



The title/
marquee wall
for Shedd's
Amphibians
exhibition uses
a dimensional,
accordion
effect so that
the graphic
appears to
change as the
viewer moves.

COURTESY OF SHEDD AQUARIUM/BRENNNA HERNANDEZ

Language as Process

Using Words to Shape Exhibition Design

Kris Nesbitt
Lindsay Maldonado

At Shedd Aquarium, planning exhibitions around a central message or big idea has been core to our process for at least two decades. As Beverly Serrell states in *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, “The big idea provides an unambiguous focus for the exhibit team throughout the exhibit development process by clearly stating in one noncompound sentence the scope and purpose of an exhibition.”¹

In reality, though, our teams have sometimes found it challenging to integrate the “big idea” throughout all aspects of the exhibition—environment, design, interpretation, interactives, text, graphics—to support the concept and create a truly cohesive experience. The more cohesive the experience, we’ve learned, the more likely our visitors are to grasp the concept behind the experience.

Recently, our exhibition, audience research, and evaluation teams have been collaborating to explore different ways to bring the big idea to life by using language as an integral part of the exhibition planning and design process. We translate core messages into key words and phrases that help us to focus and shape an exhibition’s content and experiences. These words become a shared language that not only informs the overall design process, but help us to more accurately test

how visitors actually describe their experiences within our designed spaces. Used in conjunction with a new testing tool, “Dimensions of the Visitor Experience,”² we are finding this to be a rich and rewarding approach to design planning.

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Jellies: A Special Exhibition Case Study

Our planning process for a 2010 special exhibition on sea jellies, also known as jellyfish, was our first foray into using language as process. The exhibition design team had established a working big idea for the exhibition: “Encounter the intriguing ways jellies survive—and thrive—in the world’s oceans.” We wanted the design to be immersive; we also wanted to provide a transformative exhibition experience for our visitors. But our design concepts were not gelling into a cohesive approach. Because members of the design team had collaborated extensively before, we were able to frankly discuss our

¹ Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 7-8.

² Jan Packer, Roy Ballantyne, and Nigel Bond, “Understanding and Capturing the Visitor Experience” (paper presented at the Visitor Studies Association Conference, Chicago, Illinois, July 24–27, 2011).

[T]he “Dimensions of the Visitor Experience”...is a list of 15 dimensions (characteristics) of the visitor experience: attention; fascination; aesthetic appreciation; togetherness; excitement; privilege; compassion; connection; reflective engagement; peacefulness; personal growth; autonomy; spiritual engagement; physical activity; and tension.

problem—which revealed a struggle to translate the big idea into an overall design vision that would support the content.

Our breakthrough came when we thought more about the *way* jellies “survive and thrive,” and translated that into a single, core narrative keyword: “drift.” The word “drift,” which describes jellies’ movement through the ocean, would shape all aspects of the exhibition design. The exhibition flow became a subtly meandering path, and there were no right angles in the space; even habitat windows were designed as curving forms (fig. 1). We imagined a large, swooping “meta-curve” drifting through the space, and all visuals within the graphic design followed this arc. We created a color palette that gently progressed through a series of subtle gradients, resulting in a noticeable change from the beginning of the exhibition to the end. Lastly, we added a soundtrack of ethereal, pulsing music, which complemented the space and storyline. Overall, *Jellies* was a tremendous success for Shedd, not just in popularity but, as evaluation showed, in visitors’ comprehension of key exhibition messages.

Taking It to the Next Level: *Amphibians* and “Dimensions of the Visitor Experience”

In 2014, we began to plan a new special exhibition about amphibians. The design team was struggling to translate the exhibition’s big idea—“an amphibian’s life is full of change”—into a dimensional experience. We simplified the big idea to the obvious narrative keyword—“change”—and developed a marquee wall concept (intro images) that captured the word’s dynamism. However, when we tried to integrate “change” throughout the design of the entire space,

our ideas were falling flat. They seemed either formulaic and repetitive—or potentially overstimulating and outside our budget. Team conversations became looping discussions that typically ended with someone saying (followed by an awkward silence), “What does ‘change’ really mean?” We were stuck.

Around this same time, Shedd’s audience research and evaluation team was exploring the use of an existing tool, called the “Dimensions of the Visitor Experience.” The instrument, developed by researchers at the

fig. 1. The narrative keyword—“drift”—helped to shape all elements of exhibit design for Shedd’s *Jellies* exhibition.



University of Queensland and used by museums both nationally and internationally,³ is a list of 15 dimensions (characteristics) of the visitor experience: attention; fascination; aesthetic appreciation; togetherness; excitement; privilege; compassion; connection; reflective engagement; peacefulness; personal growth; autonomy; spiritual engagement; physical activity; and tension.

Each of the list's 15 dimensions is further subdivided into 75 descriptive, corresponding adjectives. When completing the instrument, visitors choose which of the adjectives best describes the experience they just had. Because the visitor experience is typically complex, subjective, and difficult to assess, the instrument's wide range of specific, emotion-packed words and phrases helps visitors to describe how they feel as they engage with the exhibition. Analysis of the data collapses the visitor choices into scores for each corresponding

3 Packer, Ballantyne, and Bond, "Understanding and Capturing the Visitor Experience."

dimension word. The checklist is a constant, making comparison possible across exhibition experiences.⁴

At Shedd, the Dimensions of the Visitor Experience (or DoVE, as we refer to it internally) has become a standard tool for exhibition evaluation. We can assess and compare the mean scores on each of the 15 dimensions (possible range of 0–5), and we can look more deeply at the individual items within each dimension. For example, central to Shedd's mission is the idea of connecting visitors to the natural world, which may prompt our teams to examine more closely scores on the dimension of connection. This dimension is described as feeling a "sense of attachment or personal connection with nature, objects, or the past," and consists of five individual items: attachment, connected to the past, connection with objects, nostalgia,

4 Jan Packer and Roy Ballantyne, "Conceptualising the visitor experience: a review of literature and development of a multifaceted model," *Visitor Studies* 19, no. 1 (forthcoming, 2016).



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and connection with nature. Aside from an individual exhibition evaluation tool, DoVE also offers the opportunity for comparison; thus, we have used DoVE to better understand the variability in the visitor experience Shedd-wide. Using the previous example of connection, we have been able to identify where connection scores are high and where they are lower, and then use those findings to further investigate why such variation exists across exhibition experiences.

Since Shedd's exhibition team had struggled to develop a shared language for *Amphibians*, we wondered if we could somehow use this newfound tool to help our team focus. As an experiment, the *Amphibians* design team completed a series of exercises using DoVE. We asked ourselves which of the dimensions we felt should define the experience for our visitors, and debated and discussed how the dimensions might manifest themselves within the space. "Connection," "fascination," "excitement," and "aesthetic appreciation" emerged as our primary experiential targets. We then explored how the exhibition's three different rooms might "change" experientially for visitors as they progressed through the space. Rather than trying to capture the keyword "change" in each component, could the overall exhibition experience provide a changing feel for visitors as they progressed from start to finish? Perhaps even more importantly, could the exercise dislodge the team from its creative impasse?

For the design team, words had become a powerful mechanism for creating a shared language that bridged design intent and visitor experience.

We used DoVE to map out *how* the space would change. The first room would emphasize the dimensions "reflective engagement" and "spiritual engagement," offering a more contemplative, transformative experience that reflected the room's stories about amphibian metamorphosis. In the second room, our design would spring from emphasis on the dimensions "physical activity" and "attention," since here we anticipated lots of close looking and craning to peer into hard-to-see habitats. In the final room, where we planned to share stories about collaborative efforts to help struggling amphibian populations around the world, our team chose "togetherness" and "compassion" as the dominant dimensions.

The design team regrouped and recalibrated the look and feel to reflect this matrix. In the first room, we used

a deep blue color palette and subdued lighting to create a reflective feel. In the second space, we used brighter lighting and more active juxtapositions of saturated color—along with lily pads "hopping" across the ceiling—to evoke the desired dimensions of physical activity and attention. In the final space, the design team gave a nod to togetherness and compassion with a warm palette, large-scale images showing people connecting with amphibians, and, on the ceiling, a sun feature, whose rays merge together as one. For the design team, words had become a powerful mechanism for creating a shared language that bridged design intent and visitor experience.

After *Amphibians* opened, evaluators asked visitors to the special exhibition to fill out the DoVE checklist, allowing our team to compare our visitors' reactions to the experience with our design intent. Results of this analysis suggested that to a certain extent, visitors were experiencing the exhibition as intended by the design team, with high "fascination" and "aesthetic appreciation" scores. But there were also some key areas of misalignment. When compared to other Shedd exhibitions, *Amphibians* had higher scores in the dimensions of "attention," "tension," and "personal growth," but lower scores in the dimensions of "reflective engagement" and "togetherness." The high "attention" scores suggested an alignment with one of our design intents—that visitors would look closely and attentively as they searched the lush habitats for hard-to-spot animals. However, the higher than normal "tension" scores were a red flag. They suggested that visitors might be finding the challenge of searching more frustrating than anticipated. On the other hand, the high scores in the dimension of "personal growth," categorized as accomplishment and fulfillment in the checklist, indicated that our visitors are feeling a sense of satisfaction when they did discover the animals.

This information about our visitors' experience in *Amphibians* provided valuable insight. In collaboration with our animal care staff, we began to alter lighting, habitat design, and even the animals on exhibit to help create a better experience that allowed for a less tense and more satisfying search.

Using DoVE to Test Our Biases

As we explored using DoVE dimensions as a shared language for planning and a means to check for alignment between visitor experience and design intent, a nagging question emerged. As an exhibition team, we always try to put ourselves in the shoes of the visitor, and for the

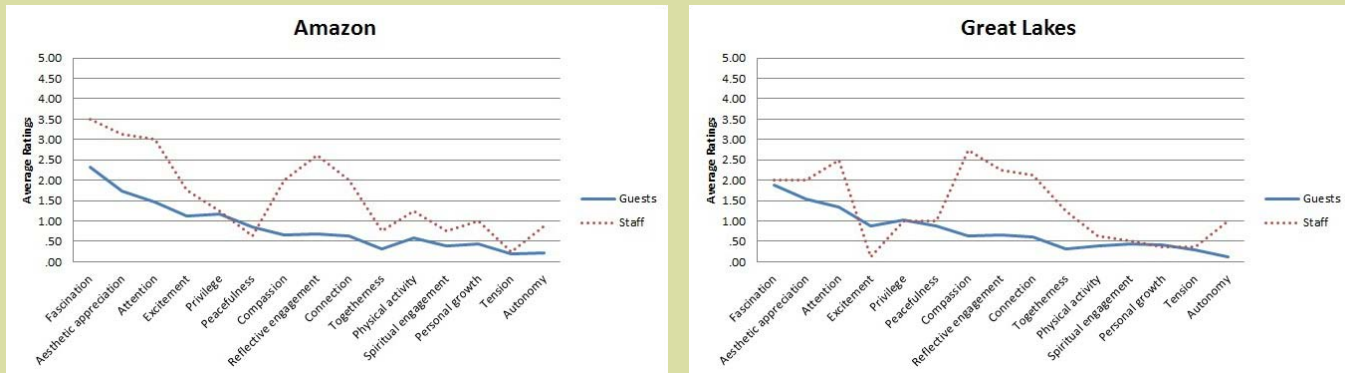


fig. 2. Graphs of the DoVE instrument for two Shedd exhibitions, showing how the experiences of staff and visitors in the spaces differ markedly.

most part, we tend to believe we can project how a guest might feel about the experiences we plan. But is our perspective accurate? Do we really understand what it means to be a visitor at Shedd?

To find out, each member of our exhibition planning team explored five of our exhibition experiences “as a visitor.” After each visit, staff independently completed the DoVE instrument as a visitor does, assessing which adjectives best described their experience. Shedd’s audience research team then analyzed the data, providing individual and combined staff scores for each space. Each team member received data and a visual graph that compared their DoVE scores with average visitor scores. We then compared our aggregate staff score to visitor data (fig. 2). The results were startling. There were wide-ranging differences between how we perceived spaces and how our guests perceived them. For our visually-oriented team, the graphs put our biases in high relief.

Using the instrument this way helped the design team members acknowledge their biases and reflect on the true nature of the visitor experience at Shedd. One team member stated, “I was not surprised that as a group of designers and developers, we would have a hard time putting ourselves in the shoes of a guest, even though we perceive that as a built-in skill of our jobs. It’s not as easy as it might seem to take off that hat and remove the filter of the design intent.” But by testing and reflecting on their experiences, the design team was able to recognize the value of DoVE in helping our team to use a shared language to help focus our collaborative work and better align our intent with our visitors’ experiences. “Using this instrument allows me to connect with guests’ experiences through a shared vocabulary,” said another team member. “This provides consistent guidelines to

plan/design for specific experiences you want your guests to have and evaluate the experience after it has been completed.” This reality check among our team members has helped us to step back and consider the experience from our guests’ perspectives more accurately, with the help of a shared language.

Our teams are continuing to experiment with ways we can use audience research tools and shared language to empower our visitors and staff alike. For instance, in recent early stage planning for a project, we identified key DoVE dimensions we hoped to emphasize and then examined DoVE data from other existing exhibitions to find other spaces with high scores in those dimensions. We then discussed what aspects of the existing exhibition we believed led to those high scores, and used that information to help shape our planning efforts for the new space. We have also begun to experiment with using the dimensions as keywords for iterative exploration and design thinking. With a space up for renovation in mind, we gave small groups of team members different DoVE dimension words and asked them to explore how they might design the space to emphasize those dimensions. The exercise resulted in a wide range of concepts for further exploration, and we will continue to look for ways to incorporate this type of thinking into our exhibition planning processes. ■

Kris Nesbitt is Senior Director of Exhibits and Experience Development, Shedd Aquarium, Chicago, Illinois.

✉ knesbitt@sheddaquarium.org

Lindsay Maldonado is Director of Audience Research and Evaluation, Shedd Aquarium.

✉ lmaldonado@sheddaquarium.org