or did it feel welcoming?

Sarah-Jane and really validating for them as a researcher to think, 'Oh, I'm a researcher, because they're asking for my opinion.'

D1 Yeah, that's true. Yeah. Yeah. We shall see.

Sarah-Jane Thank you so much, I'm aware that we're kind of coming up to time, and I don't want to impose upon you for too long. But thank you so much for your time.

D1 Well, that's helpful, well, I might, if I think of any other things, if I can find any pictures, I suspect the examples that I've talked about they're pictures from too long ago that I probably haven't got them anymore, because I'm a bit rubbish like that. But if there's anything else, I'll let you know.

Sarah-Jane And if I may come back to you or anything, if I realise there are gaps as well, that would be great.

D1 Yeah, sure. Yeah. And I think it would be good to talk to [named staff member] because I think, you know, he's on the ground.

Sarah-Jane Yeah.

D1 But I think [named staff member] is really committed to evaluation, but I think he, capacity wise, it's really hard. I think if we can find ways of making it lighter touch and more efficient.

Sarah-Jane It's what I'm hoping for.

D1 Yeah, I think, so that it sort of just like sweeps it all in. Yeah. I think, and confidence, it's confidence, too.

Sarah-Jane And if I'm able to speak to D2, about the comments cards, would that be okay?

D1 Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, that would be good, actually. And I feel like I might not have well represented those. But yeah, she'd have a good thought on that.

Sarah-Jane Super, thanks ever so much D1.

D1 Oh, you're very welcome. It's exciting what you're doing, really exciting is it's, yeah, yeah. Yeah. Lovely. Nice to talk to you.

Sarah-Jane Speak soon, see you soon. Bye.

D2 (Administrator) Interview Transcript

Sarah-Jane So that's all very formal, isn't it? Thank you very much for agreeing to have a chat to me.

D2 No problem.

Sarah-Jane And could you tell me a little bit about your current role and what it involves please?

D2 Oooh, so I am the administrator for the [museum name]. It's a bit of a jack of all trades, type of role. So if I was to list everything, it would, it would take up a full A4 page, because I have done that before. But it's a lot of the behind-the-scenes work, dealing with operational things, managing front of house and retail, dealing with website, finances, HR, and a bit of admin as well as the title suggests, and generally providing a lot of project support, reporting and things like that. So yeah, a few copyright licences, volunteers, throw in a bit of everything really.

Sarah-Jane That's quite broad!

D2 [Laughs] Yeah, that's why I like it!

Sarah-Jane Yeah. And can you tell me a bit about the museum as well, please?

D2 Yeah. [Museum details cut for anonymity] And it's a very interesting building. And generally, we're very popular with families, and the kids in the region, as well as tourists and the older generation. And in recent years, we've been trying to focus a bit more on getting the younger generation in, that sort of difficult late teens, early 20s, who don't necessarily want to come to museums, but I think that's definitely improving at the moment.

Sarah-Jane Nice. And can you tell me about the displays, please as well, and exhibitions, things like that?

D2 Ooh, the displays. Okay, so the museum is basically, it's a historical building, and it is historical from the inside out. And that's definitely part of the experience as you come to the museum, it's very old-fashioned. [museum details cut for anonymity] We have a few other interactives spread out throughout the gallery, if you want me to mention them?

Sarah-Jane Yeah, definitely!

D2 Yeah? So we have some puzzles. And we have a couple of other computer interactives [other interactives cut for anonymity]. So yeah, there's lots going on.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, that's lovely. Thank you. And I wanted to talk a little bit about evaluation. And I wanted to preface this by saying that this is not a judgmental conversation. You know, I work for a museum, I love evaluation, but work in a museum where we don't do that much at all. And so this is not me thinking, 'Oh, but

they don't do this.' This is, you know, the point of the professional doctorate that I'm doing is that we find out what is actually happening so the things that we create are based in reality, and not just on the theory of what we should all be doing, and so I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about evaluation that is carried out in the [museum] at the moment.

D2 So there's probably two sides to it, if we have a particular project on the go, or a particular research display, a temporary research display, then they may well have some individual evaluation attached to the project, and sometimes to the funding as well. But in terms of the general evaluation happening in the museum, again, this is, this is sort of pre-COVID, I hope that's okay to tell it in that way. We normally have comment cards, which are left out for the public to fill in, and we have them located in sort of probably three locations in the museum so they can be picked up. And then they have deposit boxes that they can be put in, or they can be handed in at the front desk. And those comment cards, there's sort of a bit of data filling in if they choose to. So name, address, location, and then their email address if they want to be contacted, the date that they visited. And then on the other side, it's designed as a sort of free text space. And there are some hints for what they might like to use that space for. So I feel like it's definitely aimed at anybody who would want to complete it. It's definitely child friendly. So the children tend to draw pictures in that space. They're asked if you know, 'what did they see today?' Or 'what were your top three favourite things that you saw today?' And we'll often get some interesting answers. Sometimes kids draw these amazing pictures. And we try and keep hold of those. And actually, we've uploaded a few onto our website, because they're genuine works of art, some of them. And otherwise, if they tell us what their favourite thing was, we try to record what that object was. So we end up with a, sort of, what the public see as the highlights of the museum in some way. And we also, I think, try to record the general tone of the feedback. So not necessarily the specific words, but whether it was positive or negative. And that, that as well, can be quite helpful. But that's the main form of evaluation that we do, we don't have a visitor book, we don't have any kind of electronic recording. Or that people can sort of do surveys on the way out like you get in some of the bigger museums. But the other sort of evaluation that we're involved with, is, it's run by the UCM and its audience research. And that is based as an exit survey. And UCM have designed the questions. And that includes a lot of data around the people, but also how they discovered the museum, you know, how they found their experience and things like that. So I'd say those are the two main sorts of valuation that are going on, normally, in normal times in the gallery.

Sarah-Jane That's great. Thank you. And so those comments cards you said that they were in three locations, can you remember where they were in the before times?

D2 So I'm trying to think, there might actually be four locations, and we have things sort of placed strategically so I think they were up near [one part of the museum], and that sort of seating area, kind of chill out zone. There was definitely a stack in the [specific gallery]. And that I think originally was part of the project. It was part of evaluating gallery renovations specifically, and the cards, this is before my time, but I think potentially came out of that renovation, that evaluation, and were just then utilised for the rest of the museum. And they are on the front desk, inside the shop and the information point area. And I think they were normally on a little table, where

we had things like leaflets and trails that people could pick up. So that was just a little coffee table.

Sarah-Jane Great. And then did they have their boxes next to those slots? In those areas as well?

D2 Yes.

Sarah-Jane Fantastic. And what sort of respon, were you getting a lot of responses from these?

D2 I would say yes, but not a lot of useful responses. So they were utilised quite a lot, but almost in a way of, in lieu of there just being blank paper lying around the museum. So that sounds quite negative. But kids enjoy drawing and any opportunity for them to draw they enjoyed. But I think we kind of try to take that and ran with it as just a different sort of feedback, in a way, if they left those cards for us, it showed what they'd enjoyed, what they chose to draw. And, yeah, we got a lot of rude feedback, people, you know, teenagers tended to write nasty words on them. And every so often we'd get a real gem, which was a really lovely paragraph explaining that, you know, they'd come for the day, and they didn't know we were there. And you know, that they were so glad that they found us, and they really appreciate us being open and free, you know?

Sarah-Jane Yeah,

D2 We certainly didn't get feedback from everybody. But I don't know the exact percentage.

Sarah-Jane Thank you. It's also really hard to remember what it was all like before, I mean, I can't remember where we had things before.

D2 I'm trying hard to picture it.

Sarah-Jane Yeah. And so Have you made any changes in response to kind of audience comments or any evaluation that you've done?

D2 I..., trying to think, I think in terms of the comment cards, we haven't necessarily made any changes, but it has reinforced, sort of, I guess, what the highlights of our collection are in terms of what people focus on. So if we were ever to redisplay that area of the gallery that they commented on, we would know that those are the favourite, you know, items, like the [object] or the [object] or the [object], or, you know, those kinds of things. It seems sort of fairly obvious, because they are sort of the giant showstopper things as opposed to one tiny [object] in a case. But it's kind of nice to have that reinforcement. But no, there's no sort of direct changes from that. But I would say, as a result of the audience research that has gone on with UCM, I would say that we've got a renewed focus on our welcome. And what happens when people walk through that door, and how they are spoken to. Is there someone for them to speak to? And if not, then how are they experiencing the gallery as a result? One of the questions in, in that survey, I think, is, is something to do, I can't quite remember, it's something to do with talking to someone, or how was your welcome,

or something like that. And we're in a slightly awkward position of not, of our shop being set back, so they're not generally, they're not met by someone immediately saying, 'Hi, welcome. Come on in', you know, 'have you been before?'. And that's something that we're trying to definitely rectify. But due to staffing, it's just not always possible to have that friendly face right at the front door.

Sarah-Jane Yeah. Yeah. That's really interesting. Thank you. And what would you really like to know about visitors that are coming in?

D2 What would I like to know about them?

Sarah-Jane Yeah.

D2 As in what they're thinking about us?

Sarah-Jane Yeah.

D2 I don't know really. Do you mean like, what, what would I like them to be telling me on the evaluation?

Sarah-Jane What would make your life easier? How would you be able to do your job better if you knew this thing about people that are coming in?

D2 I mean, one of the one of the main things that we find out from, not necessarily from evaluation, but from talking to people, is that a lot of locals don't know that we're there. And it's, it's an interesting theme throughout my time at the museum, that so many people have only just discovered us then it, you know, it might have been that they were here for university or so I think, it, I don't know if this is the right answer, but it would make, it would be interesting for me if people could tell me more about how they eventually found the museum, I think, because we do get these people coming in eventually. But it's sort of like, well, how did you finally find us then?! You know, we're right in the middle of Cambridge, we're slightly set back, but we're sort of quite famous, I think, and throughout the town for being the [subject matter] museum, and it does surprise me that a lot of people don't necessarily find us until a few years later. So that would be good to know. Yeah, it'd be good to know how they finally made it in so that we could improve on that, I think.

Sarah-Jane I think that's a really big one, isn't it in Cambridge that; people still find MAA, and then are like, "Oh, we never knew you were here!" How?! we've got a front door now.

D2 You do have that that lusted after front door entrance!

Sarah-Jane But yeah, they still do the same to us. And I think yeah, it's exactly that, isn't it? How did you... what happened? What changed in your life that suddenly you discovered there were all these places here?!

D2 I think I would also, I mean, we are really old fashioned. And from like, just observation, you can see that it doesn't really bother children, that we look old fashioned that we're not full of computers. But I know that it actually bothers parents

more than it bothers the children, they're worried that they're going to come in and not have anything to do, it's probably one of our most asked questions, either on the phone or in person, you know, what is there for them to do? And I always find that a really interesting question, because the thing to do is actually coming through the door and seeing the collections. And that always interests me. And so it would be nice to know, I guess, either on their way out, or, you know, just generally, did it kind of live up to expectations? And did you know, did the fact that we're full of quite, you know, old, gloomy cases full of tiny, tiny [objects] and [objects] and [objects] and things, did that put them off or did that mean they had a better time? And, you know, really, was it what they expected? And again, it's just that, was your overall experience positive or negative? I think, because I have my impression of it. But it would be nice to know, I think, what the reality was, but you can't talk to everybody. Well, you can try, but you wouldn't get any other work done!

Sarah-Jane And so how does evaluation fit into your role?

D2 My role specifically? So I work with, the front of house team are my staff, and I manage them. And we make it our job to collect and collate those comment cards. For the evaluation we created, together, we created a spreadsheet, which kind of historically shows what the general impression is, of those people who have completed a card, that is a card that we can actually use, hasn't just been scribbled on, there's a lot of wastage, I would say that, there's a huge amount of wastage. But yeah, so in terms of my role, it's sort of collecting, collating, and then when I'm asked, or it happens to come up, that it's relevant for reporting, we would then use that spreadsheet to pass on anything that we could from it.

Sarah-Jane And so if there are quite long comments, did they ever get fed back at another time? Or is it just you know, that, I don't know, if there's either a really positive or a really negative one? What happens with those?

D2 Yeah, so if there's a really good comment, then we will actually type it out and we'll keep a record of that it can be really helpful in feeding back. And UCM have, I can't remember, if it's quarterly, or if it's every six months, but they, I think, at the end of that, it's informal reporting, but it does feed back to the bigger picture. And I think they ask for any particularly nice quotes at the end of that form. So, we definitely use it for that. We use them on websites and in marketing, we can consider, you know, bringing out those quotes, quotes for that as well.

Sarah-Jane And do you get any or much negative feedback in there?

D2 We get some, again I can't quite remember the proportion. Often if it's negative feedback, and it's really negative, people will tell it to us rather than write it down. So I would say, I don't know if that's relevant here for evaluation purposes, because it's oral but yeah, it's, I would say that negative feedback, people often just want to say their piece and walk away. They don't necessarily want a conversation. And that's fine. If you, if you know with experience you kind of understand that that's what's going on and just let them have their say, but I wouldn't say it's that common, I would say the negative comments that we get are not necessarily to do with the displays. Or I would say even the museum itself, it's to do with access. So coming in with a buggy or wheelchair is quite complicated, and it can leave people feeling a bit

frustrated. And I'd say the other negative theme is around the fact we only have one toilet. People like to tell us that that's a terrible travesty for them. Um, but yeah, in terms of the comment cards, I would say, it's quite rare to get negative feedback, that's actually, you know, not just a swear word or something like that, with someone just having a laugh, or they think it's a laugh. In terms of the surveys, the exit surveys that we do with audience research and UCM. There have been some negative gradings on there. But again, it's all to do with stuff that we're aware of that we try and tackle as being part of the historic building and listed building. Sorry, the dog's making lots of noise, she's on the floor, looking at me.

Sarah-Jane I like it.

D2 Yeah. So I think that's that.

Sarah-Jane So are people encouraged to fill in a comments card ever? Or are they just left there for people to pick up? Do you ever kind of have a, or do you know, if the front of house ever have a conversation and are like, 'oh you might want to fill in one of these'.

D2 So I would say if it's just someone who's passing by, and you're not having a conversation with them, necessarily, they're not actively encouraged as part of the general blurb that we say to visitors, either on entrance or exit. However, we do make the point if you're having a chat with someone, and they've said something lovely, or even negative, in recent years, we've tried, I've tried to encourage front of house to say 'that's really interesting, would you mind putting that down in writing?' then we can, you know, take it further or, you know, feedback to the staff that you really enjoyed your chat with [a specific staff member] or something, because that's something that happens quite a lot, is the positive feedback can be around members of staff, and if they've had conversations in the gallery often that will be recorded, and it's nice to be able to take that back.

Sarah-Jane Yeah. That's really useful. So though, and you said some of those ones that people say out loud, do the front of house or the volunteers ever write those down themselves?

D2 Yeah, they would. They are encouraged to make a note and whether that's in an email to myself, or whether they then write it down on a comment card and post it in the box, or just record it on the spreadsheet themselves. But often, I would say that's relayed verbally.

Sarah-Jane [the dog appears on camera] Oh my goodness!

D2 She's made it up! Yeah, so often that would be relayed verbally, and then we'll deal with it as a team or, you know, take it to the next level, if it's quite serious, which is rare.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, it doesn't happen often does it? But I find it really interesting that a lot of the stuff that you're getting is around that kind of, not sort of the content, but the access and the toilets and all of those sorts of

D2 The facility itself. Yeah. Or why often it's sort of, why they almost blame it on us that they didn't know we were here. Why didn't we know we were here? You know, why didn't you tell us? What will we try and obviously, with UCM, that's obviously changing, and the joint marketing obviously helps support us all, helps with that.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, definitely. Right. So you get that spreadsheet. And then if it's something that needs to be escalated, you'll escalate it. Otherwise, it's used for kind of reporting and things that's really useful. Thank you.

D2 Okay.

Sarah-Jane And just sort of Finally, I love a bit of evaluation. And I you know, I love a bit of a comments card, and I love whatever we've got, I just wondered if there was anything that you any examples that you've seen anywhere on your travels, of evaluation techniques that you thought, 'Oh, my goodness, that's amazingly great', or 'why on earth did they do that, that was really stupid.' So this is one of those questions where some people are like 'why would I remember this?' And then some people have sent me photographs afterwards of evaluation things, I'll protect their anonymity. But yeah, I didn't know if you'd seen anything that you thought 'that worked really great', or 'I'd really love to try something like that'?

D2 It's an interesting question. I wouldn't necessarily say, I mean, I have quite probably quite a lot to say on it. But not necessarily with actual examples. But one thing I would say is that, as with a lot of what we do, it depends on your audience. So how a method of evaluation is utilised is going to depend on who is there, if you have someone of an older age, they might prefer the old-fashioned visitor book. If you have children, or sort of the younger generation, they might prefer, an interactive computer survey that they can do. I've often seen on the exit, actually I don't know if the Fitzwilliam has this or not, but on an exit from a museum, you can literally just tap a happy face or a sad face on your way out as to how was your experience today. And I guess that's probably quite useful in terms of overall positivity or negativity about, about the visitors, but at the same time, I could see it being abused, and not getting particularly good data from that, because you might just have someone standing there just tap tapping them 100 times until their parent realises what they're doing, you know. And so I think a good example of evaluation being gathered in somewhere should take that into account, that there should be different methods for different audiences. And then the focus should be on how that's collated and brought together. I'm sort of imagining a museum probably that doesn't exist that has all of these things in place, and the people to run them and collate this information. But yeah, I would say things like, getting that email after you visited somewhere, 'how did you find your experience?' I would just delete that. I don't think that they're helpful at all. And I feel terrible saying that, because I know that we try and do something similar for our events. But I think, one thing I would say as well is that is possibly underutilized: gathering evaluation from social media feedback, especially as we progress through, it's now just part of everyday life. And I think we could probably do more to gather information from those sources, or having more available on our website for people to just hop on and tell us how they how they felt. Yeah, so sorry, that's not exactly, that's not great in terms of I've seen something in particular, but it's kind of my general thoughts about what works and what doesn't.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, it's really useful. So do you think that your comments cards are hitting the right audience?

D2 I would say, interestingly, that they fit a wide range of audiences, which is maybe unusual, because they are utilised by children and families, and probably the sort of retired older age visitor that comes in. I would say they're not..., I'd say there's always going to be chunks of our audiences that aren't going to use them. And we definitely don't get a full picture from them. I definitely at the [museum], don't think that we're gathering enough evaluation to get a good idea of really of what's going on. And at the moment, we gather that by, just oral feedback, really. Which isn't necessarily the best plan. But yeah

Sarah-Jane And is the barrier there resources?

D2 I would say, this might be an odd answer, but in some ways the barrier is space. Because it's like, where do you set up something that's maybe a computer unit with evaluation on it for someone to do as an exit survey? Or, you know, where do you lay out a visitor book, when you don't have any surfaces or room to have a table? You know, so I would say it's partly logistical and space and it's maybe partly just not really knowing what the best way to capture that information is. And I think the exit survey done with the audience research with UCM was something we hadn't tried before, to my knowledge, and was definitely interesting. But needs to be done year round and there aren't really resources to do that, as we know. So we've got quite an odd snapshot of people's opinions often during a really quiet time of year. So it's yeah.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, that's really useful. Thank you so much. If there's anything else that you'd like to add at this point, then please do.

D2 I don't know. I mean, I think the burden of collecting this information always falls to front of house. And they often have a million other things to do. So in some ways, the evaluation is better off being hands free, if you'd like. So visitors can just carry it out themselves. I'm sure there's a term for that that I don't know. But yeah, I think there's probably a lot of missed opportunities. And it often just relies on those good conversations happening. So that evaluation that you maybe need and can utilise the most will come from that Front of House member of staff's communication skills, which, it's not like the computer with the survey, it's not the book with the pen being out, it's actually having someone who's able to have those conversations, and then feed that back. Which is maybe not a traditional way to view evaluation. But I can see that that's what happens in reality.

Sarah-Jane Yeah. And that's the point, isn't it? What is happening in reality is where we've got to be grounded in what we do.

D2 Yeah, yeah.

Sarah-Jane Thank you very much, if I've got any other questions is it all right, if I come back to you?

D2 Yeah, of course. Did I send you my form? I can't remember.

Sarah-Jane I can't remember. I'll check. If not I'll

D2 if not just prompt me and I will.

Sarah-Jane But thank you so much. That was really, really useful. And thank you for your time. I really appreciate it. I know it's busy as always, but yeah, I really appreciate your time. So thank you very much, D2.

D2 No problem. Thanks for having me. I hope you can use some of that.

Sarah-Jane Oh, definitely. Yeah, yeah, most certainly. And I hope the rest of your week goes well.

D2 Thank you. Take care.

Sarah-Jane See you later. Bye.

E1 (Curator) Interview Transcript

Sarah-Jane I'm looking at evaluation, museum evaluation, and particularly around permanent displays. And so I'm focusing, to start with, on UCM. And just trying to speak to different people and find out what they've been doing, whether it's something or nothing, I'm not here to judge what you've been doing. Because it is practice base, so I'm trying to work out what people are doing to start with. I just wondered if you could start off with a bit about your current role.

E1 My current role? Yeah, I've only recently rewritten my job description... It's a mix of strategic and operational. So manage the collections team and the operations and visitor services team. But I work closely with the public engagement team too, because they all intersect.

Sarah-Jane Yeah.

E1 And then I'm part of the senior management team. Our structure is a bit odd. I mean, they're all odd aren't they. But we have a director, curatorial posts in the [museum subject]. So each of those curators are responsible for a [subject specific collection]... So those curatorial posts have quite a lot of say about how the museum is run, decisions are made by senior management team, which is myself, the director, and two of the curators, one of whom manages public engagement. So it's a bit of a mix between the professional staff and the academic staff and where things sit, so my role is complicated by that. It's: how do people experience the museum on a general visit, day-to-day, marketing and things like that, and then how we care for the collection, coordination with the curators as well.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, so just a small remit, then!

E1 That's why it's hard to define! Yes.

Sarah-Jane And then so thinking about the current way that evaluation happens, how is it done at the moment? Whether it's programming or exhibitions, what usually happens?

E1 Do you mean at the moment as in COVID? Or?

Sarah-Jane That's a good question, isn't it? Let's do let's do COVID. And then let's do pre-COVID.

E1 You're speaking to [E2] as well I think? Well, I mean, the only evaluations being done on the visitor experience is what's being done through Tessitura. You know more than most about that already, so that is all we're formally doing, although there are informal routes, probably more applicable pre-COVID. And then for education programme, public education programming, and for all that kind of online, social media and stuff, social media, and blogs, and things like that are all done just on analytics, so we're really only looking at numbers, which I'm not sure what else we could do, but it's hard to ask people to do much else. And then public engagement, [E2] is definitely your best bet there, but again, we're looking at analytics for [the museum website]. And then certain things, so some of the Cambridge festival evaluation has been done through the Cambridge festival. We did the one of the

ones from Cambridge festival, I think yesterday's event was done with the toolkit, Impact? the Arts Council, one where we have peer learning, and you probably again...

Sarah-Jane The impact and insight toolkit?

E1 Yeah, again [E2] is your best bet there. But we also have online for when we when we aren't doing that, our standard one is an online survey. But obviously, online surveys are pretty low take up for online events, because there's no real an incentive. Plus, it's different for our kind of online-only events, if we haven't captured booking information, and we are for some of them, we ask people to book and then send them the YouTube link, but ones that you can obviously just access on YouTube, then we can drop it into the chat, we don't get much response. That's what we're doing at the moment. I think we lose things like, this isn't evaluation, but when we do live events on normal zoom, as in not webinar, or when we're trying to interact with individuals, we can count the number of participant devices, but we lose numbers of actual people because we know that they're sharing devices. And so when I've I think we're doing it inconsistently. I did an event the other day, I just emailed [E2] the numbers, which is our system, but I was like, there were X number of devices, but, from the people that have their cameras switched on, maybe 20% had three people. So let's make up this number. But I don't think all of us are doing that. And obviously, you can only do that with zoom, if you can't see, if you're on YouTube or on webinar, you can't ask people how many people are watching on their devices. Probably far more detail than you wanted. In evaluation, that's just numbers.

Sarah-Jane No, it's all good. It's all good. And so pre-COVID in terms of exhibitions and the normal sort of the normal visitor experience, what sort of stuff were you doing around that?

E1 So the honest answer is for temporary exhibitions, really nothing formal. As in we weren't collecting a formalised survey or anything. We have had, two years ago, three years ago, kind of just a visitors book in an exhibition, when it was a staffed space, which we don't normally do, we have volunteers in the gallery, but when we had that [subject specific] exhibition, I don't know if you saw it, that had to be invigilated because you can push the cases over really easily and it was really crowded. So we had a visitors book and people were encouraged to fill it in, but we haven't done that since. In the permanent displays, what we are doing is slightly different to what we planned to do. And I should say we haven't spent more than 20 quid of our evaluation budget yet. Partly because it was like, okay, we're gonna do it in 2020 and then... So we've extended the project for our sins for another 18 months. [E2] has got a beautiful binder of what we intended to, what we intend to do, and what we have been doing is the exit surveys that the UCM have been doing, so the same questions across UCM. We also have visitor feedback cards by the entrance, with a box to post them in, and then a more structured but informal way of doing it is, particularly in the first year, we had... So I joined in 2018, in 2018 [E2] did a huge amount of formative evaluation, and baseline evaluation, before embarking on interpretation. I was gathering feedback on the interpretation, obviously no museum is finished, ever. And we've done quite a lot of interpretation work since then. Not all of it is yet on display, but the way we structured that was through the volunteers,

essentially, the volunteers, we have between two and four volunteers in the gallery all the time. And I asked them a series of questions, like “Are there things that you yourself think are missing?”, “are there conversations that you keep having that indicate that people are particularly struggling with a certain thing?”, “Have you spotted typos?” And because our volunteers are not only kind of reading it and absorbing the displays themselves, but they’re also obviously observing, how the visitors are doing it too, so they kind of had this... It was all, it wasn’t through a structured survey, it was an email with a list of question, but also, you know, tell me anything else. And then there was also a notebook behind reception where they’re encouraged to write quick things in. Some of them do that. So that’s how we took that on. I mean, there was nothing particularly groundbreaking in there in terms of you know, the interpretation strategy was fine, it seems, but in terms of which objects required more detailed interpretation, because obviously, you know, I don’t know how much you can remember about our displays, but like most museums we had tiered interpretation and not everything gets an explanation beyond the name. And in fact, a lot of things didn’t even get a name, because now we’ve got a metre with 40 [objects] in it, even 400 [objects] in it. So how to tackle that. But it was interesting, because there were decisions like that, okay, we’re not going to label 400 [objects] in a metre-long case. But actually the visitors do want to know what they are. So we haven’t resolved that. We know what we want to do that we haven’t done it yet, on that front. But then there were other things, there were other stories that we thought they know want to know about, so we’ll write them that label. A lot of feedback was we want to know where things are from. And that’s really hard to do, because committing the design work to global maps, for you know, 8000 [objects] on display is hard. Yeah, so we haven’t solved that. The labels say where they come from, where the [object] was collected, if we know, but that’s only a percentage of them, so I think. I dunno. This is more detail that you want.

Sarah-Jane So that’s really interesting, kind of using the volunteers as part of your feedback. Have you found that have they been really receptive? Have they given you useful feedback?

E1 They certainly have. The downside to it was that they didn’t quite understand why if they sent me something in September, it wasn’t solved by October, or may not have been solved 18 months later. And they’re like, would it be helpful if wrote this label for you, or if I did the design work for you? Thanks. I mean, we don’t have a designer. [Named member of staff], turns out is a graphic designer by trade, so she’s been doing all of our design work, but she’s also [a staff member in a different area] so... {SJ: yeah.} It’s so slow. But we’ll get there. We’re about to dump seven or 800 extra labels into the galleries [SJ: wow] next month. See how quickly they come back! [SJ: That’s a huge amount.] Yeah. It’s going to be good. Some rewrites and things like that. We’re pleased.

Sarah-Jane So you also said that you’d had exit surveys and feedback cards. And so were they just self-directed, visitors could pick them up as they wanted to, or were they pointed to them by people?

E1 Mostly, if someone came to reception and said something, or said something to a member of staff that was kind of useful, or that was clearly “I’m telling you this because I think you should know”, they would have been told, “thank you very much.

Here's a feedback form, it'd be great if you could fill those in." Other than that, they're on the reception desk, and they are in a stand by the doors as you leave, with the postbox to put them back in. And other than that, the average visitor isn't verbally told to fill it in. The sign says, please tell us what you think. Those feedback cards have a very limited number of questions on them. Including, you know, we collect some demographics. And they're only, I think, where you live, might be the only demographic. And then it's, I can't remember the questions. I don't know how to find them right now

Sarah-Jane no, no, it's fine

E1 It's a couple of questions about you know, is there something we could do better? Is this something you've learned?

Sarah-Jane Yeah. I can barely remember the Museum at times. And people keep asking me questions. And I know that it's somewhere in my brain, but I just can't quite, like it's just not quite coming. It's so frustrating, isn't it?

E1 Exactly

Sarah-Jane And you said about visitors' book that you'd had one in a temporary exhibition? Is that something that you would often do in temporary exhibitions?

E1 So we've only done it once. We do have a visitors' book on the front desk as well. I don't, to be honest, while we transcribe the cards, we don't transcribe the visitors' book. I couldn't even swear that it's there right now. We went through two of them. Well, we bought a second one. And I don't know, I haven't... Yeah. I don't know if it's a useful thing to have done!

Sarah-Jane Well, so I'm really interested in comments books, and I don't suppose I'd be able to have a look at your first one, would I just to kind of...

E1 Yeah, I mean, when we're, yeah. Yeah, I mean, when we're back. I haven't been to the museum since December.

Sarah-Jane I'm weirdly obsessed by them.

E1 Nice. I mean, like, our previous director, [name of director], would always say like, apropos nothing, I've just been standing by reception desk, flicking through the visitors' book as a kind of catharsis because, obviously people generally write nice things. And we have some volunteers, one or two, who clearly tell their people to say 'please write: that you had a wonderful time talking to X'. So that was conspicuous.

Sarah-Jane That's really interesting. Yeah. And so there's one at the front desk, you said, I just a normal kind of...

E1 There was, as I say, I wouldn't swear to it having been there, this time last year, or you know, before we closed.

Sarah-Jane And again, is that something that is by a person? Or is that just left?

E1 Well it's on the reception desk, so it's you know, it's within, a metre away from the receptionist. Yeah.

Sarah-Jane So are you looking to get different things from your surveys and your feedback cards and the general comments book? Or is it just whatever is easiest at that moment in time?

E1 Well, I think, whatever is easiest is probably the UCM survey, the Audience Agency surveys, obviously, has got the demographics, and it's got the comparable data because we can say, x percentage have said very good or very bad for orientation, and interpretation and things like that. So I think we certainly find that far more useful. I guess, the visitors comment cards, as I say, the visitors book is a bit of a dead end because we don't analyse it. I mean, we don't read it, I would probably say. Which might be why I don't think it's there anymore, because I might have just said, this is the wrong thing to do. We type up all the visitors cards, and we use them for things like arguing with the university. Because it's far more freeform and because it's handwritten, rather than someone typing into an iPad, we get more natural comments, I think. If there are comments about shop produce, good or bad, we will pass them on. We don't tend to get comments like that on the Audience Agency.

Sarah-Jane That's really interesting. Yeah. Then who is responsible for typing all those up?

E1 Our marketing person. We don't get hundreds of them though. Yeah, it's not a big task. Maybe a couple a week.

Sarah-Jane So they come in, she types them up. And then are they all fed back? Is it sort of a sample? Does she do some analysis on it before?

E1 I don't think she does. She'll tell me if there's something because you know, we don't do anything with positive feedback. Like most people, well, I don't know about most people. But positive feedback is less useful than negative feedback, so if there's something negative coming through then she'll tell me. It's really an eyeballing exercise, though. There's no systematic analysis, when we, oh wait, that's not true. So we do quarterly reports to [funders] and so I will pick quotes from the Audience Agency back end and the typed up comments and support things. Like if I'm writing for a funder, they're generally the positive ones. It means I read them at least!

Sarah-Jane Well, yeah, I mean, that's even further than some museums. And so do you think this is something that you will continue once the [funders] money has finished?

E1 Yeah. Yeah yeah. I think so. Because we need to know we are making decisions based on what they say. And it is useful, if I say, our positive comments aren't useful, I think the positive comments are less useful than positive statistics. to know, Okay, we think we've got a problem with signage, so we do have a problem with finding the museum. But actually, the feedback isn't as bad as we think it is and we can see

what's made a difference, when we've made some changes, numbers have gone up. Cause and effect is difficult to determine but it looks good. It looks like we've done the right thing, which you know, might encourage us to do more publicity and say, yes, those have worked.

Sarah-Jane Yeah. And you said that you'd already make some changes, and that huge relabelling project sounds like one of them. Are there any other changes that you've made in response to visitor feedback?

E1 I'm sure there have been. Something's very... I don't know if we've done this or not, or if we're just aware of it, or it's made us think differently about one. So we have three spaces outside the main galleries, which is the [gallery name], the [room name], which is off the gallery, and the [room name]. Although they're all labelled, it's one of the things that we know what they are. And so that's what we call them. But people might assume that a [room name] is somewhere that just you can wander into, but it's not because it's our teaching room. So when we highlight where that space is, it confuses visitors, so I think we're more careful about talking about things or orientating people towards places that they're not actually allowed just to wander into, but that has come back from feedback, people saying: 'I thought the [gallery name] was somewhere I can visit'. When we actually do use those spaces we think about what people are seeing about, so yes to that. There have been other things. As I say the shop stuff has been interesting to see, we had a nightmare with this at first. So the university, we don't manage the space [details redacted for confidentiality]. And they just sold the wrong thing and took too long and that was really reflected in our feedback and that was helpful to send that to the university. So that that was very useful, and it's certainly got better. Sorry, I didn't mention but we also look, TripAdvisor is another source of visitor feedback. And more of those comments are targeted towards the shop than the in-person visit. What else did we change? There's some specifics of the interpretation. Our museum, you don't need to visit in any order. You can walk around wherever you like. And visitors seem to find that uncomfortable. They want to be told where to go. And we actually don't want to direct them, because of bottlenecks, especially now, actually we really want to direct now, in normal times we don't want to direct them, we'd rather they spread themselves out. But we have decided that we probably do need some kind of guide, plan, but we haven't done that. We won't do it until after COVID. Although we are doing lots of trails, generally speaking, I think that is one of the reasons why we know the visitors want to be told where to go when we don't actually mind where they go. Yeah, if you put a trail in though they'd like to do it different, like the backwards route, or "don't tell me what to do".

Sarah-Jane But tell me what to do.

E1 Yeah.

Sarah-Jane You said about the thing with the labelling, not just where it was collected?

E1 But we can't actually, so what I've done with that is in the labels that have been written since, we would make a point of writing it into the content, rather than, and people have asked for maps, and we just can't do that. We have trouble enough with

[collection specific information], we work with [another department], who are in the [name of building], I'm pointing upwards as if they were in there. But every [object] has [some collection specific information], which changes every year. But just gathering that information, which is one website, we can go to one website put [an object name] in and it will tell us what the [information] is. And then you've someone's got to design it and fiddling with the design work. But we haven't done that. But we know that visitors would like it. And then we know that they would like to know who collected stuff, which we do include if we know but for most things it's not on there. So obviously we can't do everything they want, but it is useful to know what they find interesting. And it's not surprising.

Sarah-Jane And so moving forward, how are you thinking about putting that visitor evaluation into the whole process of labelling and exhibitions and any changes that you make?

E1 Good question. So as I say, we still haven't evaluated properly, but [E2] has got a massive plan for that, that involves what's the word, visitor tracking. Where do people go and how long do they linger at different exhibits, and what are they reading and things like that. And more structured surveys. So she's, she's your expert, there, definitely on what the plans are. In terms of our exhibitions, I have to say that we're not very good at it at all, other than relying on the same kind of volunteer system of what you observe people with, and it's more... it's really a resourcing thing, our exhibitions costs five, 6000 pounds, and are done, you know, done by me, essentially, with whichever artist or researcher we're working with. So I don't have the resource to do that. So we just, you know, I mean, I don't have the resource to do the exhibition in the first place. So we haven't been doing that, although, we definitely apply learning from one to the other, but it's very informal. We know our [previous temporary exhibition] last year, not last year, 2019, used the space in a different way to [the one before that], and it didn't work as well. But we know why just by observing, not in a structured way. There was no means of collecting it, there's no structured way of offering thoughts for a visitor, I mean, we didn't give them the opportunity to evaluate that. Other than there is a question in the Audience Agency survey about exhibitions, 'Did you see any exhibitions today?' isn't there. So but yes. Are there plans to do that? The honest answer is there aren't. I know that's not an excuse.

Sarah-Jane I mean, as I said, no judgement.

E1 No, I know, you don't like to say out loud, 'we're not evaluating what we do'.

Sarah-Jane I work in the museum and we do very little evaluation, and I love evaluation. And I'm employed by UCM to do evaluation. But in MAA, it is much less than it probably should be. For the same reason, you know, it's the resource. What do you think it is useful to find out from visitors?

E1 Yeah. Yeah. So in the one exhibition that I've created, that we did evaluate is a, it was at the [non-Cambridge University Museum]. It was a project across five museums, each museum creating a different exhibition around the same object. Because we were obliged to evaluate a very specific set of criteria from the project. So we employed people to come and do it. And it really made, it was great, because

then we kind of had an evaluation report, which we could send to all of our partners, that wasn't just us saying, you know, 15,000 people came, these are some comments from the comment cards, or, it was you know, we were trying to teach people this, or not teach, we're trying to convey these messages or engage people in these ideas. And have we changed their minds about this? We could say those things and that was very, very useful. We haven't done it so much at Cambridge, because the exhibitions team has really only been me, but in the past, they would have wash-up meetings where we would talk about what have we learned? What's gone wrong? What should we do differently? Or should we stay the same? And that's been invaluable, and I would do that, if it wasn't me talking to myself. I mean, obviously it's not me talking to myself, and we could certainly do it across the learning team when there's plugins between learning and exhibitions. So there... actually I don't have a reason for having not done that in [this museum]!

Sarah-Jane And [in your previous University Museum] did you find it a useful process?

E1 Yeah. Yeah

Sarah-Jane And just finally, I was wondering if you had any other examples, either of things that you have done, or that you've been in a venue and thought oh they've done that really well, or that they've done that really badly?

E1 Without having evaluated it, I'm skeptical of all the museums that do the comment card on the wall thing. We did an exhibition at [another university] called disposal. And it was quite interesting. We were, I say 'we', my colleagues, [name] and [name] were recreating a [sector resource]. Actually I say that, they were creating [it] for us, and the [sector] subsequently adopted it. So I don't know if it was an objective to give it to [the sector] in the first place. Anyway, part of the project was to talk about [the theme] through an exhibition. And we took over a room in a very accessible part of [the university] and filled it with stuff from each of the museums. And just explain what [the theme] means in museums. And that was really interesting because, one of the [university museum's] objects, a collection of plastic toys, this kind of thing, you buy in museum shops, and someone had accessioned, maybe 300, like it's actually accessioned, numbers on the bottom, 300 of these plastic toys that you could buy in a museum shop. And we were like, well, we, we don't think we should necessarily keep these. Although we know why they were acquired, they were acquired to, you know, here is a lump of plastic, obviously, they were wrong. We don't think we should keep these, and the visitors were really, really clear on it. And now there's part of the permanent display in the [museum], talking about models in museums alongside plaster casts. And so that was interesting. But that's me contradicting myself saying I don't like comment cards because we were asking people their reason for keeping things, but maybe I'm ok, maybe I just don't like filling out comment cards. Open comments where people have an emotional response to something, maybe that's just me. Okay, ignore that. I think that was a good example of evaluation that we did that we're really asking people to kind of demonstrate that they'd got the points that we were making. Another one, I didn't do the eval, well, through the [subject specialist association]. A long time ago, maybe about 10 years ago, maybe more. We, I rather, I'm responsible for evaluation, as terrible as that may sound. We were fed up of [the broad museum subject] getting kind of shoved down

the pecking order by any kind of funding body. So we commissioned an evaluating company, I can find it. We sent an evaluation team into different museums around the country with mixed collections, so museums that had you know, like the Horniman Museum, which has natural history, social history, ethnography, anthropology, music and art, and other municipal museums like that around the country and evaluated what was visitors' least and most favourite collections, which one did they visit the most, which did they always visit, which did they never visit if they're regular visitors, more their evaluation, what were their thoughts on it? Because we thought we'd know what the answer was, and we were right. I thought that was, that was an interesting evaluation project, because obviously, it isn't independent, because we commissioned it, although we got arts council money to do it, but the outcome was [the museum's theme] is the country's most favourite museum discipline, and that there were some really interesting findings about it. People who dislike art, disliked art, because it's eliteist, you know, the entry point, it's very inaccessible for people who don't already like it and we found that people who went to visit art, their number one reason for going was because of an underlying interest in it. The reason that people rated [museum theme] lowest was because it looked unfunded, it looked dilapidated. We didn't design it that way, but that was a useful piece of, very useful piece of evaluation, which we continue to cite. I don't know if that was a good piece of evaluation. It was extremely valuable for us. It's transformative in the way that we then argue to, when collections are at risk, or when posts are at risk, we can say to a City Council, sure, your visitors like art but your visitors actually prefer [this subject matter], and the ones that don't prefer [this subject matter] because it looks like you haven't funded it in 50 years. Now they do so that's nice.

Sarah-Jane That's an amazing bit of work. Yeah. And then at the [other university museum], there was the interactive that you had in there as well.

E1 Yeah, exactly. So that was really well, evalua, I should say really thoroughly evaluated, because it was two people's PhDs, were based on [the interactive]. And I almost brought it up in your QR code class the other day, which was great. The QR codes aspect of it were a complete flop, nobody used them, like less than a 1,000th of a percent, I would say, people used them. So we could have got rid of the QR codes, and the project would have been really successful. And so the I, but, yeah, so so that evaluation was was pretty intensive. So we have, you know, hours and hours and hours and days and days and days of one of the PhD students sitting on the balcony in the museum, filming people over their shoulders, like oh, you know, ethically obviously, for university and PhD. But yeah, we did a lot of visitor evaluation, a lot of visitor observation, a lot of tracking, a lot of analysis of the results. And really intensive analysis of the results of what people said, that we were, you know, we're really doing, that project was two things, it was a research project into how people use social media based interpretation, or interpretation based on a social media model, which is what the user generated content was, as aside from that, there was a computer science person studying physically how someone uses it, so not, you know, mechanically, how people use those, and how their apps are built and things like that. There were two PhDs, that was one of them, the other one was, how does the social media model work on a conversation around the label. And the other side, obviously, needed to be an actually useful visitor experience. So the two things, is the visitor experience and the research project. So because of that, both of the

how and the what was evaluated. We were asking people questions about their opinions. And we asked them to immediately form an opinion about something like [specific collection question], you know, that was one of the questions, or should... I can't even remember them now. That was a good one, people liked that one. [Subject specific question]. That was quite a controversial one. I don't think we'd have worded it like that now. Literally, 10 years ago, the Museum reopened. Anyway, there were 20 questions over the course of two or three years. And they're really well evaluated, really well studied through observation and analysis. And a questionnaire, a survey, interviews.

Sarah-Jane Is that something that you think you'd be interested in doing in Cambridge at all?

E1 I would love to do that sort of project that is a mix between testing out a new model of engagement as an academic study, and somebody who's providing visitor experience. So we did several projects like that, that was the biggest, we did several projects like that, in the [other university museum], which is great. Being an experimental testbed is what we call ourselves, which was really interesting. We've got a couple of very small, we had a couple of small conversations with digital humanities people in Cambridge but the digital humanities is so less organized than [in the previous museum] I mean Camb, well they both have a centre for digital humanities, but the Centre for digital humanities in [my previous university] is a, you know, physical, as a building, has PhDs and several professors and things like that, whereas the Centre for digital humanities is a very virtual Centre in Cambridge, that people are interested in something a lot less organised and a lot less funding structures, we have had a few conversations but nothing's come in to us.

Sarah-Jane I thought that was quite an interesting one because the questions were much more ethics based, as you said, rather than 'did you have a nice time?' or 'what you learn?', it was it was more opinion.

E1 Yeah, we weren't, the [interactive] wasn't evaluating people's visitor experience, it was a user, we were, it was supposed to be about user-generated content built on from a previous project called [name of project], which was a [name of funder] project. So this [museum object] could have a web page and people could comment on it, and add their own stories to it. So for like, in Oxfam, that objects in Oxfam had a tales of things tag so that their kind of life story as they moved between different owners could be tracked. In [the subject specialism] when we, so we experimented with tales of things in the museum, and to say, 'this is an [object], what do you think?' was really uninteresting. Because although visitor one responding to that could have enjoyed their own input, visitor two was not so very interested in what visitor one thought about [the object], because they just wanted to know what it was, I have [this object] echidna on my desk, I did a filming about them yesterday.

Sarah-Jane I wouldn't have expected anything less E1, honestly.

E1 So when we did the interactive, it was like, okay, the model, the content, isn't about the [subject]. It's something that someone could form an interesting opinion on, so it was a discussion. And that's it, you know, it's one of the social media models in that. Mechanically, it didn't quite work like this. But the idea was, here's a question,

you didn't need to know anything. So you could instantly form an opinion. We had 60 words of 'this is why we're asking' content, the balanced introduction, if you like, and then someone could input 'I think this,' and then people could respond to each other, like you can a threaded social media conversation. But for that to be, to work, it had to be interesting, visitor number one's comment had to be interesting to visitor number two, and the museum. And 'what do you think about [this museum object]?' doesn't meet that much [SJ: Yeah.] so this was a lot. Yeah, it was a conversation about a discussion topic.

Sarah-Jane Interesting. Thank you very much. That was I think that's all of my questions, but thank you for your time. I might have things to come back to you on if that's okay. At some point. And hopefully, we'll be able to do some more experimentation in [the museums], when we're allowed to reopen. But thank you for your time. It's really really useful. I really appreciate it.

E1 Good luck with it.

Sarah-Jane Brilliant thanks ever so much.

E2 (Education Officer) Interview Transcript

Sarah-Jane It's very normal. So thanks for agreeing to speak to me. Now I have to pretend to be professional E2 [E2 laughs] And it's really hard because I'm always interviewing people that I know. And then I'm like, you know that I'm not, it feels all wrong. So I'm going to now be, attempt to be, professional, it'll all go downhill at some point. And I also wanted to say that this is not like a judgmental discussion, you know that I love evaluation, but I also don't do very much in my museum. So it's not like passing judgement on what you are or are not doing., I'm just genuinely trying to scope out the landscape of what is happening. So could you tell me a bit about your current role and what it involves please?

E2 So my current role, I have a very long job title, [specific job title] at the Museum [Name].

Sarah-Jane Oooh

E2 yeah.

Sarah-Jane When did that change?

E2 Last year.

Sarah-Jane Oh exciting.

E2 Yes. Yeah. It was just a change to recognise that my job had changed quite a lot over the last few years.

Sarah-Jane Definitely.

E2 My main role is to coordinate the learning programme and engagement programme with the museum, including schools' programmes and programme, well, informal learning programmes as well, and digital learning presence.

Sarah-Jane Wow, quite a lot. Could you tell me a little bit about the museum as well, please.

E2 So the museum is part of the University of Cambridge Museums, and it's embedded within the Department of [subject] at the University. It's is of great scientific importance. [Collections details removed for anonymity]

Sarah-Jane And can you tell me a little bit about the displays and the exhibition space that you've got?

E2 [Some specific details edited for anonymity] We went through major redevelopment that took about five years, that refurbished all the displays and the stores and the building, making it far more eco-friendly, as well. So it's a very modern display, glass everywhere, and displaying [objects] that are a range of different sizes as well.

Sarah-Jane And then, so within your exhibition space, do you have temporary displays? Is it all permanent, what's the sort of ratio like?

E2 The majority of it is a permanent display, we do have a room, we call it the [room name] that's used for teaching during term time. And then, and during the long summer break, because we stopped using it for teaching at the Easter holidays, and that's used as a temporary exhibition space. This year, our temporary exhibition is actually going to be integrated within the displays. So rather than it being in a separate space it's going to be objects displayed alongside relevant [objects] in the museum within the main displays.

Sarah-Jane That's exciting. What is it?

E2 Yeah, it's a ceramics exhibition. Which sounds really lovely. I've seen images of some of them, and it's on quite an environmental theme. [Specific exhibition information edited for anonymity]

Sarah-Jane Yeah. Yeah, that's really interesting. [Specific details edited for anonymity]. But that sounds fascinating. Yeah. I'll have to come and see it. If there's no one else in the museum.

E2 It's on until the autumn.

Sarah-Jane So we start a conversation around, are you doing any events?

E2 Well, it's what we were discussing. I think we discussed it ages ago, because it was supposed to end last summer, and I had a chat to [another member of staff] about it. But we're not planning on doing any hands-on activities anymore. So I'm just going to do a few online talks, probably with the artists or something like that. If there's something that we can link up with digitally, that would be really nice.

Sarah-Jane Yeah

E2 yeah.

Sarah-Jane Thanks. Sorry. evaluation. Can you tell me a little bit about how evaluation is carried out? That could be exhibitions or events or whatever is most relevant?

E2 So at the moment, I have to say evaluation has been quite challenging with digital stuff. So it's largely been using analytics rather than, because we're finding that getting people to fill out surveys and things like that just doesn't work. So yeah, at the moment it's a slightly different approach that we've been having, and starting to play with things like polls on zoom to try and collect some data during events rather than expecting people to fill out a survey after an event and that kind of thing. For events, we would normally, if it's bookable events, in person, we would normally send out a survey afterwards through Eventbrite, so that they'd receive it very soon after they've been to visit. And that, it's not a huge rate of filling it out, but we do get some feedback that way. We'd often also have just small questionnaires that are available

within the museum as well. And we always, when we're open, have comments cards and a visitors' book and that sort of thing. We will often try and, for big events, we'd have a few questions that are just up on big sheets with some post it notes so that people can do some really simple kind of, 'I liked this', 'I didn't like this', that kind of stuff, but it's very visual and a little bit fun, particularly for families.

Sarah-Jane Nice. And so is it any one person's responsibility? Or is the evaluation stuff shared out across people depending on what they're working on?

E2 It depends on what they're working on. So when it comes to the schools programme, and the main public programme, evaluation is my responsibility. We also have things like community programmes that tend to be more our learning assistant's work, and she will, either it's something with UCM so it's using their evaluation, or it's something that she'll put together some evaluation about. So I know there is the portals programme, where they've done quite an interesting piece of evaluation on how that's been working for them, which is the dementia sufferers and their care partners. It largely depends on who it is. When it comes to the displays, we are hoping to do some more evaluation of the displays because when we were putting together the interpretation plan, I don't know, is this something useful to talk about as well? I guess, yes. Because yeah, when putting together the interpretation plan, it was very helpful to have evaluation of our [specific] gallery. So that was a piece of work that I worked on when we were putting together our funding bid. And yeah, having that data of how people were engaging with the collections was really helpful, and did inform some of the, a number of the decisions that we made, particularly in the [specific] gallery. And we would like to do something similar to see if what we've done has had the desired effect. So that's something we are hoping to do once we have a gallery back again.

Sarah-Jane Yeah. galleries and visitors, if only we had both at the same time.

E2 Yeah.

Sarah-Jane Amazing. Thank you. So for the displays, is that something that also falls under your remit?

E2 It's kind of between me and [E1]. But between us we sort of work on that side of things. Yeah.

Sarah-Jane And so you said, I think you had comments cards and visitors books. So where are they positioned? Are they throughout the museum or a one space? Or how do they work?

E2 So at the moment that visitors book is on reception, the comments cards, we don't have those out so much at the moment, because of COVID regulations. But it's, but the sort of postbox and the main cards are actually by the exit. And we are looking at finding ways of incorporating more informal ways of collecting data like that throughout the galleries as well. And also, one thing, thinking about for the future is having a pledge station or something, because one of the things that we'd like to do is to empower people to make change. And so, having if we can get some ideas of how people might change their behaviour, that would be really, really nice as well.

Sarah-Jane That's very exciting. And so have you thought about your informal ways throughout the gallery? Have you thought about how you might do that?

E2 We're just at the beginning stages really, we're thinking where that might go and how we would do it, wanting to do something that's quite visually enticing as well, rather than it just being another postbox or something like that. And potentially getting an artist involved to make it look really attractive so that people want to engage with it. And I think that's one thing that particularly, yeah, we want to make it so that people actively want to do something, to do with the evaluation. But we are, we were right at the beginning stages of thinking about it before lockdown happened. And so it's not really got very far, yeah.

Sarah-Jane And so would that be within the main galleries?

E2 Yeah, yeah. So there are a couple of places within the main galleries where we think it might work. And my favoured position will probably be actually just through the main doors, there's an area there that I think it could work, or somewhere in the [other] gallery maybe close to where we have more of the information about [a specific museum topic], that might be a good place.

Sarah-Jane I'm really interested in evaluation interventions that are not just at the reception desk.

E2 Yeah?

Sarah-Jane So I'd love to hear more. And if I can help with anything, under my UCM remit?

E2 Yeah, no, that'd be that'd be great. Oh, and I'm, I think I'm also keen that, one thing I worry about with particularly things like visitor books, where people can see what other people have written, that you probably get just a repeat of the same kind of sentiment. So having the option to put it up if you want to, but also to sort of post it away so that we can get a bit more of maybe an idea of what people actually think. But one of the things that I don't know, I would be interested to know how many people actually fill things out. Yeah.

Sarah-Jane So interestingly, that was what I was supposed to be doing in this phase of my professional doctorate, it was going to be tracking in galleries to see visitor interaction with current evaluation. So I'm hoping that I might be able to put that back in when we're open and obviously with one way systems and stuff it skews the data a little bit, but if you wanted me to do some at [your venue]

E2 Yeah, yeah!

Sarah-Jane It could be mutually beneficial.

E2 Sounds good. Yeah. I mean, it's things like I know personally, when I fill out comments cards, I either fill it out because I think someone's put loads of effort into this and it's really good and I'd want to know, or I'll fill it out because somebody has

written something that's wrong, I have done that before because I found inaccuracies. And I felt like I have to as a museum professional, fill out the comment card or something like that. But I think there's a whole load in the middle that just never gets recorded.

Sarah-Jane Yes, that's exactly, that's exactly what I'm interested in, and how we can do that better. I feel like this might be a case study in the offing. I mean, it's really interesting that you're thinking about it. So you had them before? And what happened when people filled it in? Would they..., tell me the process? Was it just something that people picked up, were they encouraged to fill it in? Was it a means of deflection from criticism?

E2 Yeah, I'd say in general, so the general comments cards and visitor book, people wouldn't really be encouraged to fill them in. It was just sort of something that was there and quite passive, I guess. Unless, I don't know. I mean, there were probably some volunteers that would push it, but it depends on who was on that day. But when it comes to events, we usually have an evaluation volunteer, sort of in the rota, so that we can collect more data during events. So yeah, I'll switch it around, because nobody wants to do that for a whole day. But yeah, and people will generally have half an hour, an hour in their rota, when they're volunteering for [specific events] or something to go and encourage visitors to fill out questionnaires. So that is giving them a pre written questionnaire and saying, Yeah

Sarah-Jane "Fill this one out"

E2 Yeah.

Sarah-Jane Nice. And, and then the comments book, tell me about that.

E2 So that is something I don't really, that's more visitor services than the work that I do. And I don't know whether that's just because it's on reception or the fact that it's the way that that data is collected is even more informal than everything else. And, but yeah, it's just a comments book that is kept out by reception, and people can put out if they feel, sometimes I think people will say, or if they make a comment to them, they'll say, 'Oh, do you want to pop that in the visitors book?' Particularly if it's nice.

Sarah-Jane So there's a person usually standing next to that one?

E2 Yeah, they'll usually, there'll be somebody on reception so, yeah.

Sarah-Jane Do you think it'd be possible for me to speak to one of those people?

E2 Yeah, probably, I don't know. Our reception staff have been furloughed, so I'm just trying to remember who...

Sarah-Jane Well, I've got another four years. So...!

E2 I can send you the email addresses of them both. But I don't know what their working patterns are. And if they're working at the moment.

Sarah-Jane Thank you, that would be really helpful. I'm really interested in kind of the visitor services angle on these things.

E2 Yeah. One person, who'd be really good for you to talk to actually, I'll send you her email instead, actually, because she'd probably be able to advise far better than me, is [named staff member]. Yeah, I'll send you...

Sarah-Jane Thanks.

E2 Because she line-manages them.

Sarah-Jane Amazing. Thank you. And so when comments cards or the comments book, or when anything comes in, what is the process? What happens to them?

E2 So the comments cards are definitely transcribed because they also have on them, they collect the data for the mailing list. So they tend to go to [another staff member] actually, I think to be transcribed, so that she can get the email addresses for the mailing list. And the visitors book, I don't know whether that's transcribed or not, or particularly analysed, but she would be able to tell you. Yeah, she would definitely know that.

Sarah-Jane And so you might not know, but those comments cards, is it all transcribed? Are they edited, you know, removing the swears?

E2 Again, I don't know, I haven't seen that, that data, sorry.

Sarah-Jane And then is that kind of fed back to you in any particular way?

E2 Not particularly at the moment. Well, obviously not at the moment. But and, if it has something about an event or something like that, that we've been doing, then yes. But generally, the general displays and that side of things, until we go through and do the full analysis, no, it's not particularly.

Sarah-Jane Again, there's no judgement. I'm not kind of, 'Oh, no, this is terrible!' That's something that I do really like about my course, because it is a professional practice course, it is supposed to be completely based on what is practical and not just, 'hey, let's make something that sounds really great, but is impossible to put into practice!' So that's partly the point of the interviews is to see what capacity there is and what procedures are happening now or not happening and how we can improve on it somehow.

E2 Yeah.

Sarah-Jane So have there been, you've mentioned a little bit about some of the stuff that you were doing with the interpretation plan and how that, that had changed, you either have been reactive to some of the formative evaluation that happened there any other changes that you've made in the museum in response to audience feedback?

E2 That's sort of, I mean, a lot of the feedback was the fact that there weren't very many labels that explained that much about the [objects]. But that was just because there wasn't time to write all the labels. So very basic ones were put in and they're being replaced. The change is happening, and it was something that was commented on, but I don't know, I would say that it probably would have happened anyway, I don't know. That's one thing. Has any any other changes happened to the museum? I'd say not, not particularly, but probably more because we haven't really done the work to get to the evaluation at the moment. But it's, I think it is something that would be an ongoing thing, I would imagine.

Sarah-Jane Yeah. I mean, that already sounds good that you've replaced your basic labels with other ones. What would you like to know about exhibition visitors? What would be useful to find out?

E2 Oooh, that's a big question. I think one thing that would be really, I mean there are some things that I think..., it's several different aspects. It would be really nice to know what their main take home messages are from coming to exhibitions. Particularly, because a lot of our exhibitions have got that specific twist on them, it would be interesting to know if that really comes through. And whether people see those sorts of issues in a different way, because there's so much, I always wonder if our audiences, like if you watch tv programmes, you're already familiar with things like the issue with [museum theme]. How much of our audience has watched those programmes? Are we reaching any audiences that we might not have? I think it unlikely, but it'd be interesting to know whether, how much overlap there is between them. And another thing is, is to know about our audiences, and whether temporary exhibitions, for example, give us a different audience to our usual exhibition, our usual permanent displays? Yeah, that would be quite an interesting thing to know. It's something that we collect. So we do collect postcodes. And that's something that's on the comments cards. And it's something that we do when we have events it's on our basic questionnaire, collecting postcodes to try and find out if we are reaching different areas because, I think most museums in Cambridge, we have a certain audience that is dominant. And are we reaching other people as well? I guess it would also be interesting to know that the age group, we tend to get a really strong family audience. And so adults tend to be, our sort of peak in adults is late 30s and into 40s. Because that's the age that tends to have the kids that, because it's often we find the kids that are saying "we want to go to the [name of] museum!". So we have a very strong family audience. It would be interesting to know if, again, in a similar way, if things like temporary exhibitions are bringing in a different age group, so we were doing things like Late events and much more before the pandemic, to see if we could reach out to that students and young professionals audience that wasn't coming in quite such big numbers, as I know it does with other museums and, and quite so dominantly as we, yeah, we do get a lot of families, which I love, but it'd be good to know if we can diversify that.

Sarah-Jane Yeah. And so on your comments cards, you collect the postcodes, is there any kind of demographic information there?

E2 I would have to check. Sorry, it's so long since I looked at them.

Sarah-Jane I'm sorry to ask these questions, it feels cruel sometimes, a museum exam.

E2 I would have to check exactly what's on that, I know it collects postcodes and email addresses. I can't remember if it collects age groups. Partly because we were relying quite a lot on the UCM data collection. So we were trying to push that as much as possible. I'm not sure that we have that on the comments card. Yeah, I'd have to check. Sorry.

Sarah-Jane No, no, don't worry. Is there a question people have to answer on there? Or is it kind of 'give us any comments', or how does it work?

E2 It is a question at the top and there's a picture on it, again, I'm trying to remember exactly what it is!

Sarah-Jane When was the last time you were in the museum?

E2 Well, I was in a couple of weeks ago. But for something very specific.

Sarah-Jane Yeah, I haven't been in this year yet.

E2 Haven't you?

Sarah-Jane No

E2 I've been in twice this year. So not that much.

Sarah-Jane No. Is this the longest you've been away from... the fewest amounts of time you've been in the museum for a really long time?

E2 Yeah. Yeah. I mean, that building, because for a while, I was like, this is the building I probably spent more time in than any other in Cambridge. It was where I studied, and you know, studying, you're spending a lot of time in one place. Yeah, no, I haven't been in there for a long time. Yeah. Sorry. Yeah, I can get our comments card. So I can share that with you. That's probably the easiest thing.

Sarah-Jane Would it be possible for me to see the results from them? Or the comments book as well? At some point, not straightaway, because I'm really interested in what people have written in those comments books.

E2 Yeah. I'm sure that'd be okay. I'll see what we've got transcribed. But the comments books it might be a case of picking up the physical ones and having a look.

Sarah-Jane That would be so amazing. I'm so geeky. I've got an exhibition one. Actually, under my under my laptop that Mark gave me that I'm looking through. Yeah, interesting things. And have you seen any, in your own museum or elsewhere, have you seen any really good examples of evaluation techniques that you've thought, 'Ah, that was really amazing'?

E2 I'm sure I will have, it's been so long, sorry, it's been so long since I've been in a museum. It's kind of evaluation, I guess, but the carbon one they had at Manchester Museum, when they had that climate change exhibition. I'm trying to remember how it worked now, but it was about the amount of carbon that was being produced and people in the museum were sort of moving different things around like that. That made for quite a visual impact. And, yeah, I'm just trying to think, sorry, my memory is just really gone because it's just so long since I've been in a museum.

Sarah-Jane It's really fine. Some people are instantly like, 'Oh, I went to this place and here's some photographs.'

E2 Yeah, I'm usually the kind of person who would take photographs of that kind of stuff. The people you are with are just like 'I'm not with that person!' Yes. There was quite a nice one, I went to the colour exhibition at the Natural History Museum. This was a few years ago, where it was all about colour and vision. And they had at the end, it was really simple, sort of you choosing the colour that sort of represented how you felt at the end, and you put that up and that was quite nice. But I don't know that you'd be able to analyse, I guess it depends on what you, how you associate with colours and things like that. And but yeah, that was good.

Sarah-Jane Did you do it?

E2 Yeah, I did. I did do that one. Yeah. I usually, yeah, I will usually try and do evaluation when it's at the end of an exhibition. But I think that's probably because I work for a museum though.

Sarah-Jane I think that's all of my questions that I had. Unless you've got anything else that you're suddenly thinking, 'Oh, yeah. And we also do this.'

E2 Anything else that we do? No, I guess it's just always trying to think of ways of just collecting little bits of data informally, like when we have school groups in, it just feels like such a long time ago, when we have school groups in, I'll often ask at the beginning of a session, how many people have been here before and get them to put their hands up, just to get that kind of feel for how many new kids we've got and things like that. Generally, when they're a school in Cambridge, they've pretty much all been before. But when we get schools that are from a bit further afield, it might just be one or two. So that's I mean it's useful for me, anyway, when doing the session to know how familiar they are with the space, but it also sort of gives that feel as well. So always trying to think of ways that we might be able to collect that kind of data without having to ask people to fill a form out.

Sarah-Jane Amazing Thank you very much, indeed. Is it alright, if I come back to you if I have other questions?

E2 Absolutely.

Sarah-Jane Thank you for your time. I really appreciate it. I'll see you again. At many times in many places, I'm sure.

E2 Yeah, haven't we got a meeting this week?

Sarah-Jane Oh, you're right. I think we have, is it Friday?

E2 Yeah, Friday morning. Yeah.

Sarah-Jane But now all inspire has been cancelled. I mean, I hadn't actually finished all my videos, so that's probably good.

E2 Yeah, I already done one video because we were first. Yeah, it's a shame. But I doesn't surprise me that teachers aren't really into it this term. Yeah.

Sarah-Jane No.

E2 I'm having my haircut on Friday.

Sarah-Jane Whoa.

E2 Ridiculous. It'll be my first haircut of the decade.

Sarah-Jane That's amazing.

E2 Yeah. Cos I didn't manage to get it cut in that, you know that tiny bit of time that we had when you could go to the hairdresser's last year. I didn't manage to get an appointment and yeah. I'm so ridiculously excited.

Sarah-Jane my hairdresser booked us in, I had one done last week. I will see you later this week, hopefully, and thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate it.

E2 No problem. Bye.

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