Sharpening Communication Skills

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"Say what you mean and mean what you say!" Sounds simple, but is it? Whether you teach in a museum, historic home, zoo, botanical garden, nature center, interpretative park, or traditional classroom, successful communication requires a strong command of language, clarity of thought, knowledge of the subject matter, an understanding of the audience, and a delivery style that's engaging.

This issue of The Docent Educator investigates a range of methods and techniques that can sharpen your communication skills and make your teaching activities more successful.
Watch Your Language!

“W”hat’s wrong with telling visitors that this is an excellent example of naturalist painting and reveals the artist’s command of color, light, and the reflective properties of water?” Everything I’ve said is correct.”

Docents are often puzzled to learn that communicating in this manner may be counterproductive. After all, the information, and in some cases the words themselves, were provided by curators or scholars.

The reason statements like the one above are inappropriate for most tours is complex, but revolves around the difference between telling and teaching, and the manner in which ideas and insights are communicated in each case.

Text panels tell: docents teach. Each has a different objective and requires a different approach to communication.

Teaching serves to impart skills, especially those of observation and analysis. The goal is to enhance visitors’ abilities to obtain and construct their own meaning from collections, exhibitions, objects, or life forms. The emphasis is weighted more toward practicing behaviors and problem solving than toward accumulating and memorizing isolated facts.

Whether in an art, history, or science institution, the majority of people taking docent-led tours lack the developed background and understanding to place definitive statements, such as those used in “telling,” in an appropriate and productive context. Visitors may become confused or disheartened by that form of communication because they see things differently, or because they don’t understand the criteria or rationale used.

For instance, when visitors are told that something is an “excellent example,” as in the statement above, they may be at a loss to understand why. The word “excellent” conveys a value judgment. Value judgments are determinations of relative worth based on subjective criteria. Understanding a value judgment requires a shared awareness of the standards by which something was judged and the particular reasons it was determined to be superior. These assumptions, however, exceed most visitors’ level of awareness and comprehension.

Look again at the statement above from a visitor’s point-of-view. What is meant by having “command” of such things as color or light? Why would a painting, which might seem poorly rendered or splotty, demonstrate mastery? This statement fails to communicate in a manner that visitors can verify or understand.

Speaking with value judgments or assumed points-of-view, as one does when “telling,” puts many visitors at a distinct disadvantage. Some will react by accepting what they are told without comprehending it; others may simply dismiss what they’re told without giving it appropriate consideration. In either scenario, visitors wind up responding to what is said, rather than to what they should be seeing and examining. The result is not only miscommunication, but missed opportunities for learning and growing.

In his book Language in Thought and Action, S.I. Hayakawa categorized words into three distinct types useful for controlling communication and comprehension. The first category he
Words that Promote Understanding

by Alan Gartenhaus

Termed report words. Report words are those that describe what can be seen, heard, felt, or otherwise verified. They are accurate descriptions of observations and can be confirmed by others. For example, stating that "the grandfather clock in the entry hall stands over six feet tall, is made of mahogany wood, and chimes on the hour" uses report words.

The second group is inferential words. Inferential words make statements about the unknown based on what is known. For example, stating that "crocodiles are well suited for life in the water" is an inference. It may or may not be true. If, however, this inference is followed by report words, communication is clarified. A verifying report statement might be that "crocodiles have eyes and nostrils higher than the rest of their heads for seeing and breathing while floating in the water."

The third group is judgmental words. They convey approval or disapproval. They are words such as "good" and "superior," or "poor" and "bad." Judgmental words inhibit understanding unless report words, which state the reasons and criteria, are put forth. For example, saying "this was a terrific advance in aircraft" tells the listener little. However, if that statement is followed by "...because this carrier used less fuel, could fly longer distances, and could hold more passengers," the communication is clear and judgment's meaning is understood.

The use of report words to ensure accurate transfer of meaning does not only pertain to docents. Visitors should be asked, in a non-threatening and non-challenging manner, to reference their ideas and opinions with report words. This not only allows docents to monitor and respond appropriately to visitors' thoughts and observations, but also allows visitors to communicate more precisely with each other.

Hayakawa suggests that in every case where inference or judgment is made, report words follow to clarify the "mental leap" between what can be confirmed and what has been implied. This not only improves communication, it teaches visitors how to use and develop their observation skills to extract information, and how to better comprehend their personal responses and decisions.

Docents, interpreters, and others who teach must be vigilant communicators, working to ensure that language serves to clarify what they (and visitors) are saying. Unlike the process of writing, which can be reworked and refined, the verbal communication taking place between docents and visitors is dynamic and fluid. The luxury of being able to second guess, to rework, or edit is unavailable. Docents are obliged, therefore, to make certain that inferences and judgments, which are subject to a wide latitude of misinterpretations, are always referred back to report words so that everyone learns and understands what is being communicated.

Alan Gartenhaus is the publishing editor of this newsletter. He has been the recipient of an Alden B. Dow Creativity Fellowship, an award of special recognition for contributions to children's television from the Taft Broadcasting Company, and an Award for Meritorious Service from the Smithsonian Institution. In addition to writing, he provides workshops for docents and classroom teachers on interpretive teaching techniques, creativity and its enhancement, and questioning strategies.

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by Alan Gartenhaus
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Connecting with Multi-Cultural

In 1989, the American Association of Museums established a task force on education to examine critical issues, and to develop proposals for strengthening and expanding the educational role of museums. Their final report, which was recently issued, discussed the “public dimension” and “educational role” of museums, and the broad contributions museums can make to society.

I urge all of the museum community to read this report in its entirety, but permit me to excerpt some of the conclusions bearing on multi-culturalism and education:

- “... individual museums of different sizes and types must ensure that they are accessible to a broad audience and that they do not intentionally, or even subtly and unintentionally, exclude anyone.

- “Each visitor supplies yet another context and another layer of meaning as he or she brings individual experiences and values to the encounter with objects in a museum setting.

- “Those charged with making museum policy, as well as those charged with carrying it out, must understand the diversity of our society and support the implications of that diversity for museum operations and activities.

- “Assure that the interpretive process manifests a variety of cultural and intellectual perspectives and reflects an appreciation for the diversity of museums’ publics. By cultivating and expressing a variety of cultural perspectives in the presentation and interpretation of their collections, museums can foster inclusiveness.”

The visions expressed in the report are laudable and desirable, and they challenge museum staff and docents to enfranchise the many racial, ethnic, social, economic, and educational backgrounds of the people in their community. To accomplish this, however, we must first confront some of the apprehensions and assumptions that may block or obscure these goals. They include:

- The mainstream culture many have come to know and value is going to be supplanted by a new, strange hybrid of exotic elements.

This country has always consisted of a mix of cultures, and today we are becoming even more diverse. The U.S. Census Bureau predicts that the percentage of population growth between now and the first 30 years of the next century will be vastly larger among Hispanic Americans, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and African Americans than it will among “white” Americans. Developing an understanding and appreciation for these various cultures and their contributions to our collective past and present, does not mean that the “mainstream” culture will be eliminated. What will change, however, is the singular emphasis on the accomplishments and lifestyles of white Americans to the neglect of others and the impression that they were the only people to make significant contributions.

- The facts presented in subjects such as history will be distorted in an effort to contribute to raising the self-esteem of other cultures.

Our view of the past has always been “slanted” simply by choosing one emphasis over another. Whether by focusing on wealthy landowners, industrialists, or political figures, we present a mere piece of the entire picture. While some people might have us completely overhaul how history is presented, it seems most appropriate and reasonable to incorporate the roles and lifestyles of men and women of various colors, creeds, and economic groups as we examine the past, rather than to mimic an elitist approach by shifting inordinate emphasis from one group to another.

- A multi-cultural approach may promote racism and rage.

There is concern that sharing information about repression will engender resentment, anger, and shame. These risks do exist. Nonetheless, by sharing this type of information about the past, we provide contrast to our present and recognize that there should be no single standard or image to which everyone ought to aspire.
Audiences

by Tamra Carboni

In the final analysis, and regardless of one’s personal views concerning a multi-cultural approach to education, there are several salient implications for those involved in interpretation within museums and historic homes. These implications impact the responsibilities of docents directly.

In most cases, the time-honored techniques of working with visitors continues to be appropriate. However, some need to be emphasized.

▲ Examine the language you use and the attitudes you express in relaying information to visitors. Be particularly wary of reinforcing stereotypes related to ethnicity, race, or sex. Do not treat students of one group differently than you treat those of another. Don’t favor, ignore, condescend, or assume.

▲ Try to present information within a broad cultural framework. If the main subject pertains primarily to one culture, find ways of putting it in a wider context that makes it relevant to other groups. Remember, people need to see themselves as participants in the history presented. Give enough information to allow for some connections to be made. For example, if you are interpreting the home of a wealthy Caucasian family, consider how the house and family related, compared, and contrasted to other segments of the area’s population. If this requires information you haven’t been provided, request it from the museum staff.

▲ Be accepting of varied comments and responses. Be open to different perceptions of artifacts. Should it prove useful for promoting communication and understanding, ask for clarifications or explanations with an interested, rather than skeptical or judgmental, tone.

▲ Ask museum staff for programs and sources of information that will assist you in learning and understanding more of the various cultures that comprise your community. The more you know about others, the easier it will be for you to convey appreciation and sensitivity in concrete ways.

▲ Be prepared to meet values that differ from your own. These differences can present real obstacles as the values among various cultures are sometimes disparate, and even in conflict. This is when understanding and respect for differences can be most difficult to attain. However, it is not your responsibility to change anyone’s values nor to defend your own. Attempt to achieve tolerance by adopting the attitude that all perceptions of the world come from “real experiences and beliefs,” and that there isn’t one dominant concept and other, minor aberrations.

▲ Don’t avoid, or use euphemisms to discuss, areas of cultural conflict and strife such as slavery or racial discrimination. Don’t misrepresent the past by giving disproportionate emphasis to a few pleasant circumstances within a generally undesirable situation. Strive for a balanced and accurate representation.

▲ Become aware of what constitutes racism, and how it pervades mainstream culture.

In conclusion, remember that education is the transmission of culture from one generation to another. We must recognize that the composition of American society has changed significantly over the past several generations, and, as a consequence, the culture to be transmitted has changed. The way we educate and what we teach must change accordingly. This doesn’t mean that we discard all the teachings of the past. It does mean that we should broaden our field of vision, not just extending the periphery, by sharpening our focus throughout.

Tamra Carboni is Director of Public Programs at the Louisiana State Museum in New Orleans. In addition to her museum responsibilities, she is the chair of the American Association of Museum’s Media and Technology Committee, and is a consultant for the New Orleans Public School System, serving on their Advisory Committee to Infuse African/African American Studies into the Curriculum. She earned her undergraduate degree in art history from Tulane University and her M.Ed. from the University of New Orleans.

Diversity among visitors will continue to increase.
Talking with Teenagers

by Susan Feibelman

The teenagers’ world is a difficult one. Between the advertising wizards of Madison Avenue and the film moguls of Hollywood, teens are given an incredible range of images to contend with. When one adds to this confusion the harsh realities faced by many teenagers, including pregnancies, suicides, substance and physical abuse, and a general lack of adult involvement in their lives, the teen years seem far from the Norman Rockwell-type images we find so comforting.

As a classroom teacher and administrator, I have worked with this age group for many years. During that time, I developed a great appreciation and affection for teaching teenagers. I found that beneath their tough, protective skin, manufactured to survive in a hostile environment, are people eager to connect and embrace new ideas and experiences. Much like peeling an orange to find its fragrant meat, I have discovered the rewards of breaking through their toughened exteriors.

Experience taught me to incorporate three, non-negotiable strategies into my teaching when working with teenagers. These strategies require that I:

- establish a sense of mutual respect;
- recognize that tapping their imagination is key; and
- realize that learning occurs best when personal meaning is ascribed.

RESPECT. Teens respond to respect with respect. To a teenager, respect equates with being treated as an adult. That means teenagers want you to be sincerely interested in them and their ideas and to engage them in “give and take” conversations. Teenagers resent being talked “at” or “down to.”

Conveying interest in your teenaged visitors requires learning who these important people are. Questions such as “Why have you come here today?” and “What do you need/want to accomplish during our tour?” can begin this process, while serving as a barometer of the group’s mood, readiness to participate, and expectations.

Respect also implies that the questioner, or teacher, will share back with the group. Consider offering your opinions or assessments with students after giving them an opportunity to express theirs.

Respect requires valuing their opinions and insights. Let them know you do, and tell them that throughout the tour you will be learning from, and with, each other.

IMAGINATION. While there is no truer home to the spirit of imagination than that of a museum, many teens arrive with preconceived notions of boring exhibits, monotone lectures, and overcrowded, rushed tours. The challenge is to capture their imagination and put it into gear. If you can do this, you’ve got them!

Throughout your tour, shift the focus back and forth — from what you want to teach to an investigation of their insights and ideas through creative questioning. Teenagers need opportunities to demonstrate and discuss their interests, knowledge, and understanding of subject matter.

Also, provide opportunities for teenagers to respond to questions using their own imaginations. Questions such as, “What smells do you associate with this type of setting?” or “How is this like a piece of music?” can serve as ice breakers to productive conversations.

PERSONAL MEANING. To be effective, a museum experience must involve all students personally and meaningfully. Students become most engaged when the instruction is interactive. Teenagers need to be totally immersed in the content, drawing upon all their senses, and linking information to many different

Docent Celeste Clark engages the imagination and interest of her teenaged visitors at the Denver Museum of Natural History.
subject areas and personal experiences, rather than simply listening.

Questions should focus on the teens’ previous experiences with similar subject matter, as well as relate to issues they are currently discussing. Teenagers relate best if linkage can be made to their world. For example, in an art museum teens might be asked how they have seen “conflict” expressed visually.

Teenagers must be made aware of how your tour relates to them personally. Remember, making connections between subject matter and the teenagers’ world is your responsibility to suggest as the teacher, not simply their responsibility to discover as the students.

Today’s teens come of age in a society of fast foods and schemes for instant gratification. Museums, gardens, historic homes, and other such institutions demand behaviors that run contrary to these experiences. They require that students and other visitors slow down enough to make careful observations and engage in thoughtful reflection. Helping teenagers practice these behaviors and skills provides them with a great service, presents you with an interesting educational challenge, and offers you one of the most rewarding of teaching experiences.

Susan Feibelman has been a classroom teacher and administrator for the Dallas (TX) Independent School District (DISD) since 1979. She currently serves as an Instructional Specialist working within DISD’s Psychology and Social Services Division.

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**A Few Principles of Public Speaking**

by Molly Dempsey

Large or small, in an auditorium or in a museum gallery, audiences respond to the same basic principles of public speaking.

▲ Begin by presenting the overview or theme that will thread itself throughout your talk. Your audience needs to understand what you will be teaching them and to have some sense of a unifying concept.

▲ Avoid confusing or technical terms whenever possible; use simple, conversational language and hone your ideas to their sparsest, yet still informative, form. If you must use an obscure term, or are attempting to introduce new vocabulary, be certain to explain fully, and in a manner consistent with the listener’s ability to comprehend.

▲ Relate each new object or important piece of information back to your main concept or theme to keep listeners “on track.”

▲ Beware of tangents, unless they are brief and directly relate to your subject. They can confuse listeners and distract you from your own train of thought.

▲ Use questions from the audience to create something of a dialogue.

Questions clarify, and can enlighten both the listener and the speaker.

▲ When you are asked a challenging question, or one requiring some thought, do not try to answer quickly to “cover up” your surprise. You risk giving misinformation or saying something you will have to modify later. Instead, give yourself a moment to think. And, if you simply don’t know the answer, say so.

▲ The “art of pausing” works better if fillers like “um...” or “well...” don’t substitute for silence.

▲ Be relaxed enough to laugh, especially if something spontaneously funny occurs. Be a part of the joke, not its subject.

▲ Cultivate enthusiasm. If you are enthusiastic about your subject, it will seem more interesting and worthwhile to your audience. If you feel less than enthusiastic, do additional research, speak with staff, or find something that makes the subject more interesting to you. Remember, what you feel inside comes through to visitors.

▲ Select clothing and accessories you feel comfortable in, and that do not dominate or distract. Visitors should be looking at the collection, not your wardrobe.

▲ Enunciate and project! Nothing is more frustrating for listeners than not to be able to understand or hear what is being said.

Most importantly, public speaking requires practice and strong knowledge of the material you want to present. Work on your presentation and your style with friends, family members, or other docents. Tape record yourself and listen to it as visitors might. A more critical approach would be to videotape your tour to improve control of body language and gesturing, in addition to speaking voice, intonation, and content. And, be sure to practice often. Chances are, when you are satisfied, your audience will be, too.

Molly Dempsey recently graduated from Boston College with a B.A. in English. In addition to her responsibilities with this publication, she is a freelance production assistant for a film and video company in Seattle, WA.
There's an art and science to . . .

Telling Stories

Throughout history, storytellers have fulfilled roles as their community's historians, spiritual counselors, educators, and entertainers. They engaged community members in thoughtful consideration of life — enabling them to laugh at their foibles, learn from the past, and make judicious decisions for the future. The settings for traditional storytelling varied from intimate gatherings around a hearth to large public ceremonies. Presentation styles ranged, too, from conversational to theatrical. However, storytelling was always defined as an event where a story was created in partnership by both the teller and the listeners.

Docents are direct inheritors of the noble storytelling tradition. Even if they are not telling stories, docents are presenting in the oral tradition. Docents establish relationships with tour groups; formally shape their interactions; improvise to accommodate the responses of their audience; and make choices about pacing, language, delivery style, and voice in acknowledgment of the drama of the event.

Given this shared tradition, why aren't more docents making storytelling an integral component of their tours? Whenever I have asked this questions of docents I usually hear variations on the same two responses.

One is that "stories are more entertainment than education, and 10 to 15 minutes of storytelling can't be justified against the time available for looking at collections." The other is that "only 'natural tellers,' or people trained in the theater, tell stories well. It's not one of those things you can learn."

Why use precious tour time for storytelling? Storytelling has "grabbing power." Even in this age of electronic extravaganzas and microseconds, the words "let me tell you what happened" command attention. And, it is just this state of readiness and anticipation that every educator wants.

Storytelling also has "keeping power." As soon as the storyteller begins the tale, listeners engage by creating images in their minds that correspond to, and elaborate upon, what is told. As the story unfolds, listeners begin to identify with characters, empathize with dilemmas, and become emotionally involved with outcomes. As the "plot thickens" and the resolution nears, listeners may even respond viscerally with a quickened heartbeat or a tearful eye. As the storyteller observes these responses, he or she, in turn, reshapes the story. This is how, together, the listeners and the teller jointly create the story. And, this is how stories can build personal relationships between listeners and a subject.

But, the big question still looms. Does storytelling have "teaching power?" And, can it teach what museums need to teach? The most important research being done in this area is by learning theorist Dr. Kieran Egan of the Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, British Columbia. Dr. Egan and his colleagues assert that listening to stories is essential to a student's intellectual development. Among the skills Egan believes are acquired from listening to stories are:

△ a cultivated imagination;
△ an ability to empathize with others;
△ a sense of causality as it operates in stories and in logical inference;
△ an ability to reflect philosophically on general historical processes;
△ moral sensitivity;
△ an ability to make romantic associations with heroes and heroines or ideas;
△ excitement for seeing ideals and ideas being worked out through events; and
△ a hobby-like fascination with particulars, whether they are costumes, designs of pyramids or castles, stamps, or baseball cards.
Twelve Exercises for Preparing to Tell a Story

If you are working from a memory or a well-known incident, you are ready to begin. If you are working from a printed text, however, read it several times until you have the sequence in your mind, then close the book and do these exercises.

Strengthening the Story Visually
1. Close your eyes and recreate the sequence of the story in very detailed mental pictures — as if you just arrived in a new country and are soaking up every detail you see.
2. Get up and literally walk through the story as if it were happening in the room.
3. Find a fellow docent and tell the story. Then ask the docent to tell the same story to you adding more details, such as colors, textures, sizes, than you did.
4. Identify the three most important objects and the most important characters in the story. Describe them to a partner. Tell your partner to ask you five questions about the way the objects and character looked that weren’t included in your description.
NOTE: These are exercises to build your visualization of the story; you probably won’t include all the descriptions in the final telling.

Getting to Know Your Characters
5. Pick three words to describe your main character’s personality.
6. Identify three physical characteristics that exemplify these traits and experiment with using them as part of your telling.
7. Walk across the room as your character.
8. What are the first words your character says in the story? Say them out loud as the character would say them.
9. Answer these questions: How does the character change in the story? What is the major hardship, challenge, or obstacle he or she faces? Then, identify two emotions the character feels and express them in the story, whether by gesture, tone of voice, or posture.

Heightening the Meaning and Plot
10. Tell the story in three sentences.
11. What universal element does this story grapple with? (The rewards of perseverance; the confusion of adolescence; the difficulty of moving to a new place.)
12. Identify the most important moment in the story and tell that out loud very, very slowly. Experiment with adding a sound, or silence, or contrasting rhythms — e.g. fast and then slow — to accentuate the drama of the moment.

While these skills may seem elementary, they are significant in that they serve as foundation skills used by practicing historians, scientists, and artists, as well as by students who are exploring the relationships between their lives and those that went before.

For those of you who find this rationale convincing, but are still uncertain about learning how to tell stories, there is good news! The techniques employed by effective storytellers to "keep" and "teach" their listeners are, in fact, very straightforward.

If you look back at the description of how listeners become engaged, you see what the teller must do:
- use strong visual language;
- portray the characters in ways that listeners can identify with and react to emotionally; and
- work with the plot to heighten the meaning and drama of the story.

While it’s true that some people do this naturally, most of us need to work at it. A few exercises are listed below to get you started. It may take a while to get the hang of it, but don’t be discouraged. It can be learned.

One last point of clarification.

The unqualified benefits of listening to stories in general does not lessen the importance of story selection. Storytelling is not confined to folktales and legends. While they may be easier for beginners to learn, as the visual language, characters, and plot are in place, they are often harder to integrate into a tour with direct relevance to your collection.

To develop the right stories, look at the tours you already give. Do they contain a biographical sketch of an artist, a historical anecdote, the daily adventures of an animal, or a description of a scientific discovery? Each of these contains the germ of a good story. With a little elaboration and shaping, they can become your own, powerful teaching tools.
Storytelling Resources

The National Association for the Preservation and Perpetuation of Storytelling (NAPPS) has the most comprehensive offerings: a large annual festival held in early October, a quarterly journal and a monthly newsletter, a catalogue listing all the professional storytellers and festivals across the country, and a mail-order catalogue filled with audio, video, and print duplications of stories.

Call or write: NAPPS, P.O. Box 309, Jonesborough, TN 37659; 1-800-525-4514

Yellow Moon Press has the most complete mail-order catalogue for audio recordings of storytellers, including traditional ones. Call or write: Yellow Moon Press, P.O. Box 1316, Cambridge, MA 02238; 1-617-776-2230

Don’t overlook your fellow docents. Those who want to develop stories for the gallery could share the research time and serve as valuable practice audiences and coaches.

For Further Reading on Storytelling --


Increasing Diversity

Docents providing guided experiences for school groups will meet with greater numbers of minority students in the future. According to The New York Times (September 13, 1991, A 8), “... the increasing racial and ethnic diversity of the United States is being reflected by dramatic increases in the number of Hispanic and non-white students in the nation’s classrooms, so that by 1995 one-third of American public school students will be from minorities.”

The two-year study conducted by the College Board and the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education, made the following projections for 1994-95 in comparison to 1984-85 figures:

- African-American students will remain the second-largest racial or ethnic group in the public schools, behind whites, but are expected to increase by 13%;
- American Indians and Alaskan natives enrolled in schools are expected to remain the smallest group, but to increase by 29%;
- Asians and Pacific Islanders are expected to increase by 70% to about 1.6 million students;
- Hispanic enrollment is anticipated to increase by 54%, to an estimated 5.1 million; and
- white, non-Hispanic students will increase by 1.2 million, but will drop to 66% of the total enrollment from 71% in 1985.

Percent Change of Public-School Graduates of White Non-Hispanic Students from 1986 to 1995

Changes in Alaska and Hawaii are 1 to 24%

source: The Chronicle of Higher Education

The Silent Communicator

Julius Fast reminds us in his book, Body Language (Simon & Schuster, 1970), that we are constantly sending emotional messages by the manner in which we hold and move our bodies.

Realizing this, docents may choose to use their body placement to reinforce specific, subliminal messages. For instance, by occasionally turning around and standing with a tour group (instead of always being in front of one), docents can communicate an interest in looking and learning along with their visitors. At the same time, this sends the message that one can continue to delight in, and benefit from, repeated viewings of even the most familiar aspects of an institution’s collection.

Honor Excellence

If you know of an outstanding history program in a museum, historic site, school, or other organization, consider nominating the group or individual responsible for an award from the American Association for State and Local History. Nominations consist of a one-page form and supporting materials, submitted by April 1, 1992. For further information, contact: Susan Miner AASLH Award Committee Wichita-Sedgwick Co. Historical Museum 204 S. Main Wichita, KS 67202

Correction: In our previous issue, the article “The National Docent Symposium” stated that the Carnegie Museum would host the 1997 National Docent Symposium; however, the site for the 1997 Symposium has not yet been finalized by the N.D.S. Council.
It Works for Me...
Docents share ideas they find successful

People visiting museums can be intimidated by the art, artifacts, and traditions of unfamiliar cultures. As a docent, I try to ease their discomfort by relating the cultures examined to our own, building a bridge between the unknown and the known.

African art and customs may seem exotic and inaccessible to some visitors. For example, most North Americans do not carve ancestral figures for the spirits of our deceased relatives to inhabit. But, talking things over with an ancestor figure is not all that different from visiting the grave of a relative and sitting there talking to him/her. Scarification is another African practice that can be difficult to comprehend. For some African people, however, lines on the face signify a civilized person, just as the lines of a plowed field mean the land has been civilized. The practice of scarification can be compared to accepted Western practices, such as plucking one’s eyebrows, ear piercing, face lifts, and plastic surgery.

Asian cultures may seem equally as puzzling. The blackened teeth and white rice powder worn on the faces of Japanese women may appear bizarre or theatrical. But, they are easily likened to mascara, eye shadow, colored contact lenses, and lipstick. The elaborately dressed geishas were the fashion trend setters of their day. Visitors, especially children, may enjoy talking about who the fashion trend setters are in our culture.

Parallels can often be found between our culture and an unfamiliar one, thereby increasing comfort and understanding. Revealing these parallels, and our common humanity, is one way to encourage exploration of the unfamiliar that works for me.

While training for my graduate degree in Art Therapy, I worked with people having chronic mental illness in day treatment at a Chicago mental health agency and used museum field-trips to encourage the group’s therapeutic art making. Nine year’s experience as a docent taking groups through museum exhibitions led me to believe that museum resources could serve as enrichment and visual stimulus for populations with special needs.

Separate to training for the Master’s degree, but related to the principal conclusions, is the experience I gained conducting museum visits with people having chronic mental illness. It provided me with insights that may benefit museum docents and others hoping to better serve and communicate with this audience.

I believe it of primary importance that therapists be invited to visit the museum and speak with museum representatives ahead of touring. The museum education department should be made aware of the needs of the group so that docents and staff will be prepared. Conversely, the person in charge of the group ought to see the exhibition in advance and determine whether certain parts of it are best avoided or require special preparation before viewing.

Beginning a group’s visit with a brief talk by a well-prepared museum guard, who can explain the museum’s rules for conduct, often raises the behavioral expectations of individual members and may result in self-monitoring behaviors within the group.

It is not unusual for a member of the tour to become separated from the group. Docents should be prepared for this and feel comfortable asking the person to rejoin and stay with everyone else.

Depressed, manic, and schizophrenic individuals may experience side effects from medication, making them seem “different” or less interested. They may appear fidgety and have a limited concentration span. Others may seem withdrawn or overly-talkative. Understanding the reasons for these behaviors, remaining focused on the tour’s theme, and asking stimulating questions that allow for participation help make the visit more meaningful and fun for everyone.

The docent or staff member working with this population should do so as they would any group — with flexibility and an understanding that the agenda belongs to the individuals in the group and not to the museum or the touring docent. In every case, the task and goals remain the same — to ensure that the experience is one of enrichment, pleasure, and learning, in a manner that allows the visitors to gain from the encounter, and which encourages them to return in the future.

Chris Alexander, docent
New Orleans Museum of Art
New Orleans, LA

Judith Podmore, docent
Museum of Contemporary Art
Chicago, IL
Another Side of Communication

Listening

Communication skills usually focus on presentation — delivering messages clearly, establishing rapport, making eye contact, speaking clearly, projecting well, and otherwise being a good speaker. It is also important, however, to expand consideration to include another communication role for museum presenters, that of listener. The following suggests ways in which those who are usually the “voices” of the museum can become even more effective by developing the “other” side of their communication skills.

SHORT TERM

Don’t guess who’s coming. Find out as much as you can about the group with which you’ll be working. In addition to number, age, school or organization, learn their special interests or unit of study, where else they’ve been or are going as part of their study or on the same day they visit you. Ask if there are people in the group with physical disabilities or language difficulties for which you should plan. If the museum sends preparatory material, have the leaders used it?

With this information in mind, imagine yourself a composite visitor with the level of knowledge, interest, energy, and attention span typical of the group. Walk yourself through your tour or presentation, listening with that visitor’s “ears.” Wherever you sense a listener lag, change your approach, vocabulary, pace, or perspective to accommodate the specific audience’s needs.

Add something new. Chances are, when you listen to yourself you’ll hear a lot of things you’ve repeated for many a group. Even in a standard presentation, you’ll find yourself more interesting to listen to if you come up with a new way of saying it, or some new examples, anecdotes, tie-ins to current events, or other way of updating your comments. Inquire about recent research that might affect your interpretation. Ask your colleagues how they present the topic. Look for related issues in the news to be aware of how your visitors might be perceiving the topic today. If the format allows, try a new activity, guided imagery, or simple game to energize your visitors’ involvement and refresh your own enthusiasm.

Wherever you sense a listener lag, change your approach, pace, vocabulary, or perspective.”

LONG TERM

Listen to each other. Ask your docent colleagues if they would like to observe one another’s tours, meet to discuss communication problems, receive training in communication skills, or practice new approaches together. Sometimes, just hearing that others have the same questions empowers us to find the answers. Schedule time for these skill building experiences and look for trainers and resource people from your museum staff, area universities, and community.

MID TERM

Video. You can’t fight it, so use it! Even the smallest museum has access to a borrowed video camera to be used to capture on tape the live interaction of docents and visitors. Unsettling as the idea may be to some, we can all benefit by seeing and hearing ourselves from the vantage point of the uncompromising camera. A taped tour can also be a training tool for new recruits eager to observe successful, experienced guides but unable to be on hand for several live presentations. With editing you can combine the best segments of several tours or different approaches to the same material to give varied views of your program. Of course, videotaped museum experiences can also be used to promote use of the program and to enlist new support and volunteers.

Strive to be a better, more attentive listener when touring. Good teachers give thoughtful consideration to the questions and answers offered by their students.

Susan Miner has been Education Director at the Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Museum in Wichita, Kansas, for 16 years. She teaches a graduate workshop for classroom teachers on utilizing local museums to promote visual learning and has served as a Chair of the Education Committee of the American Association for State and Local History.
Discipline...

Phillip stands on a chair, ready to drop his paper-and-paperclip helicopter from the two-meter mark on the door frame. His partner, stop-watch in hand, counts off a "ready, set, go!" Vanessa and Melanie are rummaging through a scrap box looking for heavier paper to construct their second helicopter, while Jeremy and Kyle dig through my desk looking for the biggest paperclip. Another 16 sixth graders are noisily building their helicopters and conducting experiments to determine some of the variables affecting flight.

Just as this frenetic scene reaches its crescendo my new supervisor opens the door and stands, motionless, in the doorway. My heart and my confidence skip a beat. Was it my imagination, or did she gasp?

A few hours later, I sat in my supervisor's office, possibly to hear a reprimand. But, instead, my supervisor shared her excitement about the learning taking place in my classroom during the science lesson she had observed. It seems she understood that the one important difference between chaos and active learning is discipline. Discipline is not scolding or punishment, but an enabling structure for learning.

That subtle difference is not readily apparent to many untrained eyes, and good teaching, be it in a classroom or in a museum, is sometimes stifled by supervisors who don't recognize the difference. Inquiry learning promotes discovery and revelation. Discovery and revelation generate excitement.

And, excitement often creates noise. Therefore, to be successfully used, inquiry learning requires discipline.

While many of the strategies of teaching in classrooms have been adopted by museums, discipline strategies are not so easily transferred. Current behavior management techniques, which may be in use with a class, cannot be replicated in a museum setting. The long-term commitment made by both teachers and students is just not feasible in the one-shot world of museum visits. Nevertheless, the basic tenants still apply.

Discipline is based on communication and relationships. A good classroom teacher begins on Day One, and spends weeks, or even months, developing the relationships that ensure appropriate student behaviors. Docents, clearly, do not have the time to build such relationships, but they can use the relationships that already exist among the children, between the children and the teacher/chaperones, and between the children and the museum to separate active learning and a successful tour from chaos.

Children arrive at the museum with their friends ... and with their enemies! If teachers have pre-grouped the class, disruptive relationships may have already been attended to. If you must group students without the teacher's help, do so with care. Younger children may be asked to "Hold up this many fingers" as you count off the number of groups desired. When "All the threes go with Ms. Cathy," friends are automatically separated because they rushed to sit next to each other as they came into the museum. While this may be preferable for younger students, older students (grade six and beyond) should be allowed to remain with a friend, because they are generally more

"One important difference between chaos and active learning is discipline. Discipline is not scolding or punishment, but an enabling structure for learning."
It's not a Four-Letter Word

by Jackie Littleton

Relationships already exist between students and adults that are helpful in maintaining effective discipline. Children expect you to be in charge. A few moments at the beginning of the tour to set the limits within which the class must operate are essential to a productive tour.

This is probably a good place to explode two myths about discipline. First, ignoring bad behavior extinguishes the behavior only if there is no reward for it. Believe me, disrupting a museum tour in front of your admiring, but more timid, peers provides much more reward than you can offer! DON'T IGNORE BAD BEHAVIOR! Usually, stopping the tour and merely looking at the miscreant will suffice. The next step involves saying his or her name... and NO more. You don't have to explain what he or she is doing wrong... he or she knows! Stage three involves standing beside the wrong-doer and waiting for silence before you resume the tour. If all else fails (and it won't), ask the teacher to intervene, to remove the student from the area.

The second myth is that you can out-talk a heckler. Ask any stand up comic... you can't! Disruptions should be met with silence, and you should maintain a quiet but clear voice throughout your tour.

Several simple techniques will help you communicate and maintain your authority.

▲ Insist on groups of manageable size whenever possible. No one can maintain the attention of a group without eye contact; eye contact is difficult with groups of more than 10 or 12.

▲ Ask teachers to have students wear nametags, or provide nametags with the museum logo. It's harder to "hide" if someone knows your name.

▲ Seat younger children when you are teaching. Some students above the sixth grade find this demeaning, however, and will refuse to sit. Don't make it an issue. Offer students of this age the option of sitting.

▲ Take charge immediately; don't wait for the teacher's lead. Be polite, be friendly, be prepared, and speak so that all can hear and understand you.

Finally, relationships that exist between children and the museum can be used to develop the framework of discipline within which a good tour exists. Most children like the museum. They are predisposed in your favor.

Although it is also a myth that simply being interesting guarantees good behavior, the content and structure of the tour go a long way toward creating an atmosphere in which good behavior flourishes. The docent who knows the subject matter, and can deliver at a level consistent with the students' interests and abilities, is best able to involve children in the learning process. Children who are actively involved in learning do have fewer reasons to misbehave.

One final word about discipline. Be prepared for what you create. If you create drama and excitement, children will become excited. Excited children make noise! But, remember... excited children learn!

![Denver Museum of Natural History docent Ollie Woodbury knows that seating younger children, such as these first graders, focuses their attention and limits distractions.](image)
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