

What is Transformation?

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Invisible Worlds is a new exhibition at the Eden Project opening in 2018, which will reveal the relationships between microbiology, earth systems science and human health. This ambitious and innovative exhibition will aim to both challenge and transform visitors' attitudes, beliefs and behaviours.

Transformation is a concept which is often used in relation to museum exhibitions¹, and the idea that visitors might be transformed by their experience is powerful. The Eden Project's strapline: "Transformation, it's in our nature", shows that it is deeply embedded in their practice. But what does it mean to be transformed in the context of an exhibition visit? Is transformation different to a more ordinary change in attitudes or behaviour?

While much of environmental communication and museums research has investigated attitude and behaviour change², transformation is an emerging concept which currently has little theoretical or empirical backing.



Disorienting dilemma

Self examination

Critical assessment of assumptions

Recognition of shared discontent

Exploration of new identity, relationships and actions

Transformation

Traditionally, science and environmental communication assumed that increased public knowledge results in a change of attitudes and behaviours, but this approach has been shown to be ineffective³. Transformative learning, a theory from adult education⁴, has been suggested as an alternative approach⁵. This kind of learning is not a change in what, or how much you know, but *how you know*⁶ - it results in a profound change in world-view (Fig. 1). This research will investigate practitioners' conceptualisation of transformation, compare it with existing theories from other fields, and test it empirically through a process of action research.

Figure 1: The process of transformative learning⁴

Planning action

Acquiring knowledge and skills

Provisionally trying out a new identity

Building competence and confidence

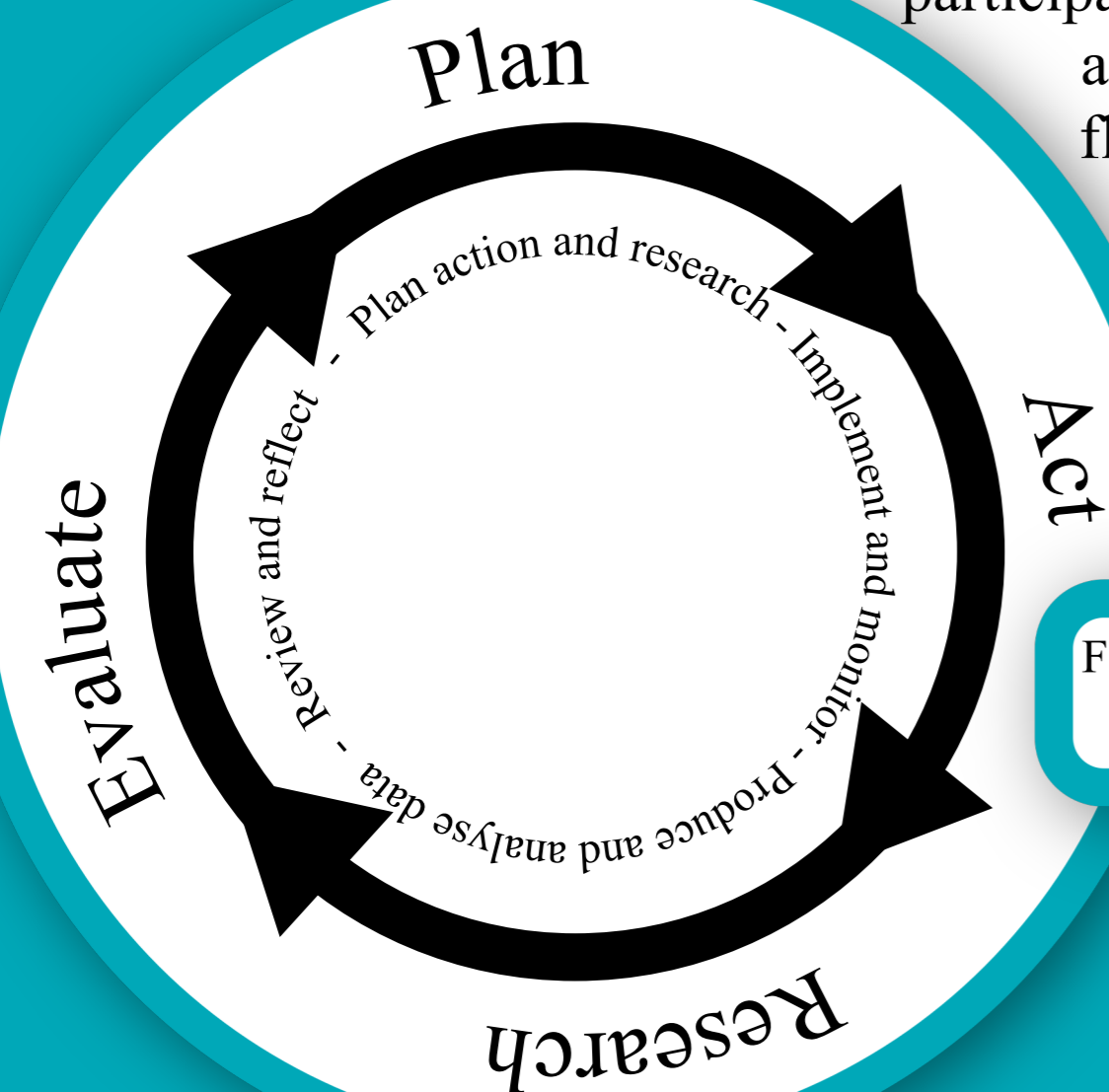
Reintegration into life with new perspective

Action Research

Science communication has been criticised due to its lack of demonstrable impact⁷, not least due to a large gap between research and practice. Action research is a collaborative approach to research which focuses on producing evidence-based change in practice. It is an iterative, cyclical process of planning, action, research and reflection (Fig. 2), where the participants are important in shaping the research as it develops. This project draws on a flavour of action research called "action science"⁸, which builds on concepts of organisational learning⁹ and critically reflective practice¹⁰.



Figure 2: Example action research cycle



How does visitor research change the way the people working on the Invisible Worlds exhibition conceptualise transformation?

1. Observing meetings
2. Structured interviews with designers, scientists, artists.

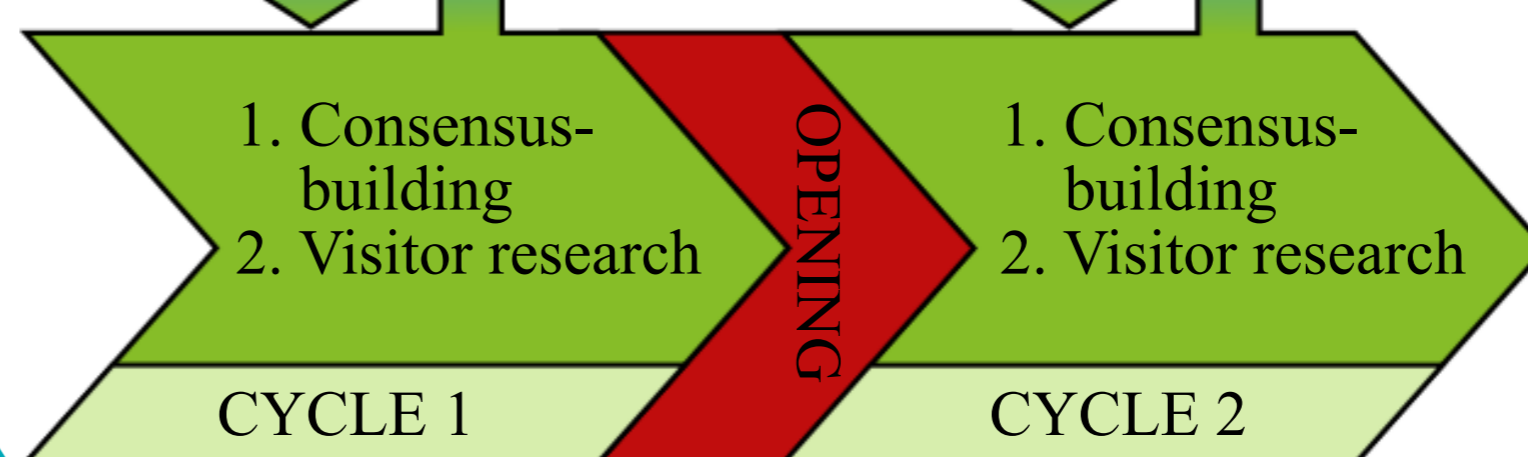


Figure 3: Research design

Aims and Methods

This project aims to:

1. Investigate the process of visitor transformation.
2. Explore the influence of a research intervention on exhibition development.

The aims will be approached by a two-layered research design (Fig. 3). Firstly, two action research cycles, one before the exhibition opens and one after, will explore transformation from a visitor perspective. The cycles will begin with a consensus-forming exercise¹¹ around the theme of transformation to establish pertinent research questions. These will be used to design research with visitors. The results of this will feed into the exhibition design, and subsequent research. The second part of the research will approach the research aims from the angle of the people working on the exhibition, including the design team, artists and scientists. Structured interviews¹² and observation¹³ during meetings will be used to understand how these different collaborators conceptualise visitor transformation, and how this changes over the time-period of the project, in response to the ongoing visitor research, as well as other influences.

References

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