

Museology—meeting the relevance problem

Jonathan Taylor

Field Museum was faced with the problem of how to determine what kinds of exhibits would be most exciting for high school students. Many institutions have attacked this "relevance" problem by inviting their audiences to communicate with one another via the modes of communication of those institutions. Newspapers and TV, for example, have been used by high school students to speak to other students. Could this approach be equally effective in exhibition? Field Museum is finding out through a recently initiated program entitled "Museology" which involves Chicago high school juniors and seniors in using the exhibition medium to communicate with other high school students.

The program actually developed from a wedding of a number of related ideas. In October of 1969, Donald Edinger, chairman of the Department of Education, Elizabeth Goldring of the Raymond Foundation, and I started extensive discussions and evaluations around a series of questions: Could we involve high school students in the Museum? How do we produce exciting traveling exhibits for high schools? Can high school students act as consultants for these exhibits? Could high school students be trained to make a museum exhibit? Gradually we came to recognize that all these questions added up to a unique idea for museums. The outcome of our discussions, strugglings, and searchings was Museology.

In January 1970, while we were still refining the plans, six seniors from Francis Parker School came to our Department of Exhibition to ask if they could make an exhibit. The interested members of the Education and Exhibition departments met with the six students in a long, smoky, productive session which concluded with the Museum agreeing to teach a pilot course in museology and the students agreeing to act as guinea pigs for the test run.



Traveling exhibit produced by high school students in pilot Museology course given by Field Museum's Department of Education, in 1970. The exhibit was designed and constructed by Francis W. Parker School students Lawnin Crawford, Hal Gerber, Bill Lawton, Peter Lewis, Steve Prins, and Mindy Schirm.

If the original meeting was smoky, the course was a forest fire in comparison. As with many pilot projects, the time devoted to this one expanded far beyond our expectations, for both Exhibition and Education. The students spent four months trying to refine their own ideas to an exhibitable level, and finally compromised on a spin-off exhibit from the Museum's temporary exhibit "Illinois by the Sea." They rewrote a segment of this exhibit, then designed and constructed their final product. In June 1970, "Death by Crowding," a traveling exhibit designed for high schools, was finished and went on display in Field Museum.

The exhibit then traveled to several Chicago high schools and to Malcolm X College during the 1970-71 school year, and was very well received by both students and faculty. High school students recognize it as a

communication from their peers and respect it. An index of this respect is the excellent condition of the exhibit after a year's use—much better condition than one might reasonably expect. It is a walk-in exhibit with every part exposed, yet it has remained completely clean of any scratches or markings.

After the 1970 pilot run of Museology, Donald Edinger and I began some extensive redesign of the course. Objectives were outlined and arranged in sequence, and appropriate instructional materials were written for each step. The final plan for a full school-year course was then considered by various educational agencies in Chicago. The Chicago Public Schools' Programs for the Gifted liked the plan and sponsored Museology for the school year 1970-71. They selected students from a diversity of ethnic backgrounds and from different parts of the city and arranged credit in both Social Studies and Science for the course, which runs nine hours per week. They assigned Mrs. Sue Maxwell to assist me in teaching it, and this past year's experience has prepared her well for teaching any subsequent offerings of Museology.

This second group of students started last October with a complete outline of the course they were to follow. First they observed and analyzed the Museum from a number of points of view: the types of audiences which come here; where most visitors go within the Museum; what disciplines are represented in Museum exhibits and the percentage of exhibition area devoted to each. Each student then studied, analyzed, and evaluated one exhibit by identifying its intended message, writing an audience test, and applying the test to an actual audience to determine the "success" of the exhibit.

The next step was a month of work in a department of the Museum for each

of the students, with two objectives. One was that each student experience directly what working within a specific scientific, exhibition, or educational discipline is like. The other was that each student record and assess the "functions of his particular department on a basis of observed activities" plus any other means he could devise to obtain this information. Three of the students were placed outside Field Museum, two in Shedd Aquarium and one in Adler Planetarium. Following this month of "apprenticeship," the students reconvened as a class to pool their information and construct from that a description of the Museum. This was an important assignment, for the exhibit which they were ultimately to produce must be consistent with the functions and disciplines of Field Museum. The students then wrote a schedule of the sequence of events necessary for production of an exhibit, including defining the limits of a traveling exhibit—size, weight, number of pieces, durability, etc.

Only at this point were they ready to start the long process of painstakingly planning and constructing their exhibit. Following their own sequence, they identified their exhibit topic, researched the subject, wrote the script and labels, got photos, designed and finally built the exhibit. This last segment of the course, the most arduous and time-consuming, takes more than half the school year. For thirteen highly intelligent, individualistic young men and women from a diversity of backgrounds to come to a consensus on an exhibit topic, on design, and on the content of that exhibit might well be one of the most difficult tasks they have ever attempted. But their reward is an ultimate product—a traveling exhibit—that is a very satisfyingly tangible communication of their ideas to other people—in this instance, "the establishing of masculine and feminine roles in contemporary society." To get feedback from this communication, they must also write an evaluation instrument to test whether the exhibit is



Students in the 1970-71 Museology program working on their exhibit. From left to right: Walter Whitford, Lindblom High School; Kathy Gunnell, Fenger; Mrs. Susan Maxwell, teacher from Chicago Board of Education; Alisa Swain, Lindblom; Leslie Biernat, Kelly; Jonathan Taylor, teacher from Field Museum. Students in the class not shown: Robert Brown, Hyde Park; Susan Fleishman, Waller; James Hisson, Kelly; Gail Isenberg, Kenwood; Joan Iwatake, Senn; Judith Nelson, Harlan; Nia Parfenoff, Waller; Felice Shiroma, Senn; Thalia St. Lewis, Tuley.

successful in evoking the intended response from the audience.

Our rewards are several. There is the satisfaction of working out an exciting cooperative program with Chicago Public Schools plus the satisfaction of sending contemporary and "relevant" exhibits to high schools in Chicago. In addition, our Museology course can now provide a continuing output of high school students who have had very real and in-depth experience with a museum, and who might seriously consider museum careers as a result.

We would like to see this program expanded in at least two ways. It could be duplicated by other institutions interested in establishing meaningful contact with their high school communities. It could also be broadened within Field Museum to include other educational agencies.

Jonathan Taylor is coordinator of N. W. Harris Extension, Department of Education, Field Museum.

Editor's note: The Museology course has been included in a compendium of museum outreach programs compiled by "Museums Collaborative," sponsored by the New York Council for the Arts, which will be published this summer. It can be obtained from: Assistant Director, Museums Collaborative, Department of Cultural Affairs, 830 Fifth Avenue, New York, N.Y. 10021.



Taylor, Jonathan. 1971. "Museology -- Meeting the Relevance Problem."
Bulletin 42(7), 6-7.

View This Item Online: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/item/21712>

Permalink: <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org/partpdf/374919>

Holding Institution

University Library, University of Illinois Urbana Champaign

Sponsored by

University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign

Copyright & Reuse

Copyright Status: In copyright. Digitized with the permission of the Chicago Field Museum.
For information contact dcc@library.uiuc.edu.

Rights Holder: Field Museum of Natural History

This document was created from content at the **Biodiversity Heritage Library**, the world's largest open access digital library for biodiversity literature and archives. Visit BHL at <https://www.biodiversitylibrary.org>.