

Conference Review

“Sustaining a Community of Learners:” Visitor Studies Association (VSA) 24th Annual Conference, July 24-27 2011 in Chicago, Illinois

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The Visitor Studies Association (VSA), is a US-based organization that holds an annual conference where well-established academics, researchers and practitioners along with newcomers from all around the world meet and share their experiences, research, questions, quests and struggles. The VSA conferences are unique experiences and opportunities for sharing information, networking with the finest people in the field and, above all, being a part of a vibrant *community of practice* that shares the same interest, museum visitors.

This year's conference, held in Chicago from 24th-27th July, 2011 and titled *Sustaining a Community of Learners*, focused on building this community by stimulating conversation about the quality of research presented and possible ways and modes for sharing this information. To further expand the audience it was held concurrently with the Association of Midwest Museums (AMM) and the Illinois Association of Museums (IAM) annual conferences.

Participants were also offered two days of professional development pre-conference workshops during which innovative and currently debated issues and practices were further explored. These included a range of subjects relevant to Visitor Studies such as research practice and methods, exhibition evaluation methodology and the implementation of social media and technology in museums. Six trips to museums in Chicago were also organised at the end of each of the three conference days. The VSA also offered scholarships and awards to new members for participating in the conference for the first time, three to new student members and one to a new professional.

The thematically organised sessions comprising individual and panel presentations were held during this conference's morning and evening sessions. For every session there were two seventy-five minutes sub-sessions of presentations where three to four presenters discussed their projects and methodologies.

On the first day keynote and plenary speaker Amina Dickerson described how urgent the need for museums to reach out to new audiences is. Dickerson underlined the importance of museums in peoples' lives as being among the three top family destinations where 'wow' and 'aha'

experiences are expected. Her point was to consider museums as 'sampling resources' especially for understanding the behaviour of young people – how they make choices from what has been placed on offer for them and how they personally relate to exhibitions. The rest of the sessions addressed a diversity of subjects such as ways for sustaining communication with visitors, expanding and cultivating online resources for Visitor Studies, and exhibition evaluations from the Museum of the City of New York, the Oregon Zoo and the Witte Museum in San Antonio.

Issues concerning the interconnection of academia and museums were raised, pointing to the necessity for ongoing collaboration between the two in an attempt to help museums better understand their roles and audiences. The importance also for museum staff to engage actively with and reflect upon their institutions' evaluations and research was emphasised by Kathayoon Khalil. The active participation of visitors in an exhibition by using comment books was discussed by Kevin Coffee. Coffee argued that knowing that their comments would be publicly shared increased visitors' levels of engagement when sharing their thoughts on the exhibition *Table of Contents: Portraits of Hunger and Resilience* at the Witte Museum in San Antonio. This suggested that more active, participatory exhibition design can change the quality of visitors' comments and reflections upon the subject matter.

Motivation research was also covered on the first day. Loomis, Eisenberger and Yalowitz discussed the concept of the *Motive for Sensory Pleasure* (MSP), which concerns enjoyment of nature and its representation in painting, music and literature. Another session on new research methods introduced attendees to the implementation of new technologies such as GPS and mobile eye-tracking by presenting case-studies from the UK and Germany.

This year's conference involved a *Poster Session* and an *Idea Lounge*, where attendees could engage in face-to-face conversation on a range of topics, including for example the attention focus of visitors (adults and toddlers) in museums, exhibition evaluations, and the role of volunteers and visitor assistants in the shaping of the museum experience. The *Idea Lounge* offered participants the chance to meet with colleagues in roundtable discussions while in the *Poster Session* 19 presenters shared a brief perspective on their research. It was generally agreed that this session

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was one of the most vibrant, as it allowed personal contact and face-to-face interaction among a significant number of participants. The only downside was the limited space and poor lighting in the room, which restricted the number of people able to stand and mingle in front of the posters. This was raised during the next day's session, and so hopefully will be taken into consideration in future.

At the VSA conferences issues or methodologies that have been introduced in previous years are presented after they have been implemented, tested, and reviewed. Hence this year the implementation of Falk's innovative and controversial *Visitor Identity Model* (Falk 2006, 2009, 2010) with a city-wide evaluation in Denver was discussed. In addition, the session titled *Are We There Yet? Building Shared Research and Evaluation Agendas* discussed steps required to make the VSA conferences even better, based on a recommendation from the previous year. These sessions raised the quality of the conference as they allowed for critical reflection upon previously discussed issues and the progress that the community has made in addressing them.

Following these deliberations, a session on the third day invited participants to give feedback on how to keep the quality of the VSA conferences high, and to even change the ways in which the VSA is critical of the research presented. A supportive and in a sense 'safe' environment for presenters should not preclude a critical and challenging approach. The more intensive sessions were criticised for not allowing time to reflect upon the presentations, as well as being sometimes less relevant to many attendees' interests. Overall, these sessions allowed members to publicly discuss their experiences of the conference, focusing on the quality, value, downsides and positives.

The third day brought the VSA, AMM and IAM attendees together for its keynote session where the speaker Dr Lisa Yun Lee discussed the role of 'Museums in (R)evolutionary Times', especially their role in championing social justice, as places that can foster debate and dialogue.

The VSA conference is an example to be followed by the Visitor Studies community in the UK. There is often only one chance annually to gather and communicate ideas, innovations, and struggles. A diversity of shorter sessions, even at a one-day conference, along with posters and roundtable discussions, can give participants a better overview of the field's current and future state and initiate a diversity of conversations. Especially today when budgets are limited and funding is heavily constrained, Visitor Studies can be one way to enhance their audiences' experiences by understanding them better through research, evaluation, and dialogue.

References:

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