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Dr. Peter Leong

Case Study: Informal Learning Environments

Honolulu Academy of the Arts: Special Exhibit *Hokusai*

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Introduction

Informal learning environments, such as museums, are constantly designing and redesigning exhibits. Museums take on the mission of educating attendees, even though many museum attendees do not have education as their motivation for attending a particular exhibit or institution. As a result the motivation of the learner must be considered, when designing informational content into an exhibit. Intrinsic motivation seems to be an ideal vehicle for learning, and an ideal method of instruction.

Csikszentmihalyi & Hermanson emphasize the importance of intrinsic motivation, curiosity and situational interest in learning environments (1999). According to Csikszentmihalyi & Hermanson interest occurs with novelty (1999). They also suggest that within novel experiences the challenge level must be appropriate to the learners (1999). The concept of flow within an experience depends on clear goals being set and an appropriate challenge level being chosen for a given group (Csikszentmihalyi & Hermanson, 1999). Furthermore, experience based design is becoming the standard in quality amongst high-end exhibits (McLellan, 2000). McLellan continues on to say the goal of experience design is to make experiences not only functional but also memorable and enjoyable (2000). McLellan breaks this concept into component parts, educational, entertaining, esthetic and escapist (2000). One of the elements of experience design is dramatic story telling (McLellan, 2000). It is suggested by Pine & Gilmore that excellence in design, marketing and delivery are crucial for planned experiences (1998).

It was encouraging to find a good example of these concepts and approaches when the *Hokusai's Summit: Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji* special exhibit was examined for this case study. This exhibit was unique to the Honolulu Academy of art as

it is the benefactor of an historic collection of Hokusai wood block prints, the gift James Mischener.

Description of Site

My site evaluation was on Honolulu Academy of the Arts special exhibit *Hokusai's Summit: Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*. As a result I have included observations from the larger Museum setting as well as the singular exhibit. The layout of the Academy of art is rectangular with one central courtyard and three minor courtyards dividing up the larger space. The galleries are mostly indoors in rooms that connect around courtyards with interior doorways. The interior portions of the museum are well lit using a combination of tungsten and daylight sources. Many of the interior galleries are subdivided into areas of small alcoves, intermixed with larger open interior spaces. The alcoves are often spotlit to highlight key art pieces. The entirety of the museum's indoor galleries is air conditioned to a comfortable level. Hard wood flooring is used throughout the interiors, which often leads to unwanted echoing of conversations and foot traffic. Text is used in all exhibits to provide background information on artists and works. The text blocks are either mounted on small boards or applied directly to wall surfaces. An audio tour is provided free of charge. The apparatus consists of a lightweight and small mp3 player with over the head headphones. A number system links audio content to exhibits via the small screen on the mp3 player.

The special exhibit, *Hokusai's Summit: Thirty-six Views of Mount Fuji*, was set in a part of the museum that had no natural light. The exhibit had one entrance and exit situated to the front, left of the exhibit hall. The hall was located to the rear central

region of the larger museum. The access to the hall was accessible to those in wheelchairs, however the distance to the exhibit from the front entrance may prove difficult for senior citizens using walkers.

Record Of Experience and Analysis

The layout of the exhibit was well designed in several respects. There were larger open areas in the exhibit hall, contrasting the more intimate alcoves. The learners were funneled through an introduction to art of the time period as well as the wood block printing process. The colorful and informative visitors guide was immediately available upon entering the exhibit hall. Directly connected to the guide bin was an invitation to begin a block printing activity. The attendees were directed to take a card from the stack, insert it into a Plexiglas box and to manipulate a rubber stamp through a slotted guide on the box to print the first stage in a series of colors. The end result if all stations were visited was a rubberstamp print that showed the famous Japanese Mount Fuji, the focus of Hokusai's art in the exhibit.

With first color printed on the card, attendees walked past colorful works of other accomplished Japanese artists that rendered painting of Mount Fuji. Following this introduction a plasma screen monitor mounted on an adjacent wall played a slide show of the stages in a wood block print. The slide show led to an analog display of wood blocks mounted in pivoting frames. The several blocks required to produce one color print were displayed in sequence. Participants could examine all sides of the blocks, touching the surface to experience the relief quality of the carvings. From this point the learners moved into the larger exhibit space finally seeing works of Hokusai himself. The first

part of this section cleverly hung other artwork of the time and described the influence the West was having on the East particularly in regards to dimensional perspective techniques. An original Rembrandt etching was one such treasure hung between the colorful Hokusai prints. Mounted text on the walls as well as information in the museums audio guide explained the concepts being shown, often with the addition of cultural music as a backdrop to the audio guide narration. At pleasing intervals learners were invited to add successive stages of printing to the print they began at the entrance. By the end of the exhibit the attendees were more aware of the process, many having experienced it themselves through printing their own images. Attendees were also better informed on the context of Eastern art and its influences at the time Hokusai had produced the works in the exhibit.

The experience design discussed in our readings was clearly at work in this exhibit. Most clearly this is scene in the attendees printing their own prints. As regards this activity, the challenge level was appropriate. One of the most difficult aspects of multi-colored stamp printing was solved as the Plexiglas boxes built for the activity provided firm registration of the printing surface. The Flow concept was apparent in the clear goals seen in the logical progression through the parts of the exhibit. The four quadrants of experience design were addressed, from the educational and entertaining to the esthetic and escapist. Entertainment and education was provided from the activity and the use of the audio guide element. Esthetic and escapism were all around the participants in the artwork itself, the many wood block prints by Hokusai.

Theoretical approaches of Ed Tech were also at work in the Nine Events of Learning. The audiences' attention was grabbed through the immediate involvement in

the printing process. The learners' attention was maintained through the subsequent stations required to complete the project. Information presented in the entry area was reinforced through immediate display of the many finished products.

There were certain challenges that were not problems. Certainly the size of the Honolulu Academy of Art placed economic limitations on the possible uses of technology in the exhibit. Another problem in this type of exhibit was turned into strength, the obscure processes involved in block printing. Block printing is such a complex process that educating the participant was important as a stage in developing their appreciation of the art. Instead of avoiding this issue the exhibit made it a central part of the experience.

The NAMES standards were mostly addressed as well in this exhibit. Audience awareness was there, people were actively involved in reading and printing their own block prints. Content and Collections were non-issues as the exhibit was very reverential of its subject matter, with security being adequately addressed. Interpretation was also taken care of through the mini-course in block printing that was designed into the experience. Design and media in the marketing and presentation were high quality considering the size of the institution. Ergonomics were adequate in the spacious air-conditioned exhibit hall and the well-lit exhibit alcoves.

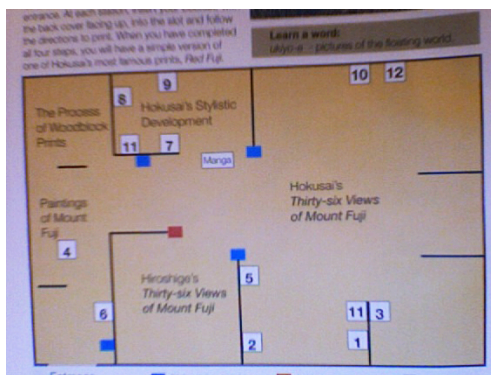
Discussion Logic and Conclusions

This site was a good example of Educational Technology in an Informal Learning Environment. In conclusion one must consider the size and relative budget of The Honolulu Academy of Art. This museum is not on the scale of major institutions in other

US cities such as the Art Institute of Chicago. By local standards, this institution is well funded and held in high regard. As a result, by local standards, the exhibit delivers a quality experience with many aspects discussed in our readings, readily incorporated. The use of novelty is apparent, as well as self-directed learning that is a result of intrinsic motivation within experience design. Participants were clearly engaged by the challenges provided by the exhibit. The most commendable of which was the wood block print activity that followed learners from start to finish in the exhibit layout.

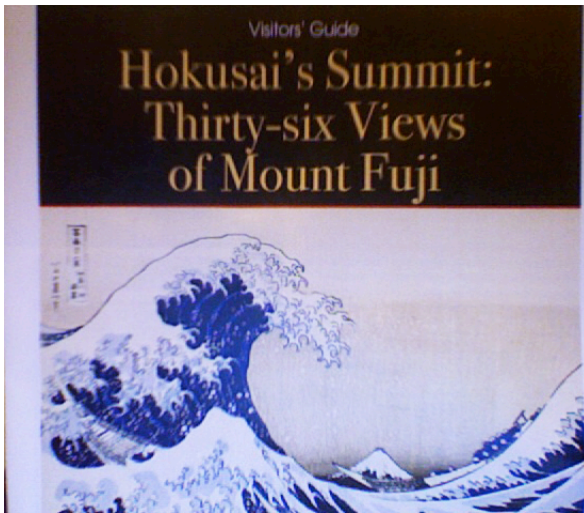
The Ed Tech that was described in the preceding section was firstly the interactive rubber-stamp printing experience that took learners step by step through making their own multi colored print. Next was the use of the plasma monitor with a slide show that looped showing the process of multi colored woodblock printing. Finally there was the tactile presentation of the blocks used for an actual woodblock print. These several blocks presented in logical order were mounted in spinning pivots so learners could examine all sides of the block, and touch them to feel the relief quality of the block carving techniques. In Figure 1 Exhibit map, please note the logical layout, as learners are guided through informative areas before accessing the larger collection of prints.

Figure 1. Exhibit Map



Good design was incorporated throughout the exhibit and in the steps leading to the exhibit. A pleasing graphic on the website made one aware of the exhibit. The colorful Visitors' Guide was informative and easy to navigate. Figure 2 shows the cover to the Guide with one of Hokusai most famous wood block prints.

Figure 2. Visitors' Guide Hokusai Exhibit



The net result was a fine exhibition of surprising scale and quality for a moderately sized fine art institution. Principles of Instructional Design were apparent in the way learners were engaged and the way their attention was maintained. Principles of experience design were at work in the tactile involvement of learners in the wood block display as well as the rubber-stamp multi-station activity. The plasma screen slide show and audio guide on the mp3 player were nice additions to the analog technology described above. The learners seemed engaged and enthusiastic and resulting in exposure to the information regarding the artist, the culture and block printing techniques.

Reference

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