Welcome to the first issue of *The Docent Educator*. Finally, docents have a nationally-distributed professional journal devoted exclusively to their needs, interests, and teaching responsibilities!

Every issue of *The Docent Educator* will present valuable information and practical techniques applicable to a docent’s professionally-sized challenges and commitment.

You are invited to join docents from throughout the country as they gain a voice and access to the latest information concerning “object-based” education by subscribing to *The Docent Educator* today!
Subjectivity

To successfully conduct "inquiry" tours, it's essential to remember that all experiences, including viewing and interpreting objects in your collection, are subjective. Whether caused by differences in physical proximity to an object, or differences in personal or cultural patterns of thinking, the range of subjective variables among visitors is great and their impact upon perception can be profound.

In his text *Communications: The Transfer of Meaning*, author Don Fabun illustrates this point by asking us to consider words such as "patriotism," "virtue," and "morality," and their many manifest interpretations. He points out that word meanings change with speakers, regions, contexts, cultures, and times.

This same element of subjective interpretation and association applies to viewing objects or living things. Consider, for example, four people inspecting a chair. Each would see that chair from a different vantage point by virtue of where he or she stood in relation to it. In addition, each might contemplate the chair from a different mental vantage point, reflecting personal thoughts and interests. Person #1 might focus on concerns about the chair's comfort; person #2 on the chair's aesthetics and design; person #3 on the weave and type of cloth fabric covering the chair's seat; and person #4 with the graining of the wood used for the chair's frame.

Images, too, are experienced subjectively. A simple "+" shape used in a non-representational work of art might be interpreted as the intersection of lines or, perhaps, streets. It could also be a sign signifying the mathematical process of addition, or even the cross hairs in a gun's sight. Some Native American people might know this shape as a symbol marking the center of the universe, while others might find it evocative of a crucifix, the Christian religion's symbol of worldly suffering and promise of salvation.

This phenomenon of subjectivity is true regardless of how quantifiable, precise, exact, or objective an experience may be. Take "time" for example. One hour is a fixed quantity. It is always and precisely 60 minutes in length. Yet, consider how differently an hour spent in the dentist's chair is experienced from an hour watching an engrossing movie.

It seems important, therefore, that docents be prepared for a multiplicity of responses when using the inquiry method of asking "open-ended" questions to teach about objects, living things, or environments. Most answers offered will have merit when individual, temporal, or cultural viewpoints are taken into account. However, they must be fully shared, discussed, and explored to be useful. Maintaining an accepting attitude is one thing; accepting answers without having visitors elaborate upon their reasoning and justifications is quite another.

Even the most informed answers to open-ended questions can legitimately vary from one another. Consider the variance among thoughtful answers to questions concerning the rights of "the accused" versus the rights of "victims," or the appropriate separation between...
religous beliefs and governmental policies, within the Supreme Court of the United States.

While not predetermined or limited, subjective answers to open-ended questions are distinguishable by the quality of their supporting arguments. For instance, simple personal opinion is an insufficient answer to most open-ended questions. Respondents should be prompted, in a supportive and non-challenging manner, to justify their responses by making use of factual information or evidence, and to clearly reference their answers back to the object inspected by showing, pointing out, identifying, linking, analyzing, or critically evaluating what they have found.

This can be accomplished if the docent is patient, develops good questioning strategies, and does not feel compelled to move from one object to another too quickly. After receiving a response to a question, docents should ask the visitor to elaborate. “What leads you to that conclusion?” or “Can you show us where you found that?” will, if asked with an encouraging and interested tone of voice, prompt respondents to explain or justify their responses. In addition, such questions allow others in the group to grasp new, unusual, or difficult understandings and insights.

The effort required to use inquiry might cause some docents to wonder if it isn’t easier and more appropriate to teach by simply telling visitors about their collection. While it is true that telling (or expository teaching) is easier, it rarely constitutes a valuable learning experience, and may present facts that have a fairly limited “shelf-life.”

Most of us learn best through direct, personal experience (called by parents of teenagers — “the hard way”). Listening to a planned talk is a very limited experience when contrasted against such participatory activities as contemplation, investigation, and discovery. Inquiry takes advantage of the way we began learning from infancy — by examining, trying, and testing our ideas.

As for the desire to convey specific factual information, not only are isolated “facts” rarely remembered, but the “facts” themselves will occasionally change. While paging through the first volume of a set of encyclopedia published in 1930, I was surprised to see how many “facts” and attitudes had changed over the intervening years. Airplanes taking off from carriers were literally blown off by a charge of gunpowder; the Amazon was a jungle so dense that not more than 25 square miles had been cultivated; and native Alaskan peoples were termed the land’s “inferior races.” Art historians, social historians, inventors, and scientists constantly challenge and re-evaluate previous findings, changing facts and altering widely accepted beliefs.

The goal of education in any setting isn’t simply to have students accumulate facts, but to guide them in the development of methods for continued learning. Rather than shy away from using inquiry to teach because of subjectivity’s challenges, docents should acknowledge and incorporate subjectivity into the learning experience, allowing diversity to enhance experience and reveal the many routes for exploring and appreciating.

Alan Gartenhaus is the publishing editor of this newsletter. He has served as an educator at the Museum of Arts and Sciences, in Daytona, FL, the New Orleans Museum of Art, the Smithsonian Institution, and as a director of the Cornell College of the Arts. He was awarded an Alden Dow Fellowship for his work investigating the relationship of museum use to creative thinking. In addition to conducting docent and teacher in-service workshops throughout the country, he is the author of the recently published text -- "Minds in Motion: Using Museums to Expand Creative Thinking."
Teachers have Great Expectations

“Freddie had such a wonderful time today,” she gushes, her arms entwining her squirming son. “I know you teachers must love field trips as much as the children do. I think it’s so nice that you all can get a day off from school like this every now and then.”

Years of professional training and knowledge of the penalties for mayhem in my State stay my hand. I merely smile sweetly at the mother before me and assure her that, given a field trip per week, I could probably forego summer vacations. Just as this not-so-imaginary parent had a distorted view of field trips, those necessary excursions out into the real world with school children, docents are occasionally misinformed about the goals of the teachers and children they guide. Three disparate groups on a collision course of diverse expectations can combine to create “the field trip from Hell” for everyone. An awareness and sensitivity to the agenda of their audience, however, can help docents provide the kinds of tours they envisioned when they volunteered.

The stated goals of docents, teachers, and children are remarkably similar — an enjoyable learning experience. Docents want to make the museum’s collection accessible to a new audience; teachers want to expand the limits of classroom instruction; and children want to learn something amazing. What hidden, or unstated, goals should the docents also be aware of as they plan tours?

“Three disparate groups on a collision course of diverse expectations can combine to create ‘the field trip from Hell’ for everyone.”

Teachers want their students to experience things which are not possible in the classroom. They want the information presented to reinforce and not to contradict what they are teaching. They pray no one will be hurt and hope no one will be embarrassed. They expect their children to behave appropriately.

Children want to have fun. They want to sit by their best friend on the bus. They want the teacher to forget the math test assigned yesterday. In a science museum, they hope to see something explode. In a history museum, they would like to try on old clothes. Animals at the zoo may do something embarrassing, and, of course, the art museum has nudes. Students don’t want to get in trouble. They also don’t want to worry about going to the bathroom or getting a drink of water if they need to.

Teachers invest a great deal in a field trip, and they want value for the
time and money spent. Administrative approval (often through at least two levels in the chain of command), transportation arrangements, funding, chaperones, and parental permission all must be obtained.

Placement within the lesson plan has to be considered. Does the tour introduce a lesson, motivate within a lesson, or summarize a lesson’s concepts at the end? Timing needs to be decided. When can the museum accommodate us? Mondays and Fridays aren’t good tour days; pre-holiday tours are only for masochists. If it snows in January, the tour will have to be cancelled. What else is on the school calendar? With all this investment, teachers have great expectations. What, then, makes the trip worthwhile?

Three basic areas of concern — presentation, content, and behavior — if dealt with properly, make a museum visit a joy to all three participating groups.

Presentation — The tour should supplement class instruction, not mimic it. Lectures, videos, worksheets, and such classroom techniques are a disappointment to teachers and children who hoped to see and experience the “real” thing. There is no substitute for “hands-on” or “participatory” activities for expanding the learning and enjoyment both teachers and students anticipate in a museum tour.

Content — Tour content should be factual. This rather simplistic truism demands that docents be informed of current information in their field. Folklore, or personal opinions, should be clearly identified. Additionally, content must be appropriate for the age and interest level of the audience.

Behavior — Neither teachers nor students want the tour disturbed by misbehavior. Docents who understand child development well enough to define and enforce appropriate limits keep learning focused.

Docents who are aware of the “hidden” goals of their audience are better able to meet them. And, a tour that meets its audience’s goals goes a long way toward meeting the hidden agenda of the docent — satisfaction with a job well done!

“Teachers invest a great deal in a field trip, and they want value for the time and money spent.”

Jackie Littleton is the Associate Editor of this newsletter and a sixth grade classroom teacher at Clarksville Academy, in Clarksville, Tennessee. In addition to her years as a classroom teacher, she has served as a museum docent and museum staff member at both the New Orleans Museum of Art and the Clarksville-Montgomery County Historical Museum.
Questioning Strategies:
For Adults Only

Whether we think of the museum as temple or forum, the experience we strive to stimulate for our visitors is that of contemplation -- contemplation leading to awareness, enlightenment, and understanding.

In today's information world, however, where attention spans are driven by 30 second media messages, contemplation is not always achieved easily or naturally. Ideas and information are to be digested instantaneously without benefit of contemplation or reflection, for they have become luxuries we can rarely afford. This orientation presents formidable challenges to adults who enter the museum seeking rewarding learning experiences. Rather than attaining a state of contemplation, which the Random House College Dictionary defines as an “act of thoughtful observation,” adults often find themselves in a trance. They wander through galleries in what seems a half-conscious state, glazed and overwhelmed, hardly engaged in any form of thoughtful inquiry.

Yet, I believe that most visitors, adults especially, want to “slow down” sufficiently to engage in contemplation, but are puzzled as to how to do it. I believe the kind of contemplation that can occur in museums often needs to be learned. Docents provide a great service to visitors by teaching them how to experience the power of the museum's "magic" through contemplation.

There are a number of strategies docents can use during their tours to stimulate "thoughtful observation." One way is through inquiry. The use of questions can be very effective for both docent and visitor. For docents, questions tell more about the visitor and how to adjust the tour; for visitors, questions help to focus and broaden experiences with the objects exhibited.

Children are thought to be more receptive to questions during tours; adults more reserved. While this is often the case, adults can be extremely responsive depending on how and when questions are posed, and what is asked.

Questions during an adult tour should accomplish one or more of the following purposes:

Create an informal and non-threatening environment

These types of questions are used from the beginning of the tour to immediately establish an atmosphere where visitors feel comfortable sharing observations and ideas. These questions send a message to visitors that you invite their own questions and dialogue. It also provides you with information useful to tailoring your tour to suit the needs and interests of participants. Here are several examples:

- Is there anything in particular you would like to see during our tour?
- Are there any questions you would like to ask before we begin, or before we leave this area?
- Can all of you see this object/exhibit?

Tell you more about the visitors

These questions are very close to the first ones as they help create an informal and non-threatening environment. The purpose of these questions is to give you more specific information about the visitors, and to help you make the tour more relevant to their lives, interests, and skills. Examples of these questions could include:

- Have you been to this museum before? What parts or exhibits did you see while here previously?
- Do any of you paint, collect, hike, bird watch, etc?
- Has anyone been to Yosemite Valley (subject of the exhibition)?
- How does this exhibition/art work compare with your experience of it?

by Barbara Henry

Docent Barbara Henderson tours adults through the Seattle Art Museum's collection.
Direct the visitors’ attention

Some questions can help the visitor focus upon, and appreciate, details. Directing the visitor’s vision by suggesting different things to consider is an important first step toward contemplating exhibits. Some examples of these questions are:

- Can you find references to the stamps and other contemporary symbols influencing the artist?
- What clues can you discover to suggest how this was made?
- What about the object tells you it is not from the twentieth century?
- What are the first three things you notice about this work/object? What caused you to see those particular areas first?
- What can you tell about this animal’s habitat just by looking at this exhibit?

Motivate adult visitors to use their experiences to think about objects

These questions call upon the adult’s knowledge, interest, nostalgia, and life experiences. They are factors that distinguish many senior adult visitors from their younger counterparts. Adults are often interested in those things relating directly to their own life experiences. Their memories wait to be recalled and re-experienced in vivid detail. (I think of my 100-year-old Grandmother and the spark in her eye whenever she tells me about growing up during the turn of the last century.) Docents can make use of adults’ experiences to stimulate deeper exploration of exhibitions. Simple questions can start the process. They might include:

- Do any of you remember this? How did you use it, or see it used? When?
- Why was it so important, popular, or unusual at the time?
- Does this remind you of anything you’ve experienced?
- How did this impact upon your life at the time?
- What made this artist’s style seem so unusual at the time?

Teach visitors how to ask questions about the objects

These questions are similar to those curators might ask themselves when selecting objects for display. They do not necessarily require a verbal response from visitors. Though some might engage in dialogue, others may prefer to find the questions rhetorical, and engage in private contemplation. A quiet visitor does not mean that his or her imagination has not been stirred. The purpose of posing these questions is as much for offering models as for actually being answered.

- We might ask ourselves, ‘Why was this so important; what are the most significant aspects or details here, and how do they relate to one another?’
- How might I learn when this was made?
- How does this relate to the technology of its time?

Address the questions you believe visitors are asking themselves.

These questions explore and acknowledge visitors’ concerns. The use of an introductory phrase, such as

“Why...” is useful with these types of questions. Other introductory phrases that validate the visitors’ questions might include:

- I used to wonder about...
- Many people want to know...
- People are frequently concerned about...

While these six categories do not constitute an all-inclusive list, they can provide a good starting point for developing questioning strategies for touring adults. You may find it useful to keep a list of questions that elicit particularly productive or enthusiastic responses.

Questioning is an appropriate teaching method with adult visitors. Once you understand why and how they are used, questions can become very helpful tools, assisting adults to investigate and appreciate museum exhibitions.

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Barbara Henry is Curator of Education at The Oakland Museum, the largest multi-disciplinary institution devoted to the art, history, and ecology of California. She has more than 13 years in the museum field, which includes docent training workshops throughout the State of California. This article is based on a docent training workshop she conducted with Mary Nell York, former Docent Council President at The Oakland Museum.
Blind People Can See Your Collections
With a Little Help From You

by Janice Majewski

A two-year old, Korean-American boy sits solemnly on the beige-carpeted steps. His dark-brown bangs cut straight across his tan forehead. With his small, heart-shaped mouth pursed, he looks directly into the camera — thoroughly unabashed by the photographer. His short-sleeved, purple tee shirt and apple-red overall shorts create the backdrop for a well-worn, white, stuffed bunny held tightly under his left arm. Navy blue leather sneakers over white ankle socks cover his feet.

To his right, two steps above, lies, belly-down, a small, scruffy terrier — brown and black fur going this-way-and-that over his eyes and paws. The pup’s chin rests on the stair edge, bringing his keen brown eyes and shining black nose to the level of the child’s ear. He, too, watches the photographer with no self-consciousness.

Can you picture these best friends? Can you see how the boy and his dog are posed in this “photo” and can you read what is on their faces? Clear and precise description is only one of the ways that you can bring alive your collection for visitors who are blind or visually impaired — as well as for sighted visitors who do not look as carefully as you would like.

Accessibility for visually impaired and blind individuals is a long-unsolved dilemma for museums: how to make collections, which are often behind glass and very fragile, accessible to people who cannot see well or at all. Issues of conservation and preservation have kept museums from doing much to serve this audience.

But things must change. On July 26, 1990, President Bush signed into law the Americans with Disabilities Act, more commonly known as the ADA. This law requires that museums, and other organizations offering public accommodations, make their programs accessible to all people with disabilities, beginning January, 1992. Now all museums across the country must tackle those problems they thought could not be solved. And you, the docent, will be a major resource in this effort.

Concerns of conservation and preservation are not going to go away and the ADA does not require that they be discarded. No one wants to destroy our nation’s collections. So
museums are going to have to become more creative in their exhibition designs and programming to allow people with visual impairments access to works of art, historic artifacts, and examples of nature or scientific progress. But how do visually oriented entities like museums do that for people who are blind (have no residual vision) or visually impaired (have varying degrees of usable vision)?

Description is one way. Objects that cannot be touched, and even those that can be seen through touch, can come alive through words well chosen. Here are some beginning suggestions:

→ Start by asking the person who is visually impaired how much he can see of the painting, object, or room you are planning to describe. Draw from that information a frame of reference as to the gaps you will need to fill for understanding this object and others. And never be afraid to continue asking questions to assure you are giving the information that is most important and relevant.

→ Feel free to use words such as “look” and “see.” These words are part of our vocabulary — regardless of our visual abilities.

→ Move from the general to the specific: describe the overall display and then work back to the details. Include color in those details. Even people who are congenitally blind want to know how artists, craftsmen, or inventors relate colors to each other.

→ Connect the descriptions to the person’s individual experience: pace out together the size of a large object; give a sense of height in relation to the person’s own height; describe objects’ shapes in terms of other, more common objects (e.g., this is shaped like an apple); describe texture (if they are not seeing tactually) in relation to what can be readily touched.

→ Use common language to describe objects. For example, make sure people understand architectural terms before launching into a full description of colonial construction.

→ If sighted visitors are also on your tour, include them in the description process. Ask questions that require identifying details — as the visitors with average vision look more closely and begin to describe what they see, they give information to the person who may not be able to see it.

Just good tour techniques, you say? You are right! Most accommodation for people with disabilities is a mixture of common sense, good teaching, and sensitivity to your audience’s level of understanding and experience in museums. If you include these

(Continued on next page.)

"Objects that cannot be touched, and even those that can be seen through touch, can come alive through words well chosen."
methods in your tour — whether or not you have participants who are disabled — you will have a better tour all the way around.

Now that the task is not so daunting, let's look at a few more ways to accommodate people with visual impairments.

→ Be aware of accessibility problems in your museum. A big issue for people who are visually impaired is lighting. General low lighting or bright spots of light in darkened areas may create a dramatic atmosphere; but each also creates serious problems for visually impaired visitors. While you may not be able to change the light level, you can be aware of when your visitors may need extra assistance.

→ Offer your assistance but do not be offended if the visitor declines. If he wants you to guide him, ask him how you can best fill that role. Different people use different techniques, so let the visitor be the teacher.

→ Start your tour with a verbal orientation. Let the visitor know where the museum is laid out and where you will be going. You may need to do this again when entering individual rooms or galleries — complex exhibition floorplans result in obstacle courses in which people can get hurt. Wherever possible, avoid those cluttered routes, and heighten your awareness if your audience has to use them.

→ Use supplemental materials to enhance your explanation of the exhibitions. These materials include: touchable objects, either actual artifacts, reproductions, or even pieces from your museum shop; Braille, audio, and large print versions of brochures and catalogs; raised-line maps and drawings; high-contrast photographs of objects in the collection; and magnifiers. If possible, let everyone in the group — regardless of vision — use these materials. You will be surprised how much they add to everyone’s tour.

The most important suggestion, however, is to respect the person who is blind or visually impaired as you would any other visitor. Always talk directly to that individual — not through the person standing next to her. And make sure that she knows who is talking to her. Do not accidentally force a blind person into a guessing game of who you are — identify yourself at the very beginning of your conversation. Once you are talking to each other, things are a lot easier for everyone. At that point, blind and visually impaired people can see your collections, with a little bit of help from you.

Janice Majewski is Smithsonian Accessibility Coordinator in the Smithsonian Institution’s Office of the Assistant Secretary for Museums. She earned a Master of Education of the Deaf degree from Smith College and taught elementary-level hearing impaired children for three years. In 1978, she joined the Smithsonian’s Office of Elementary and Secondary Education as the Coordinator for Special Education. Ms. Majewski assumed her current position as Accessibility Coordinator in January, 1991. She is the author of the training package Part of Your General Public Is Disabled, and she has presented workshops and lectures on the subject of museum accessibility throughout the country.

For more information on museum access for people with visual impairments, contact:

Friends-In-Art
American Council of the Blind, Inc.
1010 Vermont Avenue, NW #1100
Washington, DC 20005
(202) 393-3666
1-800-424-8666 (outside the District of Columbia)

American Foundation for the Blind
15 West 16th Street
New York, New York 10011
(212) 620-2000
Thinking Strategies

In their text "Teaching for Thinking: Theory, Strategies and Activities for the Classroom" (Teachers College, Columbia University Press, 1986), authors Raths, Wasserman, Jonas, and Rothstein warn that "we are graduating large numbers of students who are expert at memorizing and recalling factual information, but who lack the ability to use that information to make informed judgments."

In response to this, the authors suggest instructional strategies placing increased emphasis on "higher-order thinking activities through inquiry-oriented learning situations." This recommendation should be music to docents' ears.

To guide teachers as they restructure lesson plans, the authors offer the following thinking activities as ones requiring mental participation and independence of thought in the search for understanding and meaning:

- **Comparing** - examining two or more objects to discover similarities and/or differences
- **Observing** - looking more closely than usual through an increased level of visual involvement
- **Summarizing** - condensing form and substance of what is presented concisely, without omission of essential points
- **Classifying** - sorting according to some principle
- **Interpreting** - putting meaning into, or pulling meaning out of, experience or data
- **Hypothesizing** - proposing outcomes or solutions to a problem whose answer is not known
- **Criticizing** - making judgments, analysis and evaluations based, not on faults, but on a "critical" appraisal of qualities being studied
- **Decision-making** - adding personal values to the previously listed activities when determining actions.

These activities are also excellent starting points for developing the inquiry-type lessons used by docents. Challenging visitors to accomplish one or more of these activities can ensure a more productive and memorable learning experience.

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**Did You Know . . . ?**

Young people (18 and under) compose a highly significant source of museum attendance revenue, averaging from 25 to 50% of total. In addition, their attendance is of major consequence to institutions justifying requests for public funds, grants, corporate gifts, and foundation support.

Yet, programs benefiting young people receive no more than a small fraction of total budgets within most institutions. No art museum surveyed, for example, reported spending more than 2.5 to 3% of their annual financial resources on children's programming. This figure includes staff salaries.

(Chronicle of Non-Profit Enterprise, October 1990.)

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**Want to Know More About Teaching with "Active Learning" Strategies?**

Try reading:


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"Hands-on" projects at the conclusion of a museum lesson reinforce learning; however, funding for such activities can be difficult to obtain.

photo: Clarksville-Leaf Chronicle
It Works for Me

Docents share techniques and ideas they find successful

In a gallery where a number of portraits and genre scenes can be viewed, I instruct students to choose a painting in which the focus is a person or persons. I hand each student a sheet of paper entitled, "I Have a Story to Tell." The sheet has a space for the name of the painting and the artist. Then, it asks "If this person or persons could tell you something, what would he/she/tell you?" The sheet leaves a large space for the student to write an answer. Further down the sheet of paper, another question asks, "With this information, would you change the title of the painting? If so, what is the new title?" (I have chaperones hand out pencils, and I instruct students where they can write. Clipboards are ideal for this purpose.)

Initially, I used this activity with 7th - 9th graders; I wondered how they would respond and was delighted to find them eager participants. I watched to see which students were choosing the same paintings because even though one might not share directly, he/she might participate in the discussion of the painting being shared by a classmate. I also watched to see how people were progressing, and reminded students that we would be coming together in a few minutes. For any who finished quickly, I suggested looking quietly at other paintings in the gallery.

When we reconvene, I ask if anyone would like to begin. There are always students who do. This initial participation leads to further discussions and others revealing their thoughts.

A number of my fellow docents have used this activity and it was equally successful for 4th graders through seniors in high school. Responses varied from thoughtful to funny, but in each case contributed to the tour.

Karen Jones, Docent Seattle Art Museum Seattle, Washington

If you have a successful idea, technique, or activity you would like to share, please send it to:

minds in motion
The Docent Educator
2011 Eleventh Ave. East
Seattle, WA 98102

The National Docent Symposium
by Von Long

Organized by the Indianapolis Museum of Art in 1981 as a meeting of art museum docents, the National Docent Symposium has become a biennial event hosting volunteer and staff educators from all museum disciplines.

In 1985, the multi-disciplined Oakland Museum Association hosted the Symposium and broadened its scope to include representatives from art, history, natural sciences museums and technology centers, as well as aquariums, zoos, regional parks, planetaria, botanical gardens, historic houses, and city guide groups.

"Pioneering New Frontiers," the theme of the 1991 National Docent Symposium, was drawn from a recent Getty/National Endowment for the Arts project that researched and focused on the visitor as teacher, as learner, and as guest.

Hosted by the Denver Art Museum, the Sixth Biennial National Docent Symposium also involved the docents and staffs of the Denver Botanic Gardens, the Denver Zoological Foundation, the Denver Museum of Natural History, and various other local area museums.

The 450 docents attending the 1991 Symposium benefit from over 30 different workshops sessions and a "museum marketplace" where materials and ideas can be exchanged.

The 1993 meeting will be hosted by the High Museum in Atlanta, followed by the Los Angeles Museum of Natural History in 1995, and the Carnegie Museum. in Pittsburgh, in 1997.

Von Long, a Denver Art Museum docent, serves as Program Chair for the 1991 National Docent Symposium.

In the Next Issue of The Docent Educator

"Sharpening Communication Skills"

- Talking with Teenagers
- Principles of Public Speaking
- Connecting with Multi-Cultural Audiences
- The Art and Science of Telling Folktales

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It's Alive!
Teaching with a Living Collection

People have a natural wonder and curiosity about other living things. Docents working with live plants and animals have infinite opportunities to excite and inform visitors of all ages. A few special interpretative approaches and techniques will capture the audience as well as make their experience more enjoyable.

At the High Desert Museum, successful docents who work with the Museum’s animals have the following characteristics in common: enthusiasm, the kind which is obvious and contagious; substantive knowledge, enough to be confident about the subject; patience and some knowledge of the stages of learning in order to know how to present information and get children involved in their own learning; an abundance of ideas and action elements in order to hold the audience’s interest; and the ability to add a final touch of mystery and drama, making the experience more fun for everyone.

The first step in developing an interpretative program for a living collection is to identify the goals for the presentation. What will the audience experience, feel, and learn? While the answers may vary greatly depending on the setting of the interpretation, the presentation should encourage the audience to have fun, be involved, appreciate the animal or plant, and explore the topic further afterwards.

A key to successful interpretation is to involve the audience in the presentation. There are many ways to accomplish this. Interpreting with live animals, or in a natural setting with live plants, encourages involvement because the audience is usually curious and interested. Storytelling, using "open" questions (those that do not have predetermined, "right" answers) or telling stories about personal experiences are all excellent ways to accomplish the goals of interpretation. They certainly make the program more fun.

Props that can be touched, examined, and explored, such as bones, skulls, feathers, skins, and so forth allow visitors to become directly involved and engaged, while satisfying tactile desires. In some circumstances, it may be possible for the audience to actually touch the animal, or to come up for a close look.

One other idea that comes to mind is not yet a part of the regular interpretation at The High Desert Museum, but is used in special situations. It is to offer a presentation that allows the audience to really "get into" the subject matter, using microscopes, hand lenses, collecting trays, small dishes, and eye droppers.

Audiences of all ages are fascinated to see the abundance and diversity of living things in a small sampling of pond water, or in the moist soil under a log. Simple sampling techniques at an exhibit can involve the audience in counting, describing, or recording the movements of and the interactions among animals in a natural setting.

Rachel Carson said, in The Sense of Wonder, "The lasting pleasures of contact with the natural world are not reserved for scientists but are available to anyone who will place himself under the influence of earth, sea and sky and their amazing life."

Docents interpreting living collections have an opportunity to experience every presentation in new and exciting ways. The goals of the presentation will be accomplished if the docent treats the collection, whatever its form, with respect, a sense of awe, wonder and enthusiasm; participates in the touching, exploring and questioning along with the audience; and truly enjoys the privilege of sharing the collection and special information about it with visitors.

Ann Wheeler received a M.S.T. in Education from the University of Chicago in 1979. She was a classroom teacher for nine years and an Environmental Specialist for three years. She received a J.D. in 1986 from Northwestern School of Law at Lewis & Clark College. She has served as Education Specialist at the High Desert Museum, in Bend, OR, since 1988.
Ensuring that each child has a positive and meaningful learning experience should be the primary goal of every docent. A variety of presentation methodologies and reinforcement techniques is available to assist art museum docents in pursuit of this goal, several of which are integral parts of a new program called People and Places: Telling Stories Through Art offered by the Joslyn Art Museum in Omaha.

People & Places is a student-centered program, based on establishing a climate of mutual respect, trust, and an atmosphere of unconditional acceptance between the docent and his or her group of children. Our docent training provides modeling of appropriate questioning strategies and interactive communication techniques to use in creating a non-threatening environment where optimal learning can occur.

People & Places was developed by a team of Discipline-Based Art Education (DBAE) consultants and the Education Department of Joslyn Art Museum, working in cooperation with Omaha’s Westside School District.

To prepare children for their museum experience, a mini-trunk containing objects that represent stories and legends from a variety of cultures is sent to the school. Though no docent currently provides an outreach visit with this trunk, outreach visits represent a more ideal way to introduce and orient children to their forthcoming museum experience.

These outreach materials are accompanied by exercises that engage students in participatory activities. They emphasize relationships between people, people and nature, people and time, or people and their activities. When students arrive at the museum, docents continue this theme as they guide young people through the galleries.

Though docents are supplied with background information about specific works, their role is to serve as facilitators rather than expositors, engaging children in interactive interpretation. To be certain that this type of approach is educationally sound and that it remains focused on the art works, children are asked to tell specifically what it is about the work discussed that leads them to say what they do in their interpretations.

Docents ask questions that help children discover comparison threads between works, that are general to looking, or are specific to the work examined. In developing an approach to Thomas Hart Benton’s The Hailstorm, for example, Joslyn docents consider questioning strategies such as those found in the box on the next page to effectively engage children in the gallery.

The approach used in this program empowers children with the confidence to discuss artworks because all of their ideas and concepts are reinforced as valuable contributions to the group. Docent Ethel Flannigan believes People & Places inspires creativity, mental involvement, and active participation. There is, she told me, "...eagerness for children to add, get a word in, explain, think, and let their ideas to "catch on." All the docent has to do is set the stage and let the words flow. The deductive method allows children to create their own story and to view art with an intuitive reaction; their imaginations are challenged and ideas encouraged.”

Carol Wyrick is Curator of Education at Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, NE. She has a BFA in secondary arts education from Texas Christian University and an MA in Art History from Eastern Washington University. Involved in arts education for over twenty years, she has been a presenter for the Museum Division at the National Art Education Association Annual Conference, and served as a faculty member for Prairie Visions: The Nebraska Consortium for Disciplined-Based Art Education 1991 Summer Institute.
### Question Types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Comparative</th>
<th>Generalized</th>
<th>Specific</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Which directions are the humans facing? What difference does this make?</td>
<td>What do you think is happening? What tells you so?</td>
<td>Does this look like something you might actually see? Why or why not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Look at the sky. How does it differ from skies in other works you’ve seen?</td>
<td>What grabs your attention most? How was this element made so important?</td>
<td>What is the relationship among the people, the land, and the sky?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Does nature seem to be in harmony or discord? What makes you think so? How does this work compare with other nature scenes you’ve looked at?</td>
<td>If you were to make up a story about this painting, what would it be? In what time period would your story take place? What tells you so?</td>
<td>Which seems more important in this painting, people or nature? Why?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
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minds in motion
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