Participatory design: What do you do? And what do you get?

by Scott Billings

A young woman is strolling down the street in a medium-sized British town. Rounding a corner she is confronted with an altercation between a white man and an Asian store-owner. It is not clear what has caused the confrontation, but the aggression has a palpable racial element. As the shouting and gesticulating heightens, the observer takes out her phone and grabs a couple of photographs, as well as a short, ten-second video, all the while making sure she is out of sight.

Later, as she comes into the city centre, the woman decides to pop in to the local museum to see what's on and to pass half an hour before a meeting. As it turns out, the museum has just opened a temporary exhibition looking at the history of race relations in the city, offering oral histories, photographs and cultural objects imported to the town by its Asian immigrants. She notices that one section of the exhibition is soliciting visitor input, encouraging people to share their own stories, experiences and images. These contributions will be collected on a special microsite, built to accompany the exhibition, elements of which form part of a constantly updated digital display inside the museum.

Recalling the incident she witnessed in the street, the woman decides to upload the pictures to the museum's Flickr group, set up especially for the exhibition, where she is able to geotag the exact location of the event using Google maps, as well as the time and date it took place. One of the pictures – a decisive photographic moment – captured the white man's grimacing face, his first finger rigidly poking towards the anxious looking Asian shopkeeper. Shorn of context, the image could of course have any number of meanings; but the photographer is able to provide a firsthand account of the racist abuse she overheard and which she duly records in the image's caption.

With this contribution the exhibition has become live and dynamic. The museum has taken a difficult subject, with historical and social dimensions, examined it and opened it to the public for further and ongoing discussion and interpretation. Although focused around the physical exhibition itself, much of this public participation is made possible using online services which are constructed along the social media principles of interconnection, sharing and collaboration – an approach to web-based services encapsulated in the term web 2.0.
But more than this, in planning for the exhibition the museum staff decided to engage people outside the organisation to work through the design process itself. This participatory design sought input from a small number of community groups, local businesses and residents. One of the outcomes of this 'outside' contribution was the decision that the microsite, while hosted and branded by the museum, would be maintained and moderated by two volunteers. One of these volunteers works for a community outreach programme which organises events promoting integration and positive interaction between different sections of the community. The experiences and learning derived from these events continues to be fed into the microsite in the form of a blog.

And so on. This fictional scenario, presenting a museum operating on the tricky frontiers of social debate, begins to illustrate some of the possibilities of incorporating participation – by design – into the processes of creating exhibitions, as well as the way those exhibitions engage the public. Of course, engagement and collaboration may well form the backbone of many existing museum programmes without the term participatory design (or indeed design for participation) ever being mentioned. But a conscious decision to build participation into the design process itself and/or into the way users will interact with exhibitions once they are installed is an approach which may yield benefits for the institution and visitors alike.

Nina Simon of US consultancy Museum 2.0 explains: 'Participatory design can help museums deliver on the oft-repeated but rarely demonstrated desire for museums to become essential civic spaces, social environments that encourage the democratic process.'

Participation can be as complicated or as simple as deemed necessary, depending on resources, experience and objectives. Engaging and organising people (the public, experts from areas outside the museum, community groups and so on) to take part in a truly collaborative design process is certainly an undertaking, as is inviting visitor contributions and dialogue with the exhibitions themselves. But at its simplest level, participation might be encouraged by asking visitors to caption or comment on objects by sticking Post-It notes around exhibition displays. An example cited by Simon[1] is The Post-It Project, conducted at Sweden's Västernorrlands Läns Museum a few years ago, 'in which visitors were solicited to write down comments – about anything in the museum – and post them wherever they wanted.' As she suggests, the value and goal here are perhaps too vague to be genuinely useful, but the 'open-endedness also makes this kind of project a great starting point for a museum to explore the inclusion of visitor content. Start-up costs and development time are minimal, and the project can be aborted at any time.'

[1] http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/2007/06/tools-for-20-user-generated-exhibits.html

But for many museums, the catalyst for building visitor contributions into their activities has been the proliferation and mass uptake of online social media services – sites such as Flickr, Facebook and, more recently, Twitter. Flickr in particular is well known, easy to use and allows museums to garner relevant photographic material from the public, not just locally, but anywhere in the world. An event-based extension of this might be to organise a scavenger hunt, as the London Transport Museum has done, sending teams of people into the city to locate and photograph various London Transport related objects. All the pictures were uploaded to Flickr, allowing a vote for the best image to be thrown open to the public and in turn utilising Flickr's social network aspects to build awareness of the museum's brand amongst online 'communities'.

Similarly, the Victoria & Albert Museum's World Beach Project, devised by artist Sue Lawty, asks people worldwide to create sculptures and images on beaches using gathered stones, recording the process and finished art in up to three photographs. Rather than using Flickr, the images are uploaded to the museum's dedicated web page[2] and embedded Google world map. Again, the project is conceived specifically to create participation, engaging visitors and non-visitors alike in content generation, while marketing the V&A online at the same time.

These last two examples are competition and art project respectively, so arguably outside a museum's core public-facing activities, which are delivered via exhibitions, collections and interpretation. But participation can seed exhibitions too. The Minnesota History Society's MN150[3] exhibition and book invited public submissions of the key people, places or things that have shaped the state's history. This engagement was partly conducted online, but the bulk of submissions came from community outreach, demonstrating that participatory design need not be technology-led – it is mostly about approach and intent. The result was an exhibition populated with content gathered directly through public input, albeit curated by the museum.

A nice example of design for participation is the National Maritime Museum's Astronomy Photographer of the Year competition, set up this year so that entries are submitted via Flickr, where they are held in the public domain, while a partnership with Astrometry.net allows each image is 'astrotagged' so that they can all be combined and compared in a growing photographic chart of the night sky. The collaborative nature of this project – along with the content created by the public – is its strength. And again, it builds awareness of the museum's activities farther and wider than could have been achieved otherwise. It is competition, exhibition, research and marketing all in one, but would not be possible without public input, professional collaboration and web-based services.

Yet another example is Brooklyn Museum's Click![4] exhibition, an investigation of the 'wisdom of crowds' in which artists' photographic responses to the theme of the 'changing faces of Brooklyn' were assessed by the public online. At the final exhibition, held in the museum last

[2] http://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/textiles/lawty/world_beach/map_gallery/index.php
[3] http://www.mnhs.org/exhibits/mn150/
[4] http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/click/

summer, the artworks were installed according to their relative ranking from this public jury process.

Participatory design, then, can take many flavours. Naturally, not everything will be appropriate for every institution, exhibition or subject theme.

Traditionally, museums have delivered knowledge and learning in one direction: from institution to the public. Although it adds another dimension, participation need not supplant this model. Of course, it is valid to ask whether participation – and by extension participatory design – is actually necessary or beneficial at all. Perhaps one way to answer that is to consider changing expectations. As cultural sector consultant and Flow Associates director Bridget McKenzie[5] notes, a recent flurry of events centred on participatory culture seem to indicate that 'the public expects to participate'.

[5] http://flowassociates.com/wordpress/