Interdisciplinary Approaches

Using your collection to examine only one subject area in isolation from others can diminish its significance and narrow routes toward stimulating interest.

In this issue, we survey several ways that educators have broadened their programming by taking an interdisciplinary approach to teaching.

Inside: Reaching Kids Through Literature ▲ A Garden as Classroom
▲ Learning Through Art ▲ A Cultural Legacy ▲ Making New Connections ▲
Revealing the Spectrum

Regardless of suitability or circumstance, the traditional modes of teaching forged within schools tend to dominate education in museums, zoos, and other auxiliary educational institutions.

For instance, many docents and staff educators instruct by lecturing. This form of teaching transferred to museums in spite of the profound differences (and considerable advantages) that teaching with original works of art, living creatures, architectural treasures, historic artifacts, and scientific specimens offer when compared to teaching with textbooks and blackboards.

Consider, also, the commonly accepted practice of teaching “academic disciplines” in isolation from one another. This approach dictates that science is taught during science class, and not during art; art is taught during art class, and not during science; and so forth.

Such manufactured barriers are artificial and somewhat arbitrary. They bear little resemblance to the powerful confluence of ideas, activities, and forces that combine to shape and affect everything in our world.

Museums tend to reinforce these academic divisions when they classify themselves as art, or history, or science. While this form of labeling is considered useful and perhaps even necessary, it need not limit the boundless potential inherent in their collections.

Museum collections are most interesting, and have their greatest impact, when the full spectrum of their implications is revealed. One way to communicate a broader range of importance and value to the visiting public is to provide them with an interdisciplinary view.

Are you photocopying The Docent Educator?

While it is flattering that some museums find the information and ideas presented in The Docent Educator valuable enough to photocopy and distribute to their volunteers, they may be sowing the seeds of its undoing.

The Docent Educator is a specialized publication and, as such, is costly to produce. It requires a thriving subscriber base to succeed and continue working to professionalize docent teaching.

It is hoped that institutional subscribers will recognize and support this publication’s efforts by urging all docents to subscribe, collect, and reference their own, personal copies of The Docent Educator, so that this journal might remain healthy, strong, and reasonably priced.
There are several methods of developing an interdisciplinary lesson. One is to consider your collection from an alternate academic vantage point. In an art museum, for example, a lesson could be constructed that looks at the evolution of art from a chemistry perspective. Such a tour might examine: the availability and properties of dyes and pigments; the qualities and uses of adhesive media like egg albumen, oils, and acrylics; or differences in the characteristics of the metals used to create photographic prints.

In an historic home, this method might result in a tour that explores the form of a building’s design from the view of physics and engineering. Or, in a botanical garden, such a lesson might shift the focus from botany to art by examining the visual effects of particular juxtapositions and arrangements in landscaping, or how hybridization satisfied a desire for alternate sizes, shapes, and colors.

Another method of developing an interdisciplinary approach is to incorporate a theme that is broad enough to enfranchise other disciplines as well as the one of primary concern to your institution. Consider, for example, the theme of “endangered species” in a zoo or natural history institution.

Any endangered species lesson should begin with a definition of what the term “endangered” means. Following this, learners would be shown several different animals and/or plants that are endangered.

The lesson might continue with the docent telling learners, “All of these different life forms share the ‘endangered’ status in common. Using your powers of observation and your ability to make comparisons, develop a list of everything that’s different about these creatures.”

A wide variety of answers could follow, depending upon the endangered species presented. They might include: some are large, others are small; some are mammals, others are reptiles or amphibians; some fly, others walk; some live in warm climates, others in cold; some live on land, others are aquatic; some live among humans, others far from civilization, and so forth.

Following this, docents might ask learners to interpret, or extract meaning from, the wide range of differences they found. Interpretations might range from “there are endangered species in all parts of the animal kingdom” to “there are threats to life forms in just about all environments and geographic areas of the world.”

The last part of the lesson might involve hypothesizing, or making informed guesses. Learners would make conjectures about the sources of threats to such diverse life forms living in so many different climates and terrains. Here, the conversation would flow through every discipline, and reveal the complexity and depth of the problem. Some responses, like natural selection, predator/prey relationships, or the health of ecosystems would be fairly "science-oriented." Others, such as the economics of pollution, population and urban growth, social customs, and agricultural patterns are the domain of the social sciences. Still others, like fashion or art, approach the subject of aesthetics.

An interdisciplinary approach when teaching can reveal the full spectrum of your institution’s collection. At the same time, it serves to enfranchise the many different interests and orientations of your visitors. As an added bonus, an interdisciplinary approach can be a fun and stimulating way to reinvigorate your own enthusiasm for your institution’s permanent collection.

Alan Gartenhaus
Publishing Editor

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Ask most first graders what they'll find in a museum and they'll say with assurance, “Dinosaurs!” I used to wonder why “museum” equaled “dinosaur” for our youngest visitors until I chanced upon a small, very bright, and infinitely mischievous monkey named George. “Curious George” is the principal character in a series of books for primaries. This simian alter ego allows first graders to go places and do things, and it is with George that many of them first visit a museum. The monkey’s curiosity demolishes a dinosaur exhibit and gets George kicked out on his prehensile tail. However, the monkey can 6-year-old is later enlisted by the museum director to go into space and, as the book title says, Curious George Gets a Medal.

Knowing something of the literature that children are reading will not only help docents understand their school-aged audiences, but can add another dimension to museum tours. Taking such an interdisciplinary approach is an effective way of preparing for tours, as well as another method of presentation.

Several books such as Curious George Gets a Medal (H.A. Rey, Houghton Mifflin, 1957) place the protagonist squarely within the museum milieu. Hercules, by Hardie Gramatky (Putnam, 1960), tells the story of a gaffin horse-drawn fire engine who, when mechanized equipment replaces him, receives a place of honor in the local history museum. In Norman the Doorman (Don Freeman, Penguin, 1981), a talented mouse who works at the Museum of Art enters an art competition and wins with an exquisite — and, obviously, very small — sculpture which astonishes the panel of human judges.

Reading either of these picture books to a group of 5- to 8-year-olds as they visit the fire engine exhibit in a history museum or the sculpture gallery of an art museum brings these adult exhibits into the children’s world. Reading a story can create a mood, introduce an exhibit, or merely provide a place to rest for tired little bodies. "Story time,” which is already a familiar and valuable part of their school day, helps demystify the museum experience for first-time visitors.

Museum fiction for older children cannot, of course, be read in its entirety, but can be referred to or recommended. Often, someone in the audience will have read the book and will be excited to share his or her knowledge with the group. Asking a volunteer to read a selected passage is another way to involve students. Care should be taken, of course, to select material within the reading level of students and “non-volunteers” should never be embarrassed by being asked to read.

Probably the best of the museum-centered children’s fiction is From the Mixed-Up Files of Mrs. Basil E. Frankweiler by E.L. Konigsburg (Atheneum, 1987). In this Newbery Award winning book for upper elementary children, Claudia decides to run away to return only when her family has learned a lesson in “Claudia appreciation.” Not one to give up her creature comforts, however, Claudia chooses to live for a while in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City. As she and her younger brother Jamie (who is included in the adventure only because he has money!) solve a mystery, Claudia learns some important lessons about herself and about secrets. Her new-found knowledge makes it possible for her to go home in style.

A natural for any art museum, From the Mixed-Up Files ... will help docents from museums of every discipline see the museum through the eyes of their fourth through sixth grade visitors. Children who have read the story will enjoy finding works by the artists mentioned in the book and will enthusiastically speculate on the possibilities of living in the museum they are visiting. (Docents might want to alert Security!)

In addition to stories that take place in museums, docents can enrich their tours through the use of topical fiction. Excerpts read from any of the Little House books by Laura Ingalls Wilder, for example, will put people into historic exhibits. Although principally about the settling of the American Midwest, these books mention artifacts found in most history museums and provide excellent descriptions of the uses of home and farm implements from our pioneer era. The Little House books were reissued in 1973 by Harper.

The Quilt Story (Putnam, 1985), written by Tony Johnston and illustrated by Tomie de Paola, is a delightful picture storybook to share with young visitors to a quilt exhibition. The book tells the history of a star-covered quilt that travels on a covered wagon, becomes a home for animals in an attic, and is finally rescued and repaired to once more comfort a child, a descendant of the original owner. This book is an effective vehicle for helping children see the stories behind a museum’s artifacts.

High school visitors, too, can have tours enriched through the use of quality fiction. An exhibit of period clothing gains new meaning when students have read Charles Dickens’s classic Great Expectations. As Pip’s status changes, so does his clothing. Adolescents in T-shirts and sneakers can better understand the social role of clothing in past generations when exhibitions and literature work together in such an interdisciplinary manner.

Children in upper elementary and middle school years are especially interested in biography. Biographies are an excellent springboards for discussion
in museums with "real people" connections. For example, one such book is *I, Juan de Pareja* (Farrar, Strauss, Giroux, 1987), by Elizabeth de Trevino. This fictionalized account of the life of Diego Velazquez is told by his servant, Juan de Pareja. Although only the Metropolitan Museum of Art owns the painting of Juan, any art museum with paintings from the Baroque period will find this book useful. Another is *Carry on Mr. Bowditch* (Jean Lee Latham, Houghton Mifflin, 1955), which should be part of the repertoire of any docent in a nautical museum as well as museums with exhibits from the Revolutionary War era. Youngsters will enjoy matching museum artifacts with details from the realistic drawings of the ship chandlery where young Nathaniel Bowditch began his scientific study of the sea. Both of these books are winners of the Newbery Award for outstanding children's literature.

Another Newbery Award winner can enliven tours at museums and nature centers with insect collections. In *Joyful Noise* (Harper and Row, 1988) Paul Fleischman has created poems meant to be read by two readers, one taking the left-hand part and the other the right-hand part. Words for both readers on the same line are to be read as a chorus. The result is a great read-aloud favorite with upper elementary and middle school students. The following example is entitled "Water Striders."

*Books in Print,* available in any library or bookstore, is a good place to begin a list of children's literature related to specific museum topics. School librarians and children's division personnel in public libraries can help docents identify the literature popular with particular ages of children. Making a place for literature in a museum's education program isn't difficult, and the dividends are worth the effort. (Plus, you have an excuse to read some great stories!)

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**Water Striders**

by Paul Fleischman

Whenever we're asked if we walk upon water we answer

To be sure.

Whenever we're asked if we walk on it often we answer

Quite often

All day through.

Should we be questioned on whether it's easy we answer

A snap.

Should we be told that it's surely a miracle we reply

Balderdash!

Nonsense!

Whenever we're asked for instructions we always say

and do as we do.

and then put down another,

Believe me, there's no call at all to be nervous

But by that time your student no matter how prudent has usually sunk from view.

Whenever we're asked if we walk upon water we answer

Of course.

It's quite true.

Whenever we're asked if we walk on it often we answer

Each day.

Should we be questioned on whether it's easy we answer

Quite easy.

It's a cinch.

Should we be told that it's surely a miracle we reply

Rubbish!

Whenever we're asked for instructions we always say

Come to the pond's edge

Put down one foot

resting upon the thin film on the surface.

as long as you're reasonably mindful that you —

But by that time your student has usually
don't ask me why sunk from view.

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Interdisciplinary Teaching

**Branches, Ties, and**

Curriculum development is an arena where museums can become national leaders. Our collections and exhibitions are excellent curricular resources if we develop approaches to teaching with these objects. In schools, subject matter content and teaching strategies become the basis for curriculum development and lesson planning. This can happen in museums too, if we re-think the way we design our tours. At the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, we call these “lessons.”

**Curriculum Development and Lesson Planning in Museums**

A lesson plan is not a rigid step-by-step rule for teaching. The best lesson plans provide guidance and suggest choices for the docent educator. Below are a few examples of activities described in museum-based lesson plans developed by the education staff and taught by docents at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia.

A recent exhibition of the work and life of 19th century painter Thomas Eakins included a re-creation of the artist's studio. Docents told students that the studio space could be considered Eakins' “office.” Then they asked, “What are some of the places or offices where your parents, or other people you know, work?”

The docents informed children that the objects seen in this space could be considered the “tools” that the artist needed to do his work. Students pointed out the “tools” they saw in the studio. Then the docents distributed “tool” cards (picture cards with illustrations of 19th-c. tools on them). Students were directed to discuss their tool cards with the student sitting next to them. Wherever possible, docents also showed students 20th-c. versions of the same tools by carrying prop bags into the gallery with them.

The focus on artists' tools and work spaces helped docents introduce the concepts of scientific and artistic anatomy, the artist’s use of perspective studies based on mathematical principles. These related to the material in the exhibition and held the interest of students who enjoy exploring science and math.

In another exhibition of narrative paintings, docents explored the visual, oral, and written tradition of storytelling using a nineteenth-century “gift book.” They told a story from the gift book to a group of students in the gallery before helping them create their own gift books to take home. They asked questions to create interdisciplinary links to the school curricula.

Examples of math questions included: On what month, day, and year does the story begin? When the story begins, Thomas is 14 and Margaret is one year younger. How old is she? Mr. Williams' rent was $100 a year. He paid one quarter’s rent in advance. How much did he pay?

Social studies questions included a comparison of the cost of living in 1835 with prices today. The groups also compared what a 14-year-old did then and now. At what age do most people marry today? How could we find this out? Docents also asked students to name three forms of transportation mentioned in the story. They queried, “How long would it take Mr. Williams to reach New York?”

In the area of language arts, docents introduced the notion that a fable is a story that teaches a moral lesson. Students brainstormed other fables they knew and the lessons implicit in them. Docents also helped students create their own stories based on works of art in the exhibition.

**Lessons From the Academy, a 100-page book of museum-based lesson plans from the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts is available for $25 (including postage and handling) by sending a check payable to the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts to the museum's education department, 118 North Broad Street, Philadelphia, PA 19102.**
New Connections

Museums can play a major role to foster interdisciplinary studies by developing pre-visit materials and lesson plans that distinguish problems to be solved and culminate in a variety of student projects that help teachers form from journals, to creative writing, to portfolios of drawings and other art work, to reports, analyses of experiments, interviews, or game design. These are all viable tools teachers can use to judge students’ acquisition of skills and facts and their integration with what the learner already knows.

With fewer resources allocated to individual schools, classroom teachers are frequently asked to justify school field trips. While docents, interpreters, explainers, and museum educators know the value of quality museum experiences, we need to do a better job of helping teachers respond to these concerns. The difference between thinking of the museum visit as a frill — a break in the school day — and thinking of the museum as a partner in education, lies in the way we communicate what we teach with original objects and the kind of teaching that takes place in the galleries.

Museums that deliver pre-visit products and services, followed by engaging museum visits and post-visit suggestions to extend the museum’s resources in the classroom, are institutions that want to align themselves with their local educational community. This kind of community cooperation advances the agendas of both schools and museums. While museum educators often lead this initiative, docents insure that it happens.

Indeed, museums can be models of institutions where visitors — young children, students, families, and adults — encounter a variety of social and educational opportunities. Visitors can try activities on their own or in small groups, watch a demonstration, apply a concept through guided experimentation, perceive and question, see a short film, and participate in debated discussions offering multiple points-of-view. When visitor-directed activities are combined with docent-directed experiences, museum galleries will have been transformed into rich and varied learning environments for members of our community.

Inez S. Wolins is the director of the Wichita Art Museum in Wichita, KS. Prior to this she held education positions in a number of art museums including the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts in Philadelphia where she served as curator of education. During that time, Ms. Wolins held a joint appointment in the graduate program in museum education at Bank Street College in Manhattan. Ms. Wolins earned her Ph.D. in educational communication and technology from New York University, has published over two dozen articles about teaching and learning in museums, and has delivered lectures and conducted workshops with docents for museums nationwide.

Props, such as those described in this article, and writing projects based on paintings in the museum’s collection can help students make new connections.

Photo: Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts
Learning Through Art

In 1991, the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, began a four-year curriculum development project called “Learning Through Art.” The purpose of this project was to establish the museum’s permanent collection as a major resource for elementary teachers. The project was funded initially by an NEA challenge grant.

A group of 18 elementary teachers from the Clear Creek school district, 25 miles south of Houston, are working with museum staff, school administrators, and consultants from the University of Houston to develop an art curriculum for grades 1 through 6 that is based on the museum’s permanent collection and correlated to existing curriculum and state mandates for social studies, science, language arts, and math.

The project places art at the center of the interdisciplinary curriculum. The teachers bring to this project extensive classroom experience in the other four subject areas, but little formal knowledge of art. The Clear Creek school district has no elementary art specialists.

The project curriculum is a series of classroom units at each grade level in all five subjects that focus on works of art in the museum’s collection. For example, the second grade teachers have developed a unit focusing on three ceramic vessels: Dog, 4th - 5th centuries, Colima, Mexico; Macaw Bowl, c. 1300, Casas Grandes; and Bowl, c. 1100, Mimbres.

▲ The art lesson comes first. Students discuss the vessels’ shapes, decoration, and function; produce a clay pot by writing sequential directions and creating illustrations. In social studies, the students compare and contrast the cultures that produced the pots and explore the differences between making and consuming things.

▲ The science lesson uses classifying, ordering, sequencing, and predicting skills to describe changes in the clay during the process of making pottery. Pupils also study the properties of clay and the effects of heat on different materials.

▲ The math lesson develops skills in measurement, estimation, probability and statistics. The children estimate the size of clay, weigh the clay, and compare the weight to their estimate. They also wet one piece of clay, let a second piece air dry, and fire a third piece, then chart the differences in color, length, weight, and so forth.

The team of third-grade teachers developed a unit based on three French paintings in the collection: Edouard Vuillard’s The Promenade; Gustave Caillebotte’s The Artist’s Brother in His Garden; and The Turning Road by Andre Derain.

▲ The art lesson focuses on comparing and contrasting these views of people outdoors with special attention paid to the styles of the paintings - use of color, brushstrokes, depiction of figures. The students then create paintings of people engaged in leisure activities out-of-doors.

▲ In language arts, students work in cooperative groups to write plays about the people and setting in one of the museum’s paintings. The groups then present their plays to the rest of the class.

▲ The social studies lesson examines the value of parks and recreational areas to people and to a city. Students research how parks are planned and by whom, and how parks are financed. Students then create their ideal park.

▲ Contrasting man-made and natural objects is the theme of the

Dog Colima, Western Mexico (after 250 A.D.)
The Museum of Fine Arts, Houston
photo: A. Newbourn
By Beth B. Schneider

In order to help teachers use the reproductions most effectively, the project was designed so that teachers spent extensive time working with the collection in the museum. From June through early August, teachers served as museum docents, leading tours through all areas of our permanent collection. Their audiences included summer school classes from elementary, middle, and high school; day camps; preschool/day care groups; adult groups; and drop-in visitors.

There were several reasons for having the teachers become docents. Only by teaching with the original works of art could teachers bring the slides and posters to life and convey their power and unique qualities to students. Also, we wanted the teachers’ enthusiasm for the original works to inspire their students to visit the museum. In addition, the museum setting challenged teachers to experiment with new teaching methods that, we hoped, would carry over into the classroom.

In training the teachers as docents, we combined our usual docent education format of lectures, tours of the permanent collection, and tour technique workshops with art-making activities. The studio sessions were taught by museum staff, but the lectures and gallery sessions were taught by experienced docents. Because they work with diverse audiences every day, the docents were the best role models for teachers facing a new learning (and teaching) environment. The project gave our docents a new level of confidence and strengthened the relationship between the museum’s volunteer teachers and the professional teachers who rely on their services.

The classroom teachers were unanimous in their praise of the docents’ teaching skills. Comments include: “[The docents] helped me realize that there are different approaches;” “they [the docents] personalized their tours for us, modeling how we could personalize our tours ...;” “they taught me what kinds of questions to ask;” and “they helped me ... be prepared with extra works of art in case my tour had to change.”

The teachers were greatly impressed by the wealth of the docents’ knowledge of the collection in particular and the history of art in general. One teacher wrote “I must emphasize that the

Science lesson. Students discuss ways in which people help preserve nature and the ways they harm it.

▲ In math, students study the paintings to understand depth, space, and distance. They imagine themselves in the paintings and estimate the distances portrayed, related these space measurements to the park plan developed in the social studies unit, redraw their park plan in a designated scale, and estimate the cost of buying land for parks at current real estate prices.

In the classroom, teachers use slides and posters of works from the MFA Houston’s collection. These reproductions give teachers great flexibility in comparing and contrasting works of art, and teachers especially like the fact that the posters can remain up in the room all the time.

Teachers participating in the Learning Through Art project train to become summer docents in order to lead tours and gain new perspectives in teaching.
docs' degree of knowledge concerning specific pieces was extremely useful. The discussion of African art, stories of diviners and spirits, provided me with great material for grabbing the interest of 'challenging' groups.

The teachers were inspired by the docs' enthusiasm for teaching in the galleries. Comments include "they transmitted their enthusiasm and love for the art" and "they told personal stories [about tours] that made me enthusiastic about being a docent."

When asked to compare the museum to the classroom as teaching environments, the teachers commented on the museum's diverse audience, and the anxiety and challenge that come with teaching different age groups. Teachers were concerned that they didn't know their audience in the museum as they do in school.

"You do not know their names or the learning styles of the children you are touring. Touring requires that you constantly 'size-up' and adapt to different age groups and different interest groups."

Several teachers noted that adjusting to a learning environment in which people were constantly moving from one place to another was difficult. But perhaps the most telling remark came from a second grade teacher.

"The classroom teacher can evaluate and delight in watching the kids put their art knowledge to use after they return from the museum. The docent can only guess about what the children took with them from the museum."

But the teachers still found great rewards even from their limited time with audiences. "I was impressed by the responsiveness of the teenagers I toured — they volunteered to answer almost as much as the little ones." One noted that at the end of a tour a group of teenaged girls objected vehemently when their group leader said it was time to go shopping at the Galleria. They wanted to stay at the museum!

How has being a docent impacted classroom instruction? Almost all teachers emphasized that working in the galleries reinforced the idea that art could be used effectively to teach a variety of subject areas. One teacher noted that "I find myself not only enjoying art works because of their aesthetic value, but also I seem to automatically think of those art works in terms of how they relate to different curricula."

Teachers commented that the teaching techniques they used in the galleries have improved their classroom instruction. "I have become a better questioner, always aware that active participation results in thinking, questioning, 'wanting to know more' students." Teaching in the museum "upgraded the quality of literature and books I use in the classroom" and "I am more in tune with seeing nature and details of the earth just as an artist does."

Finally, these teachers now use the museum library on a regular basis.

Having teachers work as summer docs is an enormously successful and rewarding project, one we at the MFA Houston encourage other museums to try. These teachers have a new kind of relationship with the museum that goes beyond attending programs or bringing their classes for tours. These teacher-docents are now an important part of the museum, they are making a significant contribution, and they thus feel a sense of ownership in the institution. This sense of belonging has been a feature of docent programs for years, and we are pleased that we were able to make a place for teachers as well. Finally, the teacher-docents are helping bring new audiences to the museum. The parents in one first grade class booked a museum tour led by their children's teacher because they wanted to experience the museum with her.

Docent education is an on-going process where much of the learning takes place by doing. We in the education department of the MFA Houston have developed new respect for the dedication and skills our docs bring to their job when we see how long it takes for experienced classroom teachers to become effective gallery teachers. Through this project, we are all learning about teaching and learning about learning, and developing new respect for our volunteer and teaching colleagues.

For more information on "Learning Through Art" please call the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Education Department at (713) 639-7590. A curriculum kit will be available in January, 1994.
We know that young children learn by exploring, observing, manipulating objects, and imitating what they perceive of the world around them. When properly used, museums can be fun and exciting places providing experiences that encourage young children to learn.

At the Kingman Museum we have made several slight changes in our operations that greatly enhance learning by pre-schoolers. Shorter, multiple visits where students build upon their previous experiences have proven the most useful. We've also learned to find out what subject area the pre-school class is concentrating on at school. A short conversation with the teacher allows for a better adjustment of programming to fit their needs. Museum visits that are isolated from classroom instruction are not nearly as effective as cooperative learning experiences between the classroom curriculum and the museum.

At Kingman, we allow for exploratory learning. Pre-schoolers are naturally curious, eager, and socially and physically active. We design our programs to take advantage of these attributes.

Should your institution be working to improve its educational impact with younger audiences, you might be interested in a guide we developed titled "Tips on Visiting Kingman Museum with Young Children." Though it is specific to our museum, it provides easily adaptable suggestions that will work in any museum setting. A free copy is available by sending a self-addressed, stamped envelope to: Kingman Museum of Natural History, W. Michigan at 20th Street, Battle Creek, MI 49017. Please mark your request to the attention of the Education Department.

Paul H. Rheaume & Lisa Murphy
Education Department, Kingman Museum of Natural History

It Works for Me ... Docents share techniques they find successful.

Being thorough works for me. I find that the better acquainted I am with a school, the teachers, and the students, the better my teaching and their experiences will be.

At the Los Angeles Arboretum Foundation, docents (which we call field leaders) take turns being "Leader of the Day" for school visitors. When it is my turn, I phone the school to learn the teachers' names and titles (for instance, Mrs. Peta and Ms. Dunham). Then, I look at the listing of the California Assessment Program (CAP) test scores published annually in the Los Angeles Times. These tests, which are administered to third, sixth, and eighth graders, give me some information about the visiting school's performance in both reading and math.

Prior to their visit, I send the teachers a personal letter welcoming them, confirming the date and time of their tour, and reminding them of where we are to meet. They also receive a "group registration form" to present upon their arrival on the tour day. This form informs the Arboretum of the number of adults and students attending and lists information and rules about visiting our facility that teachers should review with their classes prior to arriving.

Before leaving my home on the day of the tour, I type a brief note to give to the teachers at the end of their visit. Enclosed with this note are follow-up materials for classroom activities, several postcards that relate to the areas or plants they and their classes will see, and the names of the field leaders providing their tours.

Teachers and their students often write following their visits. When they do, I answer them. In my letter, I make an effort to recall what we saw and accomplished together, and to review some of the salient facts we learned.

The letters I've received over the years provide valuable feedback about my teaching. They let me know which techniques I've used are most successful. For instance, recent letters reinforced my belief that it is best to encourage children to explore and learn using all their senses and that, by including a few Spanish words when conducting Spanish-speaking students on a tour, I can help reinforce the students' self-esteem.

I hope these comments are useful. I am really enjoying my subscription to The Docent Educator.

Maris A. Grumell, Field Leader
Los Angeles Arboretum Foundation
A Garden Classroom

The Tree of Education

Wanted: Docents. Must be able to point, herd, communicate in one syllable words, and clean dirt from under fingernails (Ex-mud pie makers are perfect!).

This seemingly whimsical wording is the product of hours of careful planning and coordination that also signals the beginning of the final stages for Longue Vue House and Garden’s educational programs.

The Seed

Our tree of education began with “a seed” - a vision to educate students, allowing them to experience a garden environment that many inner city kids never see. In this living laboratory, the children are put into a three-dimensional setting full of new sights, sounds, and smells.

The Roots

The program began very simply, by reviewing the subject of basic plant propagation in conjunction with 4th grade science classes. By focusing on the school’s curriculum, and how classes were structured, the roots of our “education tree” were properly established. Over the years, our program has evolved into a circle of sciences, starting with their classroom materials and quickly moving to encompass Botany, Biology, Ecology, and Nutrition using the garden as a tactile blackboard.

The Trunk

Beyond the subject matter, the strength of this program is a dedicated staff. The staff does all of the groundwork, nurtures docents, procures donations, and generally puts up with those aggravations that volunteers shouldn’t have to.

The Branches

Aside from the staff, this program involves the cooperation of three branches: the Louisiana Cooperative Extension Service, which provides teachers and class materials; the New Orleans Public School System, which provides the students and chaperones; and the much appreciated docents, who are the binding force throughout the entire process through their preparation and patience.

An “in-service” class or training session is held for docents, cooperative extension personnel, and teachers. During this two-hour class, general introductions are made, the subject material is reviewed through handouts, and most importantly — refreshments are served.

Then, the school teachers and docents are taken on tours of the gardens. There are several stops along the way to discuss various plants and terms that the children will be using during their visit. These bastions of the classroom now become part of a mock class and are encouraged to “see everything through the eyes of a nine year-old” by imitating their students. Not only does this experience provide valuable insights, but coffee break talk for at least a week.

At Longue Vue, we prefer foresight to hindsight. Teaching 30 children, on a hot day, in a garden filled with distractions can have the makings of a disaster that could drive even the most experienced teachers and docents to insanity. It is only through communication and extensive preparation that this becomes a win-win situation for all parties involved.

After the “in-service” class ends, training for the cooperative extension personnel and the students and their teachers is complete. Meanwhile, the docent training continues.
**The Leaves**

The docents arrive early to prepare for their students, carefully setting out soil, plants, seeds, pots, and goodie bags for their charges. They know that the children come to learn what most of us seem to have forgotten—that tomatoes grow on vines not in cans, the apples for grandma’s pie came from a tree, and that there are untold wonders under the leaves in the woods.

As the children arrive, they are greeted and taken to the class area. The class begins without delay as it is very important to keep things moving with words, actions, and examples.

The lesson, though “of the sciences,” is interdisciplinary. Students begin with basic plant botany by dissecting a flower. This allows them to review material from their class and is a foundation for other topics as well. Next, displays of seeds are passed around and identified. This moves the discussion to propagation with hands-on examples of bulbs, cuttings, and grafts.

Nutrition is then introduced. Calories, vitamins, and fiber are discussed. Special attention is given to the “tire” garden. The tire garden consists of flowers and vegetables grown inside discarded tires. The tire garden shows students an inventive method of inner city gardening and a productive way of recycling.

Then the children talk about soil and the environment as they put their own bulbs. Following that, they peruse their goodie bags, which are filled with colorful handouts and packets of seeds.

The children use their name tags to mark the bags containing their new plants, handouts, and materials.

Now, the tour begins. With very few deviations from the practice tour, the children are skillfully guided through a maze of gardens. Our 8 small acres represent a vast wonderland of “Giant Redwood trees (oaks)...prehistoric rocks (gravel)...pine needles...butterflies...frogs...and strange and exotic plants,” which we are assured by the kids “have probably never been touched by human hands.” It’s amazing watching the students’ interest unfold with awe. Could their eyes open any wider?

The children are led to the final stop where they will sit within a cathedral of live oak trees and enjoy oatmeal cookies and lemonade. The choice of refreshments is reinforced with another short discussion of nutrition.

Perhaps the children don’t know that they’re learning because it’s too much fun. Perhaps they don’t realize they’re receiving a lesson because they are outside their four classroom walls. Perhaps they didn’t know that it’s okay to dig in the dirt, to have a baby plant that’s all your own, or that oatmeal cookies are healthy, and why they are. But we know — everything was carefully planned that way.

All the planning and training comes together as the children are successfully taught our circle of sciences under the watchful eyes of our docents.

Our tree has grown and strengthened, and every year we get new leaves.

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John Marshall Harris is the Head Gardener with Longue Vue House and Gardens in New Orleans, Louisiana. He came to Longue Vue with 13 years experience in his field and a B.S. degree in horticulture from Louisiana State University. Mr. Harris currently directs the widely acclaimed “Learners at Longue Vue” public school program.
From Haiti to Louisiana

A Cultural Legacy

"W hat do shotgun houses, Creole-speaking Cajuns, and vodun rituals in Louisiana have in common with Haiti? Everything!" Students, teachers, museum visitors, and docents all made this discovery through an innovative cross-cultural, interdisciplinary exhibition, Haitian Cultural Legacy: From the Caribbean to Louisiana. Developed and presented by the Meadows Museum of Art at Centenary College in Shreveport, Louisiana, the exhibition was made possible through the generosity of one man, Dr. Jean C. Bierre, and a grant from the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities.

Dr. Bierre, a native Haitian and Shreveport doctor, began collecting the art of his homeland in 1944, building a personal relationship with many of the artists over the years through trips back to Haiti. The majority of his collection of 160 paintings and 50 sculptures formed the nucleus of the exhibit.

Through research on both the works in the collection and Haiti's artistic traditions, it soon became apparent that Haiti and Louisiana shared a number of diverse historical and cultural influences. Native Indian, Spanish, African, French, white, and blue. The white middle band was torn out to symbolize the end of white French domination over the country that became the first black republic and the first to achieve independence as the result of a successful slave revolt. For student tours, Rae made a flag with a white insert attached with velcro. Students were actually able to "rip" out the white, emphasizing the symbolic action represented by the colors of the flag.

Docents indicated clearly what they wanted students to focus on in a work of art. While a group stood in front of a predominately blue, monochromatic painting, Barbara Gramling asked a quiet child in her group, "Does this make you feel warm or cool?" The shades of blue in this surrealistic work prompted responses from even the shyest student. Barbara followed up with the question, "What emotion or idea do you think the artist was trying to convey?" which elicited various comments ranging from "lonely" and "scared" to "dreamlike." The discussion continued for some time from just these two specific opening questions.

• Questioning Strategies

Docents asked questions of visitors to encourage the development of aesthetic response, critical thinking, and active involvement with works. Because many of the art works in the exhibition depicted emotionally-charged themes and issues such as slavery and vodun, it was also important for docents to be accepting of varied responses and to be able to deal dispassionately and objectively with difficult or controversial questions and statements.

Aesthetic discussions focused on Haiti's rich and active art traditions, primarily characterized by vibrant color and mystical imagery. The approach to questioning on docent tours was often suggested by the characteristics of a work itself.

"What do you think is happening in the painting?" was a question Rae Ogier asked to get students involved in a discussion about a work depicting the creation of the Haitian flag. This simple question led the students into a complex investigation of the symbolic meaning of a flag.

The red and blue Haitian flag was created from the French tricolor of red, white, and blue. The white middle band was torn out to symbolize the end of white French domination over the country that became the first black republic and the first to achieve independence as the result of a successful slave revolt. For student tours, Rae made a flag with a white insert attached with velcro. Students were actually able to "rip" out the white, emphasizing the symbolic action represented by the colors of the flag.

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• Compare and Contrast Questions

The variety of work in this exhibition offered many opportunities for compare and contrast questions. For instance, paintings showing women with baskets on their heads were the overwhelming choice of students asked, "Which art work do you think best represents or describes Haiti?"

Following this, Barbara Gramling engaged students in discussions comparing differences in Haitian and American life-styles: shopping traditions; leisure time; clothing; government; religion; and freedom — virtually every aspect of the heritage, cultural values, and traditions depicted by the art.
A more emotional reply was given to this same question, “Which art work best represents Haiti?”, when asked by docent Mary Koch of a student who selected a monochromatic sepia wash of a harbor. His response was that, for him, it depicted what life for Haitians must really be like, as it had such a somber look and the water and boats symbolized the best means of escape.

**Descriptive Exercises**

Descriptive exercises were sometimes used as an entry into questioning strategies. Standing in front of a painting showing a laborer carrying a huge stalk of bananas on his head, docent Barbara Dupree asked her group of sixth graders to “Describe what you see in this work as completely as possible.” This question led to a discussion of banana trees, the fact that bananas are picked green, and the way in which the fruit grows.

Barbara then asked if anyone was familiar with Harry Belafonte’s song “Day-O,” a song about harvesting bananas. Those students who knew the song usually did not know what it meant. Through further discussion, students learned its meaning, as well as a new word, “tally.” They sang the lyrics:

“Hey, Mr. Tally-man,
Tally me bananas,
Daylight comes and
I wanna go home.”

Thus a painting, which held little initial interest for the class, became one of their favorites.

Another descriptive exercise led to some serious thoughts about ecology. While a group discussed deforestation in Haiti, one third grade boy said, “I didn’t know you could cut down all the trees in a country. Is that what they’re talking about when they talk about destroying the rain forest?” At the end of the tour, this same student motioned for the docent to follow him. He pointed to a forested landscape and said, “That’s my favorite ‘cause I know now what can happen to our trees if we cut them all down.”

**Interdisciplinary Connections**

To provide a specific example of the contributions black Haitians made to the culture of Louisiana, the development of the “shotgun” house was traced through its roots in Africa, adaptation in Haiti, and expansion from New Orleans throughout the Southern United States.

Docent Barbara Chitman took pride in telling her 8th grade tour group that she grew up in a shotgun house. Using the paintings as a catalyst, she led students into a discussion of the significance of the architectural style. Shotgun houses were the most common type of dwelling among free blacks.

Connections were also emphasized between Haitian and Louisiana carnival (Mardi Gras) traditions. There is a similar adoption of a Plains Indian costume by blacks in both places. “Black Indians,” as they are called in New Orleans, have adapted native Indian costume, embellishing them with intricate sequin and feather designs similar to costumes appearing in Haitian paintings and festivals.

**Other Activities**

Two hands-on activities, festival masks (elementary level) and cut paper designs based on metal cutouts (secondary level), were provided in the teacher packets as a culminating art production activity. Other information in this interdisciplinary packet for teachers included an exhibition brochure, historical information, a map of Haiti, vocabulary, information about shotgun houses, Haitian heroes, and a historical timeline.

**Conclusion**

The use of appropriate questioning strategies and interdisciplinary connection by docents contributed greatly to the quality of the museum experience and encouraged critical thinking and thoughtful response among its visitors and students.

Questioning allowed for discovery learning, open investigation, and thoughtful response by students. The traditional constraints of subject area were disregarded in favor of a meaningful program that celebrated the full range of creativity inherent in the human spirit.

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Judy Godfrey is the director of the Meadows Museum of Art at Centenary College in Shreveport, Louisiana.

Nancy Walkup Reynolds is project coordinator of the North Texas Institute for Educators on the Visual Arts in Denton, Texas, and educational consultant to the Meadows Museum of Art in Shreveport.
In an effort to strengthen the educational bridge between the schools and museums, Phi Delta Kappa has developed a one-day workshop for museum educators and classroom teachers.

**The workshop provides:**
- a history and explanation of discipline-based art education.
- a sample of a discipline-based art curriculum.
- a demonstration of aesthetic scanning.
- gallery activities.

The workshop presenter is Gayle M. Southworth. Ms. Southworth is an experienced classroom teacher, a trainer for the SWRL Elementary Art Program, and has worked in museum education and docent training for the Honolulu Academy of Arts, the Witte Memorial Museum, the McNay Art Institute, and the Smithsonian Institution.

The cost of the one-day workshop is $1,500. This includes presenter’s fees, all expenses, and workshop materials. If you have questions or would like to schedule a workshop, please contact Shari Bradley:

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