

Talkback Boards

Reading exhibitions via feedback from visitors

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Introduction

There are many methods for analyzing exhibitions based on visitors' opinions, for example through qualitative interviews or quantitative questionnaires. However, using talkback boards as a tool in this context is not that common (Howard 2018) and the term 'talkback board', as used by the National Museum of American History (Evans 2011), for instance, is as yet hardly known in the German-speaking world. Yet the method it describes is used in many exhibitions, such as in the project *Ostend // Ostanfang. Ein Stadtteil im Wandel* (Eastend // East Beginning. A Neighborhood in transition) at the Historical Museum Frankfurt (Piontek 2017: 271). Here – and this is a typical feature for the method – a set of questions was displayed on a wall to which visitors could supply answers. Sticky notes are usually provided for these answers, which is why the method is also called a 'sticky-note wall survey' (Deutscher Museumsbund 2019: 33, Piontek 2017: 187). In the English-speaking world, the term 'graffiti wall' is also used in the classification of possible exhibition evaluation tools. Here, graffiti walls are considered as belonging to the category of creative tools, referring to the visitors' creative process of forging responses (Foster 2008: 43, 52).

In the following, we will use the term 'talkback board' since it expresses the essential point in its application as a method of exhibition analysis: the feedback from visitors and not the interaction with the exhibit. By displaying them on the talkback board, the freely expressed opinions of the visitors become a relevant contribution to the exhibition and this appreciation in turn encourages visitors to interact (Piontek 2017: 196–197). Talkback cards are yet another method. They differ from talkback boards in that the questions are not presented centrally but are printed individually on every response card. The difference is not a significant one, but the location for the feedback can have the result that visitors' responses on the talkback board may be perceived as being more public. A further feedback format that needs to be differentiated from the talkback board is the visitor's book. Even though the format of feedback via visitors' written responses is similar, the methods are quite different,

as the feedback via the talkback board is, in contrast to the visitor's book, generated through a question prompt.

Aim of the method

Why is the method of talkback boards an attractive analytical tool for exhibitions? To answer this question, we need to take a closer look at the core of the method. The set-up of recently installed feedback walls resembles visualization tools for ideation used in innovation methods such as Design Thinking – even though this not where the method originated, as talkback methods have already been employed in many fields since the 1970s (Sieburth and Gleisner 1977: 17, Uebernickel et al. 2015: 78–80). In an office context, these sticky notes on a whiteboard stand for inventiveness and forward-thinking planning, whereas in a museum they symbolize the participatory inclusion of visitors. The audience takes part in shaping the content of the talkback board and is thus embedded in a framework of sorts that has been predetermined by the questions prepared by the museum staff. In that sense it is in essence a participatory method.

This participatory aspect has a number of implications for the use of talkback boards as a tool for analyzing exhibitions. A first implication is that the visitors enjoy giving feedback and thus participating in the analysis. That has a positive effect on the quantity of feedback. The second implication relates to quality. Feedback is not only plentiful, but a lot of it is also inconsistent. This fact, which at first glance seems to make talkback boards an unattractive tool for exhibition analysis, is actually its greatest strength: the sheer mass and diversity of the feedback captures the visitor experience in all its variety and breadth, documenting both the unexpected and surprising, but above all the visitors' manifold perspectives. This is because the talkboard gathers statements about the exhibition that result from visitors' immediate experiences and insights. The aim of the talkback board method of analysis is therefore precisely to collect the broadest possible range of impressions that visitors actually take away from the exhibition. The data collected in these circumstances can then be evaluated according to further research questions that are relevant to the museum, in order to achieve the ultimate purpose of applying this method: to obtain new knowledge about the exhibition and to make it productive for its further development.

Step-by-step guideline

The talkback board is a particularly attractive analytical tool for an exhibition if the questions to visitors are phrased accordingly and the spatial environment for the re-

sponses prepared appropriately. The design of the questions provides visitors with a guide for analytically grasping and systematically expressing their own exhibition experience. In addition, the responses are formulated both in terms of time and place directly in the context of the exhibition visit. It is therefore particularly important how the questions are phrased and how the setting for answering them is designed and staged.

1. The conception phase

The conception phase of the talkback board begins by formulating the overarching research interest, such as examining the exhibition concept, the exhibition ambience or the text design (Janelli and Hammacher 2008: 10). This reduces the great number of potential evaluation criteria for exhibitions to a few selected areas of investigation. The next step is about formulating specific questions. These questions need to be open-ended and have to be phrased in a simple and appealing way. The challenge is to find a balance: on the one hand, precision is required, as otherwise the answers' usability for the analysis would suffer. On the other, more open-ended questions also allow for off-topic answers that may nevertheless be relevant to the exhibition analysis. An example would be statements about thematic preferences of a general nature without reference to the exhibition at hand. Such comments can help to detect gaps in the exhibition content that are relevant for the exhibition analysis. One way of resolving these conflicting requirements for formulating the questions is to expand them with textual clarifications. This helps visitors understand what is expected of them and serves to prevent misunderstandings.

2. The implementation phase

Once suitable questions have been found, the next step is to determine the location and the design of the talkback board. If the aim is to conduct an exhibition analysis with the method, it may be advisable to place the talkback board within the exhibition tour rather than outside of it. The advantage in such a case is that the responses to the questions are not filtered by recall, but are reproduced directly as a part of the exhibition experience. But for this it is necessary to avoid any interruption in the performance of the exhibition visit – which refers to the spatial experience that can be described as “engaging with it” (Brandt, Ćurković and Kalinina 2008: 25–28). In order to avoid such a disconnect, the design of the talkback board is staged scenographically, like the exhibition itself, and is incorporated in the exhibition narrative. This investment pays off, because it makes participating more fun and interaction at the talkback board becomes part of the exhibition experience. Such design considerations also relate to the way in which the answers are presented on the board: an ‘extra-ordinary’ feedback format can increase the enjoyment of commenting.

3. The follow-up phase

Downstream, but all the more crucial, is the follow-up effort. Further resources are required for finalizing the project and evaluation: the feedback has to be analyzed and converted into applicable results. The talkback board method does not include its own particular procedure for analyzing the results, since it is a data collection tool. For the data analysis, other methods are applied that may come from empirical social research, such as theoretical coding, qualitative content analysis, or thematic coding (Flick 2011: 387–416). But many creative methods from design thinking can also be applied for this purpose, provided they are suited to processing a large amount of information (Uebersnick et al. 2015: 114–125). Which evaluation method is the most suitable also depends on the purpose for which the talkback board is used.

The effort in terms of time and personnel can be divided into preparation, implementation and follow-up. Preparations can involve as much work as setting up a small exhibition if the talkback board is to be staged in an elaborate scenographic way. The extent to which external service providers should be brought in will vary depending on the size of the project and institutional factors. The implementation effort is determined by the length of the investigation. Contrary to a common misconception, operational staff is essential (Foster 2008: 43). Depending on which forms of feedback have been chosen or scenographic ideas developed, material has to be replenished or space created for new comments. The staff can also be deployed to encourage people touring the exhibition to participate. The amount of work involved in the follow-up can vary from relatively compact to time-consuming, depending on the selected form of data analysis.

Case study

For the Museum of Industrial Culture in Nuremberg, considerations to analyze the permanent exhibition became particularly relevant when a fire protection upgrade offered the opportunity to rebalance the content of the permanent exhibition and to update the forms of presentation in keeping with the times. In order to take into account the visitors' wishes in these improvements, the museum initiated the project *The Walk-In Visitor's Book*, designed as a scenographic talkback board.

Fig. 1: Welcome to *The Walk-In Visitor's Book*, © Museum for Industrial Culture.



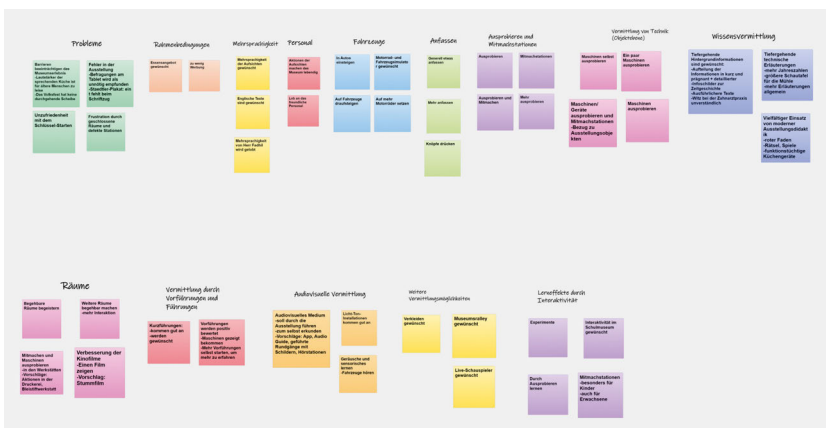
The Walk-In Visitor's Book is located in the permanent exhibition of the Museum of Industrial Culture, featuring the period from industrialization to the present. When the museum opened in 1988, the form of presentation used in the permanent exhibition was particularly innovative. Rather than being didactically patronizing, it created emotional connection, with various staged spaces, such as a workers' social clubhouse, a barbershop or a grocery store showcased along a street scene in a decommissioned factory. These pioneering spatial stagings are considered the first examples of a scenographic exhibition design (Jäger 2020: 44–45). So already for museological reasons, there is an obligation to treat the existing exhibition architecture with due care, especially since many of the displays still elicit great public delight today. *The Walk-In Visitor's Book* aimed to identify affinities of the museum audience and gather suggestions for redesigning areas in need of attention.

The research interest of the analysis focused on three areas: firstly, the motivation for the visit and thus the visitors' expectations; secondly, the thematic affinities and thus the exhibition content; and thirdly, the forms of education preferred by the audience. In considering these three areas, an attempt was made to obtain as comprehensive a picture as possible of the exhibition experience.

The appropriate questions emerged from reflecting on the motivation for the visit and the considerations of what would be the alternative to the museum visit: presumably an afternoon on the couch. This brought up the idea to ask: "What gets

you off the couch?”, setting the tone and making it easy to find similar phrases for asking about the content, “What knocks your socks off?”¹ and regarding the preferred forms of education: “What gets you going?” Since all three questions permitted an object reference, there was scope for creative ideas and the theme of the fair presented itself, because a model of the Nuremberg folk festival could be seen in the immediate proximity of the location designated for the survey. Based on this, exhibition units were developed and built by the museum’s technicians in collaboration with an external graphics and exhibition agency. Suitable objects were selected for the questions described above and were used, together with the respective question, to create scenographic ensembles in a style reminiscent of fairground stalls. For the question, “What gets you off the couch?”, a 1950s couch was transformed into a swing boat. Visitors could insert flaglets into small holes in the beam after writing down their answers on them. The text layer with the questions appeared on wooden sandwich boards. Another setting showed two vehicles: the classic moped Mars Monza and a children’s pedal car from Ferbedo, for the question: “What gets you going?” Both vehicles were mounted on a round wooden disk that represented a merry-go-round. For the question “What knocks you off your socks?” (in literal translation “What knocks you off the stool?”), three different stools were shown and staged as a lottery booth. Here too, the flaglets could be inserted in pre-drilled holes. The entire scenery was framed by a string of lights, encouraging the visitors with its appealing decoration to participate.

Fig. 2: Overview of the feedback on the question “What gets you going?” © Museum for Industrial Culture.



1 The German expression ‘Was haut dich vom Hocker’ literally translates to ‘What knocks you off the stool?’

A creative services agency was consulted for developing the scenographic and scientific design, and the project was facilitated by the museum supervisory staff, which consisted particularly in replenishing feedback material and freeing up space for new comments.

After the phase of data collection was completed, the feedback was evaluated. The KJ method was the most suitable one for processing the heterogeneous mass of data from the *Walk-In Visitor's Book* and is used in museums in an adapted form under the term 'affinity diagram' (Brüne et al. 2016, Fackler 2018). In this method, heterogeneous data can be assigned equal value, as the individual feedback is interpreted and statements that relate to a research goal are identified in a bottom-up process (Iba, Yoshikawa and Munakata 2017). For the *Walk-In Visitor's Book*, this goal was to incorporate the visitors' feedback into the redesign of the permanent exhibition, so that statements about the present exhibition were extracted from each piece of feedback. However, in many cases it was also possible to draw conclusions about the characteristics of the current audience, which led to a second and separate evaluation category. In both cases, the feedback was interpreted and sorted into larger units of meaning. A summarizing statement was formulated for each of these units of meaning, so that in the final result of the analysis, different statements were able to co-exist and complement each other.

Method reflection

Reflecting the *Walk-In Visitor's Book* clearly shows the strengths and weaknesses of using talkback boards as a method of exhibition analysis. Even the ostensibly simple method of talkback boards requires a considerable effort. To achieve the goal of obtaining as comprehensive a picture as possible of visitors' impressions of an exhibition, it is necessary to keep a talkback board set up for a longer period of time. Even if the exhibition being analyzed remains the same, the visitors change and come with different expectations. School classes, for example, provide different feedback to the talkback board than families, whose feedback may differ during the summer holidays from that around Christmas. Finding out which feedback is seasonal and which is permanent is only possible with a longer runtime. A longer runtime requires a higher material and personnel effort, which increases the overall effort. This shows that the method cannot be implemented quickly, but is connected with an intensive planning and implementation effort in terms of time and personnel and also a high material consumption.

Fig. 3: Insights can be gained from any feedback. This was also the case with the artwork created by younger visitors, © Museum for Industrial Culture.



This effort is worthwhile, considering the broad range of feedback. Although not all visitors answer all the questions, the responses come from a wide variety of people. In the *Walk-In Visitor's Book*, we noted that a lot of the feedback was written with clear comments and without spelling mistakes. But we also collected flaglets that showed that the person writing their comments had trouble formulating and writing their sentences (perhaps due their age or lack of practice with this form of feedback). The fact that we received such a wide range of feedback is an asset for the data collection and a boost for the method in capturing the most diverse experiences of the exhibition. Another strength of the method is the openness – and maybe also the lack of control – in the questions and participation, as it can lead to surprising feedback. For example, in the *Walk-In Visitor's Book*, a ‘freshly minted’ romantic couple left a message on their flaglet about just having had their first kiss. This comment did not specifically relate to the question on the talkback board, but provides the

analysis with the information that the permanent exhibition was used as a place for (romantic) leisure pursuits. In conclusion one can say that the method can be used particularly effectively in cases when you want to use these results to alter or modify the analyzed exhibition. Here, the talkback board offers a tool for visitors to have a part in shaping future exhibitions with their suggestions.

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