

## **As Happy as Can Be: Fostering Inclusiveness at Explora**

Paul Tatter, ASTC Dimensions: On Becoming an Inclusive Science Center, November 2004

"I like the museum because it makes me happy. As happy as can be." This message on a comment card left by a young visitor to Explora is a message about accessibility and inclusiveness. It's a message about the role of a place in somebody's life. So are these: "¡Divertido! ¡Muy inteligente!" "Remarkable! A great experience for 7-year-olds or 70-year-olds." "Me gustó todas las cosas." "This weekend we came Saturday and Sunday. Yea for Albuquerque!" "Dude, this is a so cool place." "This museum is awesome. I love it! I want to live here."

Explora, in Albuquerque, New Mexico, is work in progress—its very newness makes it atypical—and so it doesn't have advice to offer, only experiences to share. We keep trying to focus on the experience of the whole place; on the interplay among exhibits, environment, programs, stuff, staff, and visitors of all kinds, and passing beyond the walls to the interplay of all these things with the community and its diverse population, personal histories, special interests, schools, neighborhoods, government, organizations, and businesses. Whew! How do museums embrace all of this?

We constantly slide back and forth between attention to the whole and attention to the detail. We try to remember that the whole and the detail are connected. Since this is a process, the whole is always editing the parts and the parts in turn are making up the whole.

People—visitors, staff, board, supporters—and their learning experiences are the heart of Explora, not the exhibits, programs, building, or the business, which are just the context for the people and what they are doing. In 2001, Explora's board made a commitment to people and diversity with a policy resolution that includes the following: "Explora's exhibits and programming will be welcoming and responsive to children and families from all of New Mexico's varied cultures.... Explora is committed to the goal that its staff reflects the diversity and demographics of New Mexico's population.... Explora will seek to develop the skills and abilities of its staff members so they may assume greater levels of responsibility, either at Explora or elsewhere...."

Our current staff is 67 people. Ninety-three percent were hired from local communities; 44 percent are conversationally bilingual (English plus languages ranging from American Sign Language to Keres, Navajo, and Spanish); 40 percent are Hispanic, Native American, African American, or Asian; 37 percent are male; 30 percent are over 50. We search for new employees through referrals from staff, board, and community friends, and by word of mouth, phone calls to people who know people, ads in local English and Spanish papers, and notices to some social service organizations.

Among our criteria for hiring are the usual skills and experience. Given these, employment is offered to people whose personal qualities indicate they will

participate in and contribute to the growth of our shared and diverse institutional culture. If an applicant pool does not provide such qualities, we have learned to wait and try again. Probably the most important management activities at Explora are tirelessly advocating a vision for our developing institutional culture, hiring thoughtful, creative, generous, cooperative, and happy people to inhabit that culture, and facilitating its transactions with the community.

### **Defined by what we do**

Explora has had its share of diversity and inclusiveness studies, committees, and focus groups. These all are good at identifying myriad issues, but they can't make things happen. Our staff does that. But where to start? Rather than waiting for clarity, we decided to just start somewhere and then make adjustments as we go along—understanding that this is a long-term, organization-wide process. Explora's diverse board, and especially its board executive committee, serves as an ongoing forum for ideas. Board members represent a wide range of ages and are 40 percent female and 33 percent Hispanic/Latino, Native American, or Asian.

What matters is what people do here: what visitors do, what staff members do, what board members do. What they do defines the place. Explora is driven by an evolving, experimental pedagogy and by its mission: "creating opportunities for inspirational discovery and the joy of lifelong learning through interactive experiences in science, technology, and art." The environment shapes the behaviors of people within it, both employees and visitors, and those behaviors in turn become aspects of the environment. What matters is the overall effect of place, of small experiences accumulating into the outcome of an experience of the whole.

A common quality of the comments quoted at the beginning of this article is that they are expressions of whole, personal responses to accumulated experiences of a whole place. They communicate global feelings, from people diverse in age, culture, gender, interest, and ability, about the residues of time spent in an immersive environment.

We are not sure why such a broad cross-section of our community visits Explora. According to the most recent U.S. Census, New Mexico is 45 percent White (not of Hispanic/Latino origin); 42 percent Hispanic or Latino; 10 percent Native American; 2 percent African American; and 1 percent Asian. Our visitors reflect these proportions. Their comments are so diverse that it is difficult to identify any primary factor drawing them here. Most likely it is not because of any particular thing, but rather because of a collective whole, within which different people are drawn to different things. In attracting visitors, inclusiveness is more important than marketing.

Inclusiveness at Explora begins with attention to the most basic aspects of voluntary human learning: the proclivities and heuristic capacities of the human body (all people learn with their bodies); the analogs from past experiences that people bring into their present experience, and how these can be accommodated within our exhibits and programs; an ease and intimacy of conversation; a sense of participation, ownership, inclusion, and respect; physical and emotional comfort; personal control of materials,

space, attention, and activity. Inclusiveness starts with these conditions because they are shared by almost all people.

Pursued together, these conditions create a comfortable and familiar-feeling environment for people of diverse backgrounds and personal histories. A visitor commented, “There’s a home environment quality about it. There’s an element of intimacy. It’s not institutional in feeling.” Homelike comfort is inclusive.

A person who works downtown often spends lunchtime at Explora because she likes the atmosphere. Every day we see families in our two picnic areas. Explora takes pride in appearance, cleanliness, and workmanship; in aesthetics, colors, textures, and materials; and in hospitality, much the way people take pride in the care of their homes and in their hospitality. Almost everyone intuitively understands this analog.

### **Including basic human needs**

The following descriptions may seem out of place in an article about inclusiveness, but we believe they are essential elements of how inclusiveness works here.

As, over time, the inclusiveness of science centers is becoming more than programmatic enhancement, it is because the most basic conditions for human learning are being manifested in the details that shape people’s experiences. A few easy chairs really may matter to diversity and inclusiveness. At least they matter to the grandma who needs to rest, and to the infant who needs to nurse, and to the person sitting with you—or on your lap.

Among Explora’s exhibits, irregular mazes of mobile walls and small tables create personal spaces that support focus and attention, semiprivacy, and conversation. They distribute visitors evenly across the floor space, limiting crowding and displacement. They dampen sound and movement, lowering the volume and pace of activity. The floor and passage configurations meet ADA requirements, though some are tight as we strive for intimate spaces that are not frustratingly difficult for wheelchairs. There is seating everywhere, mostly stools but also those easy chairs in nooks and crannies, promoting thought and lingering.

The mazes seem to encourage attitudes of exploration and curiosity. (“No maze has ever been like Explora, with a new adventure at every node. It was interesting for my young grandchildren as well as for me, a physicist/engineer.”) We strive to include multiple options for engagement and lines of inquiry, and to place exhibit components accessible to different ages and backgrounds in close proximity, so that all members of a family may stay together, yet satisfy their own interests. Many exhibits are fragile, with hundreds of loose parts, emanating respect for, and trust in, our visitors.

The scale of most exhibits is small, fitting on tabletops. Parts are hand-sized and made for handling. Hands provide both a means and the proof of learning through the things they do. Not even brains can do this. We see in ordinary hands the magnificent, marvelous hands that for millennia have built civilizations; that have painted caves

and canvasses, made music and monuments, tools and technology. Provisions for free hands are important for inclusiveness because they make control and decisions personal. We try to make exhibits with transactive qualities, such that both they and their users are changed even in small and unexpected ways by their encounter, and there is evidence of that activity for the next users.

Signage among exhibits is more personal than instructional. It is short and phrased in chunks of meaning. Sometimes it resembles free verse. It offers clues, questions, support for inquiry, bits of strange but relevant information. It has humor. It is bilingual. Along with personal control of activity, intimate spaces, loose parts, and a staff that asks “What do you think?,” the signage tries to communicate that here the invitation is for experience that is yours and created by you, rather than for knowledge that is mine and provided for you.

### **A culture of experimenters**

On the exhibit floor or in programs, one sees our community and the community sees itself. Visitors hear their home languages being used. There is Spanish on the walls. Visitors meet staff members who are as diverse as they are. Explora’s exhibits are intended to have a large staff presence. Sixty percent of Explora’s staff work directly with visitors, and their main goal is to engage visitors in conversation about their experiences. One hundred percent of the staff, including executive director and custodians, spends at least four hours a month helping visitors among exhibits or in programs. This personal contact raises sensitivity and awareness and provides a continual feedback loop in both directions.

Through their activity, staff members create an inclusive institutional culture, an interpersonal working environment that shares qualities with the learning environment they try to create with visitors. They incorporate their diverse backgrounds into collective efforts at understanding learning. They experiment with exhibits and programs and with how they converse with visitors.

Unlike the transmission of established past practices and knowledge, which creates hierarchies between knowers and learners, experimentalism is inclusive because it makes peers of everyone. Outcomes are not predetermined, and everyone can contribute to them.

Recently, exhibit developers began a book group to discuss what John Dewey’s *Experience and Education* might contribute to our next step. This led to the entire staff, from the controller to the marketing manager, reading and discussing the book. At all-staff meetings we sing and spend some time discussing what is important to us, what are our values, and what is our reason for being.

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