Chapter 1: Principles of Participation

It’s 2004. I’m in Chicago with my family, visiting a museum. We’re checking out the final exhibit—a comment station where visitors can make their own videos in response to the exhibition. I’m flipping through videos that visitors have made about freedom, and they are really, really bad. The videos fall into two categories:

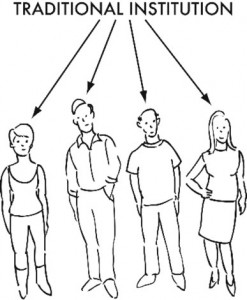
1. Person stares at camera and mumbles something incomprehensible.
2. Group of teens, overflowing with enthusiasm, “express themselves” via shout-outs and walk-ons.

This is not the participatory museum experience of my dreams. But I don’t blame the participants. I blame the design.

How can cultural institutions use participatory techniques not just to give visitors a voice, but to develop experiences that are more valuable and compelling for everyone? This is not a question of intention or desire; it’s a question of design. Whether the goal is to promote dialogue or creative expression, shared learning or co-creative work, the design process starts with a simple question: which tool or technique will produce the desired participatory experience?

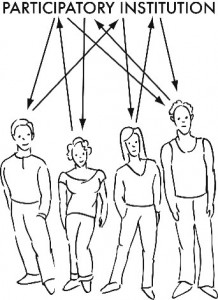
Designers have answered versions of this question for many kinds of visitor experiences and goals in cultural institutions. Professionals know how to write labels for different audiences. They know what kinds of physical interactions promote competitive play and which promote contemplative exploration. And while they may not always get it right, they are guided by the expectation that design decisions can help them successfully achieve content and experience goals.

When it comes to developing participatory experiences in which visitors create, share, and connect with each other around content the same design thinking applies. The chief difference between traditional and participatory design techniques is the way that information flows between institutions and users. In traditional exhibits and programs, the institution provides content for visitors to consume. Designers focus on making the content consistent and high quality, so that every visitor, regardless of her background or interests, receives a reliably good experience.



Drawing by Jennifer Rae Atkins

In contrast, in participatory projects, the institution supports multi-directional content experiences. The institution serves as a “platform” that connects different users who act as content creators, distributors, consumers, critics, and collaborators. This means the institution cannot guarantee the consistency of visitor experiences. Instead, the institution provides opportunities for diverse visitor co-produced experiences.



Drawing by Jennifer Rae Atkins

This may sound messy. It may sound tremendously exciting. The key is to harness the mess in support of the excitement. Being successful with a participatory model means finding ways to design participatory platforms so the content that amateurs create and share is communicated and displayed attractively. This is a fundamental shift; in addition to producing consistent content, participatory institutions must also design opportunities for visitors to share their own content in meaningful and appealing ways.Supporting participation means trusting visitors’ abilities as creators, remixers, and redistributors of content. It means being open to the possibility that a project can grow and change post-launch beyond the institution’s original intent. Participatory projects make relationships among staff members, visitors, community participants, and stakeholders more fluid and equitable. They open up new ways for diverse people to express themselves and engage with institutional practice.

**Making Participation Physical and Scalable**

Most institutions prefer to experiment with participation behind closed doors. Cultural institutions have a long history of prototyping new projects with focus groups. Some museums co-develop exhibitions with community members, whether to represent the unique experience of certain ethnic groups or to showcase works of amateur art. These participatory design processes are often institutionally defined, time-limited, and involve a small number of participants.

The growth of social Web technologies in the mid-2000s transformed participation from something limited and infrequent to something possible anytime, for anyone, anywhere. We entered what MIT researcher Henry Jenkins calls a “convergence culture” in which regular people—not just artists or academics—appropriate cultural artifacts for their own derivative works and discussions. Some cultural institutions responded, as did some music and television studios, by locking down their content so it couldn’t be used in this way. But as time has gone on, more and more content providers have opened up their material and have invited people to create, share, and connect around it. Particularly for cultural institutions with a mandate to use their collections for public good, digitization and accessibility of content has become a top priority.

But participating with visitors on the Web is just a start. There are also incredible opportunities for cultural institutions to distinguish themselves by encouraging participation in the physical environments of museums, libraries, and arts centers. These institutions have something few Web companies can offer: physical venues, authentic objects, and experienced real-world designers. By combining professional design skills with the lessons of participation pouring out of the social Web, cultural institutions can become leading participatory venues in our cities, towns, and neighborhoods.

For an institution to manage participation, staff members need to be able to design experiences that invite ongoing audience participation sustainably. Traditional participatory bodies like community advisory boards and prototyping focus groups are important, but those forms of participation are limited by design. Participation has the most impact when designers can scale up collaborative opportunities to all interested visitors. This means offering every visitor a legitimate way to contribute to the institution, share things of interest, connect with other people, and feel like an engaged and respected participant.

This leads to an obvious question: does every visitor really want to participate in this manner in cultural institutions? No. Just as there are visitors who will never pull the lever on an interactive and those who prefer to ignore the labels, there are many visitors who will not choose to share their story, talk with a stranger, or consume visitor-generated content. There will always be visitors who enjoy static exhibitions conferring authoritative knowledge. There will always be visitors who enjoy interactive programs that allow them to test that knowledge for themselves. And there will increasingly be visitors—perhaps new ones—who enjoy the opportunity to add their own voices to ongoing discussions about the knowledge presented.

Many museum professionals argue that there are some visitors for whom participatory experiences might be entirely off-putting. This is true, but the converse is also true. There are many people who engage heavily with social media and are incredibly comfortable using participatory platforms to connect with friends, activity partners, and potential dates. There are people who prefer social and creative recreational activities and avoid museums because they perceive them as non-social, non-dynamic, non-participatory places. Just as interactive exhibits were introduced in museums to accommodate the presumed educational needs and active desires of young audiences, participatory elements may draw in audiences for whom creative activities and social connection are preconditions for cultural engagement.

In 1992, Elaine Heumann Gurian wrote an essay entitled “The Importance of ‘And’” to address the need for museum practice to accommodate many different and potentially conflicting goals, including scholarship, education, inclusion, and conservation. She commented that we too often think of different institutional goals as oppositional rather than additive, and that “complex organizations must and should espouse the coexistence of more than one primary mission.” While the addition of new pursuits to an institutional plan does force some either/or decisions around policies and resources, it need not inhibit the ability to deliver on multiple promises to multiple audiences.

Participatory techniques are another “and” for the cultural professional’s toolbox. They are tools that can be used to address particular institutional aspirations to be relevant, multi-vocal, dynamic, responsive, community spaces. Again, I come back to the analogy with interactive exhibits. Interactive design techniques are additive methods that supplement traditional didactic content presentation. Interactive exhibits, when successfully executed, promote learning experiences that are unique and specific to the two-way nature of their design. And while there are some institutions, notably children’s and science museums, that have become primarily associated with interactive exhibits, there are other types of museums, notably art and history museums, in which interactives play a supporting role. The introduction of interactive exhibits does not require an entire institutional shift, and in most cultural institutions, interactive exhibits are just one of many interpretative techniques employed.

I believe the majority of museums will integrate participatory experiences as one of many types of experiences available to visitors in the next twenty years. There may be a few institutions that become wholly participatory and see their entire institutional culture and community image transformed by this adoption. But in most cases, participation is just one design technique among many, one with a particular ability to enhance the social experience of the institution. Implementing participatory techniques requires some changes to institutional perspectives on authority and audience roles, but these changes may be as small or large as a particular organization’s commitment.

**Participation at its Best**

Whatever role they play in your institution, participatory elements must be well designed to be useful. Poorly designed participatory experiences such as the video comment station mentioned at the beginning of this chapter do little to enhance anyone’s experience.

The best participatory projects create new value for the institution, participants, and non-participating audience members. When you are driven by the desire to create new value, you end up with products that are transformative, not frivolous. Consider the story of Bibliotheek Haarlem Oost, a branch library in the Netherlands. The library wanted to find a way to invite readers to assign tags to the books they read.By describing books with phrases like “great for kids,” “boring,” or “funny,” readers could contribute knowledge to the institutional catalogue system while also providing recommendations and opinions for future readers. The participatory act of tagging thus would add benefit to institution and audience alike.

The challenge was how to design the tagging activity. The most obvious way would be to ask readers to type the tags into the library’s online catalog, either from home or at the library. But the architect designing the library, Jan David Hanrath, knew that very few readers would do that. So Hanrath’s team did something very clever: they installed more book drops.

The library created a book drop for each of a set of predefined tags. They also built shelves inside the library for the individual tags. When patrons returned books, they placed them on the shelves or in the drops that appropriately described the books. The tags were electronically connected to the books in the catalog, and the new opinions were made immediately available both to in-person and online visitors.

No patron would call the activity of putting their books in book drops “tagging,” and that’s a good thing. Participation at Haarlem Oost was made easy and its rewards for the next set of visitors searching for a good book were immediate. There were few barriers to adoption or significant infrastructure or support costs. It worked because it was a clever, simple distillation of the core idea of tagging. That’s what I call good design.



Exhibit voting bins outside the MHC exit. Photo courtesy Daniel Spock.

Doing a sorting activity is a constrained form of participation, but that doesn’t diminish its ability to be useful. When I shared the story of the book drops with Daniel Spock, director of the Minnesota Historical Society’s History Center (MHC), he was inspired to adapt their model to his institution. Visitors to the MHC wear buttons in the galleries to show that they have paid admission. On their way out, visitors often throw away the buttons, and some end up littering the exit. Spock’s team designed a very simple voting mechanism so that instead of littering, visitors could toss their buttons into one of several bins to “vote” for their favorite exhibit they’d seen that day. The simple participatory activity invites people to share their opinions and gives the staff feedback instead of trash. That’s what I call value.

**What Does Participation Look Like?**

Dropping buttons into bins may not sound like substantive participation. Many cultural professionals focus on just one kind of participation: the creation of user-generated content. But people who create content represent a narrow slice of the participatory landscape, which also includes people who consume user-generated content, comment on it, organize it, remix it, and redistribute it to other consumers. In 2008, along with the release of the book *Groundswell: Winning in a World Transformed by Social Technologies*, Forrester Research released a “social technographics” profile tool to help businesses understand the way different audiences engage with social media online. The researchers grouped participatory online audiences into six categories by activity:

1. *Creators (24%)* who produce content, upload videos, write blogs
2. *Critics (37%)* who submit reviews, rate content, and comment on social media sites
3. *Collectors (21%)*who organize links and aggregate content for personal or social consumption
4. *Joiners (51%)* who maintain accounts on social networking sites like Facebook and LinkedIn
5. *Spectators (73%)* who read blogs, watch YouTube videos, visit social sites
6. *Inactives (18%)* who don’t visit social sites

These percentages add up to more than one hundred percent because the categorizations are fluid and many people fall into several categories at once. I fall into all of the first five categories. I’m a creator when I blog, a critic when I make comments on others’ sites, a collector when I assemble “favorites,” a joiner on many social networks, and a spectator when I consume social media. The percentages keep changing (and are different for every country, gender, and age group), but one thing stays constant: creators are a small part of the landscape. You are far more likely to join a social network, watch a video on YouTube, make a collection of things you’d like on a shopping site, or review a book than you are to produce a movie, write a blog, or post photos online.

And while 24% of people who engage in the social Web are creators in some capacity, on any given participatory site, the representation of creators is much smaller. Only 0.16% of visitors to YouTube will ever upload a video. Only 0.2% of visitors to Flickr will ever post a photo. In 2006, researcher Jakob Nielsen wrote a landmark paper on participation inequality, introducing the “90-9-1” principle. This principle states: “In most online communities, 90% of users are lurkers who never contribute, 9% of users contribute a little, and 1% of users account for almost all the action.”

Participation inequality isn’t limited to the Web. Even the most popular participatory opportunities in cultural institutions attract a small number of people who want to draw a picture, make a comment, or contribute to an exhibition. The surprising thing about participation inequality is not that it exists in the real world but that it exists on the Web. Some people believed that the ease of Web-based publishing tools would turn everyone into a journalist, a musician, or a contributor to a wiki. But that’s not the case. There are some people who are drawn to create, but many more prefer to participate in other ways, by critiquing, organizing, and spectating social content. This isn’t just a question of making creative tools as easy to use as possible. There are some people who will never choose to upload content to the Web, no matter how easy it is. Fortunately, there are other participatory options for them.

**Encouraging Diverse Forms of Participation**

When museum professionals express objections to participatory practice, one of the most frequent claims is “we don’t want to be like YouTube.” While I agree that museums should not focus on showcasing videos of cats doing silly things, as a platform, YouTube is an extraordinary service that carefully and deliberately caters to all kinds of social media participants.

At first glance, YouTube looks like it is made primarily for two audiences: creators, who make and upload videos, and spectators, who watch them. YouTube’s tagline—“Broadcast Yourself”—is targeted to the creator audience. Even though only 0.16% of visitors to the site will ever upload a video, YouTube’s designers know that the participation of these creators drives the content and the experience of everyone else who visits the site. That’s why, despite the fact that the vast majority of their audience are spectators, YouTube’s tagline is not “watch funny videos of cats.”

A deeper look at the YouTube homepage reveals ways that other types of participation are encouraged as well. Prime real estate is devoted not to creators but to other kinds of participants. You can join YouTube and collect favorite videos across the site. You can critique videos by commenting, rating them, and posting follow-up video responses if desired. These ratings are shown on the homepage, which means that critics and their opinions get top billing alongside the video creators themselves. Finally, YouTube displays the number of times every video has been viewed. Your participation as a viewer affects the status of each video in the system. Just by watching, you are an important participant.

While the top navigation bar invites users to upload videos, the majority of the YouTube homepage is geared toward watching and rating videos. The main area displays “featured videos” to watch, not tools to share your own videos.

YouTube provides appealing services to all kinds of participants, but the platform’s designers spend more time trying to convert spectators into joiners, collectors, and critics than they do trying to encourage more people to become creators. Why focus on these “intermediate” participatory behaviors? First, these behaviors have relatively low barriers to adoption. It’s much easier to rate a video than it is to make one—and so conversion is more likely to be successful. But the other key reason is that the platform’s value is more dependent on the number of active critics, collectors, and joiners than the number of creators. YouTube doesn’t need ten percent or even two percent of its audience to make and upload videos. The overall YouTube experience would likely be worse for spectators if the service was glutted with millions more low-quality videos. The more content there is, the more content there is. In contrast, the more interpretation, prioritization, and discussion there is around the content, the more people can access the videos (and the conversations) that are most valuable to them.

Despite the diversity and popularity of participatory options, many museums are fixated on creators. I share Forrester’s statistics with colleagues, and they say, “Yes, but we really want people to share their own stories about biodiversity,” or, “We think our visitors can make amazing videos about justice.” Many cultural professionals see open-ended self-expression as the paragon of participatory experiences. Allowing visitors to select their favorite exhibits in a gallery or comment on the content of the labels isn’t considered as valuable as inviting them to produce their own content.

This is a problem for two reasons. First, exhibits that invite self-expression appeal to a tiny percentage of museum audiences. Less than one percent of the users of most social Web platforms create original content. Would you design an interactive exhibit that only one percent of visitors would want to use? Maybe—but only if it was complemented by other exhibits with wider appeal. When I encounter a video talkback kiosk in a museum as a visitor, I never want to make my own video. I don’t choose to be a creator in those environments, and thus my only other option is to be a spectator. But I would love to rate the videos on display (as a critic) or group them (as a collector). Unfortunately, those potentially rich participatory experiences—ones which would develop my ability to detect patterns, compare and contrast items, and express my opinion—are not available to me in most museum settings. By making it easy to create content but impossible to sort or prioritize it, many cultural institutions end up with what they fear most: a jumbled mass of low-quality content.

The second problem with focusing on creators is that open-ended self-expression requires self-directed creativity. Much of contemporary learning theory rests on the idea of “instructional scaffolding,” by which educators or educational material provides supportive resources, tasks, and guidance upon which learners can build their confidence and abilities. When it comes to participatory activities, many educators feel that they should deliberately remove scaffolding to allow participants to fully control their creative experience. This creates an open-ended environment that can feel daunting to would-be participants. In an open-ended activity, participants have to have an idea of what they’d like to say or make, and then they have to produce it in a way that satisfies their standards of quality. In other words, it’s hard, and it’s especially hard on the spot in the context of a casual museum visit. What if I walked up to you on the street and asked you to make a video about your ideas of justice in the next three minutes? Does that sound like a fun and rewarding casual activity to you?

The best participatory experiences are not wide open. They are scaffolded to help people feel comfortable engaging in the activity. There are many ways to scaffold experiences without prescribing the result. For example, a comment board that provides ballots for people to vote for favorite objects and explain the reason behind their preferences offers a better-scaffolded experience than an open-ended board with blank cards and a question like “What do you think?” A supportive starting point can help people participate confidently—whether as creators, critics, collectors, joiners, or spectators.

**Who’s Involved in Participation?**

Participatory projects aren’t just about empowering visitors. Every participatory project has three core stakeholders: the institution, participants, and the audience. The audience may mean the institution’s visitors, but it can also include other constituencies who might have a particular interest in the outcomes of the project—for example, participants’ neighbors or associates. For a project to be successful, the project staff should be able to articulate and satisfy the interests of each group.

From the institutional perspective, participatory projects have value when they satisfy aspects of the mission. Institutions do not engage in participatory projects because they are fun or exciting but because they can serve institutional goals.

This is easier said than done. Many cultural professionals are more familiar with providing visitor experiences than thinking about how visitors can usefully contribute to the institution. When designing participatory components to exhibitions, I always ask myself: how can we use this? What can visitors provide that staff can’t? How can they do some meaningful work that supports the institution overall? When staff can answer these questions easily and confidently, participation can yield powerful results for institutions and participants alike.

**CASE STUDY:****Climate Conferences at The Wild Center**

At The Wild Center in Tupper Lake, New York, participatory engagement is tightly tied to the institutional mission. The Wild Center is a small natural history museum with a mostly seasonal tourist audience, but its mission is quite ambitious: to “ignite an enduring passion for the Adirondacks where people and nature can thrive together and set an example for the world.” Executive Director Stephanie Ratcliffe believes that igniting passions and setting examples cannot happen without community participation, and her team identified climate change as a key contemporary issue of interest relating to human coexistence with nature. Staff members felt climate change was not receiving the local attention it deserved from both a business and environmental perspective, and they saw the opportunity to become a place for dialogue around the issue.

In 2008, the institution started inviting builders, politicians, and scientists to come together in dialogue in a series of climate conferences. These conferences served as a hub for locals to understand and act on specific threats that climate change poses to the Adirondacks. The underlying message was that positive action on climate issues could improve town function and business efficiency.

Local citizens responded enthusiastically. After an event focused on “Building a Greener Adirondacks,” blogger John Warren wrote:

Two years ago I was lamenting that no local public leaders were stepping up to the plate on trying to understand what global climate change would mean for the Adirondacks (and its ski-tourism industry) – thankfully, that has changed. The Wild Center in Tupper Lake has taken on the lead role of informing their neighbors about the potential impacts of global warming (such as the impact on amphibians), showing local builders what they can do to mitigate those affects, and organizing scientific meetings to discuss and assess the progress of climate change in the Adirondacks.

Climate conferences are now a core part of The Wild Center’s strategic efforts to accomplish its mission. The institution has hosted national and regional conferences for policy-makers and has distributed reports and videos from these events on the Web.

[](http://www.participatorymuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/images%20for%20web/chapter1/ch1_4_wild_center_color.jpg)

Over 200 students and school administrators gathered at The Wild Center in November 2009 for an Adirondack Youth Climate Summit. Photo ©Nancie Battaglia

In 2009, The Wild Center initiated a yearly Adirondack Youth Climate Summit to bring together educators, high school students, and college students in dialogue about research and action on climate change. The institution has also has become a lead partner in a local coalition to produce an Adirondack Climate and Energy Action Plan.

The climate events helped established The Wild Center as a national player, and equally importantly, as a local community resource. Participating in this highly strategic way with community members in The Wild Center’s geographic area enabled this small, young institution to become a powerful voice of and for its constituents.

**Outcomes for Participants and Audiences**

Outcomes of participation may be as diverse as the goals of the institution overall. These outcomes include: to attract new audiences, to collect and preserve visitor-contributed content, to provide educational experiences for visitors, to produce appealing marketing campaigns, to display locally-relevant exhibitions, and to become a town square for conversation.

You should be able to define the specific way that a participatory project can benefit your institution and be ready to connect that value to your institution’s mission statement. It may be valuable for one museum to receive lots of snail shells collected from visitors, whereas another institution may find value in providing a forum where visitors discuss their opinions on racism. It’s also important to clearly state what kinds of participation would *not* be useful. Contributed snail shells that would thrill one institution might be a nuisance for another.

Unfortunately, many cultural professionals settle for an unambitious value of participation that is not compelling to institutional directors nor stakeholders: *visitors will like it*. This is not a robust value. It trivializes the mission-relevance of participatory projects. If you focus solely on participation as a “fun activity,” you will do a disservice both to yourself as a professional and to visitors as participants.

Yes, it is fun to help paint a mural or construct a giant model of a molecule. But these activities also promote particular learning skills, create outputs that are usable by others, and promote the institution as a social place. The more you think about which mission-relevant goals you want to support, the more likely you are to design a project that satisfies more than the visitors’ desires to be entertained. As Geoff Godbey, professor of leisure studies at Pennsylvania State University, commented in a Wall Street Journal article: “To be most satisfying, leisure should resemble the best aspects of work: challenges, skills and important relationships.”Participatory projects can accommodate these interests and are often better suited to providing visitors with meaningful work than traditional museum experiences.

Participatory projects suffer when visitors perceive that the staff is pandering to them or wasting their time with trivialities. Participatory activities should never be a “dumping ground” for interactivity or visitor dialogue. In cases where visitors are actually asked to “do work,” that work should be useful to the institution. It’s fine to design participatory projects in which visitors produce work that could more quickly or accurately be completed by internal staff members; however, the work should still be of value to the institution ultimately. If the museum doesn’t care about the outcomes of visitors’ participation, why should visitors participate?

**Meeting Participants’ Needs**

In the book *Here Comes Everybody*, technologist Clay Shirky argued that there are three necessary components for a participatory mechanism to be successful: “a plausible promise, an effective tool, and an acceptable bargain with the [participants].” The institution must *promise* an appealing participant experience. The institution must provide access to *tools* for participation that are easy to understand and use. And the *bargain* between institution and participants—regarding management of intellectual property, outcomes of the project, and feedback to participants—should accommodate participants’ needs. Even if your promise, tools, or bargains have to change over the course of a project, you should always be able to articulate what you offer and expect clearly and openly. Doing so demonstrates your respect for participants’ time and abilities.

Note that you can substitute the word “volunteer” for “participant” for a snapshot of the ways an institution’s most dedicated supporters would like to be engaged. Volunteers and members are people who express self-motivated commitment and interest to dedicate time and resources to institutions. Too often, staff members struggle to find fulfilling and substantive activities for volunteers to do. But when institutions can clearly convey how participants’ actions will contribute positively to the institution and to future audiences, volunteers of all types respond enthusiastically.

When it comes to the promise, staff members need to offer participants something fundamental: personal fulfillment. Institutions have explicit mission-related goals that dictate which activities are valuable to pursue, but individuals don’t have mission statements. Instead, participants have a wide range of personal goals and interests that motivate behavior. John Falk’s research into visitors and identity-fulfillment indicates that visitors select and enjoy museum experiences based on their perceived ability to reflect and enhance particular self-concepts. If you think of yourself as creative, you will be fulfilled by the opportunity to contribute a self-portrait to a crowdsourced exhibition. If you see yourself as someone with valuable stories to share, you will be fulfilled by the chance to record your own recollections related to content on display. If you perceive yourself as helpful, you will be fulfilled by the opportunity to pitch in on tasks that clearly support a larger goal.

Watching a performance or passively walking through an exhibition does not give people this kind of social, active fulfillment. Especially for adult visitors, museums rarely offer challenges that encourage participants to work hard and demonstrate their creative, physical, or cognitive ability. Games researcher Jane McGonigal has stated that people need four things to be happy: “satisfying work to do, the experience of being good at something, time spent with people we like, and the chance to be part of something bigger.” Many people visit museums in social groups to spend time with people they like in the context of something bigger. Creating content can give visitors satisfying work and the experience of being good at something. When you put these together and invite people to participate, the institution can meet all four of these needs.

When presenting participatory opportunities to would-be participants, be explicit about how they can fulfill their own needs and contribute to a project with larger impact. Just as casting activities as being “just for fun” devalues the mission-relevance of participation, it also minimizes visitors’ understanding of how they can make a meaningful and exciting contribution to the greater community. If you need participants to make a project successful—whether a research project that requires distributed volunteers, a feedback project that requires diverse opinions, or a creative project that requires many hands on deck—say so. The most compelling promises emerge from genuine needs on the part of the institution.

When it comes to the tool, participants need clear roles and information about how to participate. The tool should also be as flexible as possible. Participants don’t need to engage with the same project in a uniform way or at the same level of commitment. You may not want staff members coming in whenever they feel like it, but flexibility is an asset when it comes to participation—you want participants to be able to engage when and how they are most able.

When participants contribute to institutions, they want to see their work integrated in a timely, attractive, respectful way. Too many participatory projects have broken feedback loops, where the ability to see the results of participation are stalled by opaque and slow-moving staff activities like content moderation or editing. In some cases, it is completely acceptable to have a lag between participatory action and outcome for intermediate processing. But if a delay is required, it should be communicated clearly to participants. This can even be turned to the institution’s advantage. For example, the museum may send an email to a visitor days or weeks after the visit to inform her that her sculpture is now on display or her story integrated into an audio tour.

Regardless of the timeline, rewarding participants involves three steps that should remain consistent. First, the institution should clearly explain how and when visitors will be rewarded for participating. Second, it should thank visitors immediately upon participating, even if their content will now go into a holding pattern. And third, the staff should develop some workable process to display, integrate, or distribute the participatory content—and ideally, inform participants when their work is shared.

At their best, these three steps are immediate, automatic, and obvious to visitors. Imagine a children’s museum that includes an area where visitors can build sculptures or toys out of found objects. Visitors can place their creations on a conveyor belt that moves throughout the museum for all to see. In this case, there are no labels necessary. Visitors see what will happen to their sculptures when they put them on the belt, and they understand of how that might fulfill their self-interest in sharing their work with their community of fellow-visitors.

Providing a good bargain for participation means valuing participants’ work. This doesn’t require giving every visitor a gold star for participating. It means listening to participants, providing feedback on their efforts, and demonstrating how the institution will use their contributions.

Whether the institution asks for a long commitment or a brief encounter, clarity and honesty are the keys to helping participants feel comfortable contributing. This includes addressing issues of privacy and intellectual property. What happens to the videos that participants record in the gallery? Who owns the ideas they share with the institution? Being clear, specific, and honest about participants’ roles in participatory projects helps people know what to expect and evaluate whether an opportunity is right for them.

Lack of clarity erodes trust between institutions and participants and can lead to substandard experiences for both. In August of 2008, I worked with the Chabot Space & Science Center on a participatory design institute in which eleven teenagers designed media pieces for an upcoming Harvard-Smithsonian exhibition on black holes. Unfortunately, while the Harvard-Smithsonian representatives were enthusiastic about encouraging teens to “be creative,” they were unable to give the teens any specific information about how their work would be integrated into the final exhibit. There was no initial design, no graphics, and no idea of where the teens’ work would fit into the overall website. This lack of clarity made teens suspicious that the client was “hiding” the goals from them and preventing them from meeting the criteria for success. In the end, the teens’ work was not in line with the client’s final website design, and their work was marginalized rather than being featured in the final product. Lack of clarity at the beginning led to a somewhat frustrating experience for participants and an unsatisfactory product for the institution.

When complete clarity is not possible, honesty suffices. The Chabot project was not a failure. While we could not give the teenagers the answers they wanted, we were direct with them about what we did and didn’t know and supported them as best we could. Staff members can change their mind, make mistakes, and evolve with participants if they are honest every step of the way. And the more the staff can express to participants—in actions as well as words—how their work helps the institution or other visitors, the more participants will see themselves as partners and co-owners of the project and the institution by extension.

**Creating Quality Outcomes for Audiences**

Participatory projects are not solely for institutions and participants. There is another populous constituency: the audience of non-participating visitors. How can a participatory project produce outcomes that are valuable and interesting to the larger institutional audience? Some participatory environments are continually open and evolving, so that any audience member can electively become a participant, but most projects limit participation to a small group. It is simpler to say, “You can submit your idea until the end of the year” or “We will work with twenty teenagers from a local high school to develop this project,” than it is to construct a system that can let anyone participate at any time. For many institutions, constraining the scope of participation is an appropriate starting point for collaborative engagement.

No matter how large the participating group, the audience for their work matters. Participants’ experiences, no matter how superlative, must be weighed against the experience that others will have with the outcome of their work. A mural isn’t just for those who painted it; it must bring pleasure to others as an art object as well. Likewise, exhibits, research, marketing materials, programs, and experiences produced in collaboration with visitors must be compelling outputs in their own right. That is not to say they can’t be different from standard institutional programs. Ideally, projects developed using participatory models will have unique value that cannot be achieved by traditional processes.

Audience goals, like participant goals, are based on individuals’ diverse and idiosyncratic criteria for fulfillment. You can’t please everyone, but staff can decide what kind of experiences they want to offer and design participatory platforms to accommodate those. Some visitors are looking for high-quality consumer experiences and do not care about the process by which those experiences are developed. For those visitors, project staff need to make sure the participatory process can deliver a product at the desired levels of rigor, design, and content. Other visitors want to familiarize themselves with participation from the “safe space” of spectating before jumping in. For those would-be participants, staff members should design in mechanisms that celebrate, encourage, model, and value participants’ work. The more specifically you can define the intended audience for a project, the more successful you will be at designing a participatory project that will satisfy their needs.

**How Does Participation Work?**

There are two counter-intuitive design principles at the heart of successful participatory projects. First, participants thrive on constraints, not open-ended opportunities for self-expression. And second, to collaborate confidently with strangers, participants need to engage through personal, not social, entry points. These design principles are both based on the concept of scaffolding. Constraints help scaffold creative experiences. Personal entry points scaffold social experiences. Together, these principles set the stage for visitors to feel confident participating in creative work with strangers.

**Participation Thrives on Constraints**

If your goal is to invite visitors to share their experiences in a way that celebrates and respects their unique contributions to your institution, you need to design more constraints, not fewer, on visitor self-expression. Consider a mural. If given the chance, very few people would opt to paint a mural on their own. The materials are not the barriers—the ideas and the confidence are. You have to have an idea of what you want to paint and how to do it.

But now imagine being invited to participate in the creation of a mural. You are handed a pre-mixed color and a brush and a set of instructions. You know what you are supposed to do to be successful. You get to contribute to a collaborative project that produces something beautiful. You see the overall value of the project. You can point out your work in the final product with pride. You have been elevated by the opportunity to contribute to the project.

This is a well-scaffolded participatory experience. In successful participatory projects, visitors don’t build exhibits from scratch or design their own science experiments. Instead, they participate in larger projects: joining the team, doing their part. Constrained projects often provide opportunities for partial self-expression—a flourishing brush stroke here, a witty sentence there—but the overall expressive element is tightly constrained by the participatory platform at hand. Meaningful constraints motivate and focus participation. As Orson Welles put it, “the enemy of art is the absence of limitations.”

The Denver Art Museum (DAM) provided an excellent example of a constrained participatory museum experience in their *Side Trip* gallery on display in the spring of 2009. *Side Trip* was an interactive space that accompanied an exhibition of psychedelic rock music posters called *The Psychedelic Experience*. In one *Side Trip* activity, museum educators invited visitors to make their own rock music posters.

[](http://www.participatorymuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/images%20for%20web/chapter1/ch1_5_sidetrip_color.jpg)

Photo courtesy Denver Art Museum

Rather than giving people blank sheets of paper and markers (and reaching a narrow audience of self-motivated creators), the DAM educators devised an activity that blended collecting, critiquing, and creating. Visitors were offered clipboards with transparencies attached. There were stacks of graphics—cut-out reproductions from the real rock posters on display next door—which visitors could place under the transparencies to rearrange and remix into poster designs of their own choosing. Visitors then used dry erase markers to trace over the graphics, augment them, and add their own creative flair. When a visitor was satisfied with her recombined poster, she handed it to a staff member, who put it in a color copier to create a completed composite. Each visitor was given a copy of her poster and was given the option to display a copy in the gallery.

Visitors carefully constructed their own rock music posters at the Denver Art Museum by placing graphics under transparencies and drawing additions on top.*Side Trip’s* immersive environment encouraged visitors both to connect to the pscyhedelic era and to behave differently than they would in other galleries.

The results of this physical “remix” activity were beautiful, intricate posters. As a*Side Trip*visitor, I couldn’t easily tell where the remixed artifacts ended and the participants’ additions began. 37,000 posters were made over the run of the show, compared to total exhibit attendance of 90,000. The average amount of time spent making a poster was twenty-five minutes. This was a popular activity that visitors took seriously.

The poster-making activity was successful because visitors didn’t have to start with a blank slate. Their creativity was scaffolded by graphic cut-outs that also tied their creative experience to the artifacts in the show. The constraints gave participants a comfortable entry point to engagement without limiting their creative potential. It invited visitors who did not think they could make art to engage confidently with a positive result. It created an attractive, high quality body of visitor-generated content for spectators to enjoy.

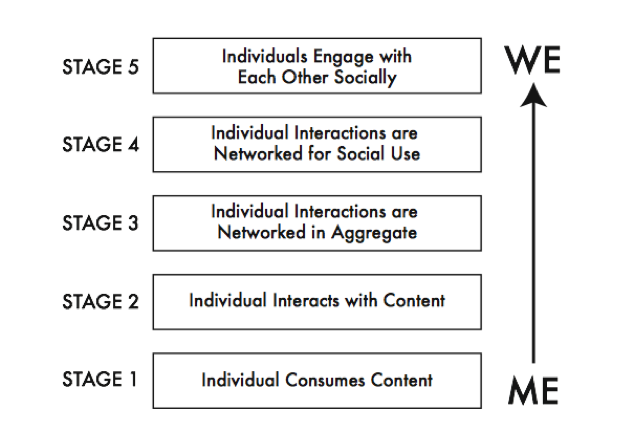
Why aren’t more museums designing highly constrained participatory platforms in which visitors contribute to collaborative projects? The misguided perception is that it’s more respectful to allow visitors to do their own thing—that the highest-value participatory experiences will emerge from unfettered self-expression. But that idea reflects a misunderstanding of what motivates participation. Visitors don’t want a blank slate for participation. They need well-scaffolded experiences that put their contributions to meaningful use.

**Going Social**

So far, we’ve looked at a few techniques for designing experiences that invite diverse participation and produce meaningful work. But another key focus of this book is the design of experiences that encourage people to participate socially with each other. To design successful social experiences, you don’t start by designing “for the crowd.” Instead, think of yourself as a cocktail party host. Your job is to graciously and warmly welcome each individual, and then to connect her with other people whom she might connect with particularly well. When you connect enough individuals to each other, they start feeling like they are part of a communal experience. I call this “me-to-we” design, which builds on individual (me) experiences to support collective (we) engagement.

In other words, you don’t start from the top down to design a participatory space. Transforming a cultural institution into a social hub requires engaging individual users and supporting connections among them. While at a party a host might connect people for a variety of reasons—shared professional fields, shared love of Basset Hounds, common personality traits—in a museum, staff members should connect people through the content on display. By introducing individual visitors through the content they both love, hate, or have a personal connection to, staff can motivate dialogue and relationship building around the core focus of the institution.

This evolution of the visitor experience from personal to communal interactions can be expressed via five stages of interface between institution and visitor. The foundation of all five stages is content. What changes is how visitors interact with content and how the content helps them connect socially with other people.

[](http://www.participatorymuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/images%20for%20web/chapter1/ch1_6_fivestages.png)

The five stages of social participation.

Each stage has something special to offer visitors. *Stage one* provides visitors with access to the content that they seek. *Stage two* provides an opportunity for inquiry and for visitors to take action and ask questions. *Stage three* lets visitors see where their interests and actions fit in the wider community of visitors to the institution.*Stage four*helps visitors connect with particular people—staff members and other visitors—who share their content and activity interests. *Stage five* makes the entire institution feel like a social place, full of potentially interesting, challenging, enriching encounters with other people.

These stages are progressive in that you cannot consistently design physical environments for a stage five experience without providing the groundwork of stages one through four. They are somewhat flexible; there are some highly social people who can easily jump from stage two to stage five, whereas other people may feel most comfortable never moving beyond stage three. Not all institutional projects should be designed for upper-stage experiences. Each stage affords a different kind of visitor experience, and most visitors experience multiple stages in a given cultural experience.

At present, most institutionally designed experiences are on stages one and two. I do not advocate a re-staging of all visitor experiences but rather the inclusion of a greater diversity of experience types, including some that promote the social over the personal. While many traditional museum visitors may be happy with a blend of stage one and two experiences, there are other potential visitors for whom the introduction of stage three, four, and five experiences can make the institution more enticing and meaningful.

Many cultural institutions provide facilitated experiences on all five stages. Tour guides and educators frequently help visitors feel comfortable and confident engaging socially with each other. Facilitated educational programs like camps or reenactments provide stage five opportunities to work in a team or group. The problem is that when the facilitator isn’t there or the event isn’t happening that social engagement ceases to exist. Designing stage three and four experiences can lay the groundwork to support and encourage unfacilitated social experiences. These frameworks enable visitors to do it for themselves whenever they like.

For example, consider the experience of visiting a historic house on a guided tour. There are many stage one experiences in which visitors can look at things and learn information about the house. There are some stage two opportunities for visitors to touch things, ask questions, and dig into personal interests. Because many visitors tour historic houses in groups with strangers, there is the potential for experiences on stages three to five. Guides can ask individuals to vote for the room they’d most like to live in and see how they compare to others in the group (stage three). Guides can encourage subsets of people who have particular interests, say, in the lives of servants, to spend time in dialogue with each other around artifacts related to that interest (stage four). And the best guides make the group feel like a close-knit team, working together to answer each other’s questions and discover new surprises (stage five).

Without a guide, a visit to a historic house is much less social. Visitors look and learn on their own with the companions who accompany them on their visit. The institution makes stage one and two experiences available, but not upper-level social engagement. If visitors engage with strangers, it is based entirely on personal initiative.

How could a historic house encourage visitors to have social experiences with each other outside the guided tour? Stage three and four activities can be designed as unfacilitated experiences. The stage three “vote for your favorite room” mechanism could be a cardboard floor plan on which visitors vote by sticking a pin on their favorite rooms. Visitors could have stage four interactions with other people with similar interests prompted by labels that encourage visitors to share personal memories with strangers through audio-recordings or letter-writing stations.

Designing unfacilitated opportunities for social engagement makes visitors more likely to see each other as potential sources of information and enjoyment in the house. Once this feeling is widespread, the house is ripe for stage five experiences, in which visitors feel comfortable pointing things out to strangers, having brief discussions about their own memories, and so on.

I’m not suggesting that institutions replace educators, front-line staff, or volunteers with exhibitry. Staff interactions provide the most consistent kinds of social experiences, and staff can be an important bridge to support and enhance even the most social exhibit design. Indeed, many of the examples in this book rely on staff or volunteers to work successfully.

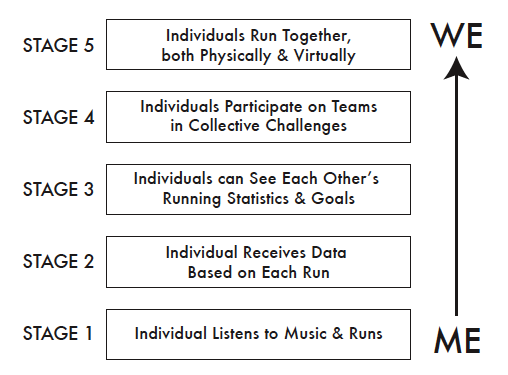
But staff cannot be everywhere. Designing physical spaces to support interaction means that it can happen anytime, even when guides or staff members are not available. The goal is not to replace staff but to scale up the opportunity for social engagement. This is what the social Web does so well. It leverages the interests and profiles of individuals to create opportunities for new connections and social experiences.

Let’s look at an example of me-to-we design from the corporate world that successfully provides experiences at all stages around a frequently disliked, voluntary activity that takes place all over the world. No, I’m not talking about visiting museums. I’m talking about running, and a platform called Nike Plus.

**CASE STUDY: From Me-to-We with Nike Plus**

Nike Plus (Nike+) is a combined iPod and shoe sensor product for tracking personal running. It provides real-time data about your progress as you run and stores your data for later review online. You can create goals for yourself and challenge other users (both friends and strangers) to run at your pace or complete a target number of miles. You can also create motivational playlists for the iPod to give you a “power-up” audio boost when you most need it. When you start to lag, your favorite song will get you back on track.

Nike+ uses me-to-we design brilliantly to support a product, an activity, a community, and ultimately, a healthy lifestyle. It offers experiences on all five stages of user engagement.



The five stages of Nike+.

Nike+ is built on two basic products: shoes and music. These provide a stage one experience—you consume music as the pavement consumes your shoes. There’s nothing special about Nike+ on stage one.

On stage two, Nike+ distinguishes itself by providing real-time data tracking. It is responsive to your actions and provides you with feedback to influence further action. Nike+ users report that the experience of being tracked actually improves their performance. The real-time statistics help motivate people along their runs, and reviewing the data later helps them spot their weaknesses and set future goals for improvement.

Nike+ gives users points and virtual trophies for completing personal goals. The game-like tracking system makes for an addictive individual stage two experience. But the individual experience with the system can only take you so far. If you take a break from running or stop looking at your statistics on the Web, the memories of trophies and goals slip away. Why run? It’s not even a human encouraging you—just a stupid machine.

And that’s where stage three comes in. In the online environment for Nike+, users can see the goals and runs set by other people, and use them as inspiration. Seeing the aggregate actions of other runners in the stage three environment helps people see themselves as part of a community, even if they don’t connect with other individuals directly. If fifty thousand other people can run ten miles, maybe you can too.

Then Nike+ goes further, offering “collective challenges,” in which users team up based on a wide range of similarities or affinities (gender, age, political affiliation, athletic ability) to accomplish shared running goals. This is a stage four experience. When you engage in a collective challenge, you don’t just focus on your own running goals or compare yourself to the masses. You have external goals for which you are accountable to virtual teammates. You’re motivated to run so you can meet the challenge and contribute to the team. Here’s how one enthusiastic blogger, Caleb Sasser, put it:

And the coolest part about Nike+ running? Like any good online game, you can challenge your friends. First to 100 miles? Fastest 5-mile time? Your call. These challenges wind up being incredibly inspiring — running against good friend and athletic powerhouse J. John Afryl kept me on my toes — and they’re also incredibly fun. Logging in after a long run, uploading your data, and seeing where you are in the standings, is a pretty awesome way to wrap up your exercise. And more importantly, sitting around the house, wondering what to do, thinking about jogging, and then realizing that if you don’t go jogging tonight you’re going to lose points and slip in the standings — now that’s true, videogame motivation.

The combination of game mechanics with social challenges makes Nike+ a powerful stage four experience. But what about stage five? One of Nike’s goals—and a major component of their online presence—is to encourage people to run together. The company sponsors races and running groups all over the world.

There are many Nike+ online forums and opportunities for meeting up with real people in your real neighborhood to go running. But there are also Nike+ users who have clamored for ways to run with their distant virtual teammates. It’s not crazy to imagine a future version of Nike+ that allows you to talk real-time to a running partner halfway around the world as you both navigate the streets.

Think about what a strange feat Nike pulled off with this product. Nike took a non-screen-based, often anti-social, occasionally loathed or feared activity—running—and turned it into a screen-supported social game. It transformed the motivation to run from being about exercise to being about social competition. Nike+ took an uncontrolled venue—the streets and trails used by runners all over the world—and created a compelling experience around it. For its users, Nike+ transforms running into a pervasive, fun, socially driven experience. And if Nike could do it for something as feared and despised as running often is, surely you can do it for your cultural institution.

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Where do you start in designing systems that can help visitors connect to each other through their content interests? Before considering social opportunities for stage three, four, and five experiences, it’s important to begin by getting to know visitors as individuals. Remember the cocktail party analogy. If you want to help visitors and staff members connect with the people who will be most interesting and useful to them, you need to welcome them personally and acknowledge their individual interests and abilities. Chapter 2 is all about ways to make cultural institutions more personal so that visitors can feel comfortable, confident, and motivated to participate.

**Chapter 1 Notes**

[] Learn more about convergence culture and Jenkins’ book with that title [here](http://www.participatorymuseum.org/ref1-1/).

[] See pages 14-18 in Elaine Heumann Gurian’s book, *Civilizing the Museum*(2006).

[] For an example of a radically participatory institution, check out the case study in Chapter 8 on the Wing Luke Asian Museum.

[] Tagging is a term that refers to a collecting activity in which people assign descriptive keywords (“tags”) to items.

[] The statistics shown here are for adults over 18 in the US as of August 2009. Up-to-date data for different countries, genders, and ages are available from Forrester Research [here](http://www.participatorymuseum.org/ref1-5/).

[] These statistics come from the “Principle in Action” page on the [90-9-1 website](http://www.participatorymuseum.org/ref1-6/).

[] See Jakob Nielsen’s October 2006 article, [Participation Inequality: Encouraging More Users to Contribute](http://www.participatorymuseum.org/ref1-7/).

[] Consult the work of Lev Vygotsky for foundational material on instructional scaffolding. For a museum-focused discussion, see George Hein’s *Learning in the Museum* (1998).

[] See John Warren’s October 2008 blog post, [Wild Center: Local Leader on Adirondack Climate Change](http://www.participatorymuseum.org/ref1-9/).

[] Explore [the full slate](http://www.participatorymuseum.org/ref1-10/) of The Wild Center’s climate initiatives.

[] See Jared Sandberg’s July 2006 *Wall Street Journal* [article on active leisure](http://www.participatorymuseum.org/ref1-11/).

[] For a longer discussion on the multiple values of participation, see Chapter 5.

[] See Chapter 11 in Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing without Organizations* (2008).

[] See John Falk’s book, *Identity and the Museum Visitor Experience* (2009).

[] McGonigal shared this list in a cultural context in a December 2008 lecture, “Gaming the Future of Museums.” See slide 22 in [this presentation](http://www.participatorymuseum.org/ref1-15/) for the list.

[] See page 170 for an example of a stage five program at the Conner Prairie historic park called *Follow the North Star*.

[] See Cabel Sasser’s effusive August 2006 blog post, [Multiplayer Game of the Year](http://www.participatorymuseum.org/ref1-17/).