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Title: Giving The People What They Want Meeting Zoology Collections With Their Audiences: A Case Study

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## Giving The People What They Want
## Meeting Zoology Collections With Their Audiences: A Case Study
### - Jack Ashby, Grant Museum of Zoology

In 2005 the Grant Museum of Zoology at UCL took part in a London Museums Hub project *Say it Again, Say it Differently*, aiming to completely reinterpret the Museum. The Grant Museum (GMZ) was founded in 1827 as a teaching resource for UCL students, and despite opening its doors to the public ten years ago, had not done enough to make the collection into a useable space for non-academics. Below I outline what the GMZ did to generate accessible interpretation to encourage new audiences into the Museum for the first time in 180 years, and why. I discuss the understanding and appreciation of natural history by the public and how to make use of it.

**Background**
The GMZ is a fairly typical Victorian natural history collection: tens of thousands of skulls, skins, skeletons and wet specimens displayed extremely densely in wooden cases. It was founded by Robert Grant, a radical evolutionist and the country's first Professor of Zoology and Comparative Anatomy, at the University of London. Grant is famous for his influence on the young Darwin in Edinburgh, and is considered to be the first person to teach evolutionary theory at an English university, using our collection to do it. The collection is displayed taxonomically, as it was in Grant's day. There are a number of hero objects including one of only seven quagga skeletons, dodo bones and a pickled thylacine dissected by Thomas Henry Huxley.

In 1995 the Museum opened its doors to the public, and since then the small number of staff have been working to welcome new audiences into the Museum. A Learning and Access Programme was established in 2004 to develop services for the Museum's audiences, and with it the opportunity to create new interpretation for all visitors. The process we undertook in our re-interpretation can be rolled out into other natural history galleries and museums and need not be exclusive to exhibitions: it suits any audience-geared project.

**1) Choosing an audience – who are you talking to?**
The first task in any engagement exercise is to select an audience. It helps to be as specific as possible. In writing an exhibition the tone of voice, design, size, number and indeed the height of the labels from the floor will vary between age-groups. This decision must be made first as it directs all other work. The choice may be obvious in that you are building a new set of interactives for a family gallery, but in the case of the GMZ we were redisplaying the whole museum and had to consider all of our user groups.

People can use the Grant Museum in a number of ways: as general visitors during public opening hours (weekday afternoons), as part of the schools programme, as part of University teaching, or on an educational activity day. Of these audiences, specimen-based facilitated workshops and activity days cater for families and schools and UCL teaching provides for the students; it was the general visitors who were not being provided for. As a result of the opening hours, most of these visitors are adults. We decided that the new interpretation would be for them.

**2) Establishing goals – why are you talking to them?**
With any audience-based project, clear outcomes for the museum should be established at the outset. Why is a project going ahead? What does the museum want the users to go away with at the end? Two types of measure are set: simple statistical goals (How many visitors? How long did they stay? How much merchandise did they buy? How many repeat visits? etc), and learning outcomes. It is sensible to be general when setting educational targets – specific pieces of information may be included, but be realistic about how many pieces of information visitors will experience on a visit. Most people will not read every label in a gallery – just listing content to be memorised from your interpretation does not constitute useful learning outcomes. For our project, we developed a short set of general learning outcomes based on the Inspiring Learning for All framework (MLA, 2004), which would be tested before and after the work. These were:
*To learn facts about the collection.*
*To increase appreciation for the natural world.*
*To be surprised and inspired by the museum displays and to enjoy what they see and do.*

As important as what a museum wants to do in a project, is what the target audience wants to get out of it. We needed to establish what our non-specialist adult audience wanted from the Museum? The staff had their own ideas of the Museum's short-comings: the existing labels were tiny and handwritten in Latin; visitors didn't understand the taxonomy and no information was being provided about the animals represented.

**3) Selecting themes – what are you going to say?**
Natural history is an unusual science; perhaps more than in any other field, the layman can be extremely well informed. Unlike the other sciences, and particularly the more physical disciplines, people are very regularly exposed to intelligible, undisguised and undiluted information about the natural world. Natural history documentaries are an obvious method of public science communication, and many people can even source almost all of their learned knowledge to a single man on the BBC. However the topic is far more prevalent than even that: the physical adaptations of the platypus have been used to advertise crisps; animal species frequent linguistic idioms and sayings; thousands of creatures are used as accurately interpreted fictional characters; and Darwinian metaphors are rife in the world of sport. When engaging with museum audiences, it is crucial to realise that people will often know what you are talking about.

We knew what we wanted to say to our audience. The specimens have a great deal of history themselves, as well as the natural history of the species they represent. Five main themes were identified: specimen history, natural history, ecological conservation, scientific research and mythology. Once themes have been established it is important to be strict when developing content. If it doesn't fit into the overall stories you are trying to tell, it ought to be left out. Being consistent will help visitors go away with the topics you want discussed.

**4) Evaluation – what do they want to know?**
Knowing what you're doing wrong and what you want to do about it is all very well, but it is very dangerous to imagine what an audience think and want without actually asking them: evaluation is critical.

The GMZ set up a focus group representing adults of varying age and background, and they met with a team of consultants before work began. We felt it was important that external consultants led discussions so that no biases were introduced. This involves more costs than running sessions yourselves, but the data are more reliable this way.

Evaluation can be a three stage process (Hooper-Greenhill, 1994): baseline (to identify goals before a project), formative (to ensure progress is occurring in the right way during a project) and summative (to make minor changes after the product is launched). Formative evaluation can take place as many times as needed, and is arguably the most valuable part of the process.

Thankfully our focus group agreed with what we wanted to say at the baseline stage, and also agreed with our ideas about why the Museum was not delivering: "It feels very cramped, it's like you've wandered into a mad collector's living room – all jumbled together". Many people felt confused "all crammed together, I don't know what's what or what information goes with what". In addition they brought new ideas we hadn't considered.

**5) Meeting the audiences' goals – how do you use evaluation?**
Evaluation as a developmental exercise is pointless if it happens only after a project has finished or if you don't take into account the outcomes. There are examples of museums replacing focus groups like a monarch sacking parliament when they don't like what they hear. Problems can arise when a museum's ideas conflict with focus groups' and they are hard to resolve. Arguments that an evaluation team is too small to be a representative sample of the audience are not necessarily invalid, but it would take a very good reason, and a lot of bravery, to ignore well-researched evaluation. To avoid uncertainty, think hard about what a focus group is being asked and word your questions well. Do not put words in their mouths and don't cherry pick the bits that you agree with. Satisfying their suggestions requires effort, but if you don't intend to listen to them don't ask. Developing a project which deliberately ignores an audience's view will alienate them to a greater extent than one that doesn't ask their opinion in the first place.

As with many museums that are trying to open themselves up to new visitors, the GMZ was concerned that the changes that they needed to make might upset or alienate our original audience, in our case the UCL community of staff and students. It was considered crucial that this existing audience was as in-

volved in the developments as the new one, and so a second set of focus groups was established for them and asked the same questions.

Education and exhibitions staff across the sector have long-lamented their conflicts with curatorial and academic staff. It is important that the two work together and both meet their own strategic aims. However, it must always be kept in mind that while curators and academics are often the experts in their field, they may not be the best people to interpret their subject to the public. Understanding what an audience knows and what they will be able to learn are often the points at which interpretation can succeed or fail. With zoological objects, while people do know a lot about animals, they do not know a lot about skeletons or body parts (Tunnicliffe, 1998).

Some of the academics in our UCL focus group were keen that visitors were encouraged to work out what animal a skeleton came from themselves, while education staff said it would take a non-specialist too much thinking to interpret several hundred specimens in one visit. Discussions took place and we managed to convince them that skeletons should be accompanied by the image of the living species to aid interpretation (Tunnicliffe, 1998). Debate can only happen if you lead the focus groups yourselves, and we felt that it was appropriate for us to run the internal UCL focus group as our own colleagues were likely to be more candid and critical to our faces than the public group.

Discussion led they way through the focus groups and in the end we came out with an interpretation strategy to develop the Museum as a new public-space. The look and feel of the Victorian collection wouldn't be changed, but the labelling would transform the space into a valuable learning environment.

At the end of the first stage of evaluation the focus groups were given prototypes of proposed labels to comment on, starting the formative phase early. The feedback was very positive and the comments extremely constructive. It was thoroughly worthwhile to get approval from the audiences at a very early stage. With this in hand, huge amounts of progress can be made with the confidence that developments will be successful.

**6) Develop new ideas – unite what you want to say with what they want to hear**
One of the outcomes of the focus groups was that they wanted to know what every specimen was. How we were to do this presented a challenge: some cases house over one thousand objects – one thousand labels would fit in as well. What information would be useful? It would certainly not be possible or practical to give everything a name. There may be five hundred species of gastropod in a display, but the public would not want to know all of their names.

Taxonomy was the key. Most members of the public would not feel able to define taxonomy, but I would claim that to some extent they know it when they see it; the principles at least. People instinctively put things into groups, whether they are zoologically accurate or not. The interpretation of natural history for a public audience can tap into this. What the Grant Museum did is to affix a tiny label depicting the outline of an animal to most specimens. Taxonomic groups were assigned a representative animal and each member of that group was then united by a common icon. Each bony fish had a perch icon on it, whether it was an eel or a salmon, and each insect, from beetle to phasmid was represented by a wasp.

This icon-based taxonomy was the lowest rung of a four-tiered hierarchy of information. If nothing else, it labelled every specimen as a member of a group. It was a gastropod, a bat, a marsupial, a crustacean etc. It also challenged people's preconceived groupings, whales as mammals for example, and underlined the relatedness of living things. Specimens were then selected to be individually named, labelled with brief interpretation, and large labels represented an entire case. This interpretive strategy was built through formative evaluation by the audience focus groups.

Exhibition label writing is a constant battle between what there is to say, what the audience want to discover, how to say it and keeping text to a minimum. A case of specimens can be visually ruined by the presence of too many labels, or too much text. The stories the Grant Museum's specimens had to tell, and the information the audience wanted to know would not fit in the cases. Our solution was to provide the interpretation outside the cabinet – in the form of audio-guides and hand-held Factfiles. The specimens represented in this way are numbered so that if the visitor wants more information they can get it from the hand-held tools.

Throughout the whole project, which took over a year, progress was determined by the comments of the focus groups and the extent to which the learning outcomes were met. No redisplay or reinterpretation should happen without consultation with the intended audience, and curators cannot be given free reign. Sacrifices may well need to be made with regards to the information conveyed.

A year has passed since the new interpretation was launched. The Grant Museum can report a 600% increase in our annual users since 2004, and dramatic (though unmeasured) improvements in visitor dwell-time. This is thanks in part to well-designed evaluation by our consultants, as well as the enhanced programme of events in out Learning and Access Programme.

**Conclusion**

Natural history collections are in a very lucky position: they do not need to start from scratch. Thanks to the media people know a lot about animals, plants and the environment, and often they know a great deal of detail about specific organisms. While visitors to museums may not be able to identify a skeleton of a certain animal, they may well be able to take a lot away from seeing it without being told anything but the name. Once visitors have been pointed to a bat skeleton, for example, they do not need to be told how they fly because they can see the bones of the hands for themselves. There is a balance to be made between highlighting information that is already known in this way and telling the specimens' stories that will be new to visitors. This balance can only be struck with a detailed understanding of what people already know and what they are interested in once they are told for the first time. To find out what this is you have to ask them.

Pandering to modern popular culture by highlighting animals that are fresh in an audience's psyche due to inclusion in a recent Disney film may leave a bad taste in the mouth, but it will relate to your visitor. Natural history is everywhere, through dialogue with evaluators museum staff can gauge what is known and what people want to hear.

If you would like a free copy of the best practice guide produced by the London Museums Hub as a result of the *Say it Again, Say it Differently* project then please contact me at j.ashby@ucl.ac.uk (limited numbers available). Other comments and questions are welcome.

**References**

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### In search of an Emperor Penguin

The Natural History Museum in London are looking for a smart looking display specimen of an Emperor Penguin to exhibit in our forthcoming blockbuster exhibition, *Ice Station Antarctica*. The exhibition will be touring internationally for 5 years from 2008. We are therefore looking for a taxidermy specimen with minimal conservation requirements (and therefore provenance) that can form part of a travelling exhibition.

Do you have an Emperor Penguin that might be suitable? If so, please contact Emma Freeman at the Natural History Museum  (contact details below).

The Natural History Museum are producing *Ice Station Antarctica* in partnership with the British Antarctic survey. It opens at the Natural History Museum from 25th May 2007.

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