Engaging Places LLC

Eight Ways to Engage Visitors:
From Receiving to Reflecting

Prepared by Max A. van Balgooy, version November 1, 2025.
Adapted from Verpoorten, Poumay, and Leclercq, "The Eight Learning Events Model,"
Interactive Learning Environments 15, no. 2 (2007): 151-60.

These eight interpretive methods describe how people learn and engage in museums and historic sites. Each experience shows what the museum does to create the conditions for learning and what the visitor does in response. Effective interpretation moves visitors from receiving to reflecting—building knowledge, curiosity, and personal meaning.

1. Receiving Information

Museum: Presents stories, facts, and ideas through text, talk, or media. Provides structure and context.
Visitor: Listens, reads, or watches to take in information and make sense of it.
Examples: Guided tour script, exhibition labels, video on the site's history
Purpose: Build foundational knowledge and situate the visitor within the story or theme.

2. Observing and Imitating

Museum: Demonstrates a skill, process, or behavior for visitors to watch and possibly try.
Visitor: Observes carefully and may mimic actions to understand technique or process.
Examples: Craft or cooking demonstrations, historical reenactments, guide demonstrating how a parlor organ worked.
Purpose: Model authentic practices and build understanding through observation.

3. Practicing and Applying

Museum: Provides opportunities for guided participation and feedback.
Visitor: Tries out a skill or process, learning by doing with support or prompts.
Examples: Writing with a quill pen, stitching a sampler, cooking a historic meal, using an historic tool.
Purpose: Reinforce learning through guided practice; move from passive to active participation.

4. Experimenting and Testing

Museum: Designs experiences that invite visitors to manipulate, test, or explore materials and ideas.
Visitor: Experiments to see what happens, trying different approaches or solutions.
Examples: Comparing tools from different eras, testing period recipes, building a stone wall
Purpose: Spark curiosity and promote inquiry through trial and discovery.

A DESIGN AND STRATEGY FIRM THAT CONNECTS PEOPLE TO HISTORIC PLACES

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5. Exploring and Discovering

Museum: Offers open-ended paths, choices, and tools for self-directed exploration.
Visitor: Seeks information, follows curiosity, and pursues personal interests.
Examples: Self-guided tours, scavenger hunts, augmented reality, open collections storage.
Purpose: Encourage autonomy and intrinsic motivation; support individualized learning.

6. Creating and Expressing

Museum: Provides materials, prompts, and encouragement for creative expression.
Visitor: Designs, writes, draws, performs, or constructs something original to convey understanding.
Examples: Writing a letter as an historic person, making a video, or sketching house details.
Purpose: Transform learning into personal expression and synthesis of ideas.

7. Discussing and Debating

Museum: Facilitates dialogue and ensures a respectful, inclusive environment for sharing perspectives.
Visitor: Exchanges ideas, asks questions, and engages with others' viewpoints.
Examples: Facilitated discussions, dialogic tours, questioning strategies, comment boards.
Purpose: Encourage social learning, empathy, and multiple perspectives through dialogue.

8. Reflecting and Connecting

Museum: Creates space and cues for reflection, follow-up questions, or personal connection.
Visitor: Thinks back on experiences, relates ideas to their own life, or forms new questions.
Examples: Sharing a family story, quiet spaces, comment walls, discussion on the ride home.
Purpose: Deepen understanding, reinforce memory, and inspire continued engagement.

How to Use This Framework

- **Design for variety:** Combine several experiences within each tour, exhibit, or program. Effective interpretation weaves these experiences together—inviting visitors to receive, explore, express, and reflect.

- **Shift facilitation:** Move from museum-directed to visitor-directed experiences as learning deepens.

- **Assess balance:** Identify which experiences are most common or underused in your interpretation.

- **Encourage autonomy:** Support visitors in taking increasing ownership of meaning-making.

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