

Report from the AAM Annual Meeting 2009 – Caroline Thalund

The 2009 AAM conference took place in Philadelphia and explored the theme “The Museum Experiment – Where Ideas Live!” In this short article, Caroline Thalund, recipient of a 2009 CARE Professional Scholarship and working as the Learning Evaluator at the Natural History Museum in London, UK, describes her experience at the conference.

Attending the conference was an amazing opportunity to learn, develop my skills, create new contacts and enhance existing relationships. The experience enhanced my professional development as an evaluator, and reinforced the need for such effective communication and collaboration between global organizations.

I would like to explore with examples some of the benefits to me of attending the conference:

Inspiration:

- Key note speakers Walter Isaacson and Malcolm Gladwell provided listeners with highly inspirational talks. It was a pleasure listening to these two articulate and compelling presenters. I now know what Fleetwood Mac, quarterback Dan Marino, Mark Twain and Cezanne have in common (they achieved success through a trial-and-error process) and how Einstein became so successful (by constantly questioning and challenging authority and assumptions). Mostly though, I left with renewed inspiration.
- At the conference I chose sessions related to visitor studies, learning, interpretation and professional development. Many were inspirational but one in particular that stuck in my mind was the presentation by Minda Borun about learning styles and preferences for computer-based educational activities. Minda explored how children (age 10-13) and adults' learning styles affect their preferences for educational experiences. This particularly interested me as I am currently working on evaluating online resources. I was inspired in how to use the findings to further develop my own projects.

Networking:

- CARE provided an abundance of opportunities to network. For me, the conference kicked off properly with a rather special first evening at the Victor Café. This was co-hosted with the Visitor Studies Association (VSA). This evening event, however, wasn't intended to be of the usual kind. I very soon discovered that the special ingredient wasn't in the food but appeared in the shape of opera singers who entertained us between meals. One of the other diners, an elderly man, even swept his wife out onto the floor and serenaded her in front of the rest of the restaurant. This was the perfect ice breaker as it allowed attendees who didn't know each other to engage through a neutral and easily discussed subject in a very relaxed and informal atmosphere.
- The business breakfast meeting gave me an opportunity to learn about the inner workings of CARE and get to know the others better. Furthermore I volunteered to be a proposal reviewer for 2010 which I thoroughly enjoyed. It also coincidentally brought up the opportunity to chair a CARE session at next year's conference with which I am absolutely delighted.
- As most of the activities were attended by the same core group of people, I was able to extend, develop and consolidate relationships. The Issues Luncheon however brought together a quite different group of conferees, most of whom I had never met before. It was a great opportunity to make new connections.
- Volunteering to help staff the CARE Stall at the MuseumExpo not only allowed me to get to know other CARE members but also to engage with a wide range of people to share experiences, offer advice and to promote CARE and the benefits of conducting audience research and evaluation.

Presenting:

- At the CARE Marketplace I had the opportunity to present and discuss my work. This not only allowed my to develop my presentation skills and help others, but also develop and improve the evaluation framework I was presenting. A colleague asked me if this framework would apply to exhibits and I realized I could indeed apply this to exhibits though it had actually been developed for face-to-face programs. The marketplace was a brilliant opportunity to share and develop. As a bonus, I learned how entertaining it can be to bring tarantula and beetle specimens in your carry-on luggage through US customs!

I would like to thank CARE for offering me this wonderful opportunity and I am sure that next year's conference held in Los Angeles May 23-26, 2010, will be just as valuable to the fortunate recipients of the CARE Fellowships.

Caroline Thalund
Natural History Museum, London