

Focus Group RESULTS

Formative Testing - *CHILDREN OF COURAGE* EXHIBITION

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Introduction

Three focus groups were carried out over a period of two days at the Alice Deal Jr. High School in Washington, DC. A teacher group (N=17) met on the afternoon of Thursday, Feb. 18, a student group (N=15) on the morning of Friday, Feb. 19, and a second student group (N=15) on the afternoon of Friday, Feb. 19. Each group met in the school auditorium for a pre-briefing during which they were asked to carefully attend to all aspects of the exhibition, which was assembled on the stage. They were given approximately one hour to spend in the exhibit. They were also told that they would be asked detailed questions about the exhibit when they had completed their examination of it. Each group then assembled in the school library for the focus group discussion. The teacher group met for about 45 minutes, and each student group met for one hour.

Members of each of the three groups were selected by the school. The students were from the 7th and 8th grades, and represented both ethnic and gender diversity. Teachers were drawn from a variety of subject-matter disciplines.

Several informal groups of students assembled in the auditorium on both test days to "take a look" at the exhibition. While not part of the focus group population, the National Park Service team present had an opportunity to observe the behavior of these groups as they "used" the exhibition. The evaluator conducted very brief post discussions with these groups to get some general reactions to the exhibition. In contrast to the formal focus groups, these students more closely represent the typical casual visitor to such an exhibition in a museum or visitor center setting.

The high quality of the mockup version of the Children of Courage exhibition, the composition of the various focus groups, the enthusiasm with which everyone connected with this test carried out their assignments (especially the students who participated), all combine to provide a rich source of valuable information that can help to "inform" the work remaining to be done .

Special Note:

it is important to remember in considering the results of this formative evaluation that this was NOT a casual visitor study but a maximum effectiveness study. Not only will the typical "real" visitor not spend anywhere near the time in the exhibit that our students and teachers spent, but they will not have to think (worry?) about answering questions about the exhibit when they are finished!

The results of the teacher group discussion are presented first, followed by a composite of the salient (and non-repetitious) comments made by the two student groups.

Teacher Group

(Subjects taught: Phys. Ed., Home Ec., Music, Geography (3), Science, Social Studies, English (4), History (3), Reading, Nlath.)

The teachers began the discussion with an extended critique of the discovery drawers. Teachers wondered how interesting these materials will be as well as how expendable they will be. I tried to explain that the final "product" will look very different, with real things, but their concern for level interest, relevance and maintenance of these materials is duly noted.

A discussion of typos followed. Again, I tried to get them on to other more important concerns with limited success. (Is this attention to detail and minutia a characteristic of the teacher population?)

In response to a direct question, they liked the mirror idea very much (although they know it needs to be raised up).

The diary was noted as looking too artificial. It should look real even if it is not an actual diary. They thought visuals would help as well.

The tour of MLK's home in the video was noted as being very good. "The guide was excellent."

The video should show more about the children who integrated the schools.

Video should be in a separate location so it does not draw visitors away from the exhibit itself.

There needs to be something before the intro. panel that breaks the exhibit down into its sections. Perhaps a video. Maybe some of this could also come at the end as a review.

The middle section could be expanded more. Tell more about what young people actually did. Also, the panel containing the theme (fun) park story seemed out of place in this section. It would seem to fit better in the first section. (This person was reminded by others in the group that the first section was about the 30s and this panel was about the 50s and 60s.)

When asked what the main theme of the exhibit was, about 1/3 said "children," another 1/3 NIIUK and the rest the civil rights movement. Many thought the first "30s" panel set the tone for the rest of the exhibit. An extended discussion followed on this topic, showing considerable differences of *opinion* as to what the central or main theme or message of the exhibit was.

(Many teachers had to leave temporarily to lock their rooms. Came at an inopportune time when we were beginning to get into something important'.)

It was noted that the Sweet Auburn panel will mean a lot more to the Atlanta children than to these children. This will make that section more interesting to them. Pictures on the Sweet Auburn panel could show "then" and "now" versions.

The captions on the pictures of Sweet Auburn need to be larger. Too much material in this area. Also, some of the print on the Computer Interactive was too small and the scrolling pace was too fast for this age group.

Credit should be given to identify the voice heard in the Voting section of the Computer Interactive. (I could not get the name - sounded like Sarah something. Several teachers seemed to know about this person.)

Group agreed that the comprehension level of the exhibit for 7th and 8th grades was appropriate, but felt that it would not be appropriate for the lower grade levels. Comments included: It needs to be a "larger" presentation for the lower grade levels (meaning larger type I think). Pictures need to stand out more. More colorful. Words need to be at their comprehension level. (This was the one topic that everyone seemed to agree on!)

The wheel has too much space on it that isn't used, "window" is too small and text too hard to read. Not easy to turn the wheel with only one knob. Also, fourth graders are not going to be able to think about how to change the world.

The pledge card is a nice idea - would be good if there could be a follow-up to see what they do with it.

Exhibit needs more dates on it to show the time periods being represented. Enlarge the print and put more visuals with text, especially for the last section (wheel, etc.) so lower grades can get the final message.

There is a general lack of context as to when and where things are happening. For example, when were the laws that the computer program talks about repealed'?

The exhibit goes right from MLK panel to civil rights movement - it seems to ,jump. Last section needs more practical information about today. What is happening and where - maps would help.

There were a lot of white kids involved in the CR movement - exhibit does not show that enough (in voting, lunch counters, etc.) Needs a wider racial outlook. (Comment made by Black teacher).

The color scheme of the exhibit is rather dull for 4th graders. It needs to be more vivid to get their attention. All the captions are a kind of brown or sepia color. The computer program needs more sound effects and music to keep interest up.

Try to get people to go in sequence through the exhibit - use arrows, for example. "I wasn't sure at one point which way to go."

Connection between "Spending, Saving, Sharing" and newspaper was not clear. (Several others in the group explained it to this person.)

,More visuals on computer program - like cutting the hair of black girls. (I thought there was one, but the general point is worth noting.)

Use more maps - like showing where the various laws were enacted (on computer program). Also, since the computer was near the last section, many visitors might think that these laws are still in force. Repeal dates need to be added.

The burned cross in MLK's lawn was too hard to see (computer program).

Needs more music - civil rights songs. Use earphones. (From music teacher, but reflects comments made in Front-end stud,,.)

Response to question about how useful the exhibit would be to teachers in connection with their classroom studies was very positive.

Overall impression from the group was that they basically liked the exhibit very much, but thought that it could be "fine tuned" to be even more effective, especially for the lower grade levels.

Student Comments

Some initial comments in both groups were negative. However, when asked to cite specific things that they did not like, the comments from both groups concentrated on the following: not enough things to do, not enough real stuff (like the shoes and basketball), and not colorful enough. These "themes" tended to be repeated throughout the remainder of both sessions.

One student used the word "patronizing" to describe the level of written material. Another said the words used seemed "childish." On this general subject, another noted that the different size and type of lettering was confusing. I did not feel that these ideas were shared by the majority of students, however.

Everyone agreed that the daily planner book and the diary were unrealistic. Should be made to look like the actual things, even if they are not. Another comment was that no kid is going to keep such a detailed log of what to do every day. The use of pictures in the diary (I guess sketches or doodles) would help to make it look more real.

The shoes were a definite hit. As one young lady said, "The shoes are cool!" As noted above, they would like to see more of this kind of "real stuff" throughout the exhibit. (Echoes of the Front-end study!)

How to "use" the exhibit was a prime topic in both groups. It was felt that more attention should be given to the proper sequence in which to go through the exhibit. "It should be designed so people have to go a certain way - in the proper sequence." It seemed to be difficult for many in the group to grasp the notion of three distinct historic periods being represented. Apparently many of them turned left from the first panel and that tended to destroy the time/storyline idea. MLK as a child and MLdi as an adult with a child seemed to be one source of the confusion. to "solution" to the sequence problem was suggested - have footprints in the floor showing which way to go!)

Everyone thought the "flips" were good (but could be made more exciting and

colorful). The mirror was also given high marks by both groups. However, the history wheel came in for extended criticism (too hard to use, type too small, only one handle to turn the wheel.)

In general the exhibit needs more illustrations - "In most exhibits we don't have time to do a lot of reading." (Translation - we don't want to do a lot of reading?)

Interactive computer got high marks in general. However, it would be even better if it had more sound and music. Also more pictures to go with the text. The AM group seemed to dislike the song/singer on the interactive program. The PM group had no particular problem with this. They Just wanted more first-person narrative sound and more music. (Earphones were noted several times as a way to control for audio interference.)

The last "Today" section came in for more negative comments than the other two sections. ical comments: "Needs more examples, maybe from the UN about human rights activities." "Needs summary at the end so we can remember what the main point is."

When each group was asked what they thought the main theme of the exhibit was, about half of them mentioned children and the CR movement. Others mentioned MLK and the

history of CR movement. The first panel was noted as the main reason some of them took this as the main theme. (However, see below for results of the small pre-discussion quiz they took that seems to suggest that most of them actually did "get it.")

Related to the above, when asked what in the exhibit was new to them several noted the fact that so many young people were killed and injured and arrested in connection with the CR movement. Interesting comment: "It's true that the exhibit covers material that is well known to most of us but it's like a movie that you see more than once - there is always something new that you did not notice before. That makes it worthwhile."

"If the exhibit is going to be near the house where MLK grew up why have a video showing a tour of the house? They can go and see it for themselves." Not a bad question.

A few in the AM group thought that the descriptions of the children who were killed were too gruesome and should be less graphic. However, the PM group had no problem with this. As one said, "It made a point."

When I asked what the message was that they were left with at the end of the exhibit, one student said "What was the end of the exhibit?" He thought maybe it was the computer interactive program. In general, both groups had real difficulty articulating just what the final message was supposed to be. It seems weak to them at best. One idea to make the last section stronger - Have visitors type in on a computer or select from a menu what they pledge to do and then have it printed out for them to keep. Then you could also show on a chart or graph how many people had picked each of the choices to compare with your own. The Pledge Card idea was given a lukewarm okay. "I'll take it home but will no doubt lose it right away." This lack of a strong sense of "closure" to the exhibit seemed to be very real for the majority of students!

General agreement that exhibit needs a better introduction. "More graphic." "No questions. Just tell us what it is about in a few simple words." One person thought that a video version would be best but must be kept short. Everyone would "have to see it" before going into the exhibit itself.

A summary at the end was suggested, but it should be a visual summary and not one with a lot of words. Again, video was mentioned.

Suggestion - "Maybe you could have some way to get comments from people who go through the exhibit - like a book where they could write down what they thought."

A concern was expressed about large groups coming into the exhibit at the same time, like a bus full of school children. "It should be a larger exhibit than it is in order to handle large groups." Use of guides to show people where to go was suggested. Also noted - having a room for the video and computer interactive would allow some to do those things while others went through the exhibit.

Behavioral Observations

As noted, the exhibit was located on the stage of the school auditorium, providing an ideal setting for observing the behavior of those who were going through the exhibit from the auditorium seats. Even though a formal tracking study was not carried out, several things about the way the exhibit was attended to are worth noting:

- The orientation panel was initially ignored (passed by) by the vast majority of students and manic of the teachers. On occasion, some of the participants would walk back to this panel to take a look. In most cases, this was a very casual look rather than a careful reading.

- All elements of the exhibit seemed to get adequate attention from both the student and teacher groups. The video, in fact, was getting too much attention, and led to the decision to turn it on only during the last 15 minutes of the observation period. As predicted, once it was turned on, most student participants spent their time remaining watching it.
- The computer interactive created intensive use for some, but not for everyone. Once it was in use, it tended to exclude all but a few who were willing to stand behind the "user" and watch for awhile. In the absence of a formal tracking study, it is not possible to document the effect of the interactive in a precise way. It may be worth considering doing such a study as part of the summative evaluation. (Previous studies of casual visitors have found that those who intensively use interactives tend to spend less time in the other parts of the exhibit.)
- Even though the exhibit was not raised up so that the lower parts of the panels could be easily seen, many persons were observed "getting down" so that they could read, look, etc. at this floor-level material. It is hard to say precisely what impact this atypical situation may have had on the results of this formative study.
- The "flips" seemed to get a lot of use, as did the mirror. It did not appear that the wheel was used very much, at least not to the extent that all or even most of the text items were read. (Here is a case where height may have had an impact.)
- It seemed to be the case that while most participants started with the first panel (the 30s), many of them moved to the left from there rather than the right (which is the "logical" direction). Also, since more time was given to our people than most casual visitors will probably spend in the exhibit, it is not surprising that there was considerable wandering back and forth from one area to another. Again, in the absence of a tracking study of the completed exhibit with real casual visitors, we cannot say for sure just what a typical pattern of use would be.

Focus Group Quiz Results

Prior to initiating the open focus group discussion, each student was asked to complete a three-item multiple choice written quiz covering critical areas related to the overall theme of the exhibit. These three items are shown on the next page along with the combined results for both groups (N=30).

The results are quite good, since they conform for the most part to the basic objectives of the exhibit as articulated by the development team. Worth noting, however, are the number of students who did not pick the correct time periods covered by the exhibit, with one-third picking a "wrong" answer, and almost one-fourth picking the 50s and 60s. Also worth noting is the fact that 20% were not sure of the name of the exhibit (or admitted that they did not!), although only one person actually selected a "wrong" name.

Again, keep in mind two things. (1) These students spent more time in the exhibit than is likely to be spent by "real" visitors once the exhibit is installed in Atlanta. One should expect these students to do much better in dealing with these theme/message kinds of issues. (2) We were using the upper end of our target audience age group. One might find that the lower end (4th, 5th, 6th grades) would do less well.

ANSWERS TO FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS

1. What do you think was the main subject of the exhibit you just saw? Pick only ONE of the following by putting a check mark on the line next to the one you pick.

I think the exhibit was mostly about:

 0 The early years of ' Martin Luther King, Jr. growing up in Atlanta.

 2 The Sweet Auburn neighborhood of Atlanta where Martin Luther King, Jr. was born and raised.

 26 The critical role young people played throughout the history of the Civil Rights Movement.

 2 The critical role played by Martin Luther King, Jr. throughout the history of the Civil Rights Movement.

2. The exhibit covered what time periods? ((heck only one answer.)

 4 Mostly the period of the 1930s, especially in the Sweet Auburn area of Atlanta where Martin Luther King, Jr. grew up.

 1 Mostly the last several years of the Civil Rights Movement.

 7 Mostly the middle period in the 50s and 60s when the Civil Rights Movement became a real force for change in the South.

 18 All of the above.

3. What was the name/title of the exhibit you just saw?

 6 I'm not really sure. (If you checked this answer, look at the four choices below and check the one you_ think makes the best title or name of the exhibit.)

 1 *A Short History: The Civil Rights Movement in the United States.*

 0 *Martin Luther Kind', Jr: Hero of the Civil Rights Movement.*

 29 *Children of Courage: Young People and the Civil Rights Movement.*

 0 *Atlanta: Birthplace of the Civil Rights Movement.*

Summary and Recommendations

It is obvious from the comments made by our three focus groups that they reflect a fairly wide range of ideas about how the exhibit might be modified to "improve" its effectiveness. Some are obviously not realistic ("Make it bigger.") and others are valid for the mock-up version but will be no doubt be corrected in the final configuration of the exhibit ("More real stuff."). However, it is also clear that certain patterns emerge from these qualitative data that point to real issues and concerns that should at least be given serious thought in taking the exhibit through the rest of its development cycle.

While I will present what I consider to be my own list of "things to think about," I do not by any means want to suggest that this is the only list. I would encourage those connected with the project to put their own "spin" on this exercise, adding new items and deleting or modifying the ones presented here. I found it helpful to test all recommended changes to the exhibit against three fundamental sources of guidance: The focus group results, the statements of goals and objectives, and the definition of the target audience. Of course, the project team needs to balance those things that may be *desirable* to do against those that are *possible* to do, given the realities of the resources (personnel, time, and budget) that are available. I also realize that many of these concerns have already been noted and will be dealt with in the final exhibit.

1. Every opportunity should be taken to "lighten up" the exhibit. This term is being used as a meta-notion that includes a wide variety of specific things and comes out of many of the comments, direct and indirect, made by both teachers and students. A driving force behind this notion is the age/grade range problem which the teachers explicitly pointed to. While we do not have inputs from the lower grade levels to provide better guidance, I think we can make some intelligent guesses about things that would improve their ability to make effective use of the exhibit, without, I hasten to add, detracting from its appeal to the upper grade levels. These would include:

- While the comprehension level of the text material seems quite good for the upper grade levels, it should be reexamined to see if it "sounds right" and "looks right" for the lower levels. (Remember, not only are we targeting a younger age group than the one we used, but their average time in the exhibit is almost certainly going to be more limited.)
- Add more visuals and make the ones we have more colorful. This applies throughout the exhibit and the computer interactive, but probably would make the biggest difference in the Today section.
- Add more "real" things and objects, and make sure what we have now looks like the real thing (e.g., the diary).
- Look for opportunities to add more color and drama to the overall exhibit. Type face and background color contrast should be high. Dark colors in general should be avoided. Block paragraph, or text-book looking layouts of print should be kept to a minimum.
- Adding music and sound effects where possible would heighten the overall appeal of the exhibit to all age groups. (I know that sound-bleeding problems make this tricky, but not impossible.)
- Final lighting of the exhibit must be vastly improved over what we had for this tryout. (I would think seriously about having your own track-lighting system and not rely on the ambient light at the Visitor Center'.)

2. A more effective orientation panel needs to be seriously considered even including the use of a video presentation for this purpose. Such a panel should be very explicit about the basic content and theme of the exhibit and its layout. It should be designed so that it is almost impossible to miss. One minute viewing time or 30 sec. reading time would be about right.

3. The sequence of the exhibit should be made more obvious within the exhibit itself. This is part of another need - the time periods need to be made more obvious. In addition to the help given by the (proposed) improved orientation to the exhibit, there are any number of possible ways of doing this on the panels themselves.

4. Based on student comments, it seems clear that the Today area needs to be given more substance and clarity and punch. It may also be worth thinking about a separate summary panel at the end that would put the final message in a more attractive and compelling "package." Since the mirror idea seemed to be a winner, perhaps this idea could be incorporated into this final panel. Also, the suggestion made by a student that visitors could select/pledge their own commitment to "get involved" on a keyboard with a printout they could take with them, may be worth thinking about. This recommendation is driven by all three of the criteria I noted above - including the 4 objectives that were stated for the Today section of the exhibit. (These are admittedly the most difficult of all the objectives to meet - but we can give it the old college try!)

5. The 30s panels need to be looked at again to see if they are correctly putting the emphasis on the "right" messages. They seem to me and to many of the student and teacher participants in this evaluation to be mostly about MLK and Sweet Auburn (as the objectives say they should be!). But, we seem to be paying a price for this early emphasis on these two subjects - and that price is ambiguity and even some confusion about the main purpose/subject/objective of the exhibit! I think we know how to "fix" this if we make these panels primarily about the lives of children growing up in the 30s, with MLK and Sweet Auburn as the subtexts for telling this story. I should note that there is nothing wrong with modifying ones supporting objectives when it is seen that they are no longer working toward the achievement of more important objectives. I think the issue here is quite clear - it is really a matter of deciding whether (or to what extent) this is seen as a problem. (I might add another element to this issue - if there is some confusion from the upper age range who spent lots of time in the exhibit, what can we expect from the lower age ranges who will spend less time in the exhibit!)

6. I think it is generally agreed that the video needs to be in a separate location away from the exhibit itself. The need for the MLK house tour is questionable.

7. Use maps where possible and appropriate. Also, a better integration of the Sweet Auburn pictures and the location of these various landmarks in the area itself outside the visitor center will help to meet one of the objectives (#3) for this section of the exhibit.

8. The "wheel" should be rethought through. It does not seem to get much attention and it probably only marginally helps to meet objective #4 for the Today section (which is a very important objective!). Lower grade levels are especially "at risk."

9. The daily planner flip book is not working - actually it may be having a negative impact since it is not considered at all realistic. How will the lower grade levels relate to this? Is it expendable?

Conclusion

Evaluation reports by their very nature emphasize those exhibit elements that are not working as well as they could, and this is especially true of formative evaluations where the opportunity of taking corrective actions is of paramount importance. However, it should be noted that the Children of Courage exhibit, even in its mockup stage, has many excellent elements and ideas in it that hold the promise of a finished product that all those connected with the project can be proud of. The summative evaluation will provide another opportunity to assess the impact of the exhibit and, hopefully, to make even further improvements/adjustments as appropriate. The National Park Service is to be commended for taking these bold steps in the interest of meeting its public commitment to the preparation of meaningful, enjoyable, and effective exhibits!