Designing for Empathy in Museum Exhibits:
The Empathy Show at ACM Interactivity

Session Summary Notes

(Note: this summary is from Brad Larson’s blog post of the session located at: https://www.bradlarson.com/empathy-show-2019)

This day and time, it's pretty clear that empathy has been in short supply as our culture grapples with fear and anger that is fanned for political benefit and portable devices that divide our attention. Are there ways museums can facilitate more empathy in our daily lives? Children's museums have been grappling with this question for years, and emerging are some exhibit techniques -- as well as whole exhibits themselves -- focusing on empathy.

At the recent Association of Children’s Museums' Interactivity conference in New Orleans, we gathered to discuss this. Participants included Robin Frisch, Experience Director at Mindsplash, who presented the work of author/designer Brianna Cutts, Anne Fullenkamp, Director of Design at Children’s Museum Pittsburgh, and Brenda Baker, Director of Exhibits at Madison Children’s Museum. I led the session and wrangled media to do live streaming and archiving to broaden the reach.

The session is about an hour long, so to make it easier to digest, I’m listing below some of the main sections here. Feel free to dive in, check out sections that are especially interesting to you...

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vu1FtjLXX0w

Video sections:

- **0:00 Intro.** (Sorry, the audio isn't good here, maybe I’m not close enough to the mic. Also, not crazy about the camera angle. Please fast forward to the next section).
- **5:00 Robin Frisch** presents Brianna Cutts’ design theory approach to empathy in exhibits
  - 5:30 three keys: Curiosity, Connection, Compassion
  - Curiosity is the starting point
  - 11:39: "Wait, Watch, Wonder" program out of Toronto
15:50: Empathy starts at about age 3, developmental process
17:40: Compassion, sympathy for others in distress

**18:30: Anne Fullenkamp** reviews the process on Children's Museum of Pittsburgh's "XOXO: An Exhibit on Love and Forgiveness"
- Key elements: giving people space and tools to communicate
- Traveling to different venues beyond children’s museums
- Silhouettes, mirrors, telephones: successful techniques for reflection and communication
- 27:55 Popup version created out of sudden necessity after shooting at Tree of Life Synagogue
- Release the negative (shredder) and kindness buttons
- Love letters, photo op

**35:05 Brenda Baker** of Madison Children’s Museum reviews "Top 10" techniques for cultural and bio-empathy
- Inclusive exhibit process, immersive environments, scaffolding
- Collaborative spaces for sharing and kindness
- Opportunities for emotional connection, celebrating similarities not differences
- Creating vivid messages on how to empathize
- Storytelling and listening, WOW experiences
- Plants and baby animals: the number 1 method up until age 7

**53:56 Q&A** (hard to hear)
**1:03:00 Examples** from audience (hard to hear)
**1:07:00 bye bye**

One of the main points overall: **empathy is an outcome we can design exhibits for**, whether integrated in small ways in existing exhibits or designed for as the overall outcome of a whole exhibit. It’s a topic worth updating and revisiting, and we talked about doing a future session either at ACM Interactivity or an online session sometime in the future. Send an email if you’d like to be kept posted, empathyshow@bradlarson.com.