Embracing Risk with *XOXO:*
An Exhibit about Love & Forgiveness

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I n 2014, the Children's Museum of Pittsburgh (CMP) created the traveling exhibition *XOXO: An Exhibit about Love & Forgiveness.* It was developed with financial support from the Fetzer Institute, a nonprofit organization working to further the principles of love and forgiveness as transformative forces in the world. Our goal was to encourage meaningful experiences and conversations about love and forgiveness, to gain insight into the various ways people express feelings, and to make visitors aware that they control how they choose to respond to those feelings. Working with CMP partner University of Pittsburgh Center for Learning in Out-of-School Environments (UPCLOSE), *XOXO* was evaluated to determine its impact on families and communities and the efficacy of its responsive format as a model for exhibition design.

In alignment with the CMP's mission to provide innovative museum experiences, developers worked to create a space for visitors to explore love and forgiveness through collaborative, hands-on activities that welcome personal, and potentially evocative, connections and conclusions. Such emotive subjects are not common in exhibitions and represent a departure from traditional models designed for family audiences. Responsive components and programs were designed to provoke emotionally authentic conversations, leaving visitors to make the broad themes specific through their own frame of reference. In this way, *XOXO* relies heavily on audience participation for content. The conversations and responses gathered through the exhibit evaluation exemplify visitors' willingness to engage with the topic and their eagerness to participate.

Fig. 1. Overview of XOXO. Photo by Jim Schaffer, 2014

Fig. 2. Response Walls. Photo by Kristi Jan Hoover, 2014

XOXO is Real: Creating a Robust Environment

An illustration of two hands overlaid to form the shape of a heart invites visitors into *XOXO*. Soft yellow, warm purple, and a wall playfully painted with Xs and Os set the tone for this emotionally rich exhibition. Tensile fabric pavilions provide places for community convening, while smaller, semiprivate pods create more secluded spaces for discussions in dyads. Along the perimeter are tactile sensory activities, such as a wooden infinity puzzle and a carved wooden basin filled with blue glass beads, surrounded by ample seating (fig. 1). All of these elements work together to create a welcoming, participatory environment. Mirrored easels, each with an emotive quote printed on the surface, wrap the room to suggest a reflective and conversational atmosphere. As visitors explore, they find the content is a compilation of the drawings, words, and images of previous participants and know that this space calls for collaboration.

When planning the fixtures and furnishings, the designers created a flexible structure that works in a variety of settings and easily travels. The full exhibition is 2,000 square feet, but it can be modified to fit spaces 1,250 to 2,250 square feet. The pavilions provide a unifying color and material palette that support the exhibit theme, yet are independent of the interactive components. Similarly, the mirrored easels are a flexible organizing element that can define the space in a variety of configurations. These systems allow for variation while maintaining consistency and control over the look and feel of the exhibition as it travels.

XOXO is Responsive: Relying on Visitors for Content

Most of the experiences in *XOXO* rely on the visitor to activate and add content to the exhibition. Unlike exhibitions that deliver information with a single voice, or arrange exhibits around a prescribed visitor path, *XOXO* is purposefully open-ended. Visitors are invited to engage with the exhibits, to interact with one another, and to respond to the prompts in their own way. Thus, each visitor's experience in the exhibition is personal and unique.

To foster an inclusive environment that is not intimidating, we created both collaborative moments, where visitors display their thoughts and feelings, and private moments, where visitors explore personal experiences and feelings in more intimate settings.

The "Response Walls" are a shared experience. This exhibit consists of a set of display racks and writing desks (fig. 2). Visitors are presented with two questions—one about love, the other about forgiveness. Each person can write an answer on a paper tag and tie it to the racks. Typical is this example of love's expression: "My grandson gives me hugs and kisses and tells me he loves me more than Transformers." A constantly changing collection of thoughts and feelings, the wall forms an emotional narrative that is more dynamic and

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Fig. 3. Silhouettes. Photo by Kristi Jan Hoover, 2014

interesting than anything the development team could have created alone. Each tag becomes an artifact, the handwriting, language, and message a public record of a person in a specific time and place. Collectively, they are evidence of the conversational opportunity created in the space. An adult visitor interviewed in the exhibition said, "The response wall showed me that we can start a conversation simply by asking the question in a different way than usual."

"Silhouettes" requires cooperation in a different way. Here, one visitor traces another person's shadow profile onto paper. They can keep it or hang it on a salon-style gallery wall fitted with easy-to-use spring clips (fig. 3). Visitors repeat the experience, switching roles between subject and artist. When asked about the exhibit, visitors said, "It got us focusing on each other," and it started conversations about looking at someone while talking, which reinforced the designers' intent of helping people connect in new ways.

"Release the Negative" and "Tokens of Love" are examples of more private experiences. In "Release the Negative," visitors write or draw something that makes them angry, sad, or afraid on a piece of paper. Then they dispose of the paper using a crank-operated shredder. The act of shredding is intended to release the negative feelings. This colorful, shredded paper is used to fill clear jars

slotted into a wall display, thereby turning the negative feelings into a positive art piece. One mother interviewed said, "The shredder encouraged me just to talk about [concerns and feelings] more with [my kids]. We did most of our deep talking at this activity." The complementary exhibit, "Tokens of Love," invites visitors to write or draw a positive message on a piece of paper. Then they place it in a custom-designed press to transform it into a keepsake token embossed with a heart. These two experiences have proven to be especially popular. The action is clear and powerful, and the comments elicited are often personal. At the paper shredder, a young boy wrote and talked about being sad "when my dad is away for work, especially on Sundays and Saturdays because I love him so much that it makes me really sad when he goes away." After hearing his son say this, the father started to cry and left the room. The son followed to give him a hug.

XOXO is Risky: Creating Systems to Manage the Unexpected

Designers, educators, and researchers hold different beliefs about the appropriate level of interpretation or instruction to provide visitors. One approach is to provide information about the desired outcomes to lead the participant in a specific direction. This method is often preferred by exhibition developers and visitors alike because it increases the likelihood that visitors will engage with the exhibit in

prescribed ways and helps guarantee the visitors a level of success. However, the visitors' experience may be limited; an opportunity to create unexpected results might be missed. An open-ended, visitor-generated approach is risky because it reduces institutional control and invites the unexpected. These unexpected results might make some visitors and institutions uncomfortable and cause them to avoid an exhibition like *XOXO*. Visitors, staff, funders, and host sites all need to be up for the added responsibility of making a responsive, visitor-focused exhibition successful. It may require work to host or attend an exhibit like *XOXO,* but the outcome has the potential to be more rewarding and lasting.

Developing simple systems that guide, not dictate, the visitors' experiences is a step toward being responsive. For example, each *XOXO* sign consists of a simple instruction and relevant, thematic quote, as illustrated by the sign at "Telephone Booths," which reminds visitors that voice conveys emotion. There are no other cues dictating what to say or do. The component is simple. A handset and cord is mounted on a wooden box installed on a sturdy pole, similar in shape and size to iconic 20th-century pay phones (fig. 4). Live lines connect the booths and hang above to mimic exterior telephone poles. The booths are outfitted with a soft rug and a stool to signal that this is a place to linger. Finally, the booths are oriented so users see whom they are calling. The developers' intent was to provide an opportunity for people to be left on their own to have unscripted conversations with minimal intervention. One mother explained the value of this exhibit to her: "The phone was neat, because it

encouraged my four-year-old son and I to communicate in ways that we usually don't communicate. We now have a play date set up together."

Programming was used to add depth to the exhibition through more structured, facilitated opportunities. "Story Time," for example, featured yoga sessions, sing-alongs, and books read in Braille by volunteers. This daily event allowed strangers to come together and share

Fig. 4. Telephone Booths. Photo by Kristi Jan Hoover, 2014

experiences. Likewise, "When Life Gives You Lemons" added a layer of public engagement to the exhibition. Inspired by the iconography of lemonade stands, a mobile, *XOXO*-themed version was built to be set up outside the museum, in parks, and at farmers' markets. Lemonade was offered in exchange for a promise of a good deed. Promises focused largely

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Endnote:
[1]Beverly Serrell, "Paying Attention: The Duration and Allocation of Visitors' Time in Museum Exhibitions," *Curator* 40 (1997): 108-125.

on improving family life, neighborhood, or the wider community. In this way, the lemonade stand extended the messages of *XOXO* beyond the walls of the museum. Programming like this is one way host venues can put their own stamp on *XOXO*. It is an opportunity to build community partnerships, cultivate new audiences, and bring in local perspective and expertise.

Reflections

For exhibition developers, a responsive exhibit relieves the pressure to have all of the answers, especially for an exhibition about a subject like love. The downside is the lack of control. In such situations, developers need to exercise a higher level of oversight of the overall presentation to ensure the vision is upheld and objectives are met. The big themes addressed in *XOXO* are suited to responsive exhibition design because the flexibility becomes a useful platform for conversation and learning. Visitors seem willing to tackle these topics and to invest time and effort in *XOXO*, spending an average of 26 minutes in the exhibition, which is more than 25 percent greater than the research-documented average.[1] The conversations overheard by floor staff, shared in interviews, and documented on "Response Walls" provide evidence of

the rich conversations that take place in *XOXO*. Visitors have unique experiences as they are encouraged to make their own connections, to converse, and to come to their own conclusions. One parent shared this reaction to the exhibition: "I was surprised by how positive the ideas about forgiveness were—not sad. There were fun ways for kids to learn things that we try to teach them everyday: communication, teamwork, sharing." Notably, repeat visitors also report ways the exhibition impacts their attitudes and behaviors as they incorporate lessons and conversations from *XOXO* into their lives. When actions are taken outside the walls of the museum, it demonstrates how much an exhibition resonates with people and the ripple effect a powerful museum experience can have.

Since *XOXO* responds immediately to the audience, control is effectively relinquished to the visitor. This format naturally maintains relevance throughout the life of the tour as each community fills in the content, contributes artifacts, and perpetually updates the exhibition with their silhouettes, fears, joys, drawings, faces, and reflections. They leave feeling positive and connected, if not fully aware of how much their actions impact the experience and might contribute to the experience of others. ☀