Connecting Families to Complex Content in Museums

Lindsay Newton – Missouri History Museum
Tony Lawson – Cincinnati Museum Center
Lindsay Genshaft – Denver Art Museum
How would you define “complex”?
“Complex”:

• Not easy to analyze or understand
• Complicated
• Intricate
So how would you define “complex content” in museums?
Exhibits, programs, or instructional materials that:

• Deal with race, prejudice, bias, religion, immigration
• Push people to critically think and problem solve
• Ask for people to voice their opinions and be heard
Case Study:
Connecting Families to Complex Science Content at Cincinnati Museum Center
“I haven’t had a science class since high school.”

“My kids are too young to learn science.”
Exhibit Engagement

Learning Through Play Family Guides

• Play
• Learn
• Discover
• Explore

Energy Zone

Play
Use the treadmill to lift balls into the overhead tube. Use the pressure popper to bounce a ball off the target and direct it to land in the funnel. Work together to fill up the Big Bucket!

Learn
Simple machines (gears, levers, pulleys, wheel and axles, inclined planes) move balls in the exhibit and help make work easier. Working with others to fill up the Big Bucket helps children learn to cooperate and develop strong relationships with peers.

Discover
Now that you understand a little bit more about simple machines, here are some things you can discover for yourself:

1. Can you pick up 5 red balls and put them in the bag?
2. Discover how many balls you can load into the pressure popper and successfully shoot out at one time.
3. How many machines lead directly to the Big Bucket?
4. How long does it take to get a ball from the treadmill conveyor belt all the way to the Big Bucket?

For our younger visitors: Sorting balls by color and counting them while placing them in a bag develops early science and math skills.

Explore
Visit the Machine Tool Gallery in the Cincinnati History Museum to observe simple and complex machines in action.
Exhibit Engagement

Children’s Museum: The Woods

Science Museum: The Cave
Facilitated Science Programs

Science Process Skills

• Classification
• Communication
• Prediction
• Inference
• Measurement
• Observation
Live Animal Programs

Children’s Museum: Animals Up Close

Science Museum: Bat Flight
“I didn’t know the kids were learning science while they were playing.”

“My daughter has developed a serious interest in science!”
Case Study:
Using facilitated programs at the Denver Art Museum to tackle complex content
“...many parents question whether art museum visits are age-appropriate for young children.”
-IMLS Report

“I feel like we need “Art museum for dumb parents” or something like that.”
Miró, Magic, and the Night
A Promise to Keep
Create-n-Take
Foxy and Shmoxy: Art Detectives
Case Study:
Connecting Families with Complex Content at the Missouri History Museum
“A museum is not a good place for young children to go.”

“History is boring.”

“Kids don’t have the ability to understand history.”
Family Programs

• Over 250 programs per year
• Serving families with kids ages 2-10
• Highlighting local culture, holidays, and exhibits
History Clubhouse

• Learn about St. Louis history in a way that is interactive and fun
• For kids ages 2-10 with their families or caregivers
• 100% hands-on
• FREE
Paint for Peace Mural
Paint for Peace Mural
P.E.A.C.E. Out for Kids

Painting Everything Always Calms Everybody
Children’s Library and Storytelling
Strategies
For Connecting Families to Complex Content

• Apply to any kind of museum experience
• Humans want to make sense of the world
• Combine strategies
• Use good judgement
• Be prepared to dive deep
Ground Your Program in a Guiding Question

• What is the at the heart of what you’re exploring?
• Boil it down to the essence for clarity
Use Real/ Authentic Artifacts and Objects

• Provide unique experiences
• Encourage close looking, questions, and new conclusions or opinions
• “See it, try it”
Recreate Experiences to Support Full Immersion

- Allows kids to imagine places and times they have not experienced
- Fosters empathy
Model Process of Exploring and Empowering Kids to Have a Conversation

- Supports perspective taking and perspective getting
- Consider different methods of prompting questions
Encourage Playing and Learning Together

• Supports:
  o Discovery
  o Problem solving
  o Creative thinking
Parents as First Teachers

- Parents as first teachers
- Provide suggestions for parents
- Suggestions should vary for different types of learners
Imbed Humor

- Consider multi levels of humor
- Laughter as comfort
Use Art Making

• Expression through creating
• Ideal to encourage reflection
• Memorable
Use Storytelling in Its Variety of Forms

- Children’s books
- Performances
- First-hand stories
- Family story sharing
Incorporate Movement and Music

- Kinesthetic learners
- Channels energy to make connections
Use a Familiar Context

- Comfort
- Connect previous knowledge to new ideas
Visitors in Role (Being Part of a Story)

- Supports empathy
- Promotes critical thinking
Focus on Relevant Topics

• Provides new context to real world issues
• Encourages thinking in new ways

Youth Activism & Engagement Workshop
Be Open to Improvisation

• Supports visitor-centric experience
• Promotes inclusion
Group Work

Incorporate strategies into specific scenarios.
Share Session
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