Whatever you do in an exhibition, display or programme, it’s all about your audience. Who do you want to read the labels? Will they read them? Will anyone? Will anyone be persuaded by the design concept which includes the a consistent style of label? And so on . ..

In this presentation, I am not going to define audiences, what they do and what they want. I am going to give you some hints about audiences; hints based on evaluation and observation. I am inviting you to join me in a short tour of a museum; a museum not made of physical materials but of experiences and observation; it is the Museum of My Mind; its fabric is more durable than granite, more flexible than steel.

Visitors do not respond to our work necessarily in the way we want them to; they can react or express opinions in ways that might seem that they have missed the point, they respond in what I like to call a peripheral way
So the real subject of this talk is about how we can learn things from these peripheral observations.

We must be at least aware of the periphery; most times it will be impossible to think of all the possible reactions to a label or a display.

But we must prepare for it and be aware.

To push home this point, I will tell you a story about Dr Samuel Johnson the famous 18th Century man of letters.

Dr Johnson and a friend were walking along a London street; they walked under the overhanging first floors, which were only separated by a metre from the overhangs of the houses on the other side of the street.

They observed two women leaning out of the opposing window, arguing across the gap, almost nose to nose.

"Those women will never agree", said Dr. Johnson.

“How do you know?” enquired his friend.

“They’re arguing from different premises.”
Come!
Visit my museum
Let’s start from my office.  
Down these stairs to the public areas.  
This sign used to be beside the bottom of the stairs, not directly in the view of visitors.  
Visitors used to come up the stairs looking for exhibitions; one person even thought our offices were part of an exhibition on modern offices.  
But once we put the sign in the middle of the stairs, so no one could avoid seeing it, no one came up ever again.
Here is the entrance to the open plinth exhibition of stuffed animals. See this lovely large sign in the centre of the entry; it is a large dinosaur holing food and drink, with a big very red diagonal line across it: no food and drink allowed.

I saw a woman and two kids admiring the dinosaur and then walking into the exhibition, eating chips and drinking pop!

I pretended I was an independent evaluator and asked why she allowed this despite the clear sign, which she had read.

“Oh, I saw the sign, but I have had a terrible week, arguing with my husband, the kids have been awful, I am at my wits’ end. I just wanted to have an argument and stress free day with the kids. So I deliberately ignored the sign. Sorry.”
Ah, here is our interactive exhibition showing examples of various machines and giving people the opportunity to experience using them.

Evaluation shows that people see our pulley display as one display. All the examples and the interactives are in the one display; visitors do not distinguish between them.

But with the lever displays . . .
The examples of levers are separate but adjacent to the interactive giant lever. This was done for occupational health and safety reasons, but the visitors don’t know that.

Evaluation shows that visitors see the two as separate displays, because they are physically separate and despite the labelling that relates one to another.
Here’s a display, part of which has been changed recently. Most of it is four years’ old.
The silver cups have been put there recently; they replaced a cardboard elephant.
A visitor yesterday actually came up to me as I was passing through, and said that the glass bottle, with the red bauble, was new and had not been there before. I said it had been there since the display was set up, and that the cups were newly installed. He said that he remembered the silver cups from his visit four years ago and that I must be mistaken.
How do we explain these experiences?

- mindFULness
- mindLESSness

When visitors enter a museum or gallery or zoo or whatever, they are thinking about all sorts of things. They are on the lookout. Where are the toilets; coffee; what to do with the kids; the entry prices; what shall we see?. They are in state of mindlessness, where there is no sharp focus and time drags.

When they see something they are interested in and focus on it, they are in a state of mindfulness, where one hour can feel like a minute, and knowledge is acquired; they're learning.
What is learning?

• Learning stems from the characteristics of the learner as well as the material to be learnt.
• To understand learning, we need to understand the learner as well.
So what is learning?

- the result of incorporating potentially meaningful material into our pre-existing structure of knowledge

Learning is not like filling an empty bucket with water, or replacing the water already in the bucket.

Each person is different. A person’s view of physics, for example, is different from another’s, and will change over time.
And now . . . Let’s go to the hands-on electricity workshop
A teacher is using the Museum’s facilities to teach their class about the electric conductivity of different materials. The children set up the circuit drawn on the white board. They are told to test various materials and to start by getting the “circuit to work.”
Two girls notice that everyone else had got the globe to light up and flash. They connect a wire across the battery; the teacher notices and tells them off, removing the wire, and telling them to get the “circuit working.”
The two girls try everything they can to get the globe to light or flash. They fail, until . . .
They connect a wire as in the diagram.
The light is on; they’ve got the “circuit working”. At last!
They place different materials across the gap and find that everything conducts electricity – metal, string, wood, hair etc.

They proudly show the teacher, who is exasperated and tells them that they are silly.

The thing is the two girls wanted to get the “circuit working’, which is what people say when they walk into a room and check the lights. They say “they’re working”, when on flicking the switch, they see the lights go on.

The teacher’s definition of “working” meant setting up the circuit so they could test the materials. Its all about how information is integrated into a pre-existing framework of knowledge.
Now I would like to do a little presentation for you, giving you a glimpse of our photography collection.

So . . .

Here are some brown photos . . .
Some black and white ones . . .
And some coloured ones . . .

I once gave this show to a group of primary school kids. At the end, a little boy asked: “When did colour come into the world?”
Oh, here is a display I did myself . . . I remember a non-museum friend visited the museum and saw me a couple of days later.

She commented on it.

“Oh, definitely the best exhibit; that large glass case with all the domestic items. I really liked that. It really got the message across.”

“The message?, I asked, “Oh yes . . . but . . . there was no label, no explanation. We hadn’t . . . “

Friend: “Yes I noticed that, but I assumed the Museum had a good reason for not putting up a label.”

I thought to myself: “Wow! Such is the power of the Museum! I had better not tell her that the label just wasn’t ready for the opening of the exhibition.”
Let’s go through this gallery. The exhibition, that was here, was probably the oldest in the Museum.

It was here that another example of how powerful a museum is and it can make a visitor feel guilty.

Last week, a primary teacher on her way from the latest blockbuster, led her class through this empty museum gallery, well, empty apart from the scaffolding used by painters preparing the walls for the next exhibition.

A child asked what exhibition is on in this room. Looking sideways at the painters, her charges and me (dreaming of future glory), the teacher replied: “This is an exhibition on painting.”
Oh! Here’s another presentation . . .
Here is a show that demonstrates how electricity is produced by turning a handle that makes coils of wire rotated between the poles of magnets. It was constructed at the end of the 19th Century for teaching purposes.

See how taking the magnets away, and still turning handle, the light gets dimmer and then, when there are no magnets left, the bulb does not light.

It also does not light if you put the magnets in with the north poles (marked with dimples) opposite to the ones on either side.

See how the kids love coming up and using it. It really gets the physics across.

... The demonstration is over, so ... Let’s ask this little girl what she thought of it.

“Hello. What’s your name?”

“Sally.”

“Well Sally, what did you think of the electric generator?”

“I liked the way the wood and the brass go together.”
Theories of learning

• are like pendulums
• they swing from one extreme to another
Beware!
The truth might be on the periphery

maybe the exhibition
‘Play with a Pendulum’
might help us find out
what this might mean . . .
We’ve built this display like the Pantheon in Paris in which the French scientist, Leon Foucault in February 1851 carried out one of his earliest demonstration of the so-called Foucault Pendulum. This pendulum is used to show that the Earth rotates.

Foucault made his most famous pendulum when he suspended a 28 kg brass-coated lead bob with a 67 metre long wire from the dome of the Panthéon.

You grab hold of the bob and . . .
. . . Pull it right back to the wall.
Then you let go and walk over to the corner and wait.
The pendulum swings and very slowly changes its plane of swing.
It may take so long that you might fall asleep.
Don’t! . . .
. . . because the ball might hit you!
As it swings, the pendulum changes the plane in which it swings.
People used to think that it was some property of the pendulum that makes it swing.
But Foucault said it was not; the pendulum maintains its plane of swing; it is the Earth, on which we stand or sit, that is rotating. It appears that the pendulum is changing, but it is us, the observers who are changing.

You can show this at home . . .
Set up a small pendulum in a frame.
Set the pendulum swinging within the frame.
Grasp the sides of the frame firmly, and . . .
. . twist it sharply, keeping it level.

The pendulum continues swinging in the same plane; it is the frame (the Earth) that moves.
This conclusion appeared to be very peripheral to most people in Foucault’s time. You could not go up in space to see the rotation. A balloon was the only way you could rise above the Earth.
Back to our tour... 

now here’s an exhibit that’s all about targeting an audience
This cardboard phonograph was developed by a Christian group in the 1980s to spread the word of God to people who could not read or who do not have access to electricity, namely, people in Africa.

All you needed to do is follow the instructions in the form of diagrams, and turn the record with a twig inserted into an off-centre hole (on the edge of the label closest to the cardboard A-frame).

One side of the record is marked “Why the gospel on a record”. The other side is marked "God's gift of eternal life".

An example of selecting your audience and targeting it.
Now we’ve nearly finished our tour, it’s been very pleasant and no one’s been abusive . . .

but if a visitor were to be . . .

If a visitor or staff member is abusive, you turn a difficult situation to your advantage and get some learning in as well.

This example is very peripheral.

Suppose someone hold two fingers up to you.

You could explain that the gesture dates back to the Battle of Agincourt in 1415, when the English longbowmen devastated the armoured French knights with a continuous and massive shower of arrows.

If the French captured a bowman, they removed the two fingers used to draw back the string of the bow – literally disabling the technology.

The English, if they wanted to provoke the French, stuck their two fingers up and shouted “Come and get us” (or Olde English to the same effect).

If this doesn’t confuse the abusive person and make them slink away confused, nothing will.

And, at least, you’ve come in from the periphery!
Be on target with your peripheral learning!
Come back soon!

Au revoir