Docent Programming

Recruiting, Training, and Evaluating

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A recent declaration by the American Association of Museums stating that “there is an educational purpose in every museum activity” (Excellence and Equity. 1992. Washington, DC: American Association of Museums) could be considered true ... at least conceptually. However, this view is not consistent with reality. In practice, the purpose of museum activities can more accurately be divided into three distinct and different categories: administrative, curatorial, and educational.

Administration is the governing arm of an institution. Administrative duties are “operations-based,” and involve overseeing the mission and direction of the institution, hiring and terminating employees, sustaining the fiscal health of the institution, fund-raising, protective services, and maintaining the integrity of physical structures.

Those in the curatorial division are guardians of the collections. Curatorial duties are “object-based,” and involve preserving, conserving, insuring, researching, cataloging, and determining the physical context and presentation of the collection.

Education is the museum’s public service division. Education is “people-based” and is concerned with engaging visitors, communicating, instructing, interpreting, enfranchising, ensuring access, audience-building, and public relations.

Though overlap among personnel and responsibilities exists within these divisions, different motivations drive their concerns and fuel their actions. Administrators focus on the institution and its functions, curators on the collection and its presentation, and educators on the public and special constituencies.

Notice that the impelling force initiating most administrative and curatorial efforts is internal (i.e. - the physical institution, the collection, and exhibitions), while the force initiating most educational endeavors is external (i.e. - visitors, students, and potential audiences). This difference in perspective — education’s concern for, and response to, external exigencies as opposed to internal ones — is a recurrent source of confusion for many within the museum profession, and can blur or even convolute education’s true purpose.

What is the true purpose of education? What should educators work to accomplish? While reflecting upon the controversy surrounding such questions, the eminent educator and philosopher Matthew Lipman writes, “Education should aim to produce reasonable, judicious, and creative individuals. There are many who object to such a goal, on the ground that it emphasizes method at the expense of content — it exaggerates the importance of how one learns and underestimates the importance of what one needs to know. I think that those who raise this objection are in error. It is true that we can be knowledgable without being reasonable, judicious, or creative; we can be staid and pedantic ignoramuses.” (Education for Thinking. 1992. New York: Cambridge University Press. p. 92.)

As Professor Lipman states, the purpose of education is to teach people to think reasonably, judiciously, and creatively within a context or discipline. In museums, therefore, educational programming’s priority ought not to be the transfer of information about the collection or to predetermine the manner in which a visitor perceives the collection, but to respond to the visitor’s need to become a more effective and independent thinker in such environments.

Unlike their colleagues within the museum profession, educators view their institution’s collection as a “vehicle” — a point-of-departure — rather than as the measure of what should be learned — a point-of-destination. In other words, an educator does not teach using a Jackson Pollock painting simply to transfer information about that one, particular work of art. (That information can be succinctly included in a label.) An educator teaches how to look at, analyze, and respond to Art, using a Jackson Pollock painting as a significant and worthy example.

Education’s aim, therefore, should be to teach visitors how to observe, compare, classify, infer, deduce, induce, hypothesize, explain, interpret, imagine, and decide — using inquiry and critical thinking skills that promote reasonable, judicious, and creative investigation and reflection. For it is the ability to perform these thinking activities that enables a person to grow and become independent in learning situations.

While it is not wrong to teach content within museums, this approach falls short of education’s pre-eminent mission and purpose. It can lead one to think of content as definite and finite, which it is not. And, since content is most often conveyed using an authoritative style of instruction, visitors are passive and learn nothing about acquiring information or developing meaning on their own. While “telling” may appease the museum visitors’ desire to know without having to work, it does not address their need to learn through the mastery of such skills as investigating, extrapolating, and constructing meaning.

Teaching students/visitors how to learn is more essential than telling them what should be remembered. “Telling” does little to promote ownership of information. What is heard is much more easily forgotten than what is experienced through involved thinking. And, after all, facts are not immutable.
nor is content. Both can and do change. The reputation of artists, the classification of species, historical interpretations, causal relationships, and so forth are revised and re-defined over time. (Consider, for instance, the many geo-political changes that occurred during the past few years. Is it really more important to remember the content of a specific map than to have learned how to read and analyze the information found on maps?)

Once one decides that the true purpose of education is to respond to the externally-driven goal of enhancing a visitor’s thinking skills, rather than to mirror the internally-driven goal of accumulating, chronicling, and transferring specifics, everything changes. No where are those changes more significant or affecting than in structuring docent programs.

The whole purpose of docent interaction with the public changes from dispensing information to inquiry teaching and facilitated learning. Therefore, the emphasis of docent training shifts from delivering information to instruction and communication, as docents change their focus from product to process.

When docents are expected to conduct themselves as teachers, rather than as hostesses or “talking labels,” their duties become more demanding, more affecting, and require greater independence of action. Staff members having such a high level of visibility, responsibility, and authority would be considered, and expected to perform, as professionals. It is, therefore, appropriate that docents should be so recognized and challenged.

Changing the docents’ status to “volunteer professional” creates several difficult transitions. Professionals are held to a high level of performance standards, are held accountable for their actions, and are provided with compensation for their efforts. As professionals, docents would be expected to fulfill binding commitments, participate in all professional development deemed necessary, be accountable for their performance, and be rigorously evaluated. In return, as professionals, docents should be entitled to some form of tangible compensation for their efforts, and afforded the same professional courtesies, growth opportunities, and level of enfranchisement given to paid staff.

These changes can threaten museum staffers, especially those who feel under compensated themselves. They can also threaten some volunteers who did not choose this form of community service to be measured by professional standards. Nonetheless, the responsibilities of education are too important, and the consequences of poor teaching or public relations are too great, to allow these objections to override the real need to professionalize docent corps.

It was the museum profession that chose to use volunteers to perform the essential responsibility of public education. Therefore, it is the museum profession that should be held accountable for providing these volunteers with the best and most rigorous training, support, and resources possible. This is especially crucial in light of the American Association of Museums’ proclamation of a renewed commitment to quality education, and its assertion that education is eminent among museum activities and responsibilities.

While some staff may object, and some among the docent ranks may end their voluntary service, the process of professionalizing docents will ultimately benefit all. It will establish an even more highly effective corps of educators, worthy of the respect they deserve; it will add to the fulfilling nature of voluntary service by heightening the challenges and adding to its prestige; and, it will provide museums with the caliber of educators they require and that most conscientious docents strive to be.
Approaches to Docent Recruitment and Selection

Staff and volunteers often wonder about attrition among docent staffs. Who might drop out? Who plans to come back in the fall? Will there be enough docents? What new program initiatives will require the museum to add more docents for the next year?

Over the years, museum educators have developed effective recruitment approaches that work, and The Docent Educator is one of the few forums to share these ideas. This article may help educators and docents expand their thinking about recruitment activities by borrowing a few strategies from the fields of education, human resources, and communications.

To help you plan ahead, here are a few pointers.

Tried and Tested Recruitment Ideas

▲ Start a file to gather names and addresses of potential docents.
Throughout the year, adults may call to inquire about your docent program. Keep their names in a file so you can contact them when you are ready to launch a recruitment campaign. If your museum maintains mailing lists of individuals and groups who have participated in museum programs or taken a tour during the last two years, add their names to the file as well. Keep the list current (under a year old) since it is often difficult to maintain a list that is not current, and since people move. You may want to add the names and addresses of larger apartment complexes and nearby offices that have employee newsletters. The museum’s development staff may guide you in this direction.

Active docents should be considered a resource, providing names of friends and neighbors who might be interested.

▲ Compose and mail a letter of intent. The letter should begin, “The Museum is recruiting a new class of volunteer museum tour guides (docents).” Many people are unfamiliar with: (a) the term “docent,” and (b) with the fact that docents are volunteers.

Keep the letter to one page. In the first paragraph, inform the reader about what docents do for museums. Secondly, share the time of the new class and its requirements, and finally, tell the reader what personal benefits and rewards she or he receives by serving the museum as a docent. End the letter with a phone number to call for more information.

▲ Prepare a recruitment brochure. Even if it’s a quick-print or desk-top flyer, a brochure serves two purposes: it provides the inquirer with more detailed information, and it serves as a request for a personal interview to learn more about the program. Send it in response to any phone inquiries for information.

▲ Stage photo sessions to create a file of 8x10" black-and-white glossy photographs of docents in action giving tours. Prepare photo captions with each print and send them to community newspapers and employee newsletters, with particular emphasis on the local newspaper in the docents’ own neighborhood. The media like to run photos and stories about people in their neighborhoods who contribute time in community service projects. Send the captioned photo with a press release. Again, keep it short and simple with a headline such as, “Pied Piper Jane Doe of ___ (neighborhood or township) Creates Tours de Force at ___ Museum.” Let the press know about the docent in one paragraph. Mention the museum and its uniqueness in another. Give the museum history and announce the formation of the new class along with a phone number for more information in the final paragraph.
**Establish the Selection Criteria**

**△ Create an application form for the new docent class.** An application form can take the appearance of a simple employment document asking for name, address, phone numbers, work experience, volunteer experience, and education. You may want to ask a few open-ended questions to learn more about the candidate: List special courses taken (e.g. - art or art history), hobbies, interests, and special skills. What do you think are the main duties of a museum docent? What do you believe to be the main purpose of a museum tour? What kind of supervisor or teacher do you prefer? Do you prefer to work alone or within a group? When are you available (weekends only, weekdays only, weeks and week days, how many days per week)? Do you prefer working with children, teenagers, adults?

**△ Conduct personal interviews.**

Ask museum education staff and an active docent to share the interview process as a pair. It is helpful to create a guide for docent interviews so all applicants hear the same information. Include a list of interview questions. An active docent may also give the interested applicants a short tour of the museum building. Thank applicants and let them know you'll be back in touch within a few days. Fill out a brief summary report immediately following the interview.

Employers can attest to the need for careful and thorough decision-making because it is costly to hire the wrong staff member; it we think of docents as professional unpaid museum staff members, the same holds true. Although it may seem laborious at first, creating a rating scale from one to five may help, with one being very low and five being very high. Keep notes during or after each interview according to these factors:

- **A commitment to learning.** The desire to continue learning is what makes a docent a creative and effective teacher. The process of learning requires the investment of time, the discipline to read, study, and evaluate, the attitude of a lifelong learner.
- **An interest in and aptitude for teaching.** Effective teachers are enthusiastic about their subject, constantly seek further knowledge, and are clear about what they intend to teach. They understand how people learn, and are flexible, inventive, adaptable, and resourceful.
- **An ability to represent the museum.** Docents are liaisons between the visiting public and the museum. In part, the image of the museum is reflected by what the docents say and do.

The importance of rating a prospective docent goes hand-in-hand with the concept of "docent as teacher" which is central to the role of the docent.

It is founded on the premise that museums are vital educational institutions. Twentieth-century museums are dedicated to the tasks of collecting, conserving, exhibiting, and interpreting objects. Because of the sensitive role it plays in the major task of interpretation, the docent program is under the auspices of the museum's education department. An effective docent directs the attention of the visitor to the object and to concepts relating to that object. Teaching with real objects defines museums as unique institutions for contemplating, inquiring, and clarifying.

Some of the traits associated with these characteristics, such as oral communication ability, can only be determined in an interview. Traits related to personality, imagination, and motivation may also be proper areas for judgment in an interview. Limit the interview time to 20 minutes. In the interest of uniformity of response from a wide range of interviewers, focus the interview on two characteristics: oral communication ability and motivation. The interview form is structured to accomplish this.

An interview may consist of three parts: putting the applicant at ease; giving the applicant an opportunity to talk about her or his interests and accomplishments; and, answering the applicant's questions about the museum and the docent program.

You may evaluate the candidate's performance during the interview in two categories:

- **Motivation.** The traits we want to evaluate have to do with discipline,
drive, persistence in carrying a task to completion, and creativity in attaining a goal, all in relation to success in and a commitment to the docent program.

* Oral Communication. This is a more transparent characteristic which will be presented as a natural product of the interview. The traits we want to evaluate have to do with clarity of thought and the ability to express thought orally in an organized and clearly understandable manner.

Docents have found the structure interview described above is easy and fun to conduct, and it has proven to be a useful aid in selecting new docents.

It is important to effectively communicate appropriate and accurate information about the museum and your docent program when answering applicants’ questions. Answer questions honestly. Do not let the interview close vaguely. Let the applicant know what the next step in the selection process will be. You may want to reiterate the time commitment and inquire if the time commitment or transportation could pose a problem. Applicants who are accepted as docent candidates will be notified by phone call or letter and will begin a ___ week/month internship on [date and time].

After the Selection Process

Once the interviews are complete, follow-through with these important steps:

- Send a follow-up “thank you” letter inviting the applicant to become a docent candidate. Often, there is little need to “reject” an applicant if the interview process is structured as the one described above. Applicants will prefer to self-select and screen themselves out once they’ve learned how much time and energy being a docent will require. If you do not believe the applicant is a good match, telephone the individual and explain this, offering to pass their name along to a different museum department that may use volunteers and want to know about his or her special interests and skills.

- Create a “Welcome Packet” for new recruits. On the first day of the new docent class meeting, distribute a folder to each participant including a fact sheet about the museum, information about parking lots and nearby restaurants if necessary, a clearly defined job description of the docent’s role and responsibilities, a class outline or syllabus for each session during the course/semester, and a name tag for the docent to wear. As a special courtesy, include a list of names and address of all class members for information exchange.

- Remember that initial impressions really do count, so spend time planning for the first class session. Provide simple refreshments and design your program to include a few docents who will be asked to share their personal insights, show a few slides of tours and letters from tour group participants, and stress the value of the docent program in the context of the museum’s mission. Ask experienced docents to greet visitors at the door and to sit at round tables to speak with prospects informally. In art museums, docents often receive formal art history and museum education instruction for many weeks or months before starting to think about giving tours. Before focusing on the content of the class, be sure to give individuals time to share something about themselves along with introductions. Invent creative ways to introduce all class members to one another. If active docents will also be in the class with new docents, assign a mentor or partner for each new member.

- Celebrate the completion of the docent course with a luncheon, “graduation,” or other special event. Introduce appropriate ways to integrate the new group with the current touring program and with other active docents. This step is essential to help docents master the skills needed to be effective teachers and there is ample literature in the fields of teacher education and museum education to help you create a smooth and meaningful transition. The job of successful recruitment and selection doesn’t represent the end of an activity; it represents the beginning of a new venture for all involved.

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**In Memoriam**

We report with sadness that Sister Eileen Rice, O.P. lost her battle against breast cancer this past January.

Sister Eileen was the Director of Teacher Education for Siena Heights College, a featured speaker at several of the National Docent Symposia, and a guest instructor before many institutional audiences around the country. Her well-honed teaching skills, boundless energy, and infectious good humor made her presentations a favorite among docents.

Sister Eileen produced two articles for The Docent Educator. The most recent, entitled “Right from the Start,” appeared in our last issue (Winter 1993).

Sister Eileen will be missed by her students, her colleagues, and her friends, which compose a large and overlapping circle of admirers.

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Inez S. Wolius, Ph.D., has worked in museum education departments in Philadelphia, Tampa, Ithaca, and Boston. She admits that she’s been in museum work long enough to have recruited, educated, and graduated over 500 docents and has been on university faculties long enough to have graduated more than 50 new museum educators. A frequent author about issues of teaching and learning in museums, Dr. Wolius has conducted docent workshops for dozens of museums nationwide. She is currently Director of the Wichita Art Museum, Wichita, Kansas, where she now recruits, selects, and works with boards of directors.
Customer Training for Volunteers

by Marcia Hale

At some time in our lives we’ve all been customers, and have had a positive or negative customer service experience. In our culture, the customer is always right ... right? In the museum culture, especially in a science center, the customer may not be right, especially in areas of science content, but the customer is always the customer. So, where does the customer fit into museum training?

At the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry (OMSI) in Portland, volunteers begin their training not with an introduction to life, earth, or space science, but with the science of positive and effective communication. Feeling confident and comfortable sharing our institution and its philosophy is our first obligation.

By emphasizing the science of communication first, all volunteers learn to be comfortable responding to a visitor’s requests from the simple “where’s the bathroom” to the difficult “I want my money back.” All volunteers take this training, even those who work behind the scenes, because we believe everyone affiliated with OMSI should be exposed to the basic foundation provided in our Communication Skills workshop.

Our Communication Skills Training teaches about such elements as non-verbal communication, active listening skills, and conflict management. A slide show called “What’s Wrong with this Picture” challenges volunteers to problem-solve situations the slides depict. Routes toward resolving the complaints of unhappy customers, such as comment cards and refund policies, are also reviewed.

Next, our training focuses on communication challenges, such as foreign languages or sensitive topics. This section is introduced by a person speaking Tongan. It’s fascinating to watch people as they realize that the class has begun, but they cannot understand a single word being spoken.

They are forced to become observant, watching facial expressions and body language to understand. This approach reinforces many of the non-verbal cues discussed previously. When it is time to debrief, most everyone is actively engaged in figuring out what the speaker said, and a few actually do figure it out and even try to respond.

During the debriefing, volunteers describe how they felt. Generally, it takes only a short time before someone says she felt on the outside. This leads to a discussion of how easily people can enter our institution and feel left out.

We believe that everyone connected with OMSI must feel responsible for making the museum accessible, so we talk about ways to enfranchise people. We discuss cultural diversity and sensitivity issues, and give everyone the experience of being a member of a disabled population through activities designed to simulate experiencing our institution with a physical challenge. Discussions and handouts about communication etiquette round out this session.

Since our science center has several exhibits and concepts that could be considered controversial, we role play opposing sides of issues in our Life Science Hall. This activity helps illustrate how easily one can be drawn into an argument — something we do not want volunteers to engage in with visitors.

Training then focuses on children. OMSI follows the same guidelines as most schools regarding the issue of touching children. Procedures for assisting lost children, intervening in confrontational situations, and awareness of gender communication (in other words taking the “he” out of science) are examined. We also discuss sexual harassment.

By this time, volunteers have a comprehensive background in ways to communicate with the public. This concludes this aspect of training for everyone except the Exhibit Explorers, who are responsible for presenting science on the museum floor. Our training on “Informal Learning” introduces the concept of learner-driven education. This is when such educational topics as open-ended questioning are explored.

At OMSI, we share Exploratorium founder Frank Oppenheimer’s philosophy, that “no one fails a science museum.” Through the principles inherent in our mission, the design of our facility and exhibitions, and our emphasis on positive and effective communication, volunteers and staff can feel confident that we make customer satisfaction a top priority.

Marcia Hale serves as Manager, Volunteer Services for the Oregon Museum of Science and Industry, in Portland, OR. Prior to entering the museum profession, Ms. Hale, who earned her degree in Communications, enjoyed a career in radio and television production.
An International Overview of Art Docents

As part of my recently completed dissertation, I conducted an international survey of the role of voluntary gallery guides in art museums. The results are discussed in this article.

Who Are We?
Of the twenty-nine respondents to the international questionnaire, all indicated that the vast majority of their voluntary guides were between forty and sixty years of age, with a small number of younger members. Although some had as many as 2% male members, most had only female guides. Most participants indicated that their members were drawn from a variety of socio-economic groups, bringing a broad base of expertise and experiences to their service.

Voluntary guiding used to be almost universally the domain of non-working women — that is of women who did no paid work outside of their homes — but today that has changed greatly. Many guides now hold full-time or part-time jobs, and even more are people who, being retired from their major life’s work, are able to bring a great variety of expertise to the art museum.

At the Art Gallery of Western Australia, where I serve, the thirty respondents included eight who had earned Bachelor of Arts degrees, seven Bachelor of Fine Arts, four Bachelor of Science, two Diplomas in Nursing, eight Diplomas in Education, eleven Diplomas in Art Studies, and twenty-six who had completed or were continuing “History of Art” courses at Technical and Further Education Schools.

What keeps such a diverse group of capable people doing what they do for no tangible reward? The answer lies in the fact that gallery guiding is a very personal commitment. Of the guides surveyed 50% said they joined the guides because it was a way to work with people, a way to turn their personal commitment to art into a useful community service. It is the small child who arrives at the gallery hostile and disruptive, but leaves wanting to “bring my mum to see this stuff,” that keeps many gallery guides doing what they do!

The results that follow give some indication of the expectations and perceived rewards of voluntary gallery guides.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>When you joined the guides did you think it would be:</th>
<th>respondents</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>a good way to learn more about art</td>
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<tr>
<td>interesting</td>
<td>19</td>
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<tr>
<td>a way to meet people with similar interests</td>
<td>14</td>
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<tr>
<td>useful community service</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a way to fulfill a commitment to art</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>an opportunity to work with children</td>
<td>7</td>
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<tr>
<td>fun</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>a good training course</td>
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Gallery guiding has evolved to embrace some new groups among its ranks that in the past would have been considered only in the role of audience. Among these are students and artists of various kinds, and graduate teachers-in-service who take up the opportunities offered by gallery training programs to hone their skills for future careers. For instance, to help relieve the burden on over-loaded docents during a very popular exhibition of Leonardo da Vinci’s work as an engineer and architect, the Beaverbrook Art Gallery in Canada enlisted several university engineering students as guides. One United States report noted that a number of museums were using paid or unpaid volunteer college students as “interpreters,” while one state museum was using graduate and undergraduate students to take primary school tours.

Even as long ago as 1938 the Carnegie Corporation gave a grant to the Art Gallery of New South Wales to employ artists as guides to conduct tours for children. In Britain in 1961, art students taking a teacher’s diploma at the London College of Art were required, as part of their museum studies, to take an introductory course of six visits at the Victoria and Albert Museum. Those students who then selected museum work as an elective study worked with children for one-half day each week in the museum as voluntary teachers.

In many galleries worldwide the tour guides are paid, part-time lecturers on contract. In the case of one modern art museum in New York, the volunteers are not tour guides. They are used purely in an associate role where they welcome groups, provide brief orientations to the museum, and answer questions from visitors. At that museum paid, contracted lecturers give all the gallery talks, and “teaching artists” conduct tours for secondary school children and general gallery visitors.

Another American museum had a group of volunteers called “Chamberlains” who supplemented the work of docents. They began their service as unpaid guards, but as they pursued their security duties began to learn about the museum collections, form study groups, and respond to visitors’ questions. It is interesting to note that a gallery in Liverpool, England, has a service similar to this offering the help of “Information Assistants” who work alongside the gallery attendants.
Selection and Training

Candidates for training as guides at the Art Gallery of Western Australia are usually recruited by word of mouth. To avoid the danger of "cloning ourselves," various alternative methods of recruitment have sought to attract new members from a wider cross section of the community. Newspaper advertisements, radio and television talks, and articles in journals have been used. While these routes did bring in large numbers of prospective recruits, most failed to stay the distance. Ninety percent of the galleries surveyed worldwide had come to the same conclusion, finding their best guides were recruited by friends who were already serving as guides.

Applicants for the program at the Art Gallery of Western Australia are interviewed by those who will be most closely involved with their training, that is, the guides serving as Training Officers for that year, the incumbent guide president and secretary, the senior Education Officer, and one or more education staff members.

At another Australian gallery, paid staff interview applicants on the same basis as applicants for full-time, paid positions, assuming responsibilities for both hiring and firing are the same for all personnel, regardless of pay status. The gallery guides in this institution are considered to be part-time staff and the fact that they are not paid does not affect their professional status in any way.

Applicants at the Art Gallery of Western Australia are assessed for their strengths in several main areas. Previous study of art history is not considered essential if the candidate is prepared to undertake such a course offered at the Technical and Further Education Colleges in Perth. Much more important than knowledge of art history to a potential guide is the ability to communicate in an engaging manner, to transmit personal enthusiasm for the subject to other people.

The goal of training courses for gallery guides everywhere is to transform a varied group of individuals with a wide range of expertise and personalities into a co-operative team of para-professional translators of art to the general public. It is not to produce art historians or critics, but rather to nurture these trainees to become agents capable of talking about the gallery’s collection to its visitors in their own language.

Of the twenty-nine international galleries surveyed, all conducted training courses similar in structure and content to that of the Art Gallery of Western Australia. Fifty percent of these institutions ran courses for one day each week for one academic year, but many variations to this format exist. Lectures are given by collections curators appropriate to the field under discussion for that week, or by experienced guides with particular expertise. Discussions are conducted by experienced guides and by members of the education staff.

Courses in all galleries surveyed covered basic art history and theory, pedagogics, voice control and projection, instruction in gallery policies, instruction in the basic aims of the guiding group, and research techniques. The greatest emphasis is generally on pedagogics, or the science and art of teaching. At the Art Gallery of Western Australia, the "Socratic" method of posing a question and discussing to enhance perception and consideration is the approach. The aim is to teach the audience, whether adult or child, not what to see but how to see, as well as where to look for clues that works of art offer, and to awaken the latent powers of perception that museum visitors often are only vaguely aware of having.

Trainees are taught about “age-grading,” or what to expect of children at different ages, as well as how adults differ in their responses. Voice control is also taught as a valuable instrument in the guides’ repertoire of pedagogic variables. Often a lecturer from communications courses, or from a drama school, is invited to speak with guides about the value of changing one’s tone, pitch, or tempo, and how voice control can create or change moods.

Trainees are shown the many ways that theme tours (tours that employ an overriding theme) can be established. In addition, trainees are taught that the aim of all tours is to maintain the spirit of anticipation that most visitors arrive with, and to keep the tour interesting and lively.
Most art history segments in the training courses are directed toward an understanding of the institutional collection. Collections vary enormously from one museum to another. Many house works of very local interest or particular ethnographic artifacts, such as the Museum of New Mexico. The Australian National Gallery in Canberra holds a collection that, like the city of Canberra itself, was planned to a particular formula from its inception. Some older galleries, by contrast, have simply grown and evolved with history, preserving great works from the past as they became available. Gallery guides must be directed to an understanding of their resident collection, and to the special value that the collection has for the public.

Evaluation and Maintenance of Standards

Quality control in guided tours is an area of guide administration that some galleries find quite difficult to manage. All galleries want to provide not only a service that is of high standard, but one where that standard is of consistent quality. In a situation where the operators of the service are voluntary the pursuance of quality control is often more sensitive to operate than a similar exercise with fully paid staff. An inefficient, dilatory, or unsuitable employee can probably be dismissed or moved to another area. To terminate an offer of service given with the best of intentions, free of charge, is a more difficult proposition.

Of course, prevention is far better than any cure can ever be. Therefore, one important answer concerning quality is to be extremely careful in the original selection process. One London art museum, for instance, has a very intelligent letter that it sends to candidates, which makes two cautionary statements that can act as escape clauses, allowing the group to tactfully reject unsuitable trainees right up until the end of training. The relevant paragraph states firstly that there are only ten places available for new guides and secondly that completion of the course does not guarantee a place among the docent group. Another gallery in Washington does not consider trainees fully accepted until the completion of a full year on the floor after training, during which time probationers work with a mentor at all times. This extensive practice is followed by a formal graduation ceremony that rewards such tenacity and dedication with a certificate. It sounds a bit hard, but trainee docents at that gallery know from the outset that if they cannot meet the requirements they will not receive certification.

Most galleries responding to the international questionnaire used a system of periodical ‘spot checking’ for the evaluation of trainees and in-service guides, both by education officers and experienced guides. Such ‘spot checking’ can be carried out in a very informal way but is considered absolutely essential by both the guides and the museum staff.

Several galleries have initiated a system where the process of self-evaluation is built into the normal procedures of guiding, right from the beginning of training. This system makes participants so familiar with an assessment situation that it no longer engenders fear. Self-evaluation in both an individual and “team” situation can be an essential part of training, just as essential as any other part of the guiding technique.

Occasionally, long term guides find that not only have they lost their “memory of innocence” but also their ability to address problems objectively. They have lost their enthusiasm too, and without it feel as though they are giving tours in “parrot fashion.” Nonetheless, these guides still possess enormous experience, knowledge, and commitment to art, and want to continue in the group in a constructive way. One major Australian gallery has instituted an “Emeritus” classification within their traditional guiding system that makes very good use of such members who are considered, or consider themselves, to be “over the top.” The guides at that institution are initially contracted for three years and this Emeritus classification is for service beyond their contract. At this level these volunteers are expected to do research either for guides, staff educators, or curators, to give lectures to other guides when called

Though they may be daunting to some people, video cameras are useful tools for evaluation. Video tapes allow docents to examine and review their voice, tone, body language, and manner when interacting with visitors.
Upon, and to provide guided tours when the regular guides are under pressure.

**Style and Substance**

While the basic aim of the education programs of all the international institutions surveyed was to promote a wider understanding of art in the general public, there were variations in the manner that such education was to be delivered. On the whole, these variations fell into two main streams, one for Great Britain and the other for Australia, Canada, and the United States.

In Great Britain, the general approach is to expand their informed audience by directing programming toward school teachers and interested adults, in the expectation that these constituencies will, in turn, transmit the art museum experience to school children and the wider public. It is hoped thus to create a kind of “ripple effect,” where activity at the gallery creates ever widening circles of activity out to the edges of the societal “pool.”

In Australia, Canada, and the U.S., such programs are integral to institutional policies, but are parallel to, or even dominated by, activities designed directly for young audiences. Large numbers of school children are taken on guided tours of the galleries by trained volunteers or by paid education officers. There is no need to delineate between the paid or unpaid officers in this situation as unpaid does not mean unprofessional where the selection and training of voluntary guides is treated in a professional manner.

Regardless of location, museums are no longer simply in the business of research and conservation for the further education of the intellectually elite. Nor are museums ends in themselves; at the end of the twentieth century, museums are means in the service of society and its cultural evolution.

Today, to accomplish their mission, they have to entertain people as well as inform them. As much as museum personnel may deplore the notion that one of their roles is the business of entertainment, to ignore such a notion is dangerous at the very least. Museums must be able to compete with such leisure activities as arcade games, television, reading, or sport. It takes time and energy to visit a museum so it needs to be worth doing — it must be a rewarding and stimulating experience for all who make the effort.

The role of gallery guides that differentiates them from all other personnel remains their special ability to communicate with such visitors in language that those visitors understand. In so doing, guides bring art into the experience of all who seek it. While it would be pretentious to suggest that volunteer guides are essential to the operations of museums, it is certainly true that without their services education programs would be severely curtailed and large numbers of visitors would be left unserved, disenfranchised, or indifferent.

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Margaret Love has served as a voluntary gallery guide, or docent, at the Art Gallery of Western Australia in Perth since 1978. A professional potter for over twenty years, she recently earned a Bachelor of Arts degree with Honours, majoring in Fine Arts, from the University of Western Australia. This article represents one chapter from her honors dissertation, entitled “The Role of the Voluntary Guide in Public Gallery Education Programmes.” Ms. Love has generously offered The Docent Educator the opportunity to publish the results of her research and efforts in this and several future issues.
Docent Programming Profile

The Docent Educator sent surveys concerning docent programming to a variety of institutions and individual docents throughout the United States. The results are presented to edify, as well as to stimulate discussion about docent programming, needs, and service. We invite our readers to send us their observations, comments, concerns, and responses.

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Institutional Questionnaire

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<tr>
<th>Total Sent</th>
<th>100</th>
<th>Total Returned</th>
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1. The primary academic discipline of your institution is:
   - Art: 13
   - History: 15
   - Science: 16
   - Multi-disciplined: 6

2. Number of active docents at your institution (female/male):
   - Average: female = 69/4
   - History: female = 31/5
   - Science: female = 70/24
   - M.D.: female = 76/13

3. Percentage of all visitors receiving docent-guided tours during a year:
   - Art: 7% to 26%
   - History: 3% to 100%
   - Science: 2% to 70%
   - Multi-disciplined: 5% to 40%

4. "Professional" characteristics of docent program, such as interviews, job descriptions, evaluation, and access to chief executive officer:

   a) Art Museums
   - 10 of 13 have entrance interviews when recruiting docents
   - 10 of 13 provide docents with informal, oral evaluations of their touring/teaching
   - 8 of 13 have written job descriptions for their docents
   - 7 of 13 require commitment contracts of those who become docents
   - 5 of 13 provide docents with formal, written evaluations
   - 5 of 13 assign docents mandatory research projects
   - 2 of 13 provide docents with access to the museum's director or c.e.o. in the form of regularly scheduled meetings

   b) History Museums
   - 13 of 15 have entrance interviews
   - 12 of 15 provide informal, oral evaluations
   - 10 of 15 have written job descriptions for docents
   - 7 of 15 provide docents with regular access to museum director or c.e.o.
   - 6 of 15 require commitment contracts
   - 5 of 15 provide formal, written evaluations
   - only 1 of 15 assigns mandatory research projects

   c) Science Museums
   - 12 of 16 have entrance interviews
   - 11 of 16 provide informal, oral evaluations
   - 11 of 16 have written job descriptions for docents
   - 6 of 16 require commitment contracts
   - 5 of 16 provide formal, written evaluations
   - 2 of 16 provide docents with regular access to museum director or c.e.o.
   - none assigned mandatory research projects

   d) Multi-disciplined Museums
   - 6 of 6 have entrance interviews
   - 4 of 6 provide informal, oral evaluations
   - 3 of 6 require commitment contracts
   - 2 of 6 assign mandatory research projects
   - 1 of 6 provides formal, written evaluations
   - 1 of 6 has written job descriptions for docents
   - 1 of 6 provides docents with regular access to museum director or c.e.o.

   e) All Museums combined
   - 41 of 50 have entrance interviews when recruiting docents
   - 37 of 50 provide docents with informal, oral evaluations of their touring/teaching
   - 30 of 50 have written job descriptions for their docents
   - 28 of 50 require commitment contracts of those who become docents
   - 16 of 50 provide docents with formal, written evaluations
   - 12 of 50 provide docents with access to the museum's director or c.e.o. in the form of regularly scheduled meetings
   - 8 of 50 assign docents mandatory research projects

5. The largest audience served by docents in all museums:
   - School groups and students

6. Museums provide their docents with the following:
   - Photocopied handouts & notebooks — 50 of 50
   - Social gatherings or parties — 46 of 50
   - Guest lecturers from outside the museum — 44 of 50
   - Curatorial lectures — 42 of 50
   - Periodicals or newsletters — 36 of 50
   - Textbooks — 9 of 50

7. Average percentage of the Education Department's budget expended on docents:
   - Art museums: 8%
   - History museums: 13%
   - Science museums: 8%
   - Multi-disciplined museums: 7%
   - All museums (combined): 9%

8. Length of formal training period before new docents are permitted to begin providing tours:
   - Art museums
     - Longest: 1 year
     - Briefest: 16 weeks
   - History museums
     - Longest: 3 months
     - Briefest: 1 day
   - Science museums
     - Longest: 8 months
     - Briefest: no training required/offered
   - Multi-disciplined museums
     - Longest: 9 months
     - Briefest: 6 hours

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For Your Consideration
Among the stated "entrance requirements" for docent applicants were the following:
- none required
- "must be breathing"
- interest in subject matter
- willingness to serve and learn
- love of people
- 3 year commitment to program
- 18 years of age or older
- college graduate
- no full-time employment or school
- live within 15 miles of the institution
- well groomed, neat appearance

Main source for recruiting new docents:
- word-of-mouth 35 of 50
- press releases, media, ads 35 of 50
- Junior League / service group 10 of 50
- others:
  - museum newsletters or publications - 5
  - corporate volunteer programs - 3
  - retirement groups - 3
  - local colleges
  - United Way
  - recruitment receptions
  - telephone inquiries
  - retired teachers organizations

Docent Program Requirements - Length of Service
longest - 3 years briefest - no requirement most frequent response - 2 years

Most frequently mentioned obligations docents have to their program:
- get substitutes for missed tours
- be museum members
- observe "dress codes"
- attend "continuing education" workshops

Based on the museum director's involvement, attitudes, and allocation of resources, does he/she perceive education as:
- of greatest importance
- art - 3 history - 3 science - 0 md - 3
- a priority over most
- art - 4 history - 4 science - 7 md - 0
- equivalent to all else
- art - 4 history - 6 science - 6 md - 3
- of lesser importance
- art - 2 history - 2 science - 2 md - 0
- relatively unimportant
- art - 0 history - 0 science - 1 md - 0

Based on the involvement and attitudes of non-Education staff, do other museum employees perceive docents as:
- professionals
  - art - 1 history - 1 science - 1 md - 0
- associates
  - art - 6 history - 9 science - 11 md - 5
- outsiders
  - art - 4 history - 3 science - 2 md - 1
- problematic
  - art - 2 history - 2 science - 2 md - 0

What compensation does your institution give its docents beyond training:
- luncheons, teas, parties
- catalogues and museum publications free or at cost
- discount at museum shop
- free museum admission and/or attendance at public programs
- modest pay per tour
- compensation for mileage
- docent trips
- borrowing privileges from reference library
- performance and service awards
- free parking
- insurance coverage while on duty
- uniforms and nametags

Innovations or ideas implemented that raised the performance or status of docents:
- formal, regularly scheduled tour evaluations
- in-house docent newsletter
- mentor program
- established a regional docent council
- more input into decision-making process
- treating docents as unpaid staff members
- uniforms and badges

Individual Questionnaire
total sent - 40 total returned - 16

Which of the following would benefit or improve docent programs:
- informal, oral evaluations - 11 of 16
- entrance interviews - 9 of 16
- research projects - 7 of 16
- regularly scheduled meetings with museum's director - 7 of 16
- commitment contracts - 6 of 16
- written job descriptions - 6 of 16
- formal written evaluations - 1 of 16

How did you learn about docent service:
- word-of-mouth - 7
- press release, media, or ad - 5
- museum brochure - 3
- Junior League or other service group - 1

I would characterize the relationship between docents and the education department at my museum as:
- exceptional - 8 good - 6 fair - 1 strained - 1 poor - 0

I would characterize the relationship between docents and the curatorial division at my museum as:
- exceptional - 4 good - 1 fair - 2 strained - 1 poor - 5

Are the docents who serve in your institution treated by staff as professionals?
- yes - 8 no - 8

Should docent performance be evaluated by staff?
- yes - 10 no - 6

Based on your perceptions of the museum profession, are docents perceived to be:
- professionals - 1 colleagues - 6 outsiders - 8 problematic - 1

What might substantially improve docent performance?
- periodic reviews of docent performance by staff (4)
- have staff treat docents more professionally (3)
- provide better facilities for meeting, storage, and classes (2)
- produce and distribute docent handbooks or manuals
- provide full-time staff member to assist docents
- familiarize docents with workings of entire museum, not just exhibitions toured
- offer short, refresher courses for experienced docents
- have staff show appreciation for the time, energy, and money docents give
- have curators consider touring and logistics when designing and installing shows
- develop a docent program with opportunities for "advancement" through various levels of service
- more workshops/seminars with professionals using the inquiry method
- release docents who do not fulfill standards
Docent Training
Do We Practice What We Preach?

Most staff members think of docents as teachers because they educate the visiting public about our collections and exhibitions. The very word “docent” is derived from a Greek word meaning “to teach.” But those of us privileged to provide docent training must also consider their needs as learners.

Museum education has been quick to assimilate and adapt research in education, psychology, philosophy, and other disciplines to teaching museum visitors. Howard Gardner’s theory of multiple intelligences, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s “flow” experiences, and the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (as it pertains to learning styles) are but a few of the studies having had widespread influence in the museum education field.

In contrast, relatively little has been written about how museum educators should teach docents, who, like all learners, are complex individuals with widely diverse backgrounds, experiences, aptitudes, and learning styles. Fortunately for those of us challenged with designing relevant and engaging docent training programs, the wealth of findings about teaching visitors applies equally well — and for all the same reasons — to teaching docents.

Current thinking advocates abandoning the lecture-style format, or “show and tell” touring, in favor of more engaging methods of teaching, particularly inquiry-based discussion and guided discovery. In a previous issue of The Docent Educator, Alan Gartenhaus summarized the reasons for teaching by the inductive method. “Inquiry teaching (1) reinforces learning behaviors consistent with perceptual and intellectual self-sufficiency; (2) accommodates visitors’ diversity; (3) helps visitors develop and practice learning skills relevant in other contexts; and (4) allows visitors to make connections between their own experience and the object.”

The tour planning guide in Grinder and McCoy’s The Good Guide offers an excellent framework: establish two or three related learning goals (i.e. what should be learned); devise appropriate and manageable learning objectives related to each goal (i.e. how the goals will be achieved); outline and sequence key questions; identify objects to use as examples; and determine or design aids and supporting activities.

As with tours, docent training sessions are most beneficial if learners participate, and if experiences are allowed to vary. Therefore, individuals should have opportunities to engage in activities; look; think; reflect; conclude; discuss; write; present; touch; sit; stand; and construct meaning.

Lectures certainly have a place in docent training, particularly when there are large numbers of learners present. Lectures allow a presenter to cover a vast amount of material in a relatively short period of time. Yet, we must be careful not to confuse “covering material” with “teaching,” nor to lull participants into passive receptivity. Teaching requires learners to actively engage with the material covered and to acquire skills.

While it is crucial that docents have a solid, accurate, factual foundation in the subjects they teach, it is fallacious to believe that the best way to teach facts is to state them. Most people learn and retain little by listening to a lecture. That is why people take notes — to have data to refer to later. Notetaking also serves as a mode of engagement, a way to remain attentive and involved while listening. Passive learning in schools is nearly always followed up with engagement through such activities as: essays, research papers, presentations, discussions, homework, or exams.

How much improved our docent education programs would be if staff taught docents as they would have docents teach visitors. We would not only bolster the credibility of the methodology we advocate, we’d also model the technique.”

How much improved our docent education programs would be if staff taught docents as they would have docents teach visitors. We would not only bolster the credibility of the methodology we advocate, we’d also model the technique.

A simple, effective approach is to plan docent training sessions as though they were tours. Well-planned tours should be enjoyable educational experiences, with a definite beginning, middle, and end. They should have clear goals and objectives, which may be met within a prescribed amount of time by a group of diverse learners.
by Betsy Gough-DiJulio

Just a moderate amount of effort and creativity can transform a standard lecture into a meaningful learning activity for docents. For instance, docents might be divided into groups and given a set of postcards with reproductions of works of art. Their task might be to arrange the cards chronologically without looking at dates, or to divide the cards into various kinds of categories, such as art movements or schools.

Essentially, any gallery activity or game designed to teach exhibition content on tours can be used to teach content in docent training. At our art center we have several games for kindergartners that involve matching lines, colors, and shapes drawn on cards with lines, colors, and shapes in works of art. Rather than tell the docents how the game works, we played the game with them. In addition to being fun, it served as a good review of the design elements.

Instructing others to “do as I say, not as I do,” is ineffective and hypocritical. If staff educators earnestly believe that the best learning experiences are those requiring participation, then docent training should reflect that philosophy. Then, we will be educating docents about methods of teaching as well as content. In short, we will be practicing what we preach.

Betsy Gough-DiJulio is Director of Education at the Virginia Beach Center for the Arts in Virginia Beach, VA. She received her M.A. in art history from Vanderbilt University. Ms. Gough-DiJulio has written several other articles appearing in The Docent Educator, including “Touring Nursing Home Residents,” which appeared in the Summer 1993 issue.

It Works for Me …
Sharing successful techniques and ideas.

When the Museum of Natural History, in Albuquerque, put out a request for docents I thought, “Why not?” I sure didn’t know anything about natural history, but I could learn. So off I went to begin my training. As soon as they started the overview and people began asking questions however, I knew I was in over my head.

Did that stop me? No! I went back. I was sure that somewhere along the line I would begin to understand something. I knew this information (whatever I understood) would help me with my children. I teach with Head Start on an Indian Reservation between Albuquerque and Santa Fe. Every Monday evening I had my training and every Tuesday morning something I learned I shared with my children. They learned about dinosaurs the day after I did. The same thing happened with volcanoes, earth quakes, and the formation of caverns, such as Carlsbad.

Finally, the sixteen weeks of training were over and the Museum opened its doors to the public. The first weeks I was more of a traffic director than anything, but I listened as parents and children talked about what they saw. As I listened, I found out how much the children already knew (and this was years before Jurassic Park). I also learned how excited they were to talk about what they saw.

I found that using open ended questions helped the children put their information together. I learned to ask questions like, “What can you tell me about this dinosaur?” How can anything the child says be wrong? “He is big.” “He has sharp teeth.” “He has little arms.” These are all correct answers. The child has had a success. Now the next question could be, “If the dinosaur has sharp teeth, what do you think he would eat?”

All of us like to be right and young children are no exception. If children experience success, they are much more likely to try again, but if they fail (and you say “no, that isn’t right”) the child might not try again.

Back in my classroom, it was now March and we were going to go on our field trip to the museum. Our classroom was full of dinosaurs — pictures, puzzles, plastic model dinosaurs, books, etc. We even made volcanoes with vinegar, baking soda, and poster paint. The day was here and we arrived in Albuquerque. Seventeen five-year-old children who had never seen anything like this before, and I, of course, was going to show them everything. As we arrived in the atrium, I looked up at the large pterosaur and said “Children look! There is …” and I went blank. Sixteen weeks of training and three months on the floor went out the window. Little Laura looked up and said “Look, Miss Ramponi, it’s Questzalcoatlus.” Pretty good for someone who had never seen the creature before.

As we went through the museum this happened more than once. I realized that the reason I had signed up to be a docent was to learn more, which I did, and to share it with my children and the general public. I have learned far more than I ever thought I could, but most of all, I have learned that my job is not to tell people everything about everything, but rather to be there to answer the questions I can, and to help children and adults apply what they already know to the exhibitions we have in the museums.

JoAnne Ramponi, docent
Museum of Natural History
Albuquerque, New Mexico
Volunteer Program Mechanics

The Brookfield Zoo’s 270 docents contribute around 43,000 hours each year. Docents work every day of the year interpreting the collections, teaching classes to thousands of students, assisting with animal observations and special events, and attending refresher courses. We have no difficulty recruiting enough qualified enthusiastic candidates for the annual docent training class. So, what’s the problem?

Checking Under the Hood

When we began to look more closely at our program and how docents work in the zoo, three main questions emerged. The first centered around customer service — could we be serving our guests better? We defined better to mean with more personal contact to insure a quality visit and perhaps result in return visits. The second question was how can we attract docent candidates that are more representative of the diversity we enjoy in our 2 million annual visitors? The third question was how could we get volunteers on the job faster?

Customer Service. After meeting with front line staff, both paid and volunteer, front line staff managers, and visitors, we found the most urgent customer service needs fell into “the wayfinding” category. The zoo is 214 acres with two main gates, a centrally located fountain and many twisting paths. Experienced zoo goers sometimes get turned around while making their way to favorite exhibits. Navigating through the park for first-time guests can be downright frustrating. We don’t want our guests tired and frustrated because they spent more time getting lost than enjoying the zoo. Determining how docents could assist with wayfinding became a new program goal.

Diversity. It was clear that while we are able to attract enough docent to the program, we weren’t reaching all our neighbors with our call to action. We looked at census figures for the communities surrounding the zoo and compared these figures with visitor demographic studies and docent corps demographics, and we found that our numbers did not add up. We believe guests need to see themselves reflected in front line volunteer staff in order for the zoo to be a truly welcoming setting. A second goal would be to get the recruitment message out to all our neighbors in hopes of building a more representative docent corps.

Better Late than Never? We recruit docent candidates in late spring and summer for the annual docent training program scheduled to begin the first weekend in October. Once training class begins, recruitment is closed until the next spring. So, if someone calls in November interested in the docent program, we must tell them they will have to wait until the next summer to become involved in the program. Many candidates remain interested in the program and do return the following year to participate; however, we also lose potential volunteers due to the lengthy wait to become involved. So, our third program goal evolved into finding a way to provide more immediate volunteer opportunities.

Tinker, Tune, or Overhaul

Ironically, the program elements that make our docent program solid and appealing to so many candidates turn out to be the precise elements that create roadblocks to volunteering to others. For example, docent training is now a 20-week, college-level biology and zoology course with an emphasis on interactive teaching and communication skill building. Many potential docents seek out this type of adult education opportunity. Others find the academic load unappealing and even an obstacle to volunteering. Other program elements such as annual hourly commitment, training schedule, program intensity, and course fees also turned out to be a welcome mat for some and a major roadblock for others.

We faced a dilemma. Do we tinker with a pre-existing, successful program with a long tradition to try to make it meet developing needs or do we invent a new program designed to complement the existing program? Front line staff managers, animal collections managers, and senior staff met to discuss how to proceed. We acknowledged that change is often difficult and upsetting, so we proceeded cautiously when we attempted to incorporate new goals. We needed a vehicle that could attract more of our neighbors to volunteer at the zoo, which was more inclusive and flexible, that provided immediate opportunities to volunteer, and that could meet the wayfinding and informational needs of our guests.

The Right Vehicle

Rather than retrofitting a successful program, and perhaps risk damaging the esprit de corps among docents, we decided on a new model designed to handle the changing needs of volunteers and guests at the Brookfield Zoo. The Guest Guide volunteer program debuted in October, 1993. A Guest Guide is a well-trained volunteer who warmly welcomes guests to the zoo, assists with wayfinding and orientation to the park and its offerings, makes recommendations for a more satisfying visit, addresses guests’ concerns and questions or directs guests to someone who will be able to help.

We finally had a concept. The challenge was to design a program around the concept that would attempt to respond to the three main questions raised during the planning stage.

Customer service needs of wayfinding and orientation to the park.
could indeed be met with the new program. Guest Guides are scheduled at both main entrances to welcome guests as they enter and to offer assistance in finding attractions and exhibits. Guides also walk around the park assisting guests throughout the day. For example, a Guest Guide might work at the North Gate for an hour after the park opens then, for variety, roam a beat in the park assisting guests as they enjoy their visit. And whenever possible, Guest Guides are available at the exits to thank guests for visiting the zoo. We also noted that special events attract many first-time visitors, so, Guides will be mobilized to assist with wayfinding during special events.

We needed to design this program to open up volunteer opportunities at the zoo. Guest Guide training is designed to be short and intensive and therefore may be offered several times a year rather than just once a year as is the case with docent program training. Someone excited about giving time to the zoo will be able to become involved in the new program soon after the initial contact rather than having to wait several months for the next training session, perhaps losing interest in volunteering all together. The Guest Guide program is designed to require a smaller time commitment in both training and service than the docent program and therefore may be attractive to individuals with heavy work or family commitments who would still like to give the zoo some time.

The toughest of the three questions, by far, was how to create a volunteer program that is welcoming, attractive, and meaningful to more of our neighbors in surrounding communities. We needed to make changes in job design, scheduling, recruitment, and recognition practices in order to open the door to volunteering wider.

The Guest Guide program requires a minimum annual hourly commitment from each volunteer; however, the job is designed so a volunteer may choose to spread the hours out over the year or bunch them up into a shorter period when they have more free time available — like a student or teacher on break. A flexible training schedule accommodates a broad array of needs. Recruitment information is provided to local community newspapers and libraries, in addition to in-house publications in order to broaden the audience hearing about the new program. Recognition practices emphasize job performance with reduced emphasis on number of hours worked or years in the program. Hours and retention with a program are indeed valuable things; however, we recognize that in today's world this is not always possible. We want to have the person who is able to give a couple of weekends a year feel as welcome, connected, and committed to Brookfield Zoo's mission as the person who is able to donate several hours a week.

The Road Test
We developed the Guest Guide job description, scheduled training dates, sent out recruitment announcements and waited for the phone to ring. We didn’t wait long. Within two weeks the Guest Guide program attracted enough qualified candidates to fill the first training session.

Guides attended training on two Saturdays and one weekday evening for a total of 17 hours of formal training. Our curriculum content centered on the philosophy that if a Guest Guide had to describe it, recommend it, or direct someone to it, they needed to experience it in training. So, training consisted of visiting all the exhibits, attending all the attractions, eating in the restaurants, riding the tram, and using the maps to navigate through the zoo.

Training also included discussions, visitor observations, and role playing.

We scheduled a reunion for all Guest Guides approximately seven weeks after training ended. The reason was to share stories, tips, and suggestions for making training as relevant as possible to the actual job. Information gathered at this session will be applied to future program planning.

Next Year’s Model
The reunion provided the Guest Guides the opportunity to help shape next year’s program. The Guides reported that the enjoyed the experiential training they received and recommended including an opportunity to practice being a guide sometime during the formal training. So, the next Guest Guide training session will include on-the-job practice. Ideally, experienced Guides will oversee this portion of the training. Additionally, Guides suggested ways to improve their visibility in the park and designed a tote bag for carrying information, maps, and membership brochures.

(Continued on back page)
Oh No! Not Another Test!

Peer Observation to Improve Performance

Pay attention; there’ll be a test later.

"Did you study for your biology exam?"
"I can’t believe I failed the driver’s test ... again!"

Educators have tried to soften the blow by re-naming them — evaluations, assessments, portfolio reviews — but, a test by any other name is still a stomach-turning, heart-stomping event for most of us. Maybe we were frightened by a pop quiz when we were children, but many of us share the test nightmare — we enter the classroom to find there are only 5 minutes left for us to complete a three-hour exam for which we haven’t studied. In fact, we don’t even know the name of the course! Is it any wonder that docent evaluation strikes fear in the hearts of both docents and education directors throughout the museum community? Take heart! Classroom techniques exist that can help docents achieve the real goal of evaluation — improved performance — without trauma.

One such technique is peer observation. No, not peer evaluation! The docent being observed does the evaluating of his or her own performance based on a carefully pre-arranged observation. Of course, this type of evaluation is predicated on the assumption that most people aren’t completely satisfied with their own performance and want to do better. Those who don’t want to improve have already lost their “edge.” Perhaps this explains why receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature seemed to stop the creative juices in such authors as Hemingway and Steinbeck. When you start believing that you’ve produced your best novel — or painting, or performance, or lesson ... or chocolate cake — it’s hard to produce another good one.

GUIDELINES

The following guidelines will help you decide if you’re ready for peer observation, and, if you are, will help you set up the observation. They are adapted from GESA (Gender/Ethnic Expectations and Student Achievement) techniques.

1. Schedule the observation. Pick a time, a tour/lesson, and an observer with whom you are comfortable. Observations should take a minimum of 30 minutes, and you should be observed a minimum of three times to compile enough accurate information to help you evaluate your performance.

2. Select the event you wish to have observed. Observers will only record one event per observation. The types of events to be observed will be discussed later.

3. Instruct your observers in peer observation techniques. They are to record only one event. They are to record only when that event occurs. They are to be inconspicuous. They should not interact with your audience or class. And, most important of all, they are only to observe. They are not to evaluate, give advice, or make suggestions. When they have finished their observation, they are to give the observation form to you.

4. Offer to observe your peers, being careful to follow the guidelines. Observing the tours or lessons of other docents may help you identify areas on which you need improvement.

OBSERVATION EVENTS

What types of things should you evaluate within your tour or lesson? What will you ask your observer to observe? This, of course, is a very subjective area. Only you know areas of your teaching that you are concerned about. Some possibilities follow.
1. Response opportunities. Your observer in this event is watching for the times you give your audience an opportunity to perform. Let your presentation become a monologue, students should be more than listeners to the lesson. The observer should record instances when you provide listeners with opportunities to answer a question, contribute to the discussion, give an opinion, etc. Accepting the answer of a student who asks for feedback or asking a student to perform in some other way, such as reading aloud, demonstrating an action, and so forth, should also be recorded.

2. Disparity in sex and ethnic feedback. Ask your observer to record each time you provide feedback to males versus females and/or to members of different ethnic groups within your audience. Feedback consists of responses from you which affirm, praise, correct, criticize, or reject a response from your audience members. Research indicates that feedback is one of the most important ways we learn. Getting no feedback seems to teach students that their responses are unimportant. Surprisingly, many lessons both in classrooms and in museums lack significant feedback or are weighted with feedback directed to one sex or group more than another. The most a student will get is often a simple nod. Your observer should record only that feedback that is directed to one or several students, not to the entire group.

3. Physical position. In this observation, you are gathering data to help evaluate your physical interaction with your audience. Physical closeness is one of the ways students are included and excluded from learning. Ask your observer to record the times you are within arm’s length of three or four selected students, or that you stand with your group rather than in between them and the object you are discussing. (In a classroom situation, of course, the observer can record a teacher’s physical closeness to each individual within an entire class, but as your tour group will be moving through the museum, this type of observation is very difficult.)

4. Body language/vocalizations. Another area to be self-evaluated concerns certain body positions and/or vocalizations that may be detrimental to presenting the best lesson performance. Folding one’s arms while listening to a response, avoiding eye contact, overusing phrases such as “okay” or “you know” are among the negatives you may suspect diminish your presentation. Observers should only be asked to record one or two different body positions and/or vocalizations within one observation period.

FOLLOW-THROUGH
Observation, of course, is only part of the evaluation process. Once armed with the observation record, a docent should examine the results with an open mind. If the performance (tour/lesson) seems to have room for improvement, a plan for change should be undertaken. Sometimes this involves a simple change in position (within the group, rather than in front). Often, however, suggestions from other docents or the education director may help change the behavior. Further observations are necessary to assess progress. At all times, however, the impetus for change comes from the docent; the request for peer observation must begin with the person most heavily “invested” in the process. After all, wouldn’t you have preferred to take that algebra test when you knew you were ready?

Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor

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Volunteer Program Mechanics

(continued from page 17)

Now that the basic program was up and running, the challenge became to build a more diverse volunteer corps. First we had to decide what diversity means for us. Variety in age, ethnicity, geography, economic status, employment status, in addition to race and gender, will need to be cultivated if we are to build a volunteer corps truly representative of our community.

Results

Instinctively, we attempted to meet newly defined institutional needs by tinkering with our existing, successful docent program. We soon realized that we were attempting to fix a program that wasn’t really broken. The docent program works well, is appealing, and serves many institutional needs. But not all of them. So, rather than dilute the docent program, we chose to design a new volunteer position that complements the docent program. With the invention of the Guest Guide volunteer program, we have expanded our ability to meet the wayfinding needs of visitors, to provide satisfying experiences for more volunteers, and to be more responsive to people who seek volunteer work at the zoo.

Jean Linsner manages the Docent and Guest Guide volunteer programs at the Brookfield Zoo. She is Program Co-Chair for the Association of Volunteer Administrators - Metropolitan Chicago. She earned her M.S. in Education at Indiana University. Prior to joining the Brookfield Zoo staff, Ms. Linsner produced special events and public programs at the Chicago Academy of Sciences museum and performed science comedy as a member of C.H.A.O.S.

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