Museum Accessibility: Combining Audience Research and Staff Training

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Abstract  This article discusses an audience-informed professional development model that combines audience research focus groups and staff training that includes interaction and direct feedback from visitors, in this case, visitors with low vision. There are two critical components to this model: one is that museums’ programming decisions are informed by the focus groups of visitors and future visitors; the second critical component is that local visitors and art lovers who are blind and have low vision played active roles in the museum trainings. Art Beyond Sight, the Museum of Science, Boston, and seven art museums piloted this unique model of professional development. Here we discuss their experiences in the planning of focus groups and staff trainings, and some of the museum staff and docents’ early feedback.

When we think about learning in museums, we generally think of a model where we, the museum professionals, guide visitors in their learning. What happens when we turn the tables and place visitors in the role of experts? Last year, Art Beyond Sight (ABS), the Museum of Science, Boston (MOS), and seven art museums across the nation set out to pilot a professional development approach that is informed by learning from an audience that has traditionally been underrepresented in museums — visitors who are blind or have low vision. This project is part of ABS’s Multi-site Museum Accessibility Study. Among participating sites were San Francisco MOMA (SFMOMA), Seattle Art Museum (SAM) the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston (MFAH), New York’s Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum and Brooklyn Museum, the National Gallery in Washington, D.C., and the Indianapolis Museum of Art.\(^1\)
Audience Research Meets Professional Development

This audience-informed professional development model combined audience research focus groups and staff training that included interaction and direct feedback from the visitors with low vision. There are two critical components to this model. One is the museum’s programming decisions; decisions of what tools to use in the galleries, when to offer the program, how to reach out to the community, and whom to train at the museum, were informed by the focus groups of visitors and future visitors. The second critical component is that the ABS team that conducted two trainings at the museums, a general Disability Awareness training and a Verbal Description and Multi-sensory Tools training, partnered with local visitors and art lovers who are blind and have low vision. Active participation of museum visitors with disabilities at the ABS workshops provided an opportunity for museum staff to hear first-person accounts and ask tough questions. During the Multi-sensory Tools workshop, museum staff and docents got to practice verbal description and fine-tune their skills based on the immediate and candid feedback of blind and visually impaired patrons. This article summarizes our experience in planning the focus groups and staff trainings, and incorporates some of the early feedback gathered by staff members at ABS. An evaluation of the long-term impacts of the full professional development program is currently being conducted by the Museum of Science, Boston, the results of which are not yet available for inclusion in this report.

Mark O’Neil, in his article on disability and advancing museum practice, writes: “No one can imagine another’s life well enough to develop services for them without involving them directly in that development ... True empathy means knowing the limits of empathy and the need to learn from witnesses.” Learning directly from visitors who are blind or have low vision is essential, as only they are truly aware of what their needs are, what assets they bring with them to the museum, and what they are looking for from a museum experience. Learning by working with people with disabilities has been shown to have a profound impact on the work of education professionals. An evaluation that George Hein conducted of a professional development program for science museums found that working with people with disabilities was one of the key ways the participating professionals learned about accessible practices in the program. Studies from the field of formal education similarly show that when teachers work directly with students with disabilities, it deeply
Focus Groups as Learning Experiences

Much has been written about the role that focus groups can play in shaping the direction of museum exhibits and programs. Articles have even been written about the role focus groups have played in informing the accessibility of future exhibits and programs. Such writings, however, infrequently highlight how focus groups can serve as a tool for professional learning and development. Within the larger evaluation field outside of museums, however, it has long been acknowledged that evaluation practices can serve as a method for facilitating professional and organizational learning. Building upon such an understanding — that evaluation practices can serve as a tool for professional learning, and findings that working directly with people with disabilities is a powerful way to foster educator learning about accessible practices in particular. The Multi-site Museum Accessibility Study purposefully set out to include focus groups with visitors who are blind or have low vision as part of the professional learning experience for the participating museum professionals.

Before hosting the focus groups, we needed to ensure that the design of the focus groups was accessible and comfortable for people who are blind or have low vision and make some adjustments to traditional focus group protocols. Rather than relying exclusively on nametags or placards to enable participants to address each other, participants were asked to verbally provide their first name and information about themselves to all participants at the start of the focus group, thus enabling everyone in the room an opportunity to hear names and voices connected together at the beginning of the experience. Staff members present during the focus groups were also asked to introduce themselves so that participants could be aware of everyone in the room. In addition, if participants were asked to provide a visual representation of their stance on a particular issue (such as raising hands if they had visited a particular museum before), the focus group leader was instructed to provide an unobtrusive and quick description of such data (for example, “OK, I see that seven people raised their hands”). Given that it would be difficult to share print-based materials during the focus group, when participants were asked to comment on programmatic descriptions, the descriptions were read aloud, kept brief, and often repeated to work within the limitations of auditory working memory. Consent forms were also provided in regular print, large print, and Braille at the beginning of the focus group.

In addition to making sure that the design of the focus group was accessible,
from current and future museum visitors were represented. We worked with local disability groups to recruit eight to 12 adults of various ages, with varied levels of vision loss, various backgrounds and previous museum experience. All of the participants identified as having some interest in the arts and culture. Julie Charles, Associate Curator, Education, SFMOMA, pointed out during discussions with staff members at ABS that unlike most audience research that is done with people who visit the museum, these focus groups included not just museum patrons, but people who don't come or haven't visited for a long time. She felt that the most telling feedback came from people reflecting on why they stopped visiting the museum and what museums can do to bring them back. Another critical function of focus groups, Charles noted, is eliminating the intermediary. "What I appreciated most about these focus groups was that we invited the 'users,' not people who represented the users ... That was truly valuable."

Museum Visitors Speak Out

At most of the sites where the professional development took place, focus groups were held on the first day of the training with visitors who were blind or have low vision. Some participants from those focus groups continued to be present during the second of day of training, which addressed the topics of disability awareness, techniques for verbal description, and tools for facilitating multi-sensory learning. The focus group sessions served as places for open discussions, where museum professionals could hear the candid opinions of museum experiences as expressed by visitors who are blind or have low vision. Used in this way, the focus groups created a space where empathy and learning from the audience could meet.

One of the key lessons we all learned from the focus groups was that a loss of vision is not connected with a loss of interest in art and museums. The focus group participants expressed interest and desire to participate in museum experiences. As stated by one focus group participant: "To me the museum is more than an hour and half experience ... I am going to milk it, so yes, the cafeteria, gift store, outside grass, hang out spots, [are] all important. I am going to luxuriate in the world of art." An Indianapolis participant specifically described himself as "an art connoisseur; I just can't always see it." A partially sighted art collector from New York
lost his sight: “I realized I was looking more carefully than I did a few years ago, and looking at details more carefully ... It was very interesting because I actually got more out of it ... It was the detail that I appreciated more than I had before.” Not all focus group participants were art connoisseurs; for some, museums presented opportunities for spending time with friends and family. For others, museums facilitated powerful learning experiences; they generated new insights, and provided opportunities for contemplation and immersion.

**Listening is Part of Empathy**

Focus group participants' experiences in museums, however, were not always positive. Across focus groups, visitors who were blind or have low vision reported that they often feel unwelcome, and even worse, unsafe when visiting art museums. For some, the absence of accessible experiences made them feel that museums were not worth the effort to visit. Worse still, however, was that certain participants described experiencing a loss of “dignity” in museums or feeling like a “criminal” when reprimanded by museum staff, especially security guards, who did not understand their needs.

Also troubling to hear was that the design of museums sometime creates situations that can lead to physical or emotional harm. A participant in San Francisco noted: “I understand the aesthetics, but if you can’t see the door ...” A partially sighted New Yorker was shocked by labeling at an exhibit, noting, “the text was utterly ridiculous. It was so low contrast — gray ink on mauve paper — it was absurd ... insulting, and it would be difficult for anyone, let alone someone with low vision.” Another participant described a humiliating and dangerous experience where she tripped on stairs that were not properly designed, and one visitor even reported being injured when visiting a museum that used glass walls in a dimly lit area.

These negative experiences, although tough to hear at times, were important learning experiences for all of us in the museum community. Part of the focus group protocol for museum staff and facilitators was to suspend one’s judgment, listen to participants' perceptions, understand the museum reality as the visitor perceives it, and resist a temptation to correct or explain. Charles also said that it was important to “get comfortable with the fact that you may be uncomfortable.” Part of the learning curve, Charles noted, is accepting
Lessons Learned from the Audience

An encouraging lesson learned through these focus groups was that when we do take actions to include museum visitors who are blind or have low vision, our actions are noticed. Focus group participants reported that they treasured meaningful gallery experiences with docents and educators. One Brooklyn visitor vividly recalled a docent experience she had as a part of a field trip with a school for the blind some 60 years ago. Some enjoyed interpretive and contextual information, others opportunities for dialogue. An Indianapolis resident said: “There is nothing in my opinion that has ever beaten a really good guide. Everywhere that we have ever been, a really good guide can make or break [the experience].” Participants described wanting more of such experiences, hoping that in the future more docents would provide the kind of descriptive depictions that would allow visitors with low vision to be properly engaged with the content.

Visitors who are blind and museum professionals had a chance to reflect on one of the most critical lessons we can keep in mind as we work to improve museum experiences for people with disabilities — that changes made to improve the experience for visitors who are blind or have low vision may also enhance the experience for all visitors. This lesson was heard and embraced by some of the museum professionals who listened in on these focus groups. “It’s great for an educator to lead a tour for people with vision loss,” Victoria Ramirez, then the W.T. and Louise J. Moran Education Director at MFAH, informed us at ABS, “because it really challenges you to think about how you share information and helps your teaching outside of this experience.”

Participating docents, educators, and other staff members indicated that they felt higher levels of confidence and comfort in dealing with this new audience as a result of the professional development. They noted that the training experience and especially direct and candid feedback from the visitors with low vision helped them “break stereotypes,” “demythologize disability,” understand that “it is okay to make a mistake in communication,” and not be afraid to offer assistance. “In many ways you become less intimidated,” Ramirez noted. “I think had it not been for the focus group ... and the workshop that followed it,” she said, “we would certainly not have had the confidence to not only put together our program for people with vision loss, but to reach out to this audience and really talk about the benefits of coming to the museum and what we can offer.” Most docents and staff who submitted their post-training feedback
practicing the skills taught at the workshops. Some also expressed the need for more practice and more feedback from the audience.

A meaningful and lasting aspect of this professional development for some participating museums was not the knowledge gained, but instead the new relationships that have been formed. The SAM's Sandra Jackson-Dumont, Kayla Skinner Deputy Director of Education and Public Programs and Adjunct Curator, said: “What was richer and deeper were the strategic partnerships that came out of it. People became aware that we cared deeply about what they said.”

One of the hallmarks of a successful professional development is its sustained effect within an institution, which we see in ongoing conversations among educators, docents, security and front line staff. Ramirez noted that the interactions that began at these trainings continued: “We have constant conversations with our security staff about how we can provide visitors with the kind of participatory experience that we want them to have, yet, on the other hand, keep all of the visitors in the museum and the art safe.”

ABS will be piloting this professional development approach with a number of small and medium-size museums around the country that are working to create programs accessible to visitors who are blind and have low vision at their institutions. We will then be revising these professional development and audience research materials based on the feedback from this group of museums. All of the materials from the project, including the focus group script, full report, Disability and Inclusion Training materials and Verbal Description Training materials are available online for any museum interested in testing this approach (http://www.artsbeyondsight.org/mei/).

**Eight recommendations for museums and arts agencies:**

The prospect of creating accessible experiences for people who are blind or have low vision can feel daunting. Here are key recommendations that, for the most part, are not costly to implement:

1. **Provide a variety of programs to accommodate the diverse interests and needs of visitors who are blind or have low vision.** Avoid the mistake of building your program around the experience of just one or two individuals; don’t assume that two people can represent the population. Tours (live or audio), tactile experiences, art-making opportunities, and large-print and/or Braille brochures are a few of the offerings you might consider.

2. **Improve the visit-planning process for patrons with low vision by making the most of legible and usable information available through either phone
menus or accessible websites. Schedule accessible programs when the galleries are not busy. Take public transportation schedules into account, or work with community groups to provide transportation to the museum. Offer reduced ticket prices and/or complimentary passes for sighted companions to alleviate participants' concerns about the cost of a museum visit.

3. Provide Disability Awareness Training for all staff that interacts directly with visitors. Staff members, including docents, shop and café workers, receptionists, and guards should be aware of the needs of people with disabilities.

4. Train museum staff to give verbal descriptions. Educators and visitor services staff members should be able to use verbal description and descriptive language when describing exhibitions or museum spaces. Prepare them to provide touch tours and tactile experiences with artifacts, models, and replicas, and provide other multisensory learning opportunities, such as music, movement, art-making, and hand-on learning.

5. Make use of technology and universal design, which pertains to clear intuitive layouts, high contrast in graphics, clearly marked entrances and amenities, and sufficient lighting. Provide information about the museum's physical layout in brochures and audio guides.

6. Do more than make one particular area accessible. Trainings can contribute to organizational change by making sure that multiple departments are informed about welcoming visitors with vision loss.

7. Involve the community and end-users in program design and outreach. Form partnerships with local organizations comprised of people with vision loss and/or people that serve this audience effectively. Form an advisory board of local people who are blind or have low vision. They will help spread the word about your accessible museum.

8. Create a welcoming environment and engaging learning experiences for ALL. By making your collection and spaces accessible to people with low vision, you will create a more inclusive and universally engaging environment for everyone.

Notes

1. National Gallery conducted only a focus group. At the Guggenheim the training took place prior to the focus group.