

# QUALITY OF EXPERIENCE IN THE ARTS

## A DISCUSSION PAPER

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Annabel Jackson Associates Ltd  
The Priory  
54 Lyncombe Hill  
Bath BA2 4PJ  
Somerset  
Tel: 01225-446614  
Fax: 01225-446627  
Email: [ajataja@aol.com](mailto:ajataja@aol.com)  
Website: [www.AnnabelJacksonAssociates.com](http://www.AnnabelJacksonAssociates.com)

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## SUMMARY

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### The need

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This is a brief piece of work commissioned from Annabel Jackson by Arnolfini and Turning Point South West with support from Newlyn Art Gallery & The Exchange, Plymouth Arts Centre and Spike Island. It is intended to fuel a wider discussion about the quality of experience in the arts in other regions and in other art forms. Thinking is the essential first stage in evaluation. It clarifies the boundaries of the subject under discussion, the assumptions on which action is based, and the key questions.

Quality of experience is a key concept in Arts Council England's strategy. However, Arts Council England has not produced a conceptualisation that would operationalise this concept. Doing so is a non-trivial activity. The first output from this piece of work is a set of conditions that a good conceptualisation of quality of experience should meet.

The methodology for this paper comprised: review of ideas around quality of experience, drawing selectively on the literatures for museums, tourism and the business sector; construction of a model of experience and possible dimensions of quality; consideration of possible methods to evaluate quality of experience and issues around their application. The model of experience was tested in a workshop of the Association of British Orchestras' annual conference, so as to ensure some relevance across different art forms.

### Criteria for a good conceptualisation

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This paper looks at quality of experience from the visitor/audience perspective. We have assumed that quality of experience is more than the acoustic or visual characteristics of the artworks themselves. Quality of experience is not, of course, the same as artistic quality.

A good conceptualisation needs to be flexible enough to be useful across the operation of Arts Council England: relevant to different contexts, relevant to different art forms, relevant to different levels of familiarity with the arts, and relevant to current and future debates. A good conceptualisation should be meaningful in the context of Arts Council England's role and philosophy. It should generate insight and lead to practical recommendations for improvement. It should support the existence of a funded art sector: it should not inadvertently place entertainment over challenge. It should play to the strengths of the arts. It should link to outcomes like innovation or wellbeing. It should be consistent with arts values. It should be realistic: it should appreciate that different arts events have different strengths and weaknesses. Thirdly, a good conceptualisation should have space for the less obvious elements such as subconscious impacts and social interaction.

### Draft conceptualisation

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There is a rich literature on the value of the arts, but very little directly concerned with conceptualising quality of experience in the arts. We have therefore drawn on ideas from related fields: museum studies, tourism and business. The restructuring of functions of the MLA into Arts Council England provides an important opportunity for learning. This learning will inevitably be two way.

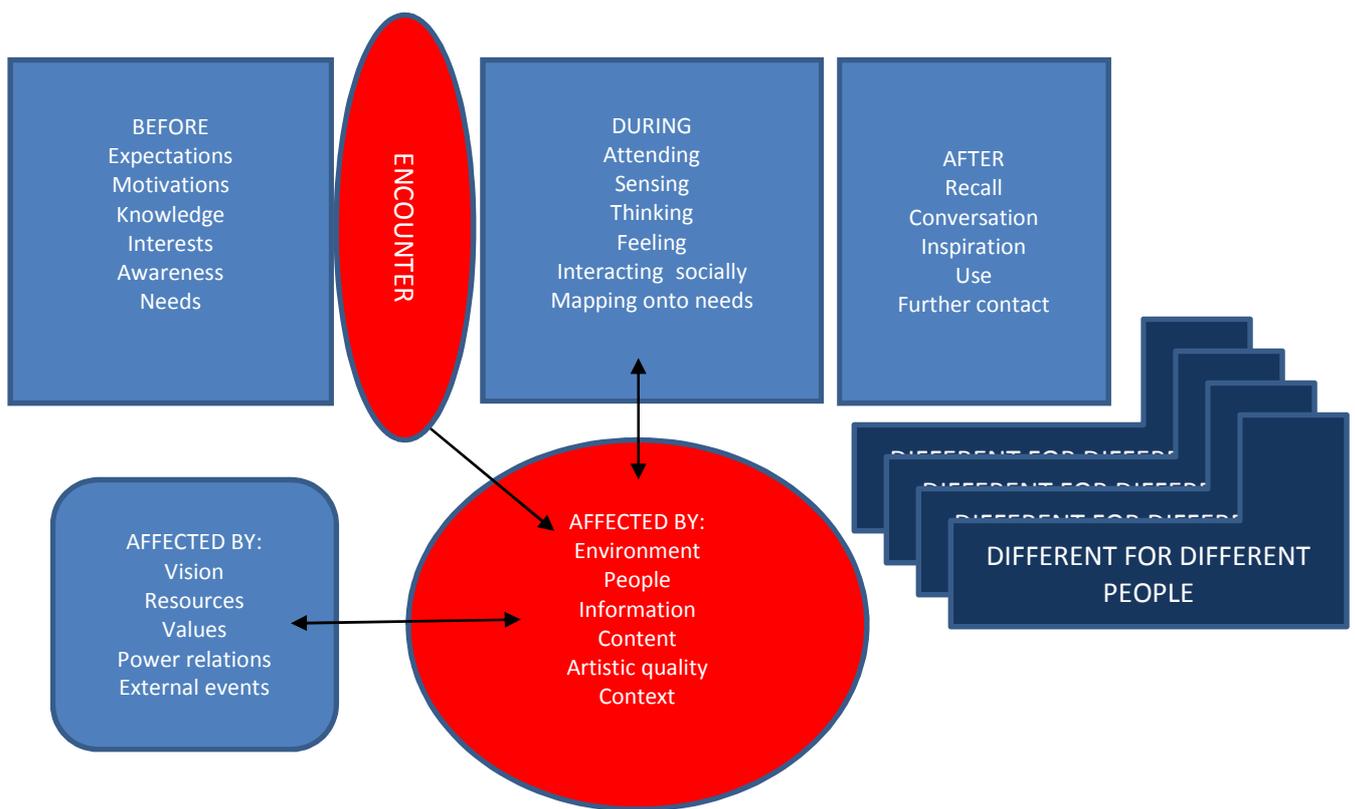
A high quality experience has some of these characteristics: high attention, altered emotional state, personal meaning, intellectual stimulation, sharing of experience, feeling of connection to those delivering or sharing the experience, memorability and desire to repeat or extend the experience.

Common themes about possible determinants of quality of experience are: relevance, newness, welcoming environment, appeal to the senses, active involvement, social interaction, openness to interpretation, and critical dialogue.

Some of these pull in different directions. For example a challenging piece might create an altered emotional state but not be immediately personally meaningful. A highly relevant piece might not be particularly intellectually challenging. The literature includes themes such as coherence and authenticity which seem too limiting to apply to the arts.

It is important to conceptualise experience as having a time dimension. The quality of experience is affected by the psychology of the individual and includes reflection after contact with the art work.

**A draft model of the arts experience**



The visual arts experience

Having considered the conceptualisation of quality of experience in the arts in general, we then considered the case of the visual arts. The visual arts experience has these special features: it is generally free; visitors are generally standing rather than sitting; visitors walk through the space or past the art work at their own speed; doors, if present, are open rather than closed as in the performing arts; visitors can form their own groupings and change their groupings during the

experience; timing is flexible rather than limited to specific viewings in the afternoon or evening; lighting varies, but is not dark in the way it is in the performing arts; the experience is multifocal and open ended. Altogether these characteristics add up to a large amount of freedom. This freedom is compatible with the expectations of the digital generation but not always comfortable for other age groups. This underlines the need for support with interpretation, which is the subject of a separate complementary assignment being carried out by Gill Nicols.

### Possible methods

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There are seven possible methods that could be employed to evaluate the quality of experience in the visual arts: visitor panels, written questionnaires, telephone interviews, online surveys, face-to-face interviews by invigilators, surveys of invigilators, and observational measures. Each has strengths and weaknesses.

### Conclusion

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There are two broad purposes for evaluation: accountability and learning. Arts Council England has already defined its system for accountability. The performance dimensions (KPIs) for the national portfolio organisations are: excellence, audience data, engagement and reach, digital content, and contributed income. Quality of experience is not included in this list, which is entirely appropriate given its complexity. We recommend against seeking a quantitative resolution to the discussion of quality of experience. While quantification is useful for internal precision, to allow comparison over time and between peers, such measurements should not be end results in themselves.

There is a concern in the sector that the tightening of funding will lead to a more a punitive approach to evaluation which will squeeze out learning. Arts Council England has defined a clear structure for accountability. To give balance it could also provide a structure for learning. Quality of experience would fit well in this structure, as a concept with broad relevance and potentially rich insight. Of course quality of experience would not be the only dimension of a learning evaluation system. We would suggest that other dimensions should include value for money, organisational strength (including resilience), and artist development.

The learning system would support the KPIs. Discussion of quality of experience would support work on engagement, although the two are not the same. High quality of experience does not necessarily lead to a greater engagement with the arts organisation that orchestrated the high quality of experience. It might lead to engagement elsewhere within the arts, to self-directed work, or to disengagement positively (for reflection) or negatively, which might or might not lead to engagement at a later stage. It is tempting to think of engagement as a steady, even linear relationship, the development of a relationship. However, quality of experience is likely to be far more complex, in part because of subjectivity and because of the role of, and reaction to, challenge and provocation.

The optional next stage of this work would be to pilot methods for evaluating quality of experience. We suggest piloting these three methods: citizens' panel, observation measure, and written survey. We have chosen these methods because they might feel less like research and more like practical operations. Ideally the next stage would develop these methods and then test them with three visual arts organisations (ideally in two regions, i.e. six organisations): a gallery, a small organisation and a non-gallery organisation such as a festival or public arts organisation.

Two other methods, telephone surveys and online surveys have already been used to evaluate outcomes and quality of experience in the visual arts. We have not recommended further work on these methods at this stage as they are less suited to integration with the day-to-day operations of an arts organisation.

### Consultation

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The next stage of our work is to consult on the conceptualisation and the possible methodologies.

## INTRODUCTION

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### The need

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Quality of experience is a key concept in Arts Council England's strategy. However, Arts Council England has not produced a conceptualisation that would operationalize this concept and allow it to be measurable. Conceptualisation is important to set the boundaries on the subject, identify its elements, and clarify its relationship to other concepts like artistic quality. A good conceptualisation improves the focus, meaningfulness and usefulness of any subsequent evaluation. It brings assumptions to the surface where they can be discussed and questioned.

### Methodology

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The methodology for this paper comprised:

- Review of ideas around quality of experience, drawing selectively on the literatures for museums, tourism and the business sector.
- Construction of a model of experience and possible dimensions of quality.
- Consideration of possible methods to evaluate quality of experience and issues around their application.
- Discussion at a steering group meeting.

These were the questions discussed in a steering group meeting:

1. What do you think about the suggested criteria for a good conceptualisation? Is there anything you would query or redefine? Are there any important gaps?
2. How does quality of experience relate to engagement? Do arts audiences have to engage with arts events for some minimum period of time before we consider their quality of experience? Does a high quality experience necessarily result in greater future engagement?
3. What do you think of the model of experience? Is there anything you would query or redefine? Are there any important gaps?
4. What do you think about the comments about quality of experience? Is there anything you would query or redefine? Are there any important gaps?
5. What do you think about the description of the visual arts experience? Is there anything you would query or redefine? Are there any important gaps?
6. What do you think about the different evaluation methods? Which seems most useful? I am suggesting concentrating on the visitor panel, written questionnaire and peer observation tool. What other questions need to be answered?

The model of experience was also tested in a workshop of the Association of British Orchestras' annual conference, so as to ensure some relevance across different art forms.

## What is quality of experience?

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Quality of experience as a concept is most useful as an intermediate indicator that, in part at least, helps to predict outcomes such as increased interest in the arts or increased wellbeing. Quality of experience is the result of the nature of the arts experience filtered through the subjectivity of the participant or audience member. The relationships between artistic quality, quality of delivery, quality of experience and outcomes will never be linear. However, there should at least be some logical relationship between these concepts.

This paper looks at quality of experience from the visitor/audience perspective. We have assumed that quality of experience is more than the acoustic or visual characteristics of the artworks themselves.

Producing a conceptualisation of quality of experience is not straightforward. A good conceptualisation needs to meet a number of conditions, which we have deduced logically.

## Criteria for a good conceptualisation of quality of experience

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A good conceptualisation needs to be flexible enough to be useful across the operation of Arts Council England:

- **Relevant to different contexts.** These include participatory contexts, such as attendance at workshops or talks, but also dedicated attendance at performances and exhibitions in theatres and galleries, and incidental encounters with public and street art.
- **Relevant to different art forms.** The conceptualisation should be equally applicable to the different art forms and capable of capturing what is special about each. It is in Arts Council England's interests to emphasise the value of having the different art forms.
- **Relevant to different levels of familiarity with the arts.** The experience of a newcomer might be quite different to that of an experienced arts attender. The conceptualisation should be able to describe the journey of each.
- **Relevant to current and future debates.** The conceptualisation should provide a structure to stimulate debate about the different experiences of live versus digital engagement. It should also be compatible with the language in the emerging research in arts neurology.

A good conceptualisation should be meaningful in the context of Arts Council England's role and philosophy. It should generate insight, and not lead to reductive conclusions:

- **Beyond entertainment.** The conceptualisation should support the existence of a funded arts sector. Quality of experience is not the same as artistic quality, but the two should be consistent or at least related rather than opposites.
- **Play to our strengths.** The conceptualisation should not use simple proxies such as the length of engagement as a measure of quality since arts engagement is inherently brief compared to other activities. More useful would be to expose the value of arts experiences given their brief nature.
- **Link to outcomes like innovation or wellbeing.** Quality of experience is an end in itself but should also have some explanatory value as a stepping stone to personal or social impact.

- **Consistent with arts values.** The conceptualisation should not assume audience members are passive or homogeneous/lacking in individuality.
- **Imply trade-offs.** The conceptualisation should be realistic. It should not be a shopping list where a high score requires an event to tick all the boxes. Rather it should draw attention to the choices available to audience members and to the variety of different experiences possible within the arts.

A good conceptualisation should be inclusive. It should be aware that:

- Arts experiences have a subconscious as well as a conscious effect.
- Arts experiences can be enjoyable but also uncomfortable or challenging.
- Quality of experience has a subjective meaning but would benefit from also defining some objective indicators.
- Quality of experience is individual but has a social context.

Overall, we conclude that the conceptualisation should have a number of different elements which are consistent but can be applied separately.

## IDEAS ABOUT QUALITY OF EXPERIENCE

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### Introduction

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There is a rich literature on the value of the arts, but very little directly concerned with conceptualising quality of experience in the arts from the audience/visitor perspective. We therefore draw on ideas from related fields: museum studies, tourism/visitor studies and business. We have included work from the United States as well as the United Kingdom.

The restructuring of functions of the MLA into Arts Council England provides an important opportunity for learning. This learning will inevitably be two way.

This section is not intended as a comprehensive literature review, but rather as a discussion of selected ideas. We are concerned that the section should not be too dry or academic since it is important that readers understand conceptualisation as a practical exercise. Our aim is to stimulate thought not exhaust it.

### Intrinsic value of the arts

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Dutton, a Professor of the Philosophy of Art, argues that artistic expression is an evolutionary adaptation, a natural and universal phenomenon. Art, like language, “emerges spontaneously and universally in similar forms across cultures”<sup>1</sup>. He defines 12 characteristics common to the arts across different cultures:

- **Direct pleasure.** The art object is valued as a source of immediate experiential pleasure in itself, and not essentially for its utility in producing something else that is useful or pleasurable.
- **Skill and virtuosity.** The making of the object or the performance requires and demonstrates the exercise of specialised skills.
- **Style.** Objects and performances in all art forms are made in recognisable styles, according to rules of form, composition, or expression.
- **Novelty and creativity.** Art is valued, and praised for its novelty, creativity, originality, and capacity to surprise its audience.
- **Criticism.** Artistic forms are always found alongside critical language of judgement and appreciation.
- **Representation.** Art objects represent or imitate real or imaginary experiences of the world.
- **Special focus.** Works of art and artistic performances tend to be bracketed off from ordinary life.
- **Expressive individuality.** Objects of art provide an imaginative experience for both producers and audiences.
- **Emotional saturation.** There are emotions provoked by the represented content of the art, but also emotions embedded in the work.

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<sup>1</sup> Dutton, D. (2009) *The Art Instinct: Beauty, Pleasure and Human Evolution*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- **Intellectual challenge.** Works of art tend to be designed to use the combined variety of human perceptual and intellectual capabilities to the full extent. The best works strength participants beyond ordinary limits.
- **Imaginative experience.** Art presents possibilities that the creative imagination interprets and creates.
- **Art traditions and institutions.** Art objects and performances are created and to a degree given significance by their place in the history and traditions of their field.

Csikszentmihalyi introduced the concept of Flow in 1990<sup>2</sup>: “a state of joy, creativity and total involvement, in which problems seem to disappear and there is an exhilarating feeling of transcendence.” Captivation, which is based on flow, is used as the heart of WolfBrown’s model of the intrinsic values of the arts experience. This model has six elements: <sup>3</sup>

- **Captivation.** The state where audience members are absorbed in the performance, inhabited the world of the performers, lose track of time and forget about everything else.”
- **Intellectual stimulation.** Relates to mental engagement and “cognitive traction.”
- **Emotional resonance.** Relates to the ability of the performance to elicit a strong emotional response from the audience, the intensity of emotional response, the degree of empathy with the performers and therapeutic value of the performance.
- **Spiritual value.** Relates to the ability of the performance to inspire, uplift or empower the audience, and so create transcendent experiences in a spiritual – but not necessarily religious – sense
- **Aesthetic growth.** Refers to the extent to which an individual was exposed to a new type or style of art, or otherwise stretched aesthetically by the performance.
- **Social bonding.** Refers to the feeling of connectedness with the rest of the audience and people in general.

WolfBrown conclude that: “Many factors influence the nature and extent of the imprint, including the participant’s “readiness to receive” the art, and the quality of the experience, which itself is affected by the nature of the art, the abilities of the artist, and also more prosaic factors such as the temperature in a gallery or the acoustics of a concert hall. Some experiences leave imprints that last a lifetime – and, then, there are those we sleep through.”

The *Values Study* funded by the Wallace Foundation in the United States<sup>4</sup> concluded that:

- The more creative control you have over an artistic experience, the more value it can yield.
- Value to the individual is not necessarily dependent on the level of knowledge, technical skill or competency with the art form.
- Many people have latent or “unactualized” interests in various art forms and activities.
- Personal connections with artists can bridge a relevance gap and ignite latent arts interests and inspire participation.

<sup>2</sup> Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly. *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience*, 1990, Harper & Row.

<sup>3</sup> WolfBrown (2007) *Assessing the Intrinsic Impacts of a Live Performance*. Engage.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Brown Associates (2004) *The Values Study: Rediscovering the Meaning and Value of Arts Participation*. Connecticut Commission on Culture and Tourism

## Feedback on the visitor experience

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Annabel Jackson Associates has carried out several evaluations of exhibitions<sup>5</sup> which have generally used indicators to measure six elements of the visitor experience:

- **Relevance.** A high quality experience is one where the art work is judged to be relevant by the participant or audience member. One of the inherent strengths of the arts is their openness to different interpretations, some intended by the creators, but some well beyond their intention or conception. Relevance can be in terms of the plot, characterisation, venue, or even one element of the presentation such as a costume or a colour. Relevance is defined, indeed created, by the audience member. This element is therefore, in part, asking about the extent to which the work engages the audience member sufficiently for them to make the mental effort to create relevance.
- **Depth, complexity.** This element is essential to explain the need for a funded arts sector. A high quality experience is one that challenges audience members as well as entertains them; it is one that encourages critical thought and makes space for dissonance.
- **Stimulation of feelings, thoughts, ideas.** The arts are sources of new ways of thinking, feeling, relating and acting. This process of inspiration gives a link to outcomes such as personal transformation, innovation, and social change.
- **Memorability.** If they are memorable, short contacts can have lasting effects. Memorability therefore provides an important bridge to outcomes. The arts have many inherent advantages in terms of memorability because they are unusual, interesting, thought-provoking, sense-based, and emotionally arousing. Memorability is a useful concept because it has potential explanatory value and is playing to the strengths of the arts.
- **Need fulfilment.** Annabel Jackson Associates developed a Theory of the Social Impact of the Arts that draws on Self Determination Theory to show how the arts meet the three Basic Psychological Needs, which are Autonomy, Competence and Relatedness. The arts generate Autonomy by helping participants through encouraging self-experience, individualism, a sense of choice, and problem solving activities. The arts generate Competence by developing sense-based ways skills, but also from the sense of achievement from unlocking an initially opaque experience. Relatedness comes from the sense of empathy, a feeling of belonging or group understanding or vicarious learning. The theory identifies sensory, emotional and cognitive mechanisms for each Basic Psychological Need and these provide a route to outcomes and impact.
- **Social multiplier.** Social multiplier is relates to the number of people audience members tell about an arts event. It gives a social, and active, dimension to memorability.

The six elements fall into three groups: relevance and depth/complexity consider the way the arts activity captures the audience member's attention. Stimulation of feelings, thoughts/ideas and memorability relate to the storing and recall of information about arts experiences. Need fulfilment and social multiplier happen are processed forms of the experience.

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<sup>5</sup> Annabel Jackson Associates (2006) *Social Impact of Artist Exhibitions: Two Case Studies*. Bristol: AHRC. <http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/About/Publications/Documents/Social%20Impact%20Exhibitions%20Web.pdf>. Annabel Jackson Associates (2007) *At Home in Renaissance Italy: An impact Case Study*. Bristol: AHRC. [http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/Documents/AHRC\\_Renaissance\\_Italy.pdf](http://www.ahrc.ac.uk/Documents/AHRC_Renaissance_Italy.pdf). Annabel Jackson Associates (2009) *Art in the Public and Digital Realms: Evaluation Toolkit*. Report to Arts Council England and Liverpool Biennial.

The pairings imply some of the trade-offs in arts experience: a highly relevant experience might be one that is less challenging: relevance might rely on familiarity, and depth might rely on newness or innovation. An event that triggers many personal feelings, thoughts and ideas might be less memorable in itself: the remembering might be itself transformative. An event that meets personal needs might be less readily communicated to others: its meaning might be highly private rather than public.

## Museum studies

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The museum literature emphasises the variation in the visitor experience. As Wright (2006) argues<sup>6</sup>: “There is no such thing as ‘the typical visitor’, and there is no single level [of motivation or knowledge] which can be expected and then addressed.”

Museum studies tend to describe the visitor experience as revolving around learning, albeit learning that is “free-choice”<sup>7</sup> and rather broadly defined: “Learning, particularly intrinsically motivated learning, is a rich, emotion-laden experience, encompassing much, if not most, of what we consider fundamentally human. At its most basic level, learning is about affirming self.”

Falk and Dierking (2000) suggest a Contextual Model of Learning, whereby learning is affected by:

- **The personal context.** What the visitor learns depends on their motivation and expectations, prior knowledge, interests and beliefs, the exercise of choice and the need to feel in control.
- **The sociocultural context.** Learning is affected by social interaction within any visitor group, between visitors groups, and with museum staff and volunteers. For example different members of a family might notice different exhibits and then create a shared learning experience through discussion. Family members might also notice and be influenced by the behaviour and conversations of other visitors. By answering questions and modelling effective inquiry strategies staff can increase the length of time visitors spend at individual exhibits and facilitate learning.
- **The physical context.** Visitors orient themselves in the space, responding subconsciously to the space, colour, shape and form of the museum environment, propelled by curiosity and perception of novelty. Learning is reinforced by sustained contact with the museum and by the individual’s own subsequent reflection. “In a very real sense, the knowledge and experience gained from museums is incomplete; it requires enabling contexts to become whole.”

Falk and Dierking conclude that “Individually and collectively, these eight factors contribute to the quality of a museum experience. When any of these eight is absent, meaning-making is more difficult.” Falk and Dierking emphasise the social nature of the museum experience: “The vast majority of visitors go to museums as part of social groups – groups with histories, groups that separately and collectively form communities of learners.... All social groups in museums utilize each other as vehicles for deciphering information, for reinforcing shared beliefs, for making meaning.”

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<sup>6</sup> Wright, Philip (2006) ‘The Quality of Visitors’ Experience in Art Museums’ in Vergo, Peter, *The New Museology*. Reaktion Books.

<sup>7</sup> Falk, John H and Dierking, Lynn D (2000) *Learning from Museums: Visitor Experiences and the Making of Meaning*. AltaMira Press.

British writers emphasise the additional dimension of power relations. For example, Hooper-Greenhill<sup>8</sup> (2000) comments that: "Visual culture within the museum is a technology of power. This power can be used to further democratic possibilities, or it can be used to uphold exclusionary values."

Serrell (2006) uses similar ideas to develop a measurement system based on work for the American Association of Museums<sup>9</sup>. The Visitor-centred Framework for Assessing the Excellence of an Exhibition has four elements:

- **Comfort.** Exhibitions are comfortable if they have: physical and conceptual orientation devices; convenient places to rest; appropriate lighting, temperature and sound; a high quality of maintenance; good ergonomics; clear choices and options so that the visitor feels in control of their own experience; identified authorship, biases, intent and perspectives; a welcome for people of different cultural backgrounds, economic classes, educational levels and physical abilities.
- **Engagement.** Exhibitions are engaging if: the physical environment looks interesting and inviting; the exhibits catch the attention and encourage the visitor to slow down and interact; exhibits are fun (challenging, amusing, intriguing, intellectually challenging etc); exhibits encourage and promote social behaviours; experiences come in a variety of formats; there are interesting things to do regardless of the visitor's prior knowledge or interests.
- **Reinforcement.** Exhibitions are reinforcing if: they are not overwhelming; challenging or complex experiences are structured to help visitors to build understanding; the presentation has a logic; the information and ideas in different parts of the exhibition are complementary and mutually reinforcing.
- **Meaning.** Exhibitions are meaningful if: exhibits are made relevant to the visitor's experience; the exhibition makes a case that its content has value; the exhibition content touches on universal human concerns and doesn't shy away from deep or controversial issues; the exhibition promotes change in people's thinking and feeling.

Pitman and Hirzy (2009)<sup>10</sup> describe a seven year programme of research at Dallas Museum which started with a three level model of engagement (awareness, appreciation and commitment), but moved away from this hierarchical view as it was a simplification of what they found. Instead the research found that visitors vary in their comfort levels, interpretation preferences and patterns of engagement. The research developed a segmentation that identified very different characteristics in four groups: enthusiasts, observers, independents and participants. The research led to clear practical recommendations about how to meet the needs of each group.

## Tourism

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The literature from the tourism and leisure sector is substantial. We offer a personal choice of material.

<sup>8</sup> Hooper-Greenhill (2000) *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*. Routledge.

<sup>9</sup> Serrell, B. (2006) *Judging Exhibitions: A Framework for Assessing Excellence*. Walnut Creek: Left Coast Press.

<sup>10</sup> Pitman, B. and Hirzy, E. (2009) *Ignite the Power of Art: Advancing Visitor Engagement in Museums*. Newhaven: Yale University Press and Dallas Museum.

Highmore (2002)<sup>11</sup> distinguishes two different states embodied in the term experience: the moment-by-moment lived experience and the evaluated experience structured through reflection. Cohen (1979)<sup>12</sup> adopts a multi-phase model of tourism experiences to give five stages: anticipation, travel to site, on-site activity, return travel and recollection. Quan and Wang (2004)<sup>13</sup> question the implicit assumption that tourist experiences are inherently peak experiences and instead suggest that the tourist experience is a combination of peak and routine experiences.

The concept of authenticity is discussed frequently in the literature. However, Wang's definition of existential authenticity as all elements of the tourist experience that lead to a real emotional or cognitive reaction, appears rather circular<sup>14</sup>.

Morgan et al. (2010)<sup>15</sup> comment that "memory is an important element in the tourist experience." However, the impact of memorability is not without its complexities. Morgan and Xu (2009)<sup>16</sup> found that student travellers did not intend to return to the places where they had the most memorable experiences, but rather to travel further afield.

Moscardo (2010)<sup>17</sup> summarises the features of events that research suggests are linked to positive experiences:

- A strong and coherent theme, clearly communicated.
- A positive and active narrative for the visitor.
- Perceived authenticity.
- Interactivity, participation and engagement so that visitors are co-creators.
- Unique, rare or novel features.
- Physical, mental and virtual access.
- Appeal to the different senses.
- Emotional charging.
- Opportunities for social interaction.
- Personal relevance.
- Total immersion.
- Opportunities for learning.

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<sup>11</sup> Highmore, B. (2002) *Everyday Life and Cultural Theory*. London: Routledge.

<sup>12</sup> Cohen, E. (2004) *Contemporary Tourism: Diversity and Change*. London: Elsevier.

<sup>13</sup> Quan, S. and Wang, N. (2004) Towards a structural model of the tourist experience: An illustration from food experiences in tourism. *Tourism Management* 25 (3) 297-305

<sup>14</sup> Wang, N (1999) Rethinking authenticity in tourism experience. *Annals of Tourism Research* 26 (2) 349-370

<sup>15</sup> Morgan, M., Lugosi, P. and Brent Ritchie, J.R. (2010) *The Tourism and Leisure Experience: Consumer and Managerial Perspectives*. Bristol: Channel View Publications.

<sup>16</sup> Morgan, M. and Xu, F. (2009) Student travel experiences, memories and dreams. *Journal of Hospitality and Management* 18 (2-3) 237-253

<sup>17</sup> Moscardo, Gianna (2010) in Morgan et al. (2010)

## The experience economy

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In a seminal book first published in 1998, Pine and Gilmore argue that the economy has passed through three stages: from commodities, to goods to services, and is now primarily about creating and selling experiences: “Experiences represent the basis of economic activity”. The Experience Economy has four main characteristics<sup>18</sup>:

- Products are mass customised – serving customers uniquely.
- Employers are proactively dedicated to serving customers. Pine and Gilmore compares a business to a theatre (“work is theatre”) where “companies must recognise that their employees are onstage.”
- Businesses find ways to charge for their time.
- Experiences create personal transformations.

“Each experience derives from the interaction between the staged event and the individual’s prior state of mind and being.”

Pine and Gilmore define engaging experiences as those that are:

- Multisensory.
- Participatory. Customers are active not passive.
- Cohesive.
- Personally meaningful.
- Shared with others.
- Intense and of some duration.
- New.
- Able to create altered states.
- Likely to generate appreciation.
- Memorable.

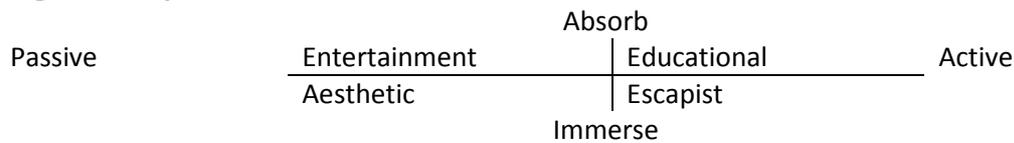
Pine and Gilmore particularly emphasise the value of newness and memory: “As the Experience Economy gears up, people look in new and different directions for increasingly unusual experiences” “Our belief is that no matter how it’s viewed, any dimension of enjoyment usually translates into the experience being more memorable.” The nature of memory means that particular importance should be attached to how the experience concludes. “A strong memory is not required for every experience, but the greater the (positive) memory created and the longer it lasts, the more value is created.”

Pine and Gilmore define four experience realms and suggest that the richest experiences encompass aspects of all four.

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<sup>18</sup> Pine, Joseph and James Gilmore, James (2011) *The Experience Economy*. Harvard Business Review Press.

**Figure 1: Experience realms**



Research has demonstrated repeatedly that purchasing experiences contributes more to wellbeing than purchasing goods<sup>19</sup>.

Other private sector work has suggested that there are four core competencies in creating strong customer experiences<sup>20</sup>:

- **Purposeful leadership.** Having and embedding clear values.
- **Employee engagement.** Briefing, supporting and measuring employees.
- **Customer connectedness.** Understanding and acting on information about the perspectives of customer groups.
- **Compelling brand values.** Communicating and delivering on values.

However, very few companies measure customer experience. A sample of 200 companies found that 84% measure customer satisfaction but only 10% have a more rounded system that includes customer emotions<sup>21</sup>.

### Customer service

The most commonly used (or adapted) tool to conceptualise service quality is SERVQUAL. Parasuraman et al. (1985)<sup>22</sup> initially identified 10 latent factors that determine the overall perception of service quality: reliability; responsiveness, competence, access, courtesy, communications, credibility, security, understanding/ knowing the customer and tangibles. Subsequent empirical work suggested that the public could only identify five factors, which became the dimensions of SERVQUAL<sup>23</sup>:

- **Tangibles.** The appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communications materials.
- **Reliability.** The ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately.
- **Responsiveness.** The willingness to help customers and provide prompt service.
- **Assurance.** The competence of the system and its credibility in providing a courteous and secure service.

<sup>19</sup> Carter, T and Gilovich, T (2010) The relative relativity of material or experiential purchases. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*.

<sup>20</sup> Temkin, B. (2010) *The Four Customer Experience Core Competencies*. <http://experiencematters.wordpress.com>

<sup>21</sup> Temkin, B. (2011) *State of CX metrics*. <http://experiencematters.wordpress.com>

<sup>22</sup> Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. & Berry, L. (1985) A Conceptual Model of Service Quality and its Implications for Future Research. *Journal of Marketing*, 49, 41-50.

<sup>23</sup> Parasuraman, A., Zeithaml, V. A. & Berry, L. L. (1988) SERVQUAL: A Multiple-Item Scale for Measuring Consumer Perceptions of Service Quality. *Journal of Retailing*, 64, 12-40.

- **Empathy.** The approachability, ease of access and effort taken to understand customers' needs.

There are versions of SERVQUAL for museums and heritage buildings<sup>24</sup>. In addition, the company World Class Service has applied its model of SERVQUAL in the cultural sector<sup>25</sup>.

## Conclusions

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Common themes associated with quality of experience are: relevance, high attention, personal meaning, sharing of experience and memorability. Common themes about possible determinants of quality of experience are: appeal to the senses, active involvement, social interaction, multiple interpretation, critical dialogue, newness. The literature includes themes such as coherence and authenticity which seem to limiting to artistic expression to apply to the arts.

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<sup>24</sup> Allen, E. (2001) Can the neglect of defining and evaluating service quality in museums be effectively addressed by Servqual? Unpublished MA thesis, mentioned in Black, Graham (2005) *The Engaging Museum: Developing Museums for Visitor Involvement*. London: Routledge.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.worldclassservice.co.uk/who>

## A DRAFT CONCEPTUALISATION

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### Criteria for a good conceptualisation of quality of experience

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The criteria suggested at the beginning still seem relevant.

A good conceptualisation needs to be flexible enough to be useful across the operation of Arts Council England:

- Relevant to different contexts.
- Relevant to different art forms.
- Relevant to different levels of familiarity with the arts.
- Relevant to current and future debates.

A good conceptualisation should be meaningful in the context of Arts Council England's role and philosophy. It should:

- Support the existence of a funded arts sector.
- Play to the arts' strengths.
- Link to outcomes like innovation or wellbeing.
- Be consistent with arts values.
- Imply trade-offs.

A good conceptualisation should be inclusive. It should be aware that:

- Arts experiences have a subconscious as well as a conscious effect.
- Arts experiences can be enjoyable but also uncomfortable or challenging.
- Quality of experience has a subjective meaning but would benefit from also defining some objective indicators.
- Quality of experience is individual but has a social context.

The review of ideas around quality of experience adds another criterion to this final category:

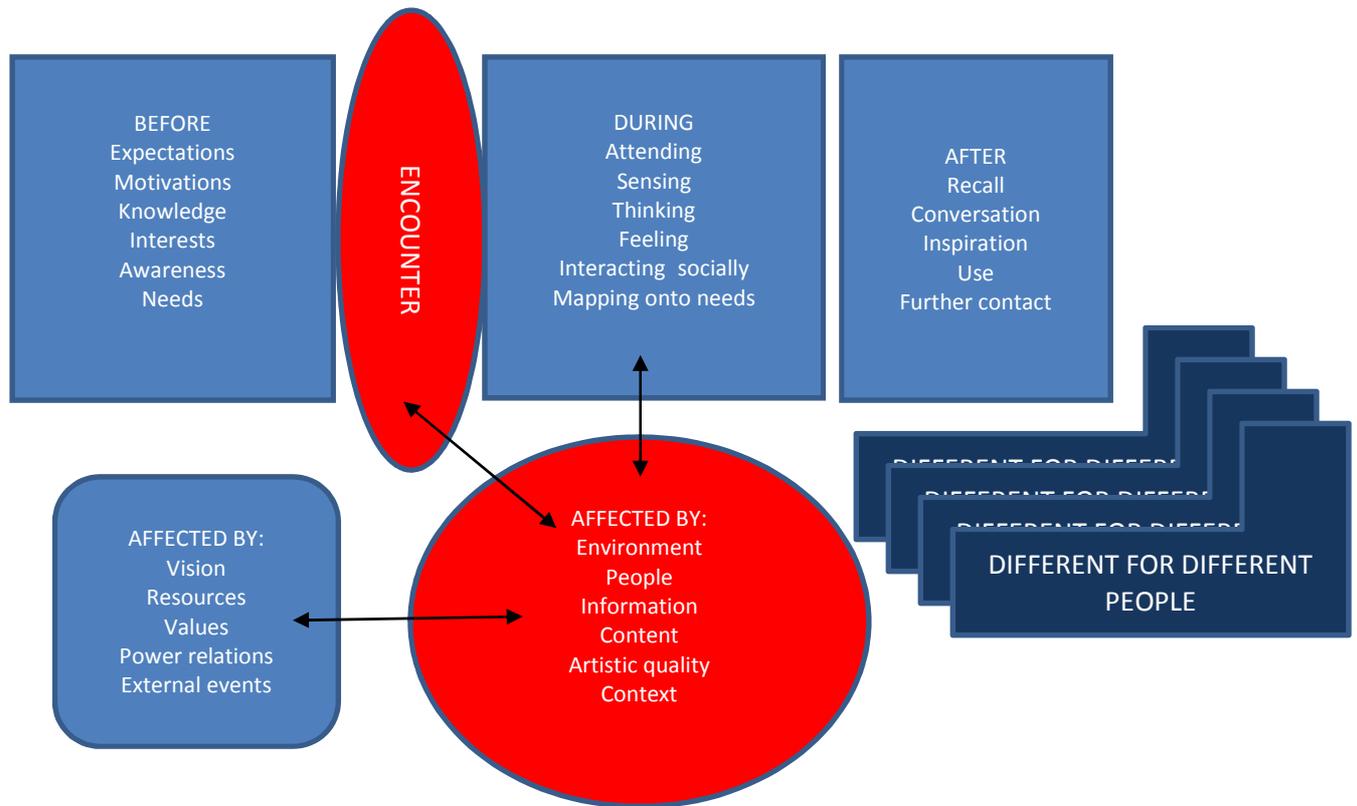
- A good conceptualisation should make explicit that experience develops through time.

### Draft model of experience

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It is important to conceptualise experience as having a time dimension. It is affected by the psychology of the individual and should not be assumed to relate only to events during contact with the art work. Reflecting on the different elements discussed in the previous section suggests this model of experience:

**Figure 2: A draft model of the arts experience**



Dimensions and determinants of quality

There are some challenges in evaluating quality of experience:

- It varies widely between visitors.
- It varies over time.
- It is only partly under the control of the arts organisation.
- It will and should vary with the artistic intent.

These challenges suggest that measurement is not impossible, but is likely to be partial.

A high quality experience has some of these characteristics:

Emotional element

A quality experience is one that arouses the emotions, that creates high attention and an altered emotional state. The emotional reaction could be positive or negative, high energy or low energy, comfortable or uncomfortable. A single art work could arouse similar emotions in the audience, or wildly different reactions. The emotions aroused could be familiar to the audience member or rare, emotions that the audience member seeks, or not. They could be life affirming or challenging.

Intellectual element

A quality experience is one that stimulates the mind and supports the creation of personal meaning. This could be in creating questions or answering them, or both. It could be in generating new ideas or making connections between ideas. It gives insight, whether in content, context or feelings. It gives ways of thinking, new constructs, but also new structures to meaning, especially more open or complex structures.

### Social element

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A quality experience brings people together, whether physically, emotionally, or intellectually. It creates an environment for the sharing of experience and feeling of connection to those delivering, sharing or inspiring the experience. It creates a context for appreciating community, but also draws attention to, and values, individuality and difference. There might be interaction with other audience members, staff, artists or other creators.

### Memorability

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Memorability provides a thread between experience and impact. Memorability can be conscious or subconscious (implicit). It can be factual, conceptual, visual, auditory or kinaesthetic.

The different elements are to some extent mutually-reinforcing. For example, emotional loading and intellectual processing strengthen memory and to recall.

### Desire to repeat or extend the experience

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A quality experience draws the visitor into the arts. However this path might not be straight or immediate. The visitor might not want to or be able to come back to the same venue. They might have an interest in the arts in general, or in making themselves, in this art form or another.

### Determinants

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Common themes about possible determinants of quality of experience are:

- Relevance.
- Welcoming environment.
- Appeal to the senses.
- Active involvement.
- Social interaction.
- Openness to interpretation.
- Critical dialogue.
- Newness.

Some of these might pull in different directions. For example a challenging piece might create an altered emotional state but not be personally meaningful. A highly relevant piece might not be particularly intellectually challenging. The literature includes themes such as coherence and authenticity which seem too limiting to apply to the arts.

### Experiences not experience

It is important that any model of quality of experience embraces variety rather than implying one way. Particularly important is an appreciation of the different contributions and values of the different art forms, and the richness that this overall mix provides.

## AN EXAMPLE: THE VISUAL ARTS

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### Introduction

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Our work is happening at the same time as Gill Nicol is running a series of training workshops and consultancies to help galleries engage with casual visitors. These two pieces of work are strongly complementary.

The visual arts should not, of course, be assumed to be solely visual.

### Characteristics of the visual arts experience

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The public engage with the visual arts in a great many different contexts and environments:

- In a dedicated gallery space.
- In other temporary spaces in or around arts buildings.
- In festivals.
- In public spaces.
- Online.
- Through marketing and learning materials such as leaflets, brochures and catalogues.

Visual art varies widely, with some having a similar form to performing arts. The general characteristics of the visual arts experience are that:

- Visual stimuli have a rapid, almost instant, and partly subconscious impact.
- It is generally free.
- Visitors are generally standing rather than sitting.
- Visitors walk through the space or past the art work at their own speed.
- Visitors can form their own groupings and change their groupings during the experience.
- Doors, if present, are open rather than closed as in a theatre.
- Timing is flexible rather than limited to specific viewings in the afternoon or evening.
- Lighting varies, but is not dark in the way it is in the theatre.
- Visual art can be purchased and taken home.
- It is multifocal.
- It is open ended.

Altogether these characteristics add up to a large amount of freedom.

## The value of the visual arts

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The Turning Point North by NorthWest report, *Why Arts Works* (2011)<sup>26</sup> mentions ten benefits of the visual arts:

- Creating better communities for people to live in.
- Changing the way that places look.
- Changing perceptions of places.
- Attracting talent, trade and investment.
- Attracting higher value tourists.
- Stimulating a creative economy.
- Connecting communities to the world (and vice versa).
- Engaging communities with other agencies.
- Changing the way people think, see and act.
- Creating art for its own sake – intrinsic worth.

Only benefit nine, and to some extent benefit ten relate to the quality of experience. It is important to understand that the benefits of the visual arts extend well beyond any features identified in a conceptualisation of the quality of visitor experience.

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<sup>26</sup> Rebanks Consulting Ltd (2011) *Why Art Works: The Value of the Contemporary Visual Arts in Lancashire and Cumbria*. Report to North by NorthWest. <http://www.harrismuseum.org.uk/why-art-works.html>

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## POSSIBLE METHODOLOGIES FOR EVALUATING QUALITY OF EXPERIENCE

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### Introduction

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A methodology to evaluate the quality of experience in the visual arts should be:

- Integrated into the day-to-day operations of the visual arts provider. This is general good practice in evaluation.
- Cost-effective.
- Contributory to rather than a distraction from the experience itself.
- Capable of being repeated frequently enough to provide insight into experiences for different types of events and contexts.

There are eight possible evaluation methods. We consider the strengths and weaknesses of each.

### Visitor panels

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A visitor panel would consist of a group of people from the target audience who agreed to take part in focus groups about the visitor experience. This group would be large enough e.g. 100+, to allow attendance at a focus group to be occasional, so spreading the work and broadening the viewpoint.

The strengths of the method are:

- The process of establishing a visitor panel could be helpful in itself. This could include making contact with residents' groups and other organisations who have links to the target audiences.
- Focus groups allow flexibility to explore the subject personally and in depth.
- Group discussion can stimulate debate.

The weaknesses of the method are:

- Focus groups require skilled facilitation.
- The results should not be used to compile quantitative measures.
- Views expressed in groups different from private reflections: they are socially constructed.

Our view is that visitor panels could be very useful for evaluating the quality of experience in the visual arts.

The practical issues to consider are:

- How should visitor panel groups be selected? Should they be from the broad population or from target groups?
- Who should facilitate the focus groups? Can this be done by a member of staff such as a learning officer?

- When should the focus groups be carried out? It would be more natural for participants to visit the exhibition individually or taken part in a public art process, before the focus group, rather than have a 'group tour' before the group. However, the organisation would need to check that the participants had attended the exhibition or had some experience of the public art process!
- How should the discussion be reported? This needs to balance objectivity and confidentiality with depth and insight.
- How often should visitor panels meet? We would recommend against evaluating every exhibitions. This leaves the question of whether panels should be held for key exhibitions (however defined), or a random sample of exhibitions?

### Paper questionnaires

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A questionnaire could be used to obtain feedback during the visitor experience.

The strengths of the method are:

- A large number of responses can be obtained relatively easily.
- Respondents can be selected rather than self-selecting, so reducing bias.
- Paper questionnaires can be easily integrated into day-to-day activity.

The weaknesses of the method are:

- Written questionnaires are not suited to complex or conceptual issues.
- Some people express themselves better verbally than on paper.
- It can be difficult to decipher handwriting or meaning.

Our view is that paper questionnaires deserve more attention as a method to evaluate the quality of experience in the visual arts. The practical issues to consider are:

- What questions should be asked? The questionnaire needs to be very short. Appendix Three describes a questionnaire that has been used in classical music concerts from which a small number of questions could be identified.
- How should questionnaires be analysed? It is important that answers are analysed systematically rather than simply reported as quotes.
- Which events should be selected for questionnaires? It is generally more impactful to choose a small number of events and obtain a large number of responses than to have a small number of responses for a large number of events.

### Interviews by invigilators

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Invigilators could interview a sample of visitors face-to-face.

The strengths of the method are:

- Face-to-face interviews allow for probing and clarification of meaning.
- The process could encourage discussion among other visitors.
- Visitors can point to art works instead of trying to identify or describe them.

The weaknesses of the method are:

- Using invigilators for interviewing is a distortion of their role. They might be more usefully deployed asking more open questions of visitors (as suggested in Gill Nicol's work).
- Results would not be particularly reliable. They would vary with the skills of the invigilator and the context of the interview.
- The context would not allow for detailed interviewing such as the use of cognitive maps.

Our view is that invigilators should talk to visitors to increase engagement, and should therefore be led by the interests of the visitor. Any evaluation should be integrated within this role and not impose rigidities upon it. The practical issues to consider are:

- How would invigilators select interviewees? Should they be given a quota of different demographic groups or asked to take a random sample (every x visitor).
- Would it be possible to include a control group? This would be a group of people who had not seen the exhibition.

### Survey of invigilators

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Invigilators could fill in a questionnaire about visitor behaviour.

The strengths of the method are:

- The method could make invigilators more aware of how visitors approach the art work.

The weaknesses of the method are:

- The invigilators' responses would be limited by their field of vision and attention.
- The task might not be welcomed by invigilators and would not yield high quality results if invigilators are not willing or enthusiastic participants.
- Behaviour is a manifestation of, but not the same as, quality of experience.

Our view is that invigilators' views would be better included by asking them to comment on summaries of results from other methods. This could seem more of a privilege than a chore.

### Observational measures

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The quality of experience could be evaluated by observation of the exhibition itself. This would be similar to Serrell's process described in the section on museum literature. Serrell's tool is reproduced in Appendix Five.

The strengths of the method are:

- This is a relatively fast process.
- Using a number of assessors would reduce the effect of personal bias.
- The method would encourage and give a systematic structure for discussion.
- The method would place the assessment in the hands of peer organisations.

The weaknesses of the method are:

- The assessors' perspective might differ from that of the target or actual visitors.
- The method could cause arguments between arts organisations.

The practical issues to consider are:

- What dimensions would be used?
- Who would carry out the visit?
- When should the form be filled in: during the visit or after the assessors have left the space?
- What is the role of discussion between the assessors?
- How many assessors should there be?
- Would the assessors need to be trained?
- How would the results be written up? It is important that reports would not be entirely quantitative.
- How would the results take account of the intentions and context of the exhibition?

### Telephone interviews

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Invigilators or other staff would have the job of compiling contact details for a larger telephone interview.

The strengths of the method are:

- Interviews can be carried out rigorously. The same questions can be asked in the same way, so yielding solid data.
- Telephone interviews provide time and opportunities for probing and clarification of meaning. They are well suited to personal subjects.
- Interviews carried out a month or more after the visit can measure memorability and reflection.

The weaknesses of the method are:

- There is some self-selection in the interview list.
- Telephone interviews are relatively time consuming.
- Telephone interviews can't use visuals.
- Telephone interviews are likely to be carried out by an individual or consultant at arms-length from arts organisation, which might reduce the scope for organisational learning.

Telephone interviews are more practical if the evaluation of outcomes and quality of experience are combined.

### Digital methods

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Digital methods could include:

- Online surveys.
- Interactive audio guides.
- Vox pop, such as opportunities to ask the artist questions.
- A telephone app.

The strengths of digital methods are:

- A relatively large number of people can be reached in a cost-effective way.
- The method can cover online engagement as well as visitors to a gallery or festival.
- The survey can include images from the art work to ensure responses are about the right event!
- The data entry task is removed (although data still need to be cleaned).

The weaknesses of the method are:

- Response rates can be low and biased.

Our view is that digital methods could be useful for evaluating the quality of experience in the visual arts, if they are carried out alongside complimentary methods.

The practical issues to consider are:

- How should the survey be publicised in order to stimulate response?
- What background information needs to be collected to identify biases in the sample?

## Conclusions

The choice of methods is partly dictated by the intended purpose, in particular the balance between learning and measurement:

- How quantitative do the results have to be? We suggest that the aim is to broaden and deepen the discussion about the quality of visitor experience. Use of quantitative measures, especially partial proxy measures could have the opposite effect, of closing down discussion.
- Is comparison between arts organisations needed? Arts organisations vary widely in aspirations, resources and contexts. It would be relatively complicated to produce a system that fairly captured all the contextual factors that should be taken into account in interpreting different measures of quality of experience. It is important that comparison is not unfair or punitive.
- Could the process be used to strengthen collaboration between arts organisations? Can visual arts organisations share resources? For example could a skilled facilitator from one organisation lead a visitor panel at another?
- How should any evaluation of quality of experience relate to other evaluation an arts organisation is carrying out, such as that on outcomes? It makes financial sense to integrate quality of experience with outcome evaluation if the organisation is using telephone interviews. During the consultation, arts organisations emphasised the importance of not over-surveying audiences and giving arts organisations too much work.
- How often should quality of experience evaluation be carried out? We always recommend a focused approach to evaluation: evaluating one exhibition or event a year to a high standard

would be preferably to attempting to evaluate all exhibitions or events and thereby staining the organisations and producing lower quality results.

## CONCLUSION

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There are two broad purposes for evaluation: accountability and learning. Arts Council England has already defined its system for accountability. The performance dimensions (KPIs) for the national portfolio organisations are: excellence, audience data, engagement and reach, digital content, and contributed income. Quality of experience is not included in this list, which is entirely appropriate given its complexity. We recommend against seeking a quantitative resolution to the discussion of quality of experience. While quantification is useful for internal precision, to allow comparison over time and between peers, such measurements should not be end results in themselves.

There is a concern in the sector that the tightening of funding will lead to a more a punitive approach to evaluation which will squeeze out learning. Arts Council England has defined a clear structure for accountability. To give balance it could also provide a structure for learning. Quality of experience would fit well in this structure, as a concept with broad relevance and potentially rich insight. Quality of experience would not be the only dimension of a learning evaluation system of course. We would suggest that other dimensions should include value for money, organisational strength (including resilience), and artist development.

The learning system would support the KPIs. Discussion of quality of experience would support work on engagement, although the two are not the same. High quality of experience does not necessarily lead to a greater engagement with the arts organisation that orchestrated the high quality of experience. It might lead to engagement elsewhere within the arts, or to a temporary disengagement for reflection, and engagement after a period of time. It is tempting to think of engagement as a steady, even linear relationship, the development of a relationship. However, quality of experience is likely to be far more complex in part because of subjectivity and because of the role of, and reaction to, challenge and provocation.

The optional next stage of this work would be to pilot methods for evaluating quality of experience. We suggest piloting these three methods: citizens' panel, observation measure, and written survey. Ideally the next stage would develop these methods and then test them with three visual arts organisations: a gallery, a small organisation and a non-gallery organisation such as a festival or public arts organisation.