2013 Topic

**The Special Visitor: Each and Every One of Us**

With this topic authors are asked to explore a theory or theories of the individual visitor. Here writers may consider the concept of the unique visitor as opposed to the system of categorizing visitors in groups by education or age. As in all ICOFOM work, this exploration of visitor individuality is not so much a study of “how” but much more an examination of “why.” One germane museum theory might be the work of John Falk. Another might be that of Michel Foucault, who, in The History of Madness, took issue with Western civilization’s willingness to demonize difference. Jean Vanier, in Becoming Human, made the case for equality. Other theories of individuality in education and communication, including social media, can be pertinent and fruitful. This topic is not about museum visitor studies, satisfaction rates and demographics. Papers on those topics do not address the issue of the individual and will be rejected. Those seeking examples of excellent articles based on theory might consider the work of Bruno Soares and Jennifer Harris in the last two issues of ISS, numbers 40 and 41, available on line at the ICOFOM website. In each of these papers a theory or theories have been identified and analysed and examples given of their museum application.

Every visitor brings to the museum his or her individual characteristics, histories, needs and desires. Museum visitors are unique and special in many ways. All visitors come with assets and liabilities, some of which might include cognitive, emotional or physical characteristics; interest or disinterest in the museum’s subject mater or focus; and amount of previous museum experience. Added to this each visitor carries the baggage, be it positive or negative, of her past and present, her language, religion, and culture; his education, knowledge and interests. This effort to identify and work with the individual, as opposed to the group, is increasingly recognized in a variety of fields. Educators are struggling with the reality and importance of individuality among students, acknowledging the need to treat each student as a distinct person. Might museums do the same thing? What theories can be identified and used to help museums recognize the unique characteristics of each visitor?

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