

## Audience-Centered Museums

(also called Visitor Centered, Participatory, Independent Learning...)

Excerpts from current literature:

How can cultural institutions reconnect with the public and demonstrate their value and relevance in contemporary life? Museums can do this by inviting people to actively engage as cultural participants, not passive consumers. As more people enjoy and become accustomed to participatory learning and entertainment experiences, they want to do more than just “attend” cultural events and institutions. The social Web has ushered in a dizzying set of tools and design patterns that make participation more accessible than ever. Visitors expect access to a broad spectrum of information sources and cultural perspectives. They expect the ability to respond and be taken seriously. They expect the ability to discuss, share, and remix what they consume. When people can actively participate with cultural institutions, those places become central to cultural and community life.

A participatory cultural institution as a place where visitors can create, share, and connect with each other around content. *Create* means that visitors contribute their own ideas, objects, and creative expression to the institution and to each other. *Share* means that people discuss, take home, remix, and redistribute both what they see and what they make during their visit. *Connect* means that visitors socialize with other people—staff and visitors—who share their particular interests. *Around content* means that visitors’ conversations and creations focus on the evidence, objects, and ideas most important to the institution in question.

The goal of participatory techniques is both to meet visitors’ expectations for active engagement and to do so in a way that furthers the mission and core values of the institution. Rather than delivering the same content to everyone, a participatory institution collects and shares diverse, personalized, and changing content co-produced with visitors. It invites visitors to respond and add to cultural artifacts, scientific evidence, and historical records on display. It showcases the diverse creations and opinions of non-experts. People use the institution as meeting grounds for dialogue around the content presented. Instead of being “about” something or “for” someone, participatory institutions are created and managed “with” visitors.

Why would a cultural institution want to invite visitors to participate? Like all design techniques, participation is a strategy that addresses specific problems. I see participatory strategies as practical ways to enhance, not replace, traditional cultural institutions.

There are five commonly-expressed forms of public dissatisfaction that participatory techniques address:

1. *Cultural institutions are irrelevant to my life.* By actively soliciting and responding to visitors’ ideas, stories, and creative work, cultural institutions can help audiences become personally invested in both the content and the health of the organization.
2. *The institution never changes – I’ve visited once and I have no reason to return.* By developing platforms in which visitors can share ideas and connect with each other in real-time, cultural institutions can offer changing experiences without incurring heavy ongoing content production costs.

3. *The authoritative voice of the institution doesn't include my view or give me context for understanding what's presented.* By presenting multiple stories and voices, cultural institutions can help audiences prioritize and understand their own view in the context of diverse perspectives.
4. *The institution is not a creative place where I can express myself and contribute to history, science, and art.* By inviting visitors to participate, institutions can support the interests of those who prefer to make and do rather than just watch.
5. *The institution is not a comfortable social place for me to talk about ideas with friends and strangers.* By designing explicit opportunities for interpersonal dialogue, cultural institutions can distinguish themselves as desirable real-world venues for discussion about important issues related to the content presented.

These five challenges are all reasons to pursue participation, whether on the scale of a single educational program or the entire visitor experience.

**Excerpt from The Participatory Museum (Simon, 2010)**  
free online version of the book - <http://www.participatorymuseum.org/read/>

One of our goals when working with groups in the galleries is always to break down the often rigid expectations of “what we do” in front of a work of art — moving past the assumptions that we need to behave a certain way or know something specific before we can have *an experience* with art. We also aim to teach for *independence* — an approach to our ‘work’ with art that empowers a [participatory](#), learner-centered process of making meaning and attempts to break down the constructed hierarchies between teacher and learner, professor and student, expert and novice, institution and audience.

“The visitor’s response and experience come first, before the museum’s, before the history of art.” —*Rika Burnham*

At its heart, *teaching for independence* asks that educators strive to facilitate deep, collective experiences with art that leave participants and learners better equipped to look, explore, question, and engage deeply on their own without always relying on the museum or an ‘expert’ to lead that process.

<https://artmuseumteaching.com/2013/05/10/teaching-for-independence/>