



10 Pain-free Ways to Evaluate Your Education Program

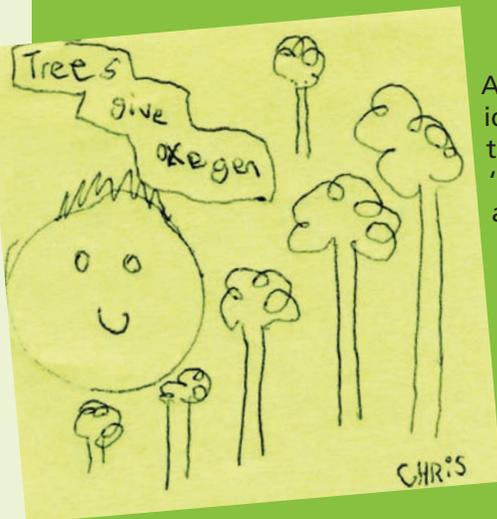
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We all know we should evaluate our programs to improve visitor experience and to show our colleagues, management and funders how effective we are. But evaluation is often avoided or tacked on at the end because it is so unappealing. In 2010, Bristol Zoo's education staff experimented with a variety of quantitative and qualitative evaluation methods. These methods were used to measure the success of "All Creatures Great and Small," a temporary education program designed to celebrate the International Year of Biodiversity. Education staff met frequently throughout the program's duration to share their experiences of using these methods. Here are the ten methods we trialled, with their advantages and disadvantages:

QUALITATIVE METHODS

1. 'Post-it' Notes



Ask visitors to write ideas in response to a question on a 'Post-it' note and add it to a display.

Visitor response to "Why is biodiversity important?"

Strengths: Non-invasive. Instant feedback. Visitors contribute to the exhibition.

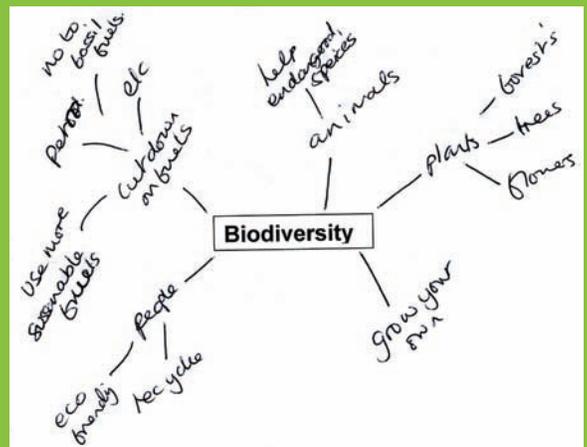
Weaknesses: Visitors may be influenced by previous comments. Offensive comments may be posted. Can be difficult to analyze.

2. Meaning Maps

Ask visitors to add ideas to a word or phrase to complete their own personal map.

Strengths: Ideal for pre- and post-program evaluation. Can measure extent, breadth and depth of understanding.

Weaknesses: Heavy burden for visitors. Analysis can be time consuming and difficult.



Pre-program personal meaning map.

3. Email Feedback

Invite visitors to send photos and accounts of conservation action after a park visit.

Strengths: Unique, personal accounts. Evidence of behavior change. Low effort for staff.

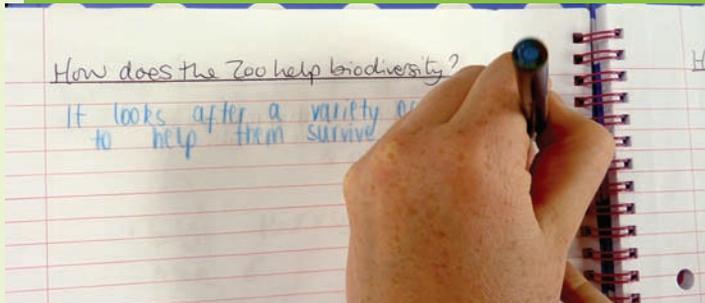
Weaknesses: Low return rate. Incentive (e.g. prize) usually needed. IT skills and hardware required. Permission required to use photos. Slow feedback.



"Here is my 4 year old son Jacob with his bughouse, which he is very proud of!"

4. Comment Book

Invite visitors to write their ideas with a focused question written at the top of each page.



Strengths: Non-invasive. Interesting for visitors to read comments. Not time-consuming. Quick feedback.

Weaknesses: Less attractive method to visitors. Response rate may be low. Visitors may copy other people's comments. Offensive/unrelated comments may be posted.

5. Comment Cards

Encourage visitors to write comments on paper and place written views into a box.



Strengths: Not time-consuming. Non-invasive. Comments can be kept anonymous.

Weaknesses: Rate of response may be low. Dedicated space needed for box and cards.

Visitor using comment card.

QUANTITATIVE METHODS

6. Stickers

Give visitor a sticker to place on faces with different expressions that match how they feel about the program.

Strengths: Attractive for visitors. Easy to segment visitors with different color stickers. Quick feedback.

Weaknesses: Visitors influenced by previously placed stickers.

Visitor using sticker placement evaluation.



7. Pre- & Post-Questionnaires

PRE EDUCATION CENTRE
Hello my name is..... And I work here at Bristol Zoo. We are doing surveys to help us plan new activities in the future. Would you mind answering 7 questions? It will only take a few minutes. Thank you for your time.

- How many children under 16?
- How many adults?
- Are you members?
- Have you already done the scratch card trail? Show a scratch card
- Did you go to the Bristol Festival of Nature this year?
- If so, did you visit the Zoo tent?
- What do you remember about it?
- What does the word biodiversity mean to you?
Personal meaning map
- Biodiversity is the variety of life on Earth. What is Bristol Zoo doing to help biodiversity?
Conservation - protecting them, breeding, releasing

Ask visitors a series of questions before or after a program.

Strengths: Collects large amounts of data. Recognizable format. Low burden if short and closed questions. Scope

to collect a range of responses; from visitor understanding to enjoyment.

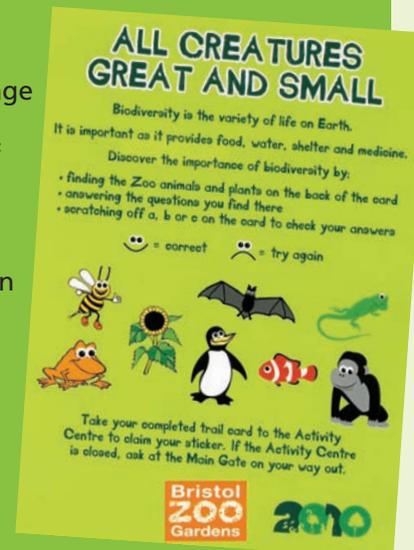
Weaknesses: Piloting is required. A valid and reliable questionnaire takes time and skill. Disrupts visitor experience. Visitors feel tested. Analysis of open-ended questions takes time. Not ideal for measuring behaviors.

8. Uptake

Calculate visitor percentage taking part in activity using counts; numbers of visitors, trail cards used, stickers claimed.

Strengths: Easy to obtain numbers and do the calculations. Quick.

Weaknesses: Validity may be low as not all visitors picking up educational resources use them. Resources need frequent monitoring and 'topping up'.



Scratch card for the biodiversity trail.

9. Attention Capture



Visitor engaging with the biodiversity trail.

Observe visitor behavior to reveal how many engage with different aspects of the program.

Strengths: Low cost. Quick feedback. Non-invasive. Uncomplicated.

Weaknesses: Needs consistent record keeping of data. Presence of observer may influence results. Observing visitors may be an ethical issue.

10. Holding Power

Observe and record visitors entering and leaving the program to calculate how long they were engaged.

Strengths: Low cost. Quick feedback. Non-invasive. Uncomplicated.

Weaknesses: Presence of observer may influence results. Observing visitors may be an ethical issue. Validity may be low as some visitors may dwell for longer if confused.



The amount of time visitors choose to spend engaged in a program can be measured.

Conclusion

Most methods are cheap, easy to prepare, carry out and interpret and are simple to integrate into everyday activities. Three different methods used together form a composite picture of visitor responses. This 'methodological triangulation' works best when you select three methods appropriate to your unique program.

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