

VOLUNTEERS AS HOSTS AND GUESTS IN MUSEUMS

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes two arguments: first, that volunteering in museums can be considered an extension of visiting; and second that museum volunteers act as both hosts and guests within the tourism industry. Volunteers are an extremely important resource to museums worldwide, as they undertake front of house roles, where they facilitate the visitor experience. This paper argues that volunteers themselves are a part of the museum's audience, with volunteers forming a link between more conventional visitors and paid staff. There is a clear link between volunteer motivation and the reasons that people give for visiting a museum and both museum volunteers and visitors share many personal characteristics, although they are usually at different stages in their lives. The relationship between visiting and volunteering is mapped out on a continuum of museum visiting, which visitors and volunteers can move in both directions, depending on their life stage and personal interest. Finally, the paradoxical role of volunteers as both hosts and guests is considered.

Keywords: volunteers, visitors, museums, heritage centre

INTRODUCTION

Museums worldwide are very dependent on volunteers. For example, studies have found that nine out of ten museums in the United Kingdom involve volunteers (Resource 2002) and it is estimated that they outnumber paid staff 2:1 (Creigh-Tyte & Thomas 2001). In Australia it is estimated that volunteers outnumber paid staff by approximately 2.5:1 (AusStats 2004). In Canada, Canadian Heritage estimates that volunteers comprise 65% of the workforce in museums (Canadian Museums Association 2001). Museum volunteers in the United States even have their own association: the American Association of Museum Volunteers. Additionally, volunteering is common in museums and historic attractions in countries as diverse as Japan, Mexico, New Zealand, Greece and Taiwan.

Volunteers take on a range of roles including front-of-house, administration, hospitality, ticket sales, conservation and work to enhance the quality of a person's visit. Many museums are entirely run by volunteers, with a quarter of museums in the UK having no paid staff (Holmes 1999). Even where museums do have paid staff, when they are registered as charities they will still be governed by volunteer trustees. In studies of museum volunteering a distinction is made between behind the scenes volunteers, who may help with administration or documenting collections, and front of house volunteers who have direct contact with the visitors. Evidence suggests that front of house activities are increasing and becoming by far the biggest area of volunteer involvement (British Association of Friends of Museums 1998). Over half (56%) of museum volunteers in Australia assisted as museum or gallery attendants and security officers with a further 22% assisting as managers, administrators and clerical support workers (AusStats 2004). This increase in front of house workers mirrors movements within the museums sector to become more visitor focused, rather than object centred (Edwards 2005a; Weil 1997). Front of house roles have also developed significantly from early days as unpaid security wardens. Indeed in Australia, Canada and the United States, volunteers often undertake up to a year of training or college level education before they can act as volunteer teachers, guides or interpreters.

As museum volunteers have become more visible to visitors, so the literature on volunteering has grown. There are two conflicting views of volunteering within museums. Volunteers themselves have been regarded as an economic resource, while sociologists have argued that volunteering is actually a leisure activity. The economic model has dominated in most Western countries and has been implemented through a style of management, which views volunteers as unpaid workers. This is called a 'professional' approach to volunteer management that seeks largely to replicate personnel practices with a volunteer workforce (Cunningham 1999) and is characterised by a top-down approach to management. A number of both external and internal influences to the museums sector have promoted this professional approach. For example, greater calls for public sector organisations to be more accountable and demonstrate competent management practice has led publicly funded museums to adopt a more professional approach to all areas of management, including museums (Edwards & Graham 2006a; Kawashima 1999; Kelly et al. 2003; Kotler & Kotler 2001). In addition, concern over the reliability of voluntary workers has led some museums to ask their volunteers to sign contracts or agreements.

In contrast to the economic model, the leisure model views volunteering as a leisure activity. This approach finds its origins in the UK with Bishop and Hoggett's study of voluntary leisure groups (1986), but this premise has been developed further by studies of volunteers in various leisure sectors (Graham 2000; Holmes 2001; Jarvis & King 1997). Leisure researchers divide all the time available in the day into four categories: paid work; work-related time, such as travel; obligatory time, such as sleeping and unobligated free time. Since volunteering is not paid work, they argue that it takes place within the last category of unobligated free time, the same category as leisure. Museum volunteers are predominantly older, retired people often over the age of 60 (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2001; British Association of Friends of Museums 1998; Edwards & Graham 2006a). This suggests that museum volunteers may fit the leisure model better. Indeed similar to Stebbins (1996), Edwards (2005a) in a study of volunteers who contribute their time to large Australian museums found that these volunteers can be considered as serious leisure volunteers; people who are directed by primary interests, obligations, and personal needs which they hope to satisfy while volunteering. Consequently "people look to volunteer in organizations in which they can pursue their needs and interests" (Edwards 2005a, p. 10). Further, she states that this "raises the notion of self-interestedness, turning the focus onto the volunteer and what they get out of volunteering rather than the contribution they make to the wider community" (Edwards 2005b, p. 22). These arguments are gaining consensus as Orr (2006, p. 206) states "museum volunteers are participating in self-generated leisure consumption, gaining access to the museum social world in order to reap the rewards of serious leisure".

MUSEUM AUDIENCES: THE VISITORS

A number of audience participation studies have been undertaken on museum visitors. The aim of these studies is to understand why people visit museums in order to develop programs and exhibitions that meet audience expectations and provide satisfying visitor experiences. Audience studies tend to focus on who visits and compiling lists of reasons to visit. Although the demographics of museum visitors varies depending on the subject matter of the museum (Kirchberg 1996) visitors are generally highly educated, with professional or intermediate occupations and the people most likely to visit are in the age range 35-44 years (Davies 1994; MORI 2001; Prince 1990; Richards 2001). This indicates a high number of family visitors with young children.

Thyme (2001) found visitors' reasons for attending museums included educational interest, to be with family, to take their children to see something new, to enjoy a day out and to escape from their daily routine. A study of older visitors (Kelly et al. 2003) established that this visitor segment have a clear knowledge of what their interests are, hold museums as part of their self-

perceptions and value museums strongly. In particular, older people visit museums to learn, take other visitors and grandchildren, to enjoy a social outing with a friend or partner, for entertainment, because they have a strong interest in the topic, to keep up-to-date, and to engage with their special interest. Debenedetti (2003) stated that people's reasons for visiting a museum included sociability, mutual enrichment, recreational outing with family or friends, reassurance through companionship, prestige, and to transfer knowledge between parents and children.

Key reasons for visiting have been identified as opportunities for learning and opportunities for socialising which Debenedetti notes can be combined especially in family visits. Museum visitors in Taiwan are predominantly motivated by the opportunity to learn as well as enjoying a low cost leisure day out (Lin 2005). The importance of learning as a motivation to visit cultural attractions (including museums) was highlighted in the ATLAS surveys of cultural tourism in Europe, where the most frequently cited reasons for visiting were to experience and to learn new things (Richards 2001). The social significance of museum visiting has been noted by several researchers (Debenedetti 2003; Dierking 1994; Goulding 2000; Hicks 2005; Hood 1994; Kotler & Kotler 2001; McManus 1988). McManus argues that museum visiting is not only a social experience, but that visiting as part of a group makes the visit much more enjoyable, while Hood (1983) and Debenedetti (2003) agree that the social element is particularly important for occasional museum visitors. In addition, evidence suggests that the social interaction between a group during a museum visit greatly enhances learning (Dierking 1994; McManus 1994).

Hood has developed the theorization of visitors' motives further. She argues that there are six attributes we all look for in an enjoyable leisure activity, which she based on a study of visitors at the Toledo Art Museum (Hood 1983). There is no ranking between these characteristics, they are, according to Hood, equally important components of an enjoyable leisure experience. If we expect to find these at a museum then we will visit a museum, rather than another leisure attraction. These attributes include both social interaction and the opportunity to learn and are listed in Box 1.

Box 1
Six Characteristics of an Enjoyable Leisure Experience

- challenge of new experiences
- doing something worthwhile
- feeling comfortable in one's surroundings
- opportunity to learn
- participating actively
- social interaction

Hood (1983, p. 51)

The likelihood of a person expecting to find these in a museum is related to demographic factors such as level of education, social class, a general interest in culture and the accumulation of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991). It is also dependent on how far an individual is introduced to museum visiting as an enjoyable leisure activity in childhood, through the process of socialisation

Visitors have been divided into segments depending on their frequency of visit (Hood 1994; Merriman 1991; Prentice & Beeho 1997). Merriman provides the widest range of categories, classifying visitors into frequent, regular, occasional, rare and non-visitors. Frequent visitors will go to a museum three or more times a year, whereas a rare visitor last visited a museum more than four years ago. A non-visitor has never visited a museum. Visitors in these different groups also have different lifestyle characteristics (Hood 1994; Merriman 1991). Frequent visitors are most likely to have a high level of education, to have professional occupations and

to be regular cultural consumers. Kirchberg (1996) in a study of museum visitation in Germany draws together different types of museums in conjunction with visitor characteristics. He argues that there is a “continuum of social and demographic characteristics, from the 'high culture' museum visitor through the 'popular' museum visitor to the museum non-visitor” (p. 256). High culture is differentiated as art museums and natural history represents the ‘popular’ museums. Similar to other researchers, he has observed social and demographic contrasts between non-visitors and visitors of museums. That is, the higher a person’s education, employment and affluence the more likely it is that they will visit a museum and will predict the type of museum they visit. Kirchberg calls for more research in this area to support this argument.

MUSEUM AUDIENCES: THE VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers have been described as active visitors (McIvor & Goodlad 1998) and Smith found that visiting can lead to volunteering (2003). Recently museum volunteering has been considered as an extension of visiting (Holmes 2003; McIvor & Goodlad 1998; Smith 2003) as museum volunteers have been found to share many of the same characteristics as visitors. They are both typically highly educated, have professional or clerical occupations and have a general interest in culture. Lifestyle characteristics and frequency of visiting, however, only tell one side of the story. Holmes (2003) identified a link between visiting and volunteering when she found a similarity between Hood’s (1983) six characteristics of an enjoyable leisure experience with the benefits reported by respondents to two surveys of volunteers conducted in the UK. Volunteers do tend to be older than visitors, so although both groups are similar, they are at different stages in their life cycle. This suggests that volunteering may be a form of visiting that is more concentrated. The link between visiting and volunteering is also evident within volunteers’ motivations. The National Trust for England and Wales are the largest involver of volunteers within the heritage sector in the UK. In 1997 they surveyed 723 volunteers across their different properties and activities. The respondents reported that the most important benefits they gained from volunteering were:

- I really enjoy it (98% of respondents)
- I meet people and make friends through it (85%)
- It gives me a sense of personal achievement (78%)
- It gives me a chance to do things I am good at (74%)
- It broadens my experience of life (73%)

Only 12% of respondents reported that they hoped it would lead to full time (paid) employment. These findings are supported by volunteer respondents to a second survey conducted by the British Association of Friends of Museums (1998), who, in a study of training and management of volunteers across the UK heritage sector, stated that the most important reason for volunteering was to do something enjoyable. Holmes’ own fieldwork with 222 volunteers at museums and heritage attractions in the UK, found that the most important benefits gained from volunteering were opportunities for social interaction with paid staff, fellow volunteers and visitors; enjoyment of the activities and the museum environment and recreation (Holmes 2003). Similarly Edwards (2006b) reported that museum volunteers enjoyed satisfying an interest, feeling competent to do the work, being able to use their skills and opportunities for social interaction were benefits gained from volunteering in museums. Volunteering is not a form of unpaid work experience rather it is a leisure activity, which involves gaining access to museums and heritage attractions, their staff’s expertise and their collections at a level that is often denied the casual visitor.

Motivation of museum volunteers can be said to have eight underlying dimensions: personal needs, relationship network, self-expression, available time, social needs, purposive needs, free time, and personal interest (Edwards 2005a). Of these eight dimensions personal needs were found to be the strongest dimension and reflected a person’s need to broaden their horizons,

vary their regular activities and do something that for them they were interested in, in an organization that they considered to be prestigious (Edwards 2005b). Here volunteers are expressing an intrinsic motivation that drives their behaviour. Intrinsic motivation is a natural motivation that emerges spontaneously out of person's need for competence and autonomy (Reeve 2005). It is a drive to realise competence and autonomy in their self-interests that push volunteers to seek out organizations that reflect their interests, and in which they perceive they can satisfy their needs (Edwards 2005b). Volunteering in these institutions helps people to translate their needs into tangible outcomes and they will choose "to visit a particular place at an in-depth level rather than many more at the relatively superficial level of the average visitor" (Holmes 2003, p. 352). Many of the reasons for volunteering reported here are identical or similar to those reported within the audience research literature. This discussion is represented in Table 1 which reflects the commonalities between volunteers and visitors with respect to their characteristics, motivations, and benefits gained.

Table 1
Comparison of Volunteer and Visitor Participation in Museums

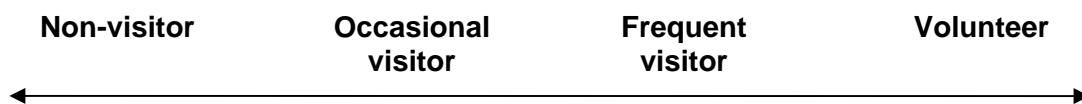
Visitors	Volunteers
Characteristics	
Generally educated	High level of education
Professional occupations	Professional or clerical occupations
Motivations and benefits sought	
Interest in culture	Special interest in culture, science, history, art
Challenge of new experiences	Enjoy their experience of volunteering
	Broadens their experience of life
Doing something worthwhile	Doing something they are good at
	Personal achievement
Feeling comfortable in one's surroundings	Immerse themselves in the culture of the museum
Opportunity to learn	Want to use their skills, broaden their skills, learn new skills
Participating actively	Satisfying an interest
Social interaction	Want to meet people and make friends
Take their children for an educational experience/transfer knowledge between parents and children	Continue to educate children about culture, science, history, art
	Early socialization to museums
Prestige	Volunteer for an organization that is prestigious
Values	
Culturally socialized	Culturally socialized
Museum is highly valued	Ensure museums continued to be valued
Passion for history, science, culture, art	Passion for preserving history, science, culture, art

As such these findings support Holmes' (Holmes 2003) argument that there are a number of similarities between museum and cultural heritage centre volunteers and visitors that require further consideration.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

This line of argument does not mean that volunteers are the same as visitors but rather they may form a distinct group of a museum's audience (Holmes 2003). As volunteers belong to one organisation they could be viewed as the definitive visitor who has ready access to their area of interest and is concerned with supporting and communicating that interest. Drawing together the lines of discussion in this paper volunteering could be considered at the extreme end of the continuum of visiting that includes non-visitors, infrequent visitors, frequent visitors and volunteers (Holmes 2003). Non-visitors could have a complete lack of interest even though they may live just around the corner from a museum: the place is not established in people's minds (Kawashima 1999) or the non-visitor may be poorly educated and unemployed, thereby placing them in the market segment least likely to visit museums for leisure. The occasional visitor is perhaps driven by curiosity and a desire for entertainment, they would have a knowledge of the museum and may visit high profile exhibits and special programs. They could be referred to as the *cultural window shopper* (Treinen 1993). The frequent visitor would have a desire to educate themselves, and in addition to regular visits, may also attend formal lectures or courses. They are most likely to be highly educated, affluent and culturally socialised. The volunteer is both producer and consumer of the museum product using their leisure time to immerse themselves in the museum culture in order to maximise the interests they have in this area and/or to contribute to socio-cultural exchange.

Figure 1
The Visitor – Volunteer Continuum



Source: Author adapted from Holmes (2003)

It is possible that there is a progression from one end of the continuum to the other with various internal and external factors influencing this progression. An invitation could encourage a non-visitor to visit because of the prospect of sharing the experience with a companion. The warmth and friendliness of a museum may encourage an occasional visitor to visit more frequently and become more immersed in the foci of the museum. While the frequent visitor for personal reasons such as broadening their horizons, varying their regular activities, and wanting to engage more intimately with the culture of the museum that reflects their interests, would consider going one step further and volunteering. Finally, the regular volunteer may become too physically frail to be able to volunteer and may revert back to being simply a visitor. Movement on the continuum can be in both directions.

The implication is that while museums view volunteers as unpaid staff it may be more appropriate to see them as another segment of the museum audience with opportunities for targeting frequent visitors as future volunteers. How can the museum cater to volunteers who wish to have both an experience and contribute to the goals of the museum? First there should be no obstacles to volunteers enjoying the dimensions of their volunteering. These obstacles may include poor management, a lack of resources, not being valued, or poor work plans (Edwards & Graham 2006b). Second the social value of volunteering can be enhanced by offering activities that bring volunteers together and provide opportunities for volunteers to meet each other. Third, the museum could assist volunteers to immerse themselves in the culture of the museum through courses and talks with artists, curators, and academics.

Another question is how can museums reach the non-visitor? This may be achieved through museum volunteer programs that specifically target the disadvantaged which will realise benefits for both the individual and the museum. For example, the Imperial War Museum North in the UK has a much cited volunteer programme, which recruits small cohorts of “lone parents; those wishing to return to work; 13-17 year olds at risk of being excluded from school; people from different cultural backgrounds; and people with disabilities” (Imperial War Museum North, undated: 5). The museum provides these volunteers, all local residents who are unlikely to be typical museum visitors, with a tailored training programme, work experience in the museum and encourages them into paid employment elsewhere. It is possibly one of the only museum volunteer programmes in the world which can measure its success by the proportion of volunteers who leave (because they have secured employment). The participants are usually referred by a third party, for example social services, as their knowledge and experience of museums is so limited, they may never have visited a museum for leisure before. Volunteering therefore provides a means of making the museum more relevant to non-visitors, by offering them something tangible, such as formal learning opportunities and valuable work experience. In this context, volunteering is a form of personal development.

The paradoxical role of volunteers acting as hosts to tourists, while being engaged in volunteer tourism themselves is not well understood, not least by those managers who view their volunteers as an economic resource of unpaid workers, rather than active visitors. According to Orr (2006) for volunteers the museum has become a leisure space “where volunteers are active in appropriating their own heritage and contextualising the museum within their own lives” (p. 202). She states that leisure is the process in which the self can be enhanced and expanded which means that museum volunteers are using the museum to construct and reconstruct their own identities. This means that volunteers need to be managed sensitively and that professional volunteer management practices may not be appropriate for a largely retired group of leisure-motivated volunteers. By viewing volunteer’s needs and interests similarly to that of the visitor, museums can offer the volunteer a valuable and enjoyable experience that will be important to the success of the volunteer programme. If museum services are appropriate for volunteers then they will also be an enjoyable and educational experience for visitors.

The visitor-volunteer continuum has sought to present an alternative way in which to view both museum visitors and volunteers. The discussion supports the notion that museum volunteering is a committed form of visiting, perhaps with the volunteer choosing to visit one museum in depth, rather than making short visits to several museums. Conceptualising volunteering as a form of visiting also helps us to understand the leisure elements of both activities as captured in Hood’s model of an enjoyable experience. This theorization raises new ideas for creating more diversity in volunteer programs and increasing visitor numbers. It is an area rich in research opportunities for both conceptual and empirical development that can be undertaken to further enhance our understanding of people who volunteer for tourism related organisations.

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