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Learning for Fun: The Unique Contribution of Educational Leisure Experiences

Jan Packer

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ABSTRACT

What do visitors want or expect from an educational leisure activity such as a visit to a museum, zoo, aquarium or other such experience? Is it to *learn something* or to *experience learning*? This paper uses the term “learning for fun” to refer to the phenomenon in which visitors engage in a learning experience because they value and enjoy the process of learning itself. Five propositions regarding the nature of learning for fun are discussed, drawing on quantitative and qualitative data from visitors to a range of educational leisure activities. The commonalities between learning for fun and other theoretical constructs such as “experience,” “flow,” “intrinsic motivation,” and “curiosity” are explored. It is concluded that learning for fun is a unique and distinctive offering of educational leisure experiences, with implications for future research and experience design.

Many visitors to museums and other educational leisure settings, when asked whether they came to learn something, will answer, “No, we just wanted to have a look.” On the surface, this may suggest that visitors are not highly motivated to learn. However, further questioning often indicates that the experience visitors are expecting or hoping to find is one of discovery, exploration and adventure, which at the very least primes them for a learning experience. What they seek from their visit is not so much to *learn something* as to engage in an *experience of learning* that is inherently valuable or enjoyable in its own right, regardless of the learning outcomes that may or may not ensue.

The phrase “learning for fun” is used here to refer to the phenomenon in which visitors engage in a learning experience because they value and enjoy the process of learning itself, rather than for any instrumental reasons, such as the attainment of specific learning outcomes. Falk (1982) uses the analogy of a window-shopper, who is not looking to buy anything in particular, but enjoys the experience of shopping. Csikszentmihalyi (cited by Scherer 2002) uses the analogy of an artist who paints for the sake of painting, not for the work of art that will result. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) uses the term “autotelic” (“having itself as its only purpose”¹) to refer to a range of activities, such as rock-climbing, chess-playing, music, dance and sport, that under the right conditions can be intrinsically rewarding. Free-choice learning, it is suggested, can also be an autotelic experience.

The term “free-choice learning” (Falk and Dierking 1998) is used throughout this paper to refer to those occasions when learners themselves have a real choice regarding what, where, when, how, and with whom they learn. While it is tempting, and no doubt accurate, to argue that all learning is a matter of choice—just as the proverbial horse can be no more than led to the water—it is also clear that the conditions under which people learn occupy a wide continuum from little to much choice—from being led to the water with bridle and bit, to being set loose in the paddock to discover previously unexplored water sources. As the data presented in this and other papers clearly suggests, it is the element of choice that makes the difference between learning as a chore and learning as a pleasure.

Just as the difference between free-choice learning and formally-regulated learning primarily hinges on the underlying motivation of the learner (Falk and Dierking 1998), so too the difference between learning for fun and other forms or expressions of free-choice learning is also a motivational one. Thus, for example, people may engage in free-choice learning in order to acquire some specific information or general knowledge that is important to them. They may come to a museum to have a spider identified, go to a library to research the history of their local area, or search the Internet for information on a medical condition. Here, it is the product of learning, or learning outcome, that is important to the learner. At other times, people may engage in free-choice learning, not because they are seeking any specific information, but for the experience of learning itself, which they perceive as enjoyable and valuable. Given that museum contexts, according to Eisenberger (1999), are less efficient at teaching facts or concepts than are books or the Internet, it is important to more fully investigate and understand this latter purpose: learning for fun.

This paper explores the type of free-choice learning that focuses on the process or experience of learning rather than the learning outcomes or knowledge gained. Of course, such an experience may have significant learning outcomes, just as a window-shopper may go home with a valued purchase, or an artist will produce an important work of art. Perhaps it is the possibility that such outcomes may occur serendipitously that is so alluring about the experience of learning for fun. Similarly, those engaged in learning with a specific purpose or learning outcome in mind are by no means excluded from the joys of the experience. Learning can be fun regardless of the setting (formal or informal) and the motivation (focused on process or outcomes). The term “learning for fun,” however, emphasises the motivational aspects of the phenomenon—learning with no other purpose than the enjoyment of learning itself. The importance of understanding the motivations of museum visitors has recently been reiterated (Falk 2006), and indeed, the possibility that some visitors value the pleasure of the pursuit more highly than the knowledge acquired has already been raised (Spock 2006).

The idea of learning for fun has commonalities with a number of other theoretical constructs such as Pine and Gilmore’s “experience economy” (1999b); Csikszentmihalyi and colleagues’ theories of “flow” and the “aesthetic encounter” (Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson, 1995; Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde 1993; Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990); Rounds’ curiosity-driven museum visitor (2004); and theories relating to “intrinsic motivation.” These constructs are discussed briefly below in order to provide a context for the presentation of quantitative and qualitative research findings regarding the characteristics of learning for fun.

The experience economy—Pine and Gilmore propose that “experiences” are a new economic offering, distinct from goods and services (1999a; 1999b). They use examples such as themed restaurants and “shoppertainment” to illustrate the marketing power of providing an experience that is engaging, personal, sensation-rich and memorable. According to Pine and Gilmore, people want to be affected by an experience. They want experiences that change them, alter their view of the world, boost their personal capabilities, or instill a sense of wonder, beauty and appreciation (Pine and Gilmore 1999b). In relation to museums and other educational leisure settings, Pine and Gilmore argue that it is not just the presentation of information that is important to visitors, it is the experience that surrounds this presentation. Although Pine and Gilmore’s discussion of experience focuses on its effectiveness as a marketing strategy, their insights into visitor needs, and the ways these might be satisfied, are valuable for museum settings and consistent with current understandings of free-choice learning.

Flow experience—Csikszentmihalyi has identified the experience of flow as the sensation of being fully involved in an activity, “to the point of forgetting time, fatigue, and everything else but the activity itself” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde 1993, 59). It often occurs when an individual’s level of skill is closely matched to the difficulty or challenge of a task. It has been labelled “flow” because it has been described by those who have experienced it using the metaphor of a “current that carried them along” (Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde 1993, 58). It may be found in almost any activity—work, play, study, sport or religion—provided the conditions are conducive. In a museum environment, people may experience flow when they are interested, engaged, involved at their own level, and open to discovery (Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson 1995). Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde suggest that flow can be characterized as “a combination of experiential states that are usually mutually exclusive: enjoyment and intense concentration” (1993, 85). In fact, the experience of flow is so enjoyable that people go to great lengths to attain it.

The aesthetic encounter—Bedford (2004) draws on another of Csikszentmihalyi’s works (Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson 1990) to argue that an aesthetic encounter in the museum is a valuable outcome in its own right, regardless of the extent to which cognitive learning outcomes are demonstrated. Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson suggest that people seek out an aesthetic experience for a variety of reasons, including its sensory, emotional, cognitive, and transcendent dimensions. They argue that “the essential point of existence is not established by criteria such as how much people own or how much power they wield but by the quality of their experiences. . . by this measure aesthetic experiences are important indeed” (1990, 2). The aesthetic experience has much in common with the experience of flow, and interestingly, Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson consider that the enjoyment derived from aesthetic encounters is partly explained by the satisfaction of a need for knowledge and understanding: “the ‘blinding intuition’ one experiences in front of a great work of art is pleasurable because a great amount of knowledge about the world is encapsulated in the transaction” (1990, 12).

Curiosity—Rounds presents the idea of the curiosity-driven museum visitor, whose goal is not to acquire specific knowledge, but rather to “have curiosity piqued and

satisfied” (2004, 389, citing Falk and Dierking 2002, 116). Visitors who are driven by curiosity may appear to “meander around the museum. . . in a seemingly haphazard manner” (2004, 390), but are actually adopting an appropriate strategy that is well-suited to their own purposes. In this way, they enjoy the “pleasures of the process” (2004, 390) rather than adopting a more focused or comprehensive visit strategy that may be more consistent with the aims of the exhibit designer. Rounds suggests that knowledge acquired in this way is likely to be “wide but shallow” rather than “narrow but deep,” the latter being more the province of formal education (2004, 390–391). He argues that such knowledge, acquired with no particular use in mind, can increase the capacity to think creatively and respond to unpredictable environmental change. Spock further elaborates the importance of curiosity as a motivation for museum visitors and describes the habitual museum-goer as one for whom “the idea of learning has taken root in them as something they have learned to love” (2006, 179). Psychological theories of curiosity focus both on curiosity as a feeling of interest and curiosity as a feeling of deprivation or a need to reduce uncertainty (Litman 2005), the former being more consistent with Rounds’s and Spock’s use of the term.

Intrinsic motivation—A task is intrinsically motivating when it is worth doing for its own sake, and not because of any anticipated rewards from outside the activity itself (Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson 1995; Deci 1992). Although learning in formal settings is often associated with extrinsic rewards such as grades and career outcomes, learning in informal settings usually depends on intrinsic motivation. According to Hidi and Harackiewicz (2000), theory and research relating to intrinsic motivation in learning tasks has typically focused on individual interest (a pre-existing and stable interest in a topic) as opposed to situational interest (a spontaneous state elicited by certain aspects of a situation (Hidi and Anderson 1992). Thus a student is considered to be intrinsically motivated if his or her interest lasts beyond the particular situation in which it was aroused (Hidi and Harackiewicz 2000).

The different theoretical approaches outlined above support, in various ways, the proposition that at least some of the people, some of the time, engage in a learning experience for its pure enjoyment value. A learning experience can be engaging and personal; it can incorporate multiple dimensions—sensory, emotional, cognitive, and transcendent; it can provide the sort of match between challenge and skills that confirms competence and leads to the “fully involved” sensation known as flow; and thus it can be intrinsically enjoyable and pleasurable for its own sake, regardless of any rewards that might be associated with the knowledge gained. In the sections that follow, the nature of the learning for fun experience is explored, drawing on data collected from visitors to six different educational leisure settings in South-East Queensland: a museum, an art gallery, a wildlife center, an aquarium, a historic site, and a National Park guided walk. Finally, consideration is given to the ways in which learning for fun differs from, or extends, the theoretical constructs outlined above.

Detailed descriptions of the participants and procedures used in collecting the data, as well as additional and complementary findings from the research, are provided in Packer and Ballantyne (2002; 2004). In summary, the research was conducted in two stages. In Stage One, independent adult visitors to each of the six sites were invited to complete a questionnaire, which was administered in two parts. (Tour groups and

families with young children were excluded from the sample.) Participants were asked to complete the pre-visit component as they arrived at the site and to keep the questionnaire with them until the end of the visit, when they completed the post-visit component and returned the questionnaire to a collection point at the exit. The pre-visit component included questions about visitors' goals or desired outcomes for their visit, and the post-visit component included questions about visitors' perceptions of the learning environment and aspects of the learning experience. Approximately 80–90 questionnaires were completed and returned at each site, resulting in a total of 499 respondents. Similar sampling procedures were used in Stage Two of the study, which was conducted approximately 12 months after Stage One, at three of the six sites (the museum, aquarium and National Park guided walk). A total of 52 visitors to the three sites participated in brief (10-minute) semi-structured interviews on completion of their visit.

LEARNING FOR FUN: FIVE PROPOSITIONS EMERGING FROM RESEARCH

The following propositions about the nature of learning for fun have emerged from visitors' descriptions of and reflections on the experience of free-choice learning in museums and other educational leisure settings. The similarities with Rounds's curiosity-driven museum visitor are fortuitous, and the data presented here provide some empirical support, not only for learning for fun as a motivational construct, but also for Rounds's interpretation of visitor behavior. However, the observations and data presented here are not designed to provide any rigorous testing of these ideas, but rather to stimulate further discussion and research.

1. Learning for fun encompasses a mixture of discovery, exploration, mental stimulation and excitement. Visitors were asked to rate a list of 40 goal statements on a seven-point scale, according to their importance as a reason for their visit. (This was included in the pre-visit component of the Stage One questionnaire.) The 40 items were designed to represent a range of desired outcomes in five categories: entertainment, social contact, restoration, education, and self-fulfillment. Factor analysis of visitors' responses to these items indicated that the items did load onto the five categories as predicted, but with some minor exceptions. These exceptions are quite instructive in terms of the way visitors view the learning experience.²

The items originally included under "entertainment" split into two factors. One was renamed "passive enjoyment" and included feeling happy and satisfied; being pleasantly occupied; being entertained; and enjoying oneself. The term "passive" was used to distinguish it from the second factor, which included items such as experiencing something new or unusual, and doing something exciting. These items were found to have more in common with some of the items originally categorized as "education," including: being better informed; being mentally stimulated; discovering new things; and expanding one's interests. This latter factor, labeled "learning and discovery," represents a more active search for experiences that are new, interesting and exciting. Such experiences are the essence of learning for fun.

Both learning and discovery and passive enjoyment were more important to visitors as a reason for their visit than the other three factors: restoration, social contact, and self-fulfilment (Packer and Ballantyne 2004). This supports the importance of learning for fun as a motivational construct in the context of educational leisure experiences, especially in museums where learning and discovery was rated even more highly than passive enjoyment (Packer and Ballantyne 2002). These findings imply that people are seeking—not a combination of education and entertainment—but “an experience in which education *is* entertainment, discovery *is* exciting, and learning *is* an adventure” (Packer and Ballantyne 2004, 68).

Interview responses also supported this view of learning for fun as a mixture of discovery, exploration, mental stimulation, and excitement:

Going through the tunnel, you just sort of came through and you feel like you are actually in there and you've got them swimming around you, it's actually really nice. I think you always learn something when you are looking at animals like that. I don't know, I think it all goes in and it's just a pleasurable experience just to watch them. —Aquarium visitor.

I don't know the name of the fish, it was white and black and yellow striped. I watched it for 10 minutes and it stayed around one piece of coral. Now does that coral sting other fish and not that fish? Because no other fish came near it. It kept going in and out for 10 minutes, it didn't go anywhere else and no other fish came through it. —Aquarium visitor.

2. The majority of visitors to educational leisure settings consider learning to be, more than anything else, enjoyable. The 52 interviewees (Stage Two) were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with 10 statements regarding their conceptions of learning in relation to the specific setting they had visited (museum, aquarium or National Park guided walk). These 10 items were based on work done in formal settings on students' conceptions of learning (Purdie and Hattie 2002). Visitors' responses, in terms of both the percentage who agreed with each item and the percentage who nominated each item as the best description of learning in that setting, are reported in table 1 (with items in descending order of agreement). Although there are limits to these data in terms of the range of items that were able to be included (due to the need for brevity) and the relatively small sample size ($n = 52$), they do shed some light on the way in which visitors to educational leisure settings understand learning. Of the 10 items, the most frequently endorsed was: “Learning in the museum is an enjoyable way of spending time.” These data indicate not only that free-choice learning is perceived to be enjoyable, but more importantly, that 40 percent of visitors consider the enjoyment aspect to be the defining feature of learning in these settings.

3. Although most visitors don't come with a deliberate intention to learn, they do seek or are unconsciously drawn into an experience that incorporates learning. Interviewees (52 participants of Stage Two) were asked whether they had felt as if they were learning during their visit, and whether they had come with the intention of learning. Responses fell into four main categories:

Table 1 Percentage of respondents indicating moderate or strong agreement with conceptions of learning items

Conception of learning	% agreement	% selected as best description of learning
Learning in the museum* is an enjoyable way of spending time.	92	40
Learning in the museum* is finding out something that I didn't know about before.	92	32
Learning in the museum* is making sense out of new information and ways of doing things.	65	2
Learning in the museum* is like gaining knowledge through daily experiences.	64	8
Learning in the museum* means finding new ways to look at things.	60	8
I learn a lot from talking to other people in the museum*.	42	2
Learning in the museum* means that I can remember that information whenever I want to.	37	4
When I have learned something in the museum*, I know how to use it in other situations.	37	4
Learning in the museum* helps me become a better person.	35	0
When learning is difficult in the museum*, I concentrate harder and keep trying.	22	0

* The specific site (e.g., aquarium or national park) was substituted in each item

A. Those who expressed no deliberate intention to learn and reported no experience of learning (approximately 10 percent of visitors).

I just wanted to have a look around really. I didn't want too much information. —Museum visitor.

I come here just to walk around, I don't actually read the information. —Aquarium visitor.

I've been to places like this before so I sort of think I know it all. —National Park visitor.

B. Those who expressed no deliberate intention to learn, but were drawn into a learning experience in the course of the visit (approximately 40 percent of visitors).

I was only going to be here for 10 minutes and I ended up here for an hour and a half. It was great to be learning actually, because I still have in my mind that museums are kind of boring and that, but this was good, I enjoyed today. . . It was enjoyable as in it was surprising, and like I spent an hour and a half here, which I didn't plan on doing. I learned quite a bit for that hour and a half as well. —Museum visitor.

C. *Those who had come with the intention or desire for an experience that was seen to incorporate learning (approximately 30 percent of visitors).* For some of these visitors, learning was such an integral part of the experience that they did not identify or recognize it as learning.

I don't think we came to learn anything, we came to just experience something. . . . No, we just wanted an experience, and it's given us that. We just wanted to find out about the past and see things we haven't seen before.
—Museum visitor.

We more or less came just to see the experience. You always learn, it doesn't matter what you do—you pick up a book, you learn something out of a book, it may be only a little thing but it all helps. It's the same coming here just to see those jellyfish, then you'd move around into this area here. It's all different and it's great to see. —Aquarium visitor.

D. *Those who had come with a conscious intention or desire to learn, including those who had a specific interest and those who valued learning in general (approximately 20 percent of visitors).*

[The spider] was the reason for coming—I rang up yesterday and they said bring it in to the spiderman at the museum. —Museum visitor.

Yes, well, I'm of the opinion that you're learning all the time—you learn something every day of the week, I don't think you ever give up. —
Aquarium visitor.

I like trees, I like to learn what all the good ones are. I hope you learn something, I think that's the idea. Yeah, you never know everything. —
National Park visitor.

According to these preliminary data, it would appear that the majority of visitors to educational leisure settings such as those included in this study either seek or are drawn into an experience of learning, even if that is not consciously part of their stated agenda for their visit, or indeed they do not recognize or refer to it as “learning.” Some visitors appeared to find the term “experience” a more comfortable descriptor of their visit than the term “learning.” This may reflect visitors’ focus on the process, rather than outcome aspects. A similar observation was made recently by Spock (2006), regarding visitors’ preference for experience over information.

4. Visitors identify four conditions that together are conducive to the learning for fun experience. Interviewees were asked to describe what the experience of learning was like for them, how it felt to be engaged in learning, and if they had enjoyed the experience, what it was that they found attractive or enjoyable. Four conditions consistently emerged as being important aspects of the experience of free-choice learning. These same characteristics were also identified as those that made learning enjoyable (Packer and Ballantyne 2004).

A. *A sense of discovery or fascination.* In describing the learning experience, visitors commonly referred to information or experiences that were new, different, surprising or fascinating, and which consequently elicited a sense of discovery:

The aboriginal women in the nineteenth century and the way they looked after the homes of the white families . . . and the way they'd often leave their own family to travel with the white families across Australia—I found that fascinating. —Museum visitor.

Fascinating, you just sort of go, “Wow, I didn’t know that.” —Aquarium visitor.

Visitors also were attracted by information that connected with something they already knew or could remember. In these cases, perhaps, it was a sense of re-discovery that they found attractive:

It made me think about how I really enjoyed the older days, with the vehicles. Now that old taxi down the back there—I can remember the old cars and the old taxis that were going. See I’m nearly 80 so I can refresh the memories. I enjoy coming here. —Museum visitor.

B. *Appeal to multiple senses.* When describing their experience of learning and the factors that made it enjoyable, visitors often referred to aspects of the presentation, and in particular, the multi-sensory nature of the experience:

When you walk around there’s things that catch your eye—you sort of are drawn around the room and it makes it interesting. There’s things up high, things down low, things you can touch. So really it’s an all-encompassing sort of aspect. —Museum visitor.

The stingrays were brilliant . . . they were just so close, almost collecting you as you pass them. What I thought was really good too was at the beginning there, the kids were allowed to pick up the starfish and touch them and put them back in and there was somebody there to show them what to do. —Aquarium visitor.

Yeah, [the guide] is great . . . he’ll come to a stopping point and say “I’d like to point this out” but at the same time, he’s letting you use all your senses—touch this, feel this, look at this, check this out. It’s not just talk, talk, talk. I think that’s a big part of it, using all your senses. —National Park visitor.

C. *The Appearance of effortlessness.* A number of visitors remarked that learning during the visit had been easy or effortless. Questionnaire responses also indicated that learning in these contexts is not generally perceived as involving effort (Packer and Ballantyne 2004):

It is very easy to learn here, easy to take something with you . . . it’s just very interesting, and something’s touched you. It doesn’t feel like learning, because learning for me is something I do at home, on a desk and read stuff

or work it out. —Museum visitor.

I think a lot of people wouldn't realize that they are learning. Like you read a little plaque or something about a particular species or whatever it is, and you're going to learn something from it, aren't you? No matter whether you are consciously trying to learn something or you're just reading over it, you can always remember it. —Aquarium visitor.

[The guide] *was very good at just imparting bits of information—not too much so there's not an overload of stuff just enough to make it interesting—if it's done in that sort of easy manner, it's not too heavy, not too lengthy.* —National Park visitor.

D. The availability of choice. Finally, the defining characteristic of free-choice learning—the availability of choice—appears to be an essential ingredient that allows the experience to be personalized, and to provide just the right level of challenge for each visitor:

When you're at school or uni, they tell you what you've got to learn—that makes it very hard. It's more enjoyable when you're absorbing at the level you can cope. —Museum visitor.

When you are walking around, you don't have to look at things when they don't interest you. You can go to another thing and when it interests you, you stand there and you read about it. You can choose. —Museum visitor.

These four conditions that contribute to the learning for fun experience are uniquely available in educational leisure settings. Three of these have frequently been cited by other researchers as being important to visitors. For example, Pine and Gilmore (1999a; 1999b) describe an “experience” as being rich in sensations and incorporating the element of surprise; Eisenberger (1999) refers to opportunities for sensual appreciation in museums; Freedman (2000) emphasises the importance of the “physicality” of the museum experience in an increasingly virtual world; Csikszentmihalyi and Robinson (1990) identify sensory pleasure and a sense of discovery as important dimensions of the aesthetic experience; Falk and Dierking (2000) consider choice and control and the expectation of novelty to be important aspects of the personal and physical contexts of learning; and choice is also seen as contributing to intrinsic motivation and the flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson 1995; Hidi and Harackiewicz 2000).

By contrast, the appearance of “effortlessness” has rarely been recognized in the academic literature as a positive component of the learning experience in museums and other educational leisure settings, although the educational psychology literature suggests that learning motivated by interest requires less effort, is faster, more effective, and may occur automatically, without the need for conscious control (Hedge 1995; Hidi 1990; Krapp 1999). Visitors' predilections for learning without effort in educational leisure experiences (also reflected in the low rate of agreement with the item “When learning is difficult in the museum, I concentrate harder and keep trying” in table 1), raises some interesting questions about the nature and depth of the learning outcomes

that are possible from a learning for fun experience, because deep learning is usually considered to involve mental effort (Salomon 1983). Rounds (2004; 2006) provides an interesting perspective on this issue, suggesting that the wide but shallow knowledge acquired by the curiosity-driven visitor (learning a little bit about many things) is just as valuable in preparing them to respond to “the unforeseeable future” (2004, 394) as deep but narrow learning is in meeting present, known needs. It is also possible that the appearance of effortlessness reported by visitors does not necessarily imply a lack of mental effort, but rather reflects the balance of challenge and skills that is a hallmark of the flow experience (Csikszentmihalyi 1990; Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson 1995; Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde 1993).

The overlap between these four conditions and those suggested by Kaplan (1995) as being necessary for a restorative experience (in particular the presence of fascination or attention that requires no effort; an environment that is rich and coherent; and compatibility between the environment and one’s purposes or inclinations) suggest that an added benefit of the learning for fun experience is its ability to help visitors recover from the stress of everyday life. Indeed, 61 percent of visitors agreed that learning and exploring new ideas helped them to relax (Packer and Ballantyne 2004).

5. Visitors value learning for fun because it is a potentially transformative experience. Pine and Gilmore (1999b) suggest that people value experiences that are transformative, in the sense that they affect or change their lives, alter their worldview, boost their personal capabilities, or instill a sense of wonder, beauty and appreciation. In these terms, any learning is transformative, because change is part of what we commonly understand learning to be. A number of interviewees agreed that they had changed in some way as a result of their visit. In many cases, this involved gaining an understanding of and respect for aspects of their environment or heritage. Often, participants’ accounts of these experiences illustrate the intertwining of cognitive and affective aspects of learning that is characteristic of informal environments (Falk and Dierking 2000; Schauble et al., 1996):

It makes you appreciate how things are today, how easy we have it today—I wouldn’t have been a very good pioneer, I’m sure of it. —Museum visitor.

I was a bit sad with the exhibition about the mammals and animals that are actually dying, becoming extinct around not just Queensland but Australia. I’m not sure there’s a lot we can do about it—but obviously you have to think about it. —Museum visitor.

I suppose there’s a lot we don’t fully understand about sharks, we just think of them as being horrible and scary and there’s probably a lot more to it than that. I still find them scary and I wouldn’t want to be anywhere near them but a little bit more understanding about them. —Aquarium visitor.

I’ve always loved water . . . I always had a very strong respect for what was underneath that, but yeah seeing some of them today you just realize why you have that respect. —Aquarium visitor.

While these reports may not provide evidence of Paris and Mercer's "transformative experiences" (2002), they do illustrate what Rounds refers to as "identity exploration" (2006) and indicate small shifts that may result in "building capacity for transformations that may or may not happen at some time in the future" (Rounds 2006, 144). Visitors' insights regarding how and why they valued their experience of learning also reinforce Rounds' assertion (2004) that this type of learning enhances visitors' capacity for creative thinking and ability to respond to unknown future events:

I love to learn things. It's always good when you learn new things. Just to know something more. It makes you more open-minded, you have a bigger pool where you can take things out of it. —Museum visitor.

The next time you see something, you'll have a better understanding of it—you can try to get something else out of it then. —Museum visitor.

Nobody can take it from you, you know. If you know something, if you learn something, it's in yourself. You can open your mind to other things because you know. —Museum visitor.

I think when I go fishing, I'll know what I'm catching, I'll know the different species, and then I'll throw it back. —Aquarium visitor.

CONCLUSION

This paper has provided evidence that learning for fun occurs in a range of educational leisure settings, such as museums, zoos and aquariums, national parks, and heritage sites. It has explored some of the characteristics of learning for fun, the conditions under which it is likely to occur, and the reasons visitors value it. This information adds to our knowledge and understanding of this important aspect of free-choice learning. In summary, it is suggested that:

1. Learning for fun encompasses a mixture of discovery, exploration, mental stimulation and excitement.
2. The majority of visitors to educational leisure settings consider learning to be, more than anything else, enjoyable.
3. Although most visitors don't come with a deliberate intention to learn, they do seek, or are unconsciously drawn into, an experience that incorporates learning.
4. Visitors identify four conditions that together are conducive to the learning for fun experience.
5. Visitors value learning for fun because it is a potentially transformative experience.

Learning for fun is an experience that many visitors consciously seek, and others find by accident. It is the unique contribution of educational leisure experiences and the feature that sets them apart from formal education on the one hand, and from other leisure activities, on the other. More than just affirming that learning *is* fun, learning *for* fun positions learning as an experience that is valuable for its own sake, regardless of the presence or absence of learning outcomes. Learning for fun is a less intense experience than flow (Csikszentmihalyi and Hermanson 1995), and does not appear to depend on the participant having clear goals or receiving feedback. It is likely to lead to curiosity-driven visitor behaviour (Rounds 2004), but differs from the psychological construct of curiosity in that it is not considered a response to deprivation, and does not depend on the reward of obtaining new knowledge. While learning for fun is undoubtedly a case of intrinsic motivation (as indeed is flow), it is the learning experience or process itself that is considered rewarding. In this way it is a situational (Hidi and Harackiewicz 2000) or emergent (Csikszentmihalyi and Rathunde 1993) form of intrinsic motivation, rather than one based on the need for—or pre-existing interest in—particular information.

If, as suggested here, the process of learning is just as—or even more—important to visitors than the product, then research and evaluation of learning in educational leisure settings needs to concentrate as much on the experience of learning as it does on the learning outcomes attained. Indeed, there is a need for further research on both the process and outcomes of learning for fun. For example, how does it differ from the experience of flow or the aesthetic experience? Is such learning actually without effort, or does it just appear so? What features of the learning environment facilitate deeper approaches to learning? How do the outcomes of a learning for fun experience differ from the outcomes of formal study?

The concept of learning for fun is also important to museum practitioners. There may be a small percentage of visitors who are committed to learning regardless of the experience, and an even smaller percentage who are not interested in learning at all. If, however, there are many visitors who have no particular learning agenda but who can be drawn into a learning experience that is both enjoyable and in many cases productive, then it is important that the conditions that facilitate such an experience be understood and provided. Some of the characteristics that educational leisure settings provide, that seem to facilitate the process of learning for fun, include a rich sensory experience, novelty, surprise, fascination, nostalgia, and the freedom to explore and to engage with information at a range of levels. None of these ingredients are new. What is new is the understanding that it is these characteristics that make the process of learning fun. Perhaps one of the most important contributions that museums and other educational leisure settings can make to society is in enabling their visitors to rediscover the joy of learning.

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NOTES

1. See Hutchison Dictionary of Difficult Words,
<http://www.tiscali.co.uk/reference/dictionaries/difficultwords/>.
2. Pre-publication details of these results are available from the author.

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