Inquiry and Participation

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Active Learning, Thinking Skills,

Unless you are reading for the first time, you probably know that I advocate teaching methods that use active learning strategies. It is my strongly held belief that object-based learning is best accomplished by placing visitors in the active roles of seekers and contemplators, rather than putting them in more passive stances of listeners and absorbers.

Learning within museums, historic sites, zoos, parks, and gardens should be conducted differently than it is in classrooms. Access to authentic objects and specimens intensifies learning by extending lessons beyond the realm of the abstract. Such access permits learners to experience encounters with the “real thing.” And, because art, history, and science collections are intrinsically powerful and interesting, they offer opportunities to intrigue and involve people in ways that no textbook or blackboard can. Therefore, rather than spend time telling visitors information that they could otherwise read about in texts, it seems preferable to challenge visitors to experience the excitement of learning directly from the collection by having them actively investigate, make discoveries, and reflect upon what they find.

Of the several forms of active learning strategies an educator can employ, I find inquiry—the asking of questions—the most productive, flexible, and engaging. Questions can be geared to the age and experience level of audiences and to the type of objects or living things being investigating. Questions immediately place visitors into an active stance by requesting that they do, find, or think of something. And, when asked in an appropriate manner, questions enfranchise everyone regardless of the discoveries they make or the conclusions they draw. There is simply no more effective way I know of to encourage participation and retention than by using inquiry.

I advocate using active learning strategies for another reason as well. Active learning strategies provide visitors with an opportunity to use and acquire skills for “continued learning.” While facts and information about a collection tend to be trivial unless connected to well-developed interests and previously acquired knowledge, skills are tools that can be used again and again, to pursue interests and acquire knowledge. Skills allow people to unlock mysteries, solve puzzles, and find new insights. They give learners the ability to continue learning on their own.

Establishing an Atmosphere that Encourages Participation

“Everyone likes the spotlight, but no one likes being put on the spot.” When working to establish an atmosphere conducive to participation, I try to remember that rule. If given positive encouragement to share thoughts, ideas, and discoveries, people will enjoy doing so, but only if they feel safe and trust that their efforts will be treated with encouragement and respect.

When first meeting a group of younger students, I begin by asking questions that set the stage for further inquiry, such as, “Have you been to other botanical gardens before? What did you see there?” or “Do you have a favorite flower or tree? What makes it so special to you?” When meeting older students or adult visitors, I let them know that I will guide their experience by sharing information and by asking questions. “My questions,” I tell them, “are meant to open up a discussion. They are not a test of your knowledge, and your participation is voluntary. However, I believe that the conversations initiated by my questions will make your visit here more interesting, more responsive to your observations and concerns, and will broaden the topics we explore together.”

Through both my demeanor and my words, I must keep my commitment to maintaining a safe environment within which visitors can comfortably share their new and untested observations, ideas, responses, and attitudes. I do this best by honoring every response offered and being grateful for the respondent’s willingness to share. Once a response to a question is proffered, I restate the answer in my own words to ensure that others and I have understood the respondent accurately (and, if not, I ask that visitor for clarification). Then, I try to validate the response by finding something useful or insightful that I can use as a bridge to factual information.

For instance, after greeting visitors as mentioned above, I might take them into a greenhouse filled
with tropical plants. Upon entering, I could ask, “What is the first thing you noticed when you walked in here?”

“It’s very muggy!” a visitor replies.

“You felt the increased humidity?” I say back, ensuring that we share the same definition of the word ‘muggy?’” After a nod of agreement, I might continue by telling visitors, “Most of the plants in this greenhouse grow where the humidity level is consistently over 80%.”

“There is a sweet smell in the air,” another visitor chimes in.

“Tell me more about that,” I answer.

“It’s a smell like that of flowers and damp earth,” the visitor replies, clarifying her observation.

“Interesting,” I respond. “Soil decomposes faster in high humidity environments and does give off a sweet smell while doing so. And, you happen to be standing near a plum tree, whose blossoms have a perfume-like fragrance. Both could be components of what you noticed.”

**Using Appropriate Questions to Promote Participation**

How do you ask questions that will encourage participation without making visitors feel tested or put on the spot? One way is to be certain that your questions are open-ended and do not have specific right or wrong answers.

It takes a bit of a mental shift to ask questions that do not request pre-determined answers, but once you catch on, they are really quite easy to construct. Rather than ask visitors, “Do you see any shades of red used in this painting?” try asking, “What colors can you find in this painting?” Or, instead of asking a question such as, “Which of these two rocks is igneous?” try asking, “What differences can you find between these two rocks?”

Unless you master the “art” of asking open-ended questions and use this form of inquiry, visitors will never feel safe responding to your questions. They will always assume that you are seeking one specific, correct response (or a set of specific, correct responses) when the best they can do is hazarding a guess.

**Questioning that Builds Skills**

It becomes far easier to construct questions for active learning if you focus on the skills being taught, rather than the objects being examined. Any one of these skills can serve as the route for investigating an object, living thing, or specimen, regardless of its subject matter or content. Historians, art historians and critics, scientists, and others who have mastered their fields employ the skills detailed below. When used for teaching purposes, they are simply requested and executed at a more rudimentary level.

What follows is an examination of four skills — observing, comparing, classifying, and hypothesizing — as well as some examples of questions that call for visitors to practice using them. Responses to any of the questions below offer a docent the opportunity to build upon answers and to relate information that confirms the significance of what is discussed.
A docent at the Toledo Museum of Art in Toledo, Ohio, sets up a “thinking-skills” oriented activity by first getting students to observe a painting in the gallery and then having them compare and contrast that painting to a work reproduced in the book she is holding.

- **Observing**

People use their five senses to gather information and impressions. Seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, or touching (or any combination of these) are the ways we explore and examine the world around us.

Observing is the starting point for all the other skills visitors will use. Yet most visitors spend very little time or energy observing items in institutional collections. The reason is that most visitors do not know what to look, listen, or otherwise observe for. Therefore, observation questions should give visitors a reason to inspect more closely.

For instance, questions that ask for descriptions encourage visitors to take more careful notice. “How would you describe this sculpture to someone who couldn’t see it?” “What words would you use to describe this chest of drawers?” or “How would you tell a friend visiting our garden next week to look for this particular cactus?”

- **Comparing**

Comparing requires finding similarities and/or differences between two or more items. It is another way to encourage active involvement with, and closer inspection of, objects, living things, and specimens.

Questions can ask visitors to make direct comparison between two or more items in close proximity to one another. “In what ways are these two paintings of Madonna and Child different from one another?” “How many differences can you find between the male and female cardinal?” and “What similarities do most of these desert plants share in common?” are examples.

Questions can also challenge visitors to compare items to other things that are commonly known, but not directly available. An example of one such question might be “What similarities are there between the status symbols owned by wealthy families in the 18th century and those that are our status symbols today?”

- **Hypothesizing**

Those of you who have a science orientation are most familiar with the term “hypothesizing,” but folks in all disciplines do it. To hypothesize is to make a considered, reasonable guess based on the evidence available.

For instance, if you asked visitors “What assumptions might you make about tribal people who produced such highly decorative items?” you are asking for hypotheses. Though your visitors might not know a definitive answer to that question, you are asking them to make reasonable guesses based on all that they have seen, thought about, and learned.

Other questions that request employing the skill of hypothesizing demonstrate the usefulness of this essential thinking tool. “If you were to try to identify this plant, what aspects of its appearance might you use?” “Based on what you see in this portrait, how do you think the artist felt about the sitter?” “What do you think life would be like if you lived in a rainforest?” Each of these questions
can lead to productive and stimulating conversations and could lead to the exploration of other, related issues.

[For a more in-depth examination of these skills, and to learn of other thinking skills that can be used with inquiry teaching, please refer to my new book, Questioning Art: an Inquiry Approach to Teaching Art Appreciation, which is available from The Docent Educator. (For information, see details in the box to the right.) While this text applies active learning to works of art, the strategies, skills, and questions modeled can easily be adapted for use with other subject areas.]

Concluding Remarks
As an educator, I hope to teach expansively. It is not enough that visitors learn the specifics about any particular artwork, historic object, or scientific specimen during their encounter with me. Such information, while interesting, is rarely remembered and has little long-term impact or usefulness. Rather, I want visitors to learn skills so that they might continue learning from such things without my being present. To this end, involvement is key. Within the museum infrastructure, curators and registrars pursue information that defines and refines understandings about the collection. Educators, on the other hand, teach and construct ways to disseminate information. For scholars and those who arrive at the institution with a developed interest and background, guided tours that adhere to a lecture format may be appropriate. But, when leading groups of students or the general public, who have limited knowledge of the subject matter, active learning strategies are a more engaging form of teaching.

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Alan Gartenhaus
Publishing Editor

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*The Docent Educator* Autumn 2002
What Was That Question?

What am I hoping to accomplish by asking a question?

I sometimes begin my “Minds in Motion” workshop about developing interaction skills by asking this question. If you will, take a moment or two to answer it yourself before you read any further. I’ll wait.

(la, la, la ... la, la, la)

Sometimes the question makes audiences a little uncomfortable. Often, I can tell that some of them are becoming agitated. Usually, however, I get several answers. Maybe you thought of some of these, too.

“You want us to focus.”
“You want us to know that you expect us to participate.”
“You want us to think about questions.”

In addition to these responses, and any others you may have thought of, I wanted us to examine the importance of the way in which a question is phrased. So, I’m going to ask my question in another way. Let’s see what happens.

How many different reasons can you think of for asking a question?

I’ll wait while you answer.

(la, la, la ... la, la, la)

You may have thought of some additional reasons, such as these that audiences have given me from time to time.

“Questions help you find out what your visitors already know about the subject.”

“Questions help you find out which members of your group are most likely to participate.”

I still don’t have the question quite the way I want it. Let’s examine the difference when I re-phrase it.

How many different reasons can we list for asking a question?

My real question, now, is “How are these three questions different?” See if you notice differences that make the last version the best of the three (and it still has some problems!) I’ll “la, la, la” again while you investigate.

You may have noticed that the first question really asked you to guess what was going on in my mind. That’s probably why the question makes some audience members (and maybe you) uncomfortable or even angry. It isn’t fair to make our visitors guess, but it’s easy to phrase a question in such a way that they think there’s a right answer and they don’t know what it is. In that case, an otherwise open-ended question becomes a trick question, and you’ve put your audience on the defensive.

The second and third versions of my question appear to ask the same thing, but I’ll bet you noticed that in the third version “we” are participating together and “we” are going to list (a concrete action) rather than merely think of reasons. Of course, you also probably noticed that the second and third versions are still poorly stated. Instead of asking my audience for a list, I’m actually asking them for a number.

“How many different reasons ...”

Question content is, of course, very important. Equally important, however, is the way questions are phrased. Let’s try creating a really good question, well-stated and designed to help your visitor discover something great about your collection or site. Start with some information you want your visitors to know. State it as a fact. Now write two questions that this statement might evoke in your audience. The first should be one that would come immediately to mind upon hearing the statement. The second, and much harder to develop, is a question that would help your audience discover the information in your statement without your having to state it.

For example, pretend for a moment that I am a docent in the historic Heyward-Washington House in Charleston, South Carolina.

Suppose, too, that I want my visitors to know that one of the reasons the house is so famous is the fact that George Washington once stayed here. If I simply state the fact, “This house is famous because George Washington slept here,” I run the risk of putting my audience to sleep as well! What sort of question might that statement evoke in my audience?

“How does she know that?”

“So what?”

“He probably slept in lots of places. Who else slept here?”

“So, who the heck was Heyward?”

As you may have noticed, the questions running through everyone’s minds don’t add much to my visitors’ enjoyment of or interest in this historic site. Let’s see about that second question. How can I phrase a question that will help visitors discover this little tidbit themselves?

I might ask the group if they’ve ever had the experience I had when I moved to a small town in Tennessee.

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New friends didn’t ask my address, they asked whose house I bought. This seems to be an “old southern custom”. With that in mind, how do you suppose this house got its name?

In addition to letting visitors discover an important fact about this site, a question such as this is “transferable.” By that, I mean, they can use this information to make generalizations about other sites’ names.

Whenever possible, your questions should empower your audience. They should be useful not only at your site, but in other situations. What sorts of questions do that? Questions that teach visitors to categorize and classify artifacts and specimens can go with them from a historic site to an aquarium to a botanical garden and allow them to learn about each location without help. Questions that show visitors how to compare and contrast data and ideas will work for them whether they are at a nature center or in an art gallery. Questions that demonstrate analysis of a document in a history museum can empower them to analyze an animal’s habitat in a modern zoo. Questions that help them generalize from their observations will open up all sorts of possibilities in all sorts of museums.

Now, it’s time to practice. Go into your institution. Select an artifact, a collection, or an exhibit that you tour frequently. Write some of the questions you typically ask a touring group. Are you asking your visitors to guess what’s on your mind? Are you asking them to “think” or to “do”? Are you asking them a question that can be answered “yes” or “no”? Are your asking them questions that empower them?

Can you questions be improved? Start thinking and writing!

Answer:

“Question content is, of course, very important. Equally important, however, is the way questions are phrased.”

Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor

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Museums in the Caribbean

Planning an island getaway? Well, you don’t have to leave your museum orientation and interests at home. The islands of the Caribbean are rich in cultural, historic, and scientific institutions that can further your understanding of, and appreciation for, these exotic locations.

Dominican Republic

The Museo Bellapart is arguably the finest gallery of modern art in the Caribbean. The museum, which displays highlights from the vast private collection of entrepreneur Juan José Bellapart, is largely unknown because of its newness and its location on the fifth floor of the Honda headquarters on Avenida John F. Kennedy (809-541-7721).

Museo de Arte Moderno is a bright welcoming space in the concrete maze that is the Plaza de la Cultura. The building is festooned with huge, colorful modern canvases and banners. Highlights include the country’s earliest painters to its more recent and more famous ones, such as Yoryi Morel. The Museo de Arte Moderno follows no real order — you can turn the corner after gazing at an Expressionist painting and face a wall of pop art — but that is part of its charm (809-685-2153).

Less a museum than a showcase of the splendor that was once Santo Domingo, the Museo de las Casas Reales has a spectacular setting in the old section of the oldest European city in the New World. Housed in a renovated brick-and-coral 16th-century palace on Las Damas, the collection includes relics and maps that take you from the bizarre weaponry and military uniforms of dictator Rafael Trujillo to its most impressive grand salon hung with portraits of the Spanish kings (809-699-7601).

The town of Altos de Chavón is the home of the Museo Arqueológico Regional. More than 3,000 relics recall the centuries-long migrations from South America through the Lesser Antilles. They range from tools and weapons from the pre-ceramic age to jewelry worn by the Taino, who became the dominant population in this region. Exhibit texts are both in Spanish and English (809-523-8554).

Guadeloupe

Victor Schoelcher was a Caribbean abolitionist, and the Musée Schoelcher is as much about the man himself as it is about slavery. Housed in a mansion near the Pointe à Pitre docks, the collection shows him to have been a man not only of iron principle but also of taste and wealth. Exhibits include 19th-century prints, an intricate working model of a guillotine, coffee and tea sets from his father’s porcelain works, copies of many statues from the Louvre, and implements and engravings recalling the inhumanity of slavery (590-590-820-804).

As heads never looked as good as they do at the Musée Edgar Clerc in the eastern port of Le Moule. Suspended and ingeniously lit, they acquire a sculptural presence in the spacious museum. Taino, Carib, Kalina, and Arawak cultures are all thoroughly covered in the monument to the migrations in the Lesser Antilles before A.D. 200 (590-590-23-57-43).

Haiti

A miraculous feat of engineering, The Citadelle was built by Haiti’s first king following the world’s first successful slave rebellion, and it took 20,000 men 13 years to construct it atop its 3,000-foot perch. Protecting the north coast at Cap Haitien, The Citadelle is the largest such fortress in the Americas. It was never besieged, although its walls, which are up to 46 feet thick, could have sustained almost any assault and remain wholly intact.

Not far inland, at Limbé, the Musée de Guébwa was created by William Hodges, an American missionary, doctor, and amateur anthropologist. Artifacts from archaeological digs follow Haiti’s history from the period of the Indians — Guébwa was their name for the town — until just after the buccaneers (509-262-6782).

Jamaica

On the grounds of Old Kings House in Emancipation Square in Spanish Town, the People’s Museum of Crafts and Technology covers the difficult decades following emancipation. Under the aged wooden rafters of what was once part of the colonial Governor’s stables, an intriguing assortment of artifacts and narrative texts attests to a long period of transculturation, grounded in African customs (876-907-0322).
Hanover Museum faces the busy harbor in Lucca. The museum houses artifacts from the Great Western Rebellion of 1832, as well as a variety of hand-hewn objects of the island's earliest inhabitants (876-956-2584).

**Martinique**

The three-story Musée Départemental d'Archéologie et de Préhistoire is above all an homage to Amerindian cultures. Opposite La Savane in Fort-de-France, the museum presents prehistoric finds, such as beautifully incised and painted pottery, animal figurines, jewelry, and ritual dresses. On the top floor are recreations of underwater, forest, and village life (596-596-715705).

The Empress Josephine is not too popular in the French Caribbean, having dissuaded Napoleon from abolishing slavery. Nevertheless, her childhood plantation home is now the Musée de la Pagerie. The expansive grounds have a small cottage crammed with memorabilia of her extraordinary life — from sugar farmer's daughter to empress of France. Highlights include the petite four-poster in which she slept as a young girl and the collection of paintings from both her West Indian and her imperial life (596-596-683834).

**Puerto Rico**

The huge Museo de Arte de Puerto Rico exhibits canvases, sculptures, photographs, and santos tracing 300 years of Puerto Rican visual arts. The west wing holds 18 galleries, while the main atrium is used for traveling exhibitions. The five-acre garden has 106,000 native flowers, 3 gazebos, and 14 modern sculptures (787-977-6277).

The small Museo Pablo Casals occupies a two-story colonial house on the Plaza San José in Old San Juan. The renowned Spanish cellist founded the symphony orchestra in Puerto Rico, which was his home. The museum invites quiet walks among the photos and manuscripts, and allows for an viewing of his cello, an chance to listen to videotapes of the chamber music festival he started, and a movie house-sized screen for viewing them (787-723-9185).

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**Future Docent Conferences**

The Council of the National Docent Symposium has announced the host institutions and locations for their up-coming symposia.

**2003**

The Art Institute of Chicago
Chicago, Illinois

**2005**

Fine Arts Museum
Boston, Massachusetts

**2007**

Phoenix Art Museum
Phoenix, Arizona.

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The National Docent Symposium Council has produced a new edition of "The Docent Handbook," a spiral-bound publication that examines programming, touring, and the docent's role in the museum.

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Skillful Inquiry Invites

by Dr. Ruth Gordon Thomas

They say you can't go home again, but I'm not entirely sure it's true. When I became a docent at the National Gallery of Art after a long career as a nurse educator, I discovered that some of the tools I had used in that former life were quite useful at the Gallery. One of these is effective communication, which I used to establish meaningful relationships with my patients. Another is Benjamin Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives, which I used to develop course objectives and structure exams for my nursing students. Both have been invaluable in my new life leading tours for school children. In this article, I will first discuss Bloom's Taxonomy as it relates to inquiry method teaching, then list some effective communication tips and describe their connection to inquiry and Bloom's Taxonomy.

Bloom's Taxonomy provides a framework by which I implement inquiry teaching, or questioning strategies, while working with school children pre-K through grade 12. In 1956, Bloom headed a group of educational psychologists who classified levels of intellectual behavior important to learning. Bloom identified six levels within the cognitive domain, from the simple recall or recognition of facts on the lowest end of the scale, to more complex and abstract mental levels, and finally to evaluation, which is the highest order. Structuring questioning strategies according to Bloom's Taxonomy assists in the development of critical thinking skills.

At the National Gallery of Art, we frequently use the inquiry method of teaching to stimulate student participation and to encourage students to draw conclusions themselves. This method is not new. In fact, it harkens back to the fourth century B.C., when Socrates taught the youth of Athens. Rather than lecture, Socrates asked his students many questions and gave them few answers. He asked his questions in a way that drew upon knowledge the students already possessed. The "Socratic Method" encouraged students to experience and consider new ideas, and ultimately, to achieve genuine self-knowledge.

In the museum, students come to us with different experiences, backgrounds, and abilities. Varying the level of questioning gives more children an opportunity to participate in the discussion. The questions themselves should relate to tour and curriculum objectives, and they should be varied to ensure that they address the different levels, experiences, and learning styles of the student audience. A framework like Bloom's Taxonomy can assist in constructing that variety.

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Bloom's Taxonomy

Knowledge

Key Words
Define
Recall
Identify
Name
Tell
Who
What
When
Where

Comprehension

Key Words
Summarize
Describe
Differentiate
Compare
Contrast
Estimate
Discuss
Predict

Application

Key Words
Apply
Demonstrate
Calculate
Complete
Illustrate
Show
Decide
Classify
Solve
How many
Which
What is

Analysis

Key Words
Select
Analyze
Explain
Classify
Divide
Arrange
Tell why

Synthesis

Key Words
Rearrange
Create
Design
Invent
Compose
Prepare

Evaluation

Key Words
Assess
Rank
Grade
Test
Measure
Explain
Support
Compare
Summarize
Conclude

< simple complex >
Participation

The Bloom classification levels are Knowledge, Comprehension, Application, Analysis, Synthesis, and Evaluation. Using this framework can help the docent develop questions that are appropriate to the age and intellectual level of the learner. Following is a list of key words for formulating questions at each level.

Knowledge
Knowledge questions are geared to students who are being introduced to a topic — students who have little or no experience with the theme of the tour. They include recall of information, knowledge of dates, events, and major ideas. Questions seeking to determine knowledge might be used with such words as recall, identify, tell, who, what, when, and where.

For example, if a tour objective is that students will be introduced to the historical figures in early American art, the docent might ask the students to “Name the first president of the United States?” or “Which president (who) can be found on the dollar bill?”

Comprehension
Comprehension builds on knowledge and implies that students understand information and can paraphrase it. The student who comprehends is able to interpret and see relationships. Queries seeking to determine comprehension might ask the student to summarize, compare, discuss, or predict. For instance, if a tour objective is to highlight differences between two artists, the docent might ask, “How is Helen Frankenthaler’s Mountains and Sea different from Jackson Pollock’s Lavender Mist?” and “How are these works similar?”

Application
Application means that the student is able to use the information to solve problems and examine new situations. Questions might ask students to demonstrate, calculate, complete, illustrate, and decide how many, and what is. For example, if a tour objective is to demonstrate a connection between math and architecture, the docent might ask the students to solve a mathematical problem: “This column is made up of six drums. Each of these drums is six feet tall. How tall is the column?”

Analysis
Analysis implies that the student can take a problem apart, see patterns, recognize hidden meanings, and identify components. Analysis is higher order questioning that requires students to think critically and in depth. Questions ask them to select, analyze, explain, classify, divide, arrange, and tell why. For example, if the tour objective is to understand the process of action painting, the docent might ask, “Explain how you think the artist made this painting?”

The inquiry method of teaching many docents use today is attributed to Socrates, who taught his students by asking questions that required them to engage in reflective thinking.

Photo: courtesy of Ruth

Continued on the next page.
Synthesis

Synthesis means that the student can use old ideas to create new ones, predict, draw conclusions, and/or relate knowledge from several areas. It requires the use of critical thinking skills. At this level, the questions might ask the student to rearrange, create, design, invent, compose, or prepare. For example, some National Gallery tours have hands-on activities. One of these activities is to compose a poem about a specific work of art after the students and docent have discussed the object. In another activity, the docent invites students to consider the way Henri Matisse used color and shape in his cut-outs and to create their own Matisse-inspired collages, using small sheets of colored paper.

Evaluation

Evaluation verifies that a student can compare and discriminate between ideas, make choices based on reasoned argument, and verify the value of evidence. It requires students to make judgments or form opinions. Personal values can be applied. These higher level questions do not have a single correct answer. Students might be asked to assess, measure, support, compare, summarize, or conclude. For example, following a discussion of the Calder mobile, Untitled, the docent might ask students to choose a name for this work. Responses can be as many and varied as there are children. The students realize that each of them interpreted the piece in a different way.

Communication Skills

In addition to using a framework to formulate questions that are geared to the age and intellectual level of the learner, docents need to ask questions in a way that stimulates interest. Essential to successful inquiry teaching, effective communication is more than casual conversation. It is thoughtful and deliberate, focusing on the objectives at hand. It is directed toward facilitating active discourse. Several techniques are useful for encouraging dialogue between the docent and students. It is crucial to use appropriate communication techniques to formulate questions that are clearly stated, age-appropriate, and open-ended. This invites students to interact with the docent and the works of art. Please note that connections to Bloom's Taxonomy are indicated in parentheses.

Open-ended Questions

One technique is to ask questions that are open-ended, avoiding questions that can be answered by "yes" or "no." Asking how two works of art differ from one another stimulates discussion (comprehension), whereas asking if the two paintings are different results in a "yes" or "no" answer, impeding further exploration.

Refer Back

Another technique is to refer to information given earlier in the tour (knowledge) and build upon it (comprehension). For example, the docent might say, "Think about the first painting we saw today. How is it similar to the one we are looking at now?"

Adequate Thinking Time

Once a question has been asked, it is important to give students time to think and formulate their answers. A few moments of deliberate silence on the part of the docent will evoke more meaningful responses from students. This is especially important when asking higher level questions (analysis/synthesis). A statement such as "think about this for a few minutes," alleviates the discomfort that silence sometimes elicits and conveys to the students that they are expected to answer.

Listening Techniques and Non-Verbal Cues

For communication to be successful, listening is as important as speaking. It is crucial to let students know they are being heard and that the docent respects what they have to say. One way to accomplish this is through positive body language. Making eye contact, moving closer to the speaker, nodding the head affirmatively, and smiling convey interest in what is being said.

When working with children, the docent can make better eye contact by sitting on the floor with them or sitting on a camp stool. This places the docent and students on the same physical plane and prevents talking down to them. It also reassures the group that the docent is listening.

Feedback to Students

Another way to let students know the docent is engaged and listening is to provide feedback when students respond to questions. Seek clarification, paraphrase, state what is perceived, and summarize. For example, the docent might ask, "I'm not sure I understand what you mean when you say this painting is wild. Would you explain?"

Paraphrasing the student's thoughts about the art sends the message that the docent has picked up on the student's ideas. For example, a docent might say, "I see that you are shaking your head 'no.' Tell us why." Summarizing puts together all the ideas that have come forth in the dialogue.

(analysis/synthesis/evaluation)
Positive Reinforcement

The age-honored technique of positive reinforcement works wonders to keep students focused and invites participation. Statements such as “These ideas are really impressive!” delight students and raise their self-esteem. Once their self-confidence increases, so does their willingness to participate.

Putting It All Together

Bloom’s Taxonomy and skillful communication techniques are practical tools to use with the inquiry method of teaching. They help docents formulate questions that are organized around a framework and geared to the intellectual levels of the learner. When docents ask open-ended questions and invite participation through verbal and non-verbal cues, they can count on “consumer satisfaction.”

After a recent visit one student was heard to say, “I expected a boring talk, but this was actually fun!” What a great way to end a tour.

Ruth Gordon Thomas, Ed. D., is in her tenth year as a docent in the Teacher and School Program at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and has served on the Docent Council as a chairman of the Virginia docents. She is a professor emeritus at Northern Virginia Community College, where she was Head of the Nursing Program. Dr. Thomas holds a doctorate in education from The American University, Washington, D.C., and master’s degrees in education from American, and in nursing from George Mason University, Fairfax, Va. She also holds an associate degree in fine arts from Northern Virginia Community College.

It Works for Me...

Sharing Successful Techniques and Ideas

As educator at the Early American Museum in central Illinois, I present to many school field trips every year. Most of the students I see are 1st through 5th graders, with few occasions to enjoy the special group of young people known as “junior high” students. So, when the opportunity to spend a full day at a middle school came up, I was really excited! The educational content was to be an extension of an elementary program I often do, easily adapted to a similar group with several minor modifications. My major dilemma was how to grab their attention right of the starting block.

The program would center around the exploration of several historic artifacts and culminate in artifact-based historic fiction stories. I settled upon the common “20 Questions” game as my opening, which worked magic on these 8th graders.

After a brief self-introduction, I went over the rules of the game, familiar to most people.

1. The class asks 20 questions answerable with “yes” or “no.”
2. “Is it a . . . ?” questions may not be asked.
3. Even if you identify the object, you are still limited to yes/no questions.

An acceptable question would be, “Would a woman use this in the kitchen?” or “Is this all the parts?” Unacceptable questions are “What kind of business uses it?” or “Is it a veggie cutter?” A tabulator came to the board, and we began.

As I slowly walked up and down aisles, prompting the first question, several students doodled in boredom. Watching this behavior gradually, but rather quickly, disappear was quite gratifying! Soon, the first hand went up, others following sporadically at first, picking up momentum as a couple of “revered” students participated. Within a very few minutes, every single boy and girl was on task.

I had chosen an artifact that I assumed, correctly, none of them had any direct knowledge of. I presented them with a challenge that they were not only quick to accept, but determined to win. Done as a class, all could participate in the solving without fear of peer ridicule. I acknowledged their intelligence, while simultaneously furthering their thinking/problem solving/language skills and “turning them on” to history.

I presented the identical 50-minute program to 5 rotating classes. This “20 Questions” activity worked successfully every time. After getting students involved in a fun and non-threatening manner, the remainder of each session continued with almost as much participation.

This age-old game is easily tailored to any age group, discipline, environment, etc. It worked like a charm, and is one of my greatest “mini success stories.” Have fun using it.

Sandy Osborne
Educator
Early American Museum
Mahomet, IL
A special challenge for docents at the Walker Art Center is a schedule of rapidly changing exhibitions. This emphasis on a changing exhibition schedule means that our docents need to not only learn the basic information about the works on view, but also arrive at some effective ways of incorporating those objects into an effective, cohesive, and exciting tour. In many ways, it seems to require almost super-human abilities!

Because of the always changing layout of our galleries, and the works within those spaces, much of our docents’ educational opportunities consist of walk-through tours of special exhibitions with a curator. Granted, the guides welcome, and truly enjoy, occasions to learn in depth about a new exhibition. However, these walk-through sessions rarely give them specific insights into how to actually tour an exhibition. Rather they focus on the art historical aspects of the work, the challenges curators faced in organizing the exhibition, and, because we are a contemporary art institution, occasionally provide insight into the challenges of working with living artists. Fascinating information, all, but not extremely useful when attempting to get an elementary school child excited about conceptual art!

Due to these obstacles, and a desire to make sure our guides know how to tour some of the admittedly challenging work that we display, we have come up with some different methods to help guides think about exhibitions, as well as some new ways to tour them.

**The Initial Walk-Through**

The first step when opening a new exhibition is the curator-led walk-through. These sessions usually consist of a 2- to 3-hour in-depth tour of the exhibition. The curator provides an overview of the show, the reason the work is being exhibited in this particular context, and detailed information on many, if not all, of the pieces on display. Docents receive copies of the label text, and if there is an exhibition catalogue, they receive this as well as any related articles to supplement their education. I will intentionally refer to these walk-through sessions as “education” rather than “training,” in an effort to highlight the differences.

I think it is important to mention that we hold these sessions twice, once in the morning and once in the evening, so we can make certain that as many guides as possible attend, including our weekend/evening docents. Of course, it’s extremely beneficial to have curators who are willing to conduct the session twice, or at least a capable intern who can step into that role. We also video or audio tape all of our training sessions, and docents are encouraged to check out these tapes and use them for review purposes.

**Follow-Up Idea Exchange**

Since the curatorial walk-through focuses on factual information about the work, but not necessarily how to organize a tour of that work in an effective manner, we usually follow the initial education session with an idea exchange, or what we call a “follow-up salon.” Our exhibition walk-through sessions are usually held on Mondays when the museum is closed and we hold our salons on the following Friday over the lunch hour. This schedule makes it possible for docents who have given tours of the exhibition between Monday’s walk-through and the Friday salon to share with others their experiences touring the works.

These informal gatherings provide a chance for tour guides to get together and exchange ideas about touring a particular exhibition. In anticipation of the salon, I usually prepare a short handout with information for suggested themes and related artworks, as well as questions for discussion. However, guides often have great ideas or questions themselves that we then add to this list. Since the docents have usually had several days to digest their experience with the exhibition, or at least information from the walk-through, they often arrive at the salon ready to offer some extremely thought-provoking questions.

They also share their reactions to the work, and will suggest items to be added to our prop/visual resources supply. This is often one of the only chances the docents have to get together on an informal basis and to hash out some of the questions and issues that come with giving tours. I believe that most of the guides who attend these sessions leave feeling much more confident, and that they have some solid ideas and tools for touring any particular show.

**Tour Planning Notebook**

Attendance at our follow-up salon is optional, with usually 20 - 30% of docents participating. However, it is important to disseminate, or at least make available, the valuable information that was gathered at this get-together to those who were unable to attend. This is where a “Tour Planning Notebook”
or other type of information center becomes a useful tool.

With the opening of each new exhibition, a small number of docents, usually 2 or 3, works together to compile a binder full of ideas for giving tours of the current exhibition. The notebook contains basic information about the works, such as label copy, reviews, and articles about the artists.

However, also incorporated into the binder are notes from the Friday "salon." Such notes include suggestions for tour themes and associated open-ended questions, a list of props that might be useful, and suggestions about how and where to use them, and a pronunciation guide for some of the names or terms that might be unfamiliar. In addition, and very importantly, we keep at the back of the binder a "comment section" where the guides can write in ideas about giving tours, including those questions or techniques that were successful (or that were not!) and questions for their fellow guides.

The notebook is a great place to compile articles and reviews that may have come out following the initial education session, as the binder can be continually updated through the course of an exhibition. Traditionally, it has been difficult for our weekend/evening guides to make contact with the weekday guides. The binder provides a vehicle for them to communicate, ask each other questions, and learn of each other's tour techniques.

**Following Tours**

Finally, we encourage docents to follow one another's tours, or to get together on an informal basis and walk through an exhibition together. This can be a great way for guides to exchange thoughts, ask questions of one another, and observe how someone else "does it." It's important to remember that in all situations, the docents themselves can be a source of valuable information and splendid ideas.

Docents need both education and training. The intellectual stimulus that continuing education provides is essential for maintaining an interested, enthusiastic, and informed docent corps. Making an effort to incorporate training into your docent program can help cultivate docents who are engaged and engaging, and who are skilled at giving effective and educational tours.

Simply providing factual information is rarely enough to ensure good, participatory tours. It is essential to encourage guides to ask questions, exchange ideas, and think about approaching exhibitions in different ways. By using techniques such as informal idea exchanges or planning books, a museum staff member can help to ensure that the tour guides are doing more on their tours than simply repeating the information disseminated by curators.

Continued on page #20.
Get Into It!

Would tour guides like it if a group of just-toured visitors slipped onto their knees and exclaimed, with tears pouring from their eyes, that the tour was the best, most life-altering experience they had ever had? Of course! While that may be pushing the envelope, tour guides do want our time and our dedication, as well as our behind-the-scenes nervousness, to be worthwhile.

Giving educational tours, especially in the historic site arena, can be an exhausting challenge. Let’s face it: museum visitors have different expectations. Some expect to be bored out of their minds, and arrive with the idea that they will get invisible brownie points somewhere (maybe with a spouse?) for taking the tour. Still others hold the notion that they are going to be entertained, and gawk at the tour guide as though the poor creature was a circus attraction.

This article explores a few ways tour guides — whether docent volunteers or paid staff — can add a little pizzazz to their tours. While the examples are drawn from a historic site perspective, those in other fields should find ideas that will add a little more gusto to their tours as well.

Our historic site is located thirteen miles outside of Portland, Oregon. When visitors make the drive to our facility, they expect to be entertained, or at the very least, they want their gas money to be well spent.

When I first became site coordinator, I realized that to make our facility a special destination, we were going to have to get fancy.

Gone were recited tours and handheld notecards that ensured the tour guides would speak in monotone. The Bybee House, a Greek Revival home dating to the 1850’s, needed to take guided tours to another level, engaging visitors in a way that would leave a lasting, and positive, impression. Instead of telling the audience about the site (known as historic interpretation), we invited them to help us make and explore history using the site as a tool. The result was an increase in return visitation, and a rise in attendance due to positive word-of-mouth publicity. The key to this quantitative success? Our tours were energized!

Here are some ideas to shake things up and keep audiences coming back for more.

1. Ask questions of the visitors to add flavor and experience to the tour.
   Ask “has anyone ever seen this item before?” or “Can any of you guess what this object was used for?” Many times, visitors will be more than happy to share their wisdom and knowledge. There is nothing better than pointing out a butter churn and having a guest step forward with stories of how she made butter.

2. If someone knows more than you, go with it.
   Often historic sites attract visitors having more knowledge about certain items than the tour guides possess. Instead of taking this as a challenge or affront, step back and allow the visitor some limelight. First, assess if the person really knows what he or she is talking about. Usually, one question as to that person’s profession or collecting hobby will suffice.

Then, if the visitor seems to have a good grasp on the subject, allow them to explore the topic.

If an antiques expert tours with your group, and has a vast knowledge of old sewing machines, let that person describe the 1854 model on display. Keep the visitor-expert’s comments within a reasonable time frame, and be sure to thank them for sharing. The end result is that you will generate good feelings with the visitor, prove that you are open and willing to expand your own information base, and will establish a friendly, conversational atmosphere with the crowd as a whole.

3. Consider how you can join more mundane items with more exciting ones.
   Got boring items to tour? Most museums have some items that are so common they are seemingly invisible to the average visitor. Join the dull items with more exciting ones to give the tour, and artifact, a fresh perspective.

For example, in the Bybee House parlor sits a horsehair couch. Visitors are familiar with couches, so it elicits no more than a casual response. However, this couch has a companion item. Hanging on the wall to the immediate left is a courting mirror — a mirror whose center is bulged out like half a grapefruit.

Many years ago, a young lady would have a gentleman friend over and they would sit oh-so-close to each other on the couch. Unbeknownst to her and her companion, the girl’s father was standing in the hallway, peering into the courting mirror. Why? He was able to see when the young man’s lips inched towards his daughter’s fair cheek. The courting
Tours!

mirror was triumphant, and puppy love was thwarted. Such a story places the couch in a whole new light!

4. Seek out stories and descriptions that visitors can relate and respond to.

Most everyone sleeps in a bed, right? When touring bedrooms of a historic house, visitors have the tendency to casually pass over items they easily recognize, such as beds. However, the good tour guide will take time to challenge the audience.

In the Bybee House, a simple wooden bed assumes the role of teacher to show social customs and emphasize everyday life during the Victorian period. As modern visitors pass the bed with hardly a glance, they are asked, “What would you do if you had to fit five people into this single bed?” This question usually provokes a chorus of nervous giggles from the audience.

“Everyone sleeps together!” one soul might step forward to offer.

The tour guide will nod, but challenge the group again. “But, how? There isn’t room!”

Wheels churn as minds search for an answer and after a few moments, the guide thrills visitors with an explanation. “In such a small bed, people could not sleep head-to-toe as we do today. People a hundred years ago would sleep lengthwise in the bed, so that their bodies were going side-to-side instead of head-to-toe.”

The on-lookers will imagine, if only for a second, that they are lying in the small bed. Suddenly, questions spring from the audience. “Why?” “How?” and so on, until finally a simple bed has become more than just, well, a bed. It is the center of attention and speculation, and could very well be among the things the audience will remember most when the tour is over.

5. Take classes in story telling and folklore.

A little story telling ability is always a winner! That is not to say that we, as museum professionals, should make a habit of telling fictional stories. Rather, the ability to mix information (no matter how common or drab it might be) with some seasoning in the form of anecdotes and peculiar tales, and toss this with a sprig of personal flare, produces a tasty treat that can stimulate and engage the audience.

6. Dress the part.

Nothing gives visitors more of a thrill than being greeted by someone who looks like they know what they are doing. A basic professional clean and neat appearance is a must. However, adding some costuming appropriate to the tour, the location, the time period, and/or the subject matter can be a great way to stimulate conversation.

When giving guided tours,

I will wear a pioneer-period outfit representing the 1840’s and 1850’s when Oregon Trail settlers (including the Bybees) settled in the Pacific Northwest. The vision of a woman dressed in a dark wool skirt with a white cotton top and a gray bonnet is too much for visitors. They are entranced, and will ask “why do you wear that” and “how does it feel?” Many want to know if I am hot, or it was hard getting dressed that morning.

Add to this the method of using fashion history to bring the family and house to life. I tell visitors to think of Julia Bybee, wearing an outfit like mine, running back and forth between kitchen and dining room while preparing a meal. Think of her skirts swishing against tables as she plops down a bowl of mashed potatoes. Think of the way the heat being generated by the open fireplace must have made the fabric cling to her moist skin. The visitors imagine the scene, if only for a moment.

This is truly “living” history at its best — when the living make history something that they can produce and hold in their own minds.

7. Keep your information up-to-date through research.

In an age where things get old quickly, keep a tour vital and accurate. It is essential for the tour’s success. On-going research of the people, places, social and material culture is crucial to keeping tours fresh and current.

So, we tour guides don’t have to push visitors off into a walking slumber. You have the recipe for “intellectual-Vivarin.” Use some of the hints above, and wake your audience up!

Jennifer Blacke, M.A., is site coordinator of the Bybee Howell Historic Site in Portland, Oregon, for the Oregon Historical Society. While she works in public history, Ms. Blacke is also a family historian with a passion for engaging people with the past by combining genealogical research with living history demonstrations.
Imagine That!

Once upon a time, my husband and I and three friends visited Sunnyside, Washington Irving’s home on the banks of the Hudson River in Tarrytown, New York. Like many historic homes, Sunnyside offers particular challenges to a docent that wants to allow visitors to “participate” in the experience. The home’s rooms are tiny, our group of 5 constituted half of the group size allowed on any one tour. The room’s furnishings, most of which actually belonged to Irving, are static and somewhat mundane. Nevertheless, we had the good fortune to encounter a docent that had developed techniques that allowed us to use our imaginations when actual hands-on participation wasn’t possible. Docents who work in similar situations could learn from his model.

Our guide wore a frock coat and top hat and carried a cane. His costume immediately, and without a word, helped us move in our imaginations back to the 1830’s and 40’s when Irving lived in the area he used as the setting for “Rip Van Winkle” and “The Legend of Sleepy Hollow.” After he greeted us, we strolled along a wide, rock-edged path under enormous chestnut trees to a spring-fed brook. This romantic setting, and the slowed pace, were perfect for beginning a brief discussion of the “romantic” writer’s life and his acquisition of the property. In fact, our docent asked us to imagine ourselves back in time, walking or riding in a carriage along this path, soon to be welcomed to his home by Mr. Irving himself.

Guided imagery continued as we entered the house. In Irving’s study, we were asked to picture the writer working at his desk, morning light streaming in as he completed his definitive series on the life of George Washington. The leather-bound set of these and others of Irving’s works, and a charming lithograph of the young Washington Irving meeting his namesake, became more than just artifacts in a museum as we were helped to envision these three parts of the story. Through the effective use of descriptive adjectives and adverbs, our docent helped us feel the awe experienced by the child in the picture as he met the famous general. We could almost feel Washington’s hand upon our heads!

The tour narrative was frequently interrupted as our guide paused while a train rumbled past only a few yards from the house. The docent didn’t comment on this aspect of the tour, however, until we reached an upstairs room with a glorious view of the river. We didn’t have to imagine the disruption the train made, but we were easily able to picture Irving’s dismay when the first train tracks were laid and trains began to rattle and whistle and belch coal all over his new property in the early 1830’s. We easily understood when our docent explained that the bedroom on the opposite side of the house was Irving’s second choice. When we peeked into that room, our docent’s brief history of a reclining chair there helped us see the place where, years later, Irving died.

As we carefully descended narrow back stairs to the kitchen and separate living quarters Irving had created for his Irish immigrant house staff, our docent’s voice took on a subtle Irish lilt. As he spoke of the safety of the kitchen — no open hearth here — and the convenience of an unusual, but effective, hot water system, we could almost hear those Irish voices of long ago.

When real, hands-on participation is impossible, there remain a number of ways to involve an audience. Costumes and props are useful in setting a mood for a particular site. Historic homes and sites are naturals for such devices, but other institutions make good use of them also. Docents at a zoo might wear pith helmets. Botanical garden docents could wear overalls or other “gardening” clothes. Art museum and gallery docents frequently wear some sort of artist’s “smock.”

Some props, such as our docent’s cane, are merely window-dressing. Others can do more than set the scene. Docents in history museums, historic sites, and science museums carry small artifacts, specimens, or reproductions that allow visitors to touch aspects of an exhibit that might otherwise be simply visual. Art museum docents, also, may provide samples of different textured fabrics, carved woods, or pottery shards to help visitors experience the “feel” of painting, sculpture, or decorative arts pieces. Props, too, can be useful in more pragmatic ways. Providing young visitors with binoculars or hand lenses as they move along a nature trail allows them to inspect closely and gives them an opportunity to use scientific equipment and become participants in the action. Guides in outdoor venues often carry first aid kits and plastic bags in which to carry out litter their group may pick up along the trail.

Movement can also help visitors transition from the “real” world into the world of the museum, historic site, aquarium, garden, zoo, or park. Just as our guide at Sunnyside slowed down physically to help us move back...
Participation and Imagination

in time, imaginary actions can do
the same. In a history museum’s
costume exhibit, children can “dress”
themselves in the clothing of a
particular period as the docent shows
them each garment. If they can
imagine or actually use a button-hook
to fasten on a high-button shoe, they
are better able to understand the time
necessary for the simple job of getting
dressed each morning in a past time.

In a history museum where I
once worked, first graders re-enacted
a bucket brigade in our fire depart-
ment exhibit by placing a cardboard
raindrop into a plastic bucket,
passing the bucket along a line of
their friends, dumping the raindrop
out into a box decorated to look like
a house, and returning the bucket
along the line. It was even more fun
when we had two bucket brigades.
In the same museum, children often
“trotted” from the carriage exhibit
to their next destination, pretending
to pull one of the vehicles they’d
just seen.

Striking poses in an art museum
lets young visitors move “into” a
painting or sculpture. Small groups
of children can create a scene from
a painting and let their peers guess
which painting they are depicting.

Another variation might have
children imagining a painting or
photograph’s subject in the minutes
following the creation of a scene.
Assuming the position of a figure that
is presented off balance or in motion
helps younger visitors understand
such concepts as movement and
dynamic tension in “motionless”
works of art. Two students might
pretend to be an artist and his/her
model and create an imaginary
conversation between the two as
they act their respective roles.
In interpreting more abstract or
contemporary art, students might use
their hands or whole bodies to create
movement they think a particular
painting exemplifies.

Telling folktales or stories to
audiences activates imaginations.

People envision characters, settings,
and events as they learn more about
other times, places, and cultures.
Very young children can help propel
the story by making sound effects
or animal noises to accompany
the telling.

While docents usually have no
trouble finding ways to help young
visitors participate by imagining, our
guide at Sunnyside proved that such
techniques are equally useful with
adult groups. Guided imagery is
non-threatening . . . no one knows
if you are really participating or not.
Costumes and props, voice and
movement all let even the most timid
visitor become part of the action.
And, becoming part of the action
is what makes a museum visit
something to remember.

Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor

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Education Versus Training

Reviewing Tips for Effective Education and Training

If possible, offer exhibition education sessions more than once. By holding sessions at multiple times, it is more likely that as many of your docents as possible can attend. In addition, you may be able to attract a more diverse group of volunteers by offering a more flexible training schedule. (People often notice that the Walker Art Center’s docent corps includes many more young professionals, men, and people of color than do other institutions.)

Also, offer opportunities for docents to “follow-up” the initial exhibition education. It is important for guides to have a chance to get together and discuss their reactions to an exhibition, as well as hear feedback from other docents.

Create a “resource center.” This can be as simple as a box or file drawer. The center can serve as a place where guides can go for further information, to pick up visual resources to use on their tours, and keep an “idea exchange” notebook handy for sharing ideas with others.

Use the docents themselves. The docent corps can be an incredibly effective resource tool. Encourage docents to follow one another’s tours, or simply try and get together with each other and walk through the exhibition together. Ask them for suggestions for props or other follow-up training ideas.

Lara Roy is the program manager, Tour Programs at Walker Art Center, in Minneapolis, MN, where she works with 85 “well-trained” docents. Prior to working at Walker Art Center, Ms. Roy taught art history and touring techniques to the docents-in-training at The Minneapolis Institute of Arts.

In addition to conducting Minds in Motion Workshops, The Docent Educator provides independent evaluations of docent training, public programming, written materials, and other educationally offered or sponsored activities.

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