



# **Qualitative Methods of Enquiry into the Arts Consumption Experience and its Impact**

## **Project Summary**

**This document is a summary of two full reports and a presentation written by Lisa Baxter, Associate Research Consultant to Audiences Yorkshire.**

**This project was made possible by generous funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council and Arts Council England. The project was delivered by The University of Sheffield and Audiences Yorkshire. Lisa Baxter, Associate Research Consultant to Audiences Yorkshire, designed and conducted the empirical research element of the project.**

<b>Contents</b>	<b>Page</b>
1. Context	1
2. Methodology	2
3. The Partner Venues	4
4. Key Findings	5
4.1. The methodology	5
4.2. Magna	6
4.3. West Yorkshire Playhouse	7
5. Future Applications	8
6. Contact details	9
7. Appendix 1	10

## 1. Context

In 2008, the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) awarded funding for a series of workshops under the Impact of Arts & Humanities Research Scheme. Working in collaboration, The University of Sheffield, Audiences Yorkshire and Lisa Baxter (Associate Research Consultant for Audiences Yorkshire) were awarded funding under this workshop series for a project entitled 'Qualitative Methods of Enquiry into the arts consumption experience and its impact'.

The project stemmed from Arts Council England's 'Taking Part' research, and its public engagement agenda, which can only be successfully embedded if the arts and cultural industry begins to understand the value of what it means to individuals to engage in cultural activity. The Sir Brian McMaster report 'Supporting Excellence in the Arts – From Measurement to Judgement' noted 'that too many organisations are trying to second-guess what their audiences want and are therefore cheating them out of the deepest and most meaningful experiences' (January 2008). These are challenging words and our project aimed to engage both academic researchers and arts and cultural professionals in developing critical understanding of 'experience' and the potential contribution of qualitative research in understanding the arts experience and its impact from the perspective of the audience.

## 2. Methodology

The project was composed of four key components:

**The Project Team:** Academics from The University of Sheffield and researchers from Audiences Yorkshire, including Associate Research Consultant Lisa Baxter, collaborated to deliver the project. They held regular meetings and were responsible for organising two Workshops, two Research Encounters and disseminating the findings.

**Two Workshops:** Workshop days brought together a range of academics, arts professionals and commercial researchers. The first was entitled '*What is experience? Innovative methodologies in arts research*' and was used to generate qualitative methodology ideas for the Project Team to trial. The second workshop was entitled '*Capturing Impact: the interaction of Research, Marketing and the Arts*' and was held after the Research Encounters to disseminate the findings and generate discussion and feedback. For a full list of delegates please see Appendix 1.

**Two Research Encounters:** Research Encounters were held with audiences at the West Yorkshire Playhouse (WYP) and Magna Science Adventure Centre to trial the innovative qualitative methods. They were delivered by the Associate Research Consultant for Audiences Yorkshire, Lisa Baxter. These venues were recruited via an open invitation for expressions of interest.

**Dissemination and development:** The findings of the research are being disseminated throughout both the academic and cultural sectors. It is hoped that the methods will be trialled and developed further.

The Workshops and Research Encounters were designed to establish an innovative methodology which could:

- Develop our understanding of the arts consumption experience and its impacts
- Encourage greater articulacy and authenticity
- Address issues surrounding imperfect recollections of past behaviours and experiences
- Elicit insights into the intangibles of the arts consumption experience
- Test the degree to which personal narrative can provide valuable context into the arts consumption experience
- Minimise the influence of subjective interpretation
- Develop a better understanding of how these methods could be commercially applied within the arts sector research community
- Deliver mutual value for the Project Team and partner venues.

After much discussion, desk research into supporting academic thinking and analysis of the findings of Workshop 1, the qualitative methodology was designed by Lisa Baxter. This combined visual metaphor, personal narrative, graphic ideation and guided visualisation:

- Visual Explorer cards<sup>1</sup> were employed to elicit intuitive responses to participant perceptions of the partner venue in relation to themselves. Cards were laid out on a table and participants were asked to choose one that represented the venue and them.
- The session combined linguistic and non-linguistic techniques in order to capture the intangibles of 'experience' as fully as possible.
- Personal narrative was incorporated (using drawn timelines of key 'milestones') to elicit participant-generated selective life histories to test the degree to which this might add insightful context and 'texture' to the arts experience being explored.
- Guided visualisation was used to enable participants to more fully re-engage with a specific arts consumption experience. Participants were then invited to record their experiences on paper through drawing and/or words.

To test the methodology, one Research Encounter (approximately 2 hours in length) was set up at Magna and one at WYP. Magna recruited annual family pass holders to take part and WYP recruited 'lapsed attenders' via their box office (see Section 3 for further details about the venues). The same methodological approach was used at both Magna and WYP.

---

<sup>1</sup> Visual Explorer is a tool for enabling dialogue through the use of visual imagery. The size of playing cards, each one shows a different image. For more details please see [www.ccl.org](http://www.ccl.org)

### 3. The Partner Venues

This section provides information about the two partner venues and explains their rationale for participating in the project.

**Magna Science Adventure Centre** is a £46m Millennium Commission Lottery funded project based within the former Templeborough steelworks building in Rotherham. Inside the building, the Magna experience is divided into four pavilions and two multimedia shows. Each of the pavilions contains challenges and games relating to the elemental themes of earth, air, fire and water.

One of the multimedia shows, entitled *The Face of Steel*, is a 100 foot high floor-to-ceiling 3D collection of projected film and imagery. Visitors can climb amongst the screens and sounds to reach the main walkway and access the pavilions within the heart of the building.

*The Face of Steel* offers a totally unique experience. Time after time, however, it has scored very low in terms of visitors' favourite areas of the site. Magna was concerned that visitors do not connect with it as much as was originally hoped when the concept was thought out. It was interested in exploring audience's experiences of *The Face of Steel* to understand more about how they interact with this exhibit.

**West Yorkshire Playhouse (WYP)** is one of the busiest producing theatres outside of London and Stratford with a diverse mix of live performance including in-house drama productions, co-productions, touring dance and drama.

WYP's audiences are in decline and to date, they have not had the internal capacity to address the potential perceptual and attitudinal roots of the problem. They already know from research undertaken a few years ago that a high proportion of their audience are infrequent attenders. What they wanted to understand is why. Is it primarily related to their experience at the venue, or is it the product they offer that is fundamentally driving their decision to attend or not?

What this study offered WYP was an opportunity to understand their relationship with an important audience segment - lapsed attenders - through an exploration of their experience of the venue and its product offer. WYP believed that a recent production of *Othello* re-invigorated lapsed attenders, providing a timely opportunity to focus on the nature and quality of their in-venue experience.

## 4. Key Findings

This section outlines the key findings in relation to the success of the methodology itself and also summarises the individual findings for the two partner venues.

### 4.1 The methodology

#### **'Visual Explorer' cards**

As a 'warm-up', the cards succeeded in establishing a conducive frame of mind and stimulated authentic sharing of the participants' relationship with the venues. The cards yielded insights into the 'place' of the venue in their lives and the particular 'filters' through which they perceived the venue. It also encouraged them, from the outset, to think laterally and metaphorically as opposed to rationally. Another outcome of using the cards as a 'warm up' exercise was to generate a positive group dynamic, creating a short-cut to a deeper understanding of their fellow participants.

#### **Timelines: A personal narratives approach**

The timelines were first drawn, and then shared and expanded on verbally. Respondents at WYP were asked to record key theatre milestones throughout their lives and those at Magna were asked to record special family days out (both as children and as parents). The exercise provided valuable context and direct links to the arts consumption experience but the success of this method varied between the two venues.

The drawn timelines provided space for quiet reflection and elicited detailed narrative-based recollections of the past. Participants seemed relaxed and comfortable with the process of producing and then sharing their drawings. The group at Magna were particularly articulate and were able to elaborate on their timelines in great detail. This element of the methodology was less successful at WYP, however, which raises questions of the validity of this technique in relation to age and the number of experiences people have to draw on (respondents were over 70) and articulacy (although this is not related to age *per se*).

#### **Guided visualisation**

The guided visualisation exercise was successful in evoking, or bringing vividly to awareness, participants' experience.

The guided visualisation script focused on the sensory element of their experience in order to access the intangible, often ethereal elements of their visit which might remain elusive in pure discussion-based techniques.

In the Magna group, participants seemed highly attuned to their sensory, emotional and, in some cases, visceral experiences. The recollections that came back from the visualisation session were rich, detailed, nuanced, containing revealing insights in relation to atmosphere, feelings and the senses.

There was a depth to their experience descriptions that the researcher had not previously encountered using purely discussion-based techniques.

This points to the value of visualisation in gaining in-depth understanding of, and insights into, the tangibles and intangibles of the arts consumption experience.

#### **The value of graphic ideation as a research tool**

Some of the visuals produced in this research did reveal important insights into experiences, behaviours and value-sets through a combination of self-interpretation and researcher interpretation. It could be argued that some of the drawings revealed deeper levels of meaning than the participant could rationally articulate.

It should be noted that graphic ideation is a technique that some people may not be comfortable with because it is not their preferred mode of expression. In most cases, participants chose to combine word and image; the words used to articulate more abstract, intangible concepts. This reversion to a 'rational mode' of self expression could be addressed by employing the Visual Explorer cards as a means of intuitively identifying points of resonance between the 'mood' or symbolic value of an image and what they feel/experience.

#### **Suitability for group sessions**

The methods used seemed to elicit limited group discussion. The sessions were largely a series of monologues as each participant went through in depth sharing of their Visual Explorer cards, timelines and visualisation experiences. The methods may be more suited to alternative formats such as dyads, triads or mini-depths.

However, all participants said that they enjoyed the experience and a number of them noted their surprise at the depth of their recollections during the process. Some of them also commented that the experience had been different to any other market research they had previously participated in.

## **4.2 Magna**

Participant attitudes towards Magna were extremely positive and the high value placed on the experience can be attributed to the degree to which the attraction meets their needs and resonates with their values. It is regarded as an active, hands-on, family experience where children can learn and play independently.

The timeline and Visual Explorer card exercises allowed the research to access a deeper set of benefits which are more attuned to the beliefs and value-sets of the participants. These were largely centred around family memories, family rituals and spending quality time together.

In terms of The Face of Steel, the visualisation exercise showed that this part of the attraction is quite distinct from the rest of Magna. It meets none of the needs and offers none of the benefits that family visitors gain from their visit to the rest of the attraction. The exercise revealed that the experience in the Face of Steel was negative for some and positive for others. Some felt fearful and uncomfortable whereas others felt it provoked an exciting sense of anticipation.

### 4.3 West Yorkshire Playhouse

The participants regard the venue as 'new', modern and friendly in comparison to some other theatres in the region. However it was not perceived or used as a 'social' venue (social in this context meaning pre and post performance in venue experience such as eating a meal, buying a drink or socialising Front of House). The reasons for lapsing were more about the lack of programme knowledge and appeal than the 'feel' of the place.

The guided visualisation exercise revealed that for these participants, the theatre experience begins and ends largely in the auditorium. There was a strong sense of 'separation' when the applause ends and their focus turns to going home rather than staying on. The research also showed that being part of a whole may generate a sense of belonging, and in doing so, a sense of commonality that generates an interest in and a degree of sympathy for/empathy with the audience; as evidenced through people watching, palpable anticipation, concern for the audience's degree of satisfaction and then applause and elation. Arts consumption is both collective and individual, the social and the personal are closely intertwined in the key 'take-aways'.

## 5. Future Applications

The research methodology trialled through this project can be developed further and might be used for:

- Customer experience management
  - Receptivity
  - Navigation and dwell time
- Shaping and evaluating the brand experience
- Developing resonant sales messages
  - Personalisation
  - Empathy
  - Communicating beyond adjective and cliché
- Points of engagement and separation as indicators of audience expectations and investment
- Points of resonance to evaluate degrees of loyalty and brand buy-in
- Market positioning
  - Comparative experiences
- Expectation management
  - Fulfilment mapping

It will be important to trial these methods further with different demographics and in different contexts. It is also suggested that researchers experiment with different formats such as individual interviews, dyads or triads.

## 6. Contact Details

For further information about this project please contact:

### Principal Investigator

Dr Elizabeth Carnegie  
Lecturer in Arts and Culture  
The University of Sheffield  
E-mail: [e.carnegie@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:e.carnegie@sheffield.ac.uk)  
Tel: 0114 2222182  
Fax: 0114 2223348

### Co-investigator

Lisa Baxter  
Associate Research Consultant,  
Audiences Yorkshire  
E-mail: [lisa.baxter@virgin.net](mailto:lisa.baxter@virgin.net)  
Tel: 01422 346 359  
Fax: 01422 346 359

### Project Co-ordinator

Helen Lisle  
Research Consultant  
Audiences Yorkshire  
E-mail: [helen@audiencesyorkshire.org.uk](mailto:helen@audiencesyorkshire.org.uk)  
Tel: 0113 320 0160  
Fax: 0113 320 0161

## Appendix 1 : Delegate Lists

### Workshop 1

Name		Organisation
Dr Andrea	Abbas	University of Teeside
Dr Simone	Abram	Leeds Metropolitan University
Kelly	Bagley	Morris Hargreaves McIntyre
Orian	Brook	Audiences London/St Andrews University
Dr Donna	Chambers	University of Surrey
Bryony	Duncan	Audiences London
Roddy	Glen	Roddy Glen Associates
Eric	Hildrew	Museums Sheffield
Dr Gretchen	Larsen	University of Bradford
Pete	Massey	Arts Council England, Yorkshire
Adelaide	Morris	Arts Marketing Hampshire
Anni	Oskala	Arts Council England
Caroline	Pakel-Dunlop	To The Heart Ltd.
Kate	Phal	University of Sheffield
Dr Susan	Reid	University of Sheffield
Saskia	Warren	University of Sheffield
Kathy	Doherty	Sheffield Hallam University
<b>Speakers</b>		
Dr Bernadette	Lynch	University of Manchester
Dr Terry	O'Sullivan	Open University
Andy	Barker	YouGov

### Workshop 2

Dr Andrea	Abbas	University of Teeside
Dr Simone	Abram	Leeds Metropolitan University
Rachel	Bannister	Magna
Nick	Boaden	West Yorkshire Playhouse
Catherine	Bunting	Arts Council England
Jon	Copley	The Royal Armouries
William	Culver-Dodds	William Culver Dodds Consulting
Bryony	Duncan	Audiences London
Anthony	Dunn	Yorkshire Dance
Alison	Edbury	Audiences Yorkshire
Roddy	Glen	Roddy Glen Associates
Dr Gretchen	Larsen	University of Bradford
Antonia	Lovelace	Leeds City Museum
Pete	Massey	Arts Council England, Yorkshire
Su	Matthewman	West Yorkshire Playhouse
Sarah	Ogle	Liverpool Everyman Playhouse
Dr Kate	Pahl	University of Sheffield
Saskia	Warren	University of Sheffield
Dr Simon	Woodward	Leeds Metropolitan University