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Think of it — the overwhelming majority of students you tour on school visits were born since 1980!! So what? So everything! We are all products of our time, and this generation of young people cannot be expected to be an exception.

For those who are now in grades nine or younger, people have been traveling to the moon for twice as long as they have been alive. Richard Nixon and Leonid Brezhnev are like Benjamin Harrison and Kaiser Wilhelm II — just names out of history. And, they have never known a time when people didn’t have computers, compact disc players, or cable (much less television).

What implications does all this have for teaching and learning in sites like museums, historic sites, zoos, parks, and gardens? Plenty!

Television and Passive Thinking

Television may be the most powerful force in contemporary life today. Most young people spend more time watching television than they do engaged in any other personal activity. On average, young people watch over four hours of television a day! Television has become babysitter to our toddlers, nanny to our children, and the purveyor of culture to our adolescents.

Television is not inherently bad. It’s just that television’s impact so overshadows other experiences of childhood today, that its effect upon learning cannot be overstated.

Television is characteristically and primarily a passive experience; it requires little participation. We do not “do” television, we “view” it. Unlike reading or even listening to radio programs, we need not conjure or imagine. We can surrender such activities to the talented few who create sitcoms, soap operas, and M-TV.

Reading requires involvement — interpreting language, conjuring images, and infusing situations and characters with expression and emotion are all active mental processes. Television, on the other hand, does the work for us by supplying these elements. Viewers need not become actively involved, but can passively watch what others have interpreted, imagined, and synthesized for them.

This is one reason why museums, historic sites, zoos, and gardens are so important for young people to experience. Such learning situations require an approach much more like “reading” than like “viewing.” The collections reveal themselves through active intellectual and perceptual involvement. Their lessons unfold best through careful inspection and reflective thinking (unless an educator robs visitors of the need to engage mentally by telling them what they could otherwise be guided to discover for themselves).

An Obsession with Speed

Contemporary society has developed an addiction to speed that borders on an obsession. Fax machines, supersonic passenger jets, calculators, microwave ovens, E-mail, “same day” delivery service, and cellular phones are merely a few of its many manifestations. What seemed so useful and efficient just a few years ago — air mail, slide rules, electric typewriters, adding machines — now seem ploddingly slow, cumbersome, or even obsolete.

Our devotion to speed influences everything, including how we inform ourselves. We expect information to be delivered to us, F-A-S-T, and with few of the details that might slow us down.

During the 1968 election campaign, for instance, U.S. television audiences were shown “sound bites” of their two Presidential candidates averaging 38 seconds in length. By 1988, those “sound bites” had been whittled down to a mere seven seconds. Just seven seconds to absorb and make decisions on topics as complex as global economics or nuclear disarmament!

Young people’s lives and attitudes are being shaped in a world that demonstrates little patience for process, analysis, or detailed examination. They see, and are shown, only results. They learn little about the lengthy process of scientific investigation that leads to revelation, conservation, or invention; the exhaustive years of study and experimentation characteristic of most artistic careers; or the exhaustive pursuit and investigation of primary and secondary sources typical of historical conservation, restoration, or reconstruction.

Society offers few opportunities to appreciate learning situations where information must be sought and considered, where answers unfold through careful observation, and where re-examination brings even greater insights. Youngsters are learning that “fast” can be more important than “good.” Could these factors be among the reasons why an increasing number of children seem to be diagnosed with attention deficits or attention spans more abbreviated than the norm?

What’s a Docent to Do?

Is it any wonder that the learning styles of those who were born since 1980 are different than of those who were born 30+ years earlier? Think of how dramatically and profoundly life has changed in that brief amount of time. Should we be surprised that schools are in trouble — that teachers, textbooks, and chalkboards fail to capture the attention and imagination of young people who
measure life’s involvement and pace against that of M-TV and video games?

What are the implications for educational environments as staid and sober as museums, gardens, parks, and historic sites? What can docents do to reinforce thinking skills among young people who have become increasingly passive and impatient?

**Talk Less, Involve More**

It has been said that all classroom teachers, regardless of the subject they teach, are first and foremost teachers of reading. Unless students can read, they cannot access information. By the same token, all docents touring and teaching students, regardless of their institution’s exhibitions or resources, are teachers of “awareness.” Awareness leads to interest; interest leads to learning; learning leads to understanding; and understanding leads to valuing. Unless young visitors are made aware — actively inspecting, gathering information, and constructing meaning — they may never fully realize or value the lessons taught by museums, gardens, parks, zoos, and historic sites.

Though those who teach must be knowledgeable about their collection and subject matter, teaching should not be equated with the act of “telling.” Teaching is the systematic transfer of information and skills based on the learner’s level of awareness — designed to accommodate and challenge what the learner is able to grasp, comprehend, and use.

A good rule-of-thumb to remember is, “the less information a visitor arrives with, the less information a visitor can absorb or retain.” Well-prepared or well-versed school groups can spend more of their time listening to an authoritative lecture because their awareness is already heightened. The vast majority of school groups, however, cannot listen long before they are adrift mentally (or even physically).

**Action, Action, and More Action!**

While museums and other such institutions can serve as an important counterbalance to today’s hyperactive environment, they will not thrive in conflict with it. If the students are not made enthusiastic and intrigued, they will not be learning much or for long. Therefore, those who work with students must adapt their methodology in a manner that makes the experience more “dynamic.”

Most objects are silent and still. They do not invite participation easily. Stimulating involvement and interest are the educator’s job. Use activities, questioning strategies, data retrieval sheets, and/or storytelling to invite participation and provide avenues for mental engagement. Make your visiting students do things! Get them talking! Challenge them to express ideas and opinions that can be referenced back to the objects examined, and reward such personal and intellectual risks by being positive and supportive. Give student visitors a boost! Help them discover the joy and excitement that comes with active thinking.

The articles included in this issue of The Docent Educator provide a starting point for constructing participatory activities and exercises (as do our previous issues). Call upon these, and use your own inventive powers to create new ones. Discover for yourself the rewards and excitement of teaching! Surely, when aware and engaged, your students will not make the same double-edged comment about their visit to your institution that Jane Austin is credited with saying about visiting her family … “It was a delightful visit; a perfect visit would have been much too short.”

Alan Gartenhaus
Publishing Editor
Constructing School Programs

History museum docents, like those in other types of museums, are increasingly offering participatory tours that encourage visitors to think creatively about the objects they encounter. Docents challenge their groups to look closely at objects, accurately describe what they see, answer open-ended questions that allow information to be interpreted meaningfully, and find connections between the past and their own lives today.

Docents who conduct such tours are often both qualified and willing to design tours that bring out the lively stories that objects are waiting to tell. At the Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Museum, our docents have recently developed a new, local history tour for eighth graders based on the theme of "contrasts" that is designed to engage students in participatory and informative object encounters.

While the planning for such a tour included teachers, administrators, and museum educators, the pre-tour resource packet and the tour itself were researched and prepared by volunteer docents who then presented the tours to students. Though every locale has its own, unique stories to tell, most of the steps completed during the Wichita project are appropriate for developing tours for school groups anywhere.

▲ Start with the Curriculum

When planning programs for students, it is best to begin with the school curriculum so that the goals of the tour and those of teachers are complementary. The more connections teachers can make between the curricular requirements and a visit to the museum, the more likely a visit can be justified.

We began by identifying as many mandated outcomes (those stated objectives for learning set by the school system) in as many disciplines as a history tour in the museum might meet.

In the case of the new Wichita tour, we continued by focusing on the Kansas history unit required in eighth grade. We designed our materials so that the outcomes can be almost entirely taught using our tour resource packet.

▲ Construct a Theme

The strength of the museum's collection will usually dictate the topics, information, personalities, and events around which a tour can be built. These variables provide a domain for identifying the theme, or "big idea," of the tour.

The Wichita docents used historic photos, published histories, label text, and artifacts in the local history exhibition to refine our theme. The tour title, Wichita: City of Contrasts, reflects the chosen idea of making comparisons—comparisons between early and contemporary Wichita, and within the early town itself.

▲ Target an Audience

Correlations between the museum's collections, its thematic potential, and the school curriculum, begin to define your target audience. Identifying the grade level at which the selected theme and learning activities can most appropriately meet student and teacher needs further refines the audience.

For the Wichita project, the eighth grade Kansas history requirement and the rich historical resources of the local history exhibition meshed with the museum's desire to extend its reach and serve a new audience at the middle school level.

▲ Assemble Advisors

In most school systems, administrators and teachers will respond positively to an invitation to work together with the museum on a new program designed for students. Consulting with these professionals should help to ensure that the content is appropriate, and that the manner of presentation is consistent with age and background of the target audience. It also provides the school system with a sense of ownership and a stake in the program's ultimate success.

Administrators can be expected to contribute a limited amount of their time to this endeavor; teachers ought to be compensated (even if nominally) for their efforts. Upon consultation with the middle school program director for the local public school system, three eighth grade teachers were selected to consult for a maximum of 12 hours during the year, and were paid $10 per hour for the time spent in meetings and reviewing materials.

▲ Draw Upon Community Resources

Universities, libraries, collectors clubs, genealogical societies, senior citizens, other museums, as well as the
public and private schools in the area can be of great help in providing assistance. Any and all are potential contributors of background information, knowledge about the targeted age group, tips on presentation, and even financial support for the project itself.

In our case, The Junior League of Wichita provided both volunteer docents and funding for tour development. The Wichita Public Schools contributed the time of two administrators and a videographer. A local Native American musician gave permission for the use of his authentic flute music, and a Kansas historian allowed us use of his recordings. These contributions made it possible for our museum to produce a 10-minute introductory video tape contrasting photos of early Wichita with modern scenes (for example, a calico-clad pioneer woman at her wash tub versus one of the docents carrying plastic covered dry cleaning to her car).

**Do the Research**

Research the topic based on the objects to be toured. Also, research the audience. Both need to be understood before the tour is designed.

Docents at the Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Museum selected areas of early Wichita history to explore via books, label text, curriculum guides, and photos provided by the museum. Each became the project “expert” on a particular facet.

In addition, school administrators and teachers and a museum education consultant coached the docents on the developmental needs of eighth graders, as well as the most appropriate means of working with them in the museum setting. Among the things we learned was that eighth graders are very concerned about embarrassing themselves in front of their peers.

To overcome this potential obstacle to student participation, the docents decided to make their tour “safer” for students to speak up by having all of them assume the persona and perspective of particular individuals living in Wichita in 1874, rather than to speak as themselves.

**Develop Teacher Resource Materials**

Assemble a variety of learning activities for teachers to use both before and after the tour so that students know what to expect from, and how to build upon, the museum experience. The City of Contrasts packet grew to over 100 pages of historical background, pre- and post-tour activities, and teacher suggestions and instructions. Contrary to docent concerns that the size of the packet would be intimidating, the teachers unanimously praised its variety and depth, and that it allowed them a wide latitude of choices.

**Plan, Practice, and Cross Your Fingers**

After 10 months of research, tour development, and training, the 12 pilot tours were still a heady mix of nervousness, success, and learning on the job. The docents had their areas of expertise to rely upon during the discussion-based tours, and they practiced, and grew increasingly more comfortable with, asking open-ended questions.

**Evaluate**

Conduct student surveys, teacher evaluations, docent debriefing sessions, and hold a wrap-up meeting of the advisory committee. Review the tour, the style of interaction, and the materials — all are important to evaluate the effectiveness of the effort.

**Revise and Regroup**

Utilize the evaluations. Make changes. Do not be so invested in the product that you are not willing to incorporate suggestions into all aspects of the project.

The docents who created Wichita: City of Contrasts did all this. They are justifiably proud of their efforts. And the Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Museum has strengthened its service to schools while reinforcing its commitment to involving volunteers in the development of its tours.

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Teaching Elementary Students

by Alan Gartenhaus

The immediacy of objects in museums, parks, gardens, and historic sites can clearly demonstrate the compelling and satisfying experience that comes from learning. Their potential to stimulate curiosity and hold interest is inherently great. This is one reason why the brief encounters that volunteer or staff educators have with school children in such settings are so significant.

The greatest number of school groups visiting such sites are grades 3, 4, and 5. To maximize one’s effectiveness when working with this age group, an educator must have an understanding of the learning characteristics of children ages 8 through 11. A few of them follow:

- For most, this will be their first experience in a museum setting. Therefore, the educator’s primary emphasis should be teaching how one learns from objects.

Educators ought to avoid reciting facts, or providing students with the information that other people have found when looking and thinking about objects. Instead, they should develop activities that allow the children to look, to find, and to consider.

- Children learn best by doing. That is why they have homework, reading groups, and are assigned projects to do and problems to solve. They are physically unable to listen for long periods of time. They retain less of what they hear than of what they do.

  It is, therefore, best to involve young visitors. Ask children questions that require them to look closely, compare things, or use their imaginations. For instance, you might have children compare two works of art, two life forms, or two rooms in an historic house to one another.

- At this stage of their development, youngsters are just beginning to view the world beyond their own “personal context.” In other words, they tend to think in terms of what they have experienced, felt, or thought, and not to comprehend as well the abstracted experiences of others. History and historic time are still new concepts. Therefore, it is best if children can relate to objects or time periods through personal references.

  In most instances, circumventing these limitations is merely a matter of how one phrases questions. For example, rather than ask youngsters “What was life like for children living in the 19th Century?” try asking them “What might your life be like if you lived without electricity, telephones, heat, or hot water?”

- A visit to your institution should be a positive experience, and should reinforce what children are able to do. It should not be an experience where children discover how little they know.

  Avoid asking youngsters “right or wrong” type questions, as you may have to say “no” or “wrong” too often. Ask “open-ended” questions that accommodate a diversity of answers, and that allow everyone to offer one that will be accepted. For instance, rather than ask children, “Do you know what this object is?” try asking “If you found this object in your kitchen, what would you think it was used for?” Or, rather than ask children, “What is the subject of this painting?” try asking “If you had painted this picture, what title would you give it? Why?”
Staying A Step Ahead

by Betsy Gough-DiJulio

For those of us in museums, "back-to-school" means yellow school buses moving into formation in our parking lots with battalions of enthusiastic young passengers mounting a benevolent assault on our institutional "front line" — the docents. The following thoughts are just a few ideas with which to prepare for the onslaught.

Diverted Attention

Children will be curious about things you do not intend them to notice, and NOT necessarily curious about things you have selected for their tour. For example, in our auditorium, a burning question is why there are names on brass plaques attached to the seats. In a gallery, a detail of exhibit design or of environmental control might create the same level of inquisitiveness.

Questions that may arise — to the extent that they relate to a child's curiosity about the way the world works — should be accommodated. In their enthusiasm, children often make inquiries without regard to the subject under discussion. Try building time into the beginning and/or end of your tour to deal with these questions to prevent them from being disruptive.

Variety is the Spice of Life

It is fallacious to assume that your tour will have enough variety to keep young minds interested and focused just because you look at more than one object. If every object is approached in precisely the same way at every stop on the tour, students may tire quickly, become bored, and lose interest.

People, young and old, become lulled by a predictable or repetitive pattern of inquiry. Try punctuating your tour with an age-appropriate memory game, a storytelling component, dramatic interpretation, or small group activity. Children become more engrossed, and have far less difficulty maintaining appropriate behavior, when the tour offers some variety.

A related issue is how many students should be allowed to respond to a given question. Elementary students usually respond with eagerness, and it is not uncommon for every hand in a group to shoot up when a question is asked. While it is important to seek a range of responses and allow all children an opportunity to answer questions during a tour, allowing too many children to answer each question becomes tiresome for everyone.

A Laugh a Minute

Recently, on a tour with a class of first graders, I asked them how a Franz Marc painting of a yellow cow in a brightly colored landscape made them feel. I pointed to a little boy with his hand raised, who sang out in his best James Brown imitation, "I feel good ..." All the adults present burst into laughter and the children followed suit.

It is important to acknowledge humor when it is in good taste (and to put a stop to it when it is inappropriate). However, an overwhelmingly positive response from adults or children will likely result in "copy-cat" answers. (Actually, this is true whether humor is involved or not.) I received four more "I feel good" responses from this child's classmates.

Young children do not understand that something which is funny the first time loses its impact to older people in the repetition. What they do understand is that a certain answer yielded attention from their peers and adults, and they want to garner it for themselves. To break the cycle, try using a gentle reminder that, while John Doe's answer was funny, we are seeking a range of different responses.

Testing Boundaries

Humor is related to the sometimes irrepressible urge people of all ages feel to test boundaries. In its most positive sense, questioning authority is a healthy function of an independent, thinking person. However, on tour, some boundary-testing tactics can be harmful, annoying, disruptive, and an impediment to learning.

The use of inappropriate language is one boundary young children often feel the need to test. What my mother used to refer to as "bathroom" humor, or "potty" language, may crop up in a group discussion. Young people are just learning the effect of that kind of humor on their classmates, and enjoy their peers' enthusiastic appreciation even at the risk of disapproval and punishment from their teachers. It may be necessary to remind students to "keep it nice."

My general rule-of-thumb is to use one summary statement about appropriate responses and behaviors at the beginning of a tour or activity. Enumerating specific unwanted behaviors or responses can have the unwanted effect of "planting the seeds" of misbehavior. By cautioning students in detail, before anything has occurred, you may cause the boundary-testers in a group to see just how serious you are.

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New Year’s Resolutions
School

by Marla K. Shoemaker

Although the fireworks explode on January 1st, for most of us it is Labor Day and the opening of school that truly signal a new beginning each year. Museum education departments are beehives of activity in September. School teachers are calling or writing, anxious to make sure their students don’t miss out on a visit to the local museum as part of their school year. Docent councils are reconvening, preparing for the onslaught of tours soon to burst into their galleries.

It is in this spirit of renewed vigor and enthusiasm for all that schools, museums, and learning have to offer, that I annually make my “New Year’s” docent resolutions. Like all New Year’s resolutions, these will not be slavishly followed. Instead they will be the basic structure around which to individualize each tour experience. I offer them here in the hopes that they will be useful to you, my fellow travelers down the complex and exciting path of museum touring.

1 I will be an ally to the classroom teacher.

School groups visit museums because teachers want them to. Often the teacher has a very specific idea of what he or she hopes students will experience. Always try to find out just before you begin your tour whether what you understand to be the goal of the tour, e.g. animal habitats, is in fact correct, and whether, to continue the example, there are any special animals the students have been or will be studying. This will ensure the best experience for everyone, and the best use of your museum’s resources.

Sometimes the goals of the teacher seem in direct conflict with the stated goals of the tour and museum. How should the docent respond when, in a gallery of contemporary art the teacher says, “This not real art! I do not want my students to waste their time in here,” or when they say, “I think you’ve talked enough about this object. Can we please move a little more quickly?” or “I know we signed up for the invertebrates tour, but we really want to see the pandas.”

After 20 years experience giving museum tours, I have decided that in virtually every case, a docent should attempt to honor a teacher’s wishes, even when she thinks the teacher is wrong or misguided. We docents are only with the students for an hour.

Teachers need to protect and maintain a year-long relationship with their students in order to try to maximize the classroom learning that can occur.

If the teacher asks to see the pandas, and you do not know about pandas, you might just admit that, and offer to take the group there and let the teacher lead the discussion. If she doesn’t want to see contemporary art, try to find another spot you both can feel good about. An open conflict between the teacher and docent will not only make students uncomfortable, it may undermine the teacher’s authority in the classroom. If subjugating your own goals is hard, think instead of how you will be supporting the important work of the classroom teacher.

2 I will ask first, then tell.

Curators hope that visitors will be “engaged” by objects in the collections. Our job as docents is to facilitate that process, to foster a kind of inquisitiveness about objects among our visitors. While the interest of curious adults is often piqued by just the right piece of information, school children are much more likely to have an “Ah ha!” experience when asked to make discoveries on their own. One could tell children that, “This is the largest gem in the collection” or that “Pablo Picasso painted every picture in this room,” but children will be more engaged (and more enthusiastic about the resultant discussion) if they are asked to find the largest gem in the collection, or figure out what is the same about every picture in the room.

3 I will ask questions that are fun or interesting to answer.

I am often asked just what kind of questions to ask children on a tour. My answer is that they should be questions that require students to examine objects, and that they should be questions that the docent thinks would be interesting to answer. Remember, we are settings of informal learning. We don’t have to test kids, and we should take advantage of that.

“Who knows where Abraham Lincoln was born?” is probably not a good museum tour question. It’s only fun if you already know the answer, and even then it requires no observation or thought. Children cannot find the answer by being in the museum. If, however, you have a map of Illinois on the wall with Lincoln’s birthplace clearly marked, then “Who can find Abraham Lincoln’s birthplace marked on this map?” is a much more fun question to answer. It’s like solving a puzzle; you know you can do it if you just try hard enough.

4 I will ask questions that make students feel successful.

Everybody loves being right. My favorite opening question is one I am certain the kids will get right, an easy question. “Do you think the person who owned this house (a mansion) was rich, medium or poor?” When students
respond, “Rich!” I can say, “You’re right! A+!” Then comes my favorite second question “How did you know?” Being right, even when answering a simple question, motivates kids to want to think about the second, much more complex question. What are the trappings of wealth? What makes something valuable or expensive? Size? Materials? Craftsmanship? Time? How did I know?? Through this kind of critical thinking students make connections between museum visits and the rest of their lives.

5 I will remember the rule of “Do, See, Hear.”

Imagine telling elementary school-aged students that they are going to go to a museum and that, while there, they will do some things, and hear some things, and see some things. Which of these three activities will they look forward to the most? Which next? Which least?

Elementary students most look forward to doing something, then seeing something, and last hearing something. All three of these activities are integral to a good tour, but a preponderance of your talking and their listening will not be well received. They want to be challenged and involved. Sometimes I use the word “job” to describe what I want students to do. I might show students bamboo growing in a garden and then tell them their job is to find at least five places that bamboo has been used to build the Japanese Tea House that sits in the garden. This leads to a discussion about the use of natural colors and materials in the Tea House. Another job might be to find all the dragons in the Chinese Palace Hall. Our discussion then centers on dragons as symbols. The kids are invested in the discussion, because it is based on what they did.

6 I will not criticize children, only their behavior.

All children misbehave. The ways in which they choose to act out change depending on their ages, and certainly some children demand more attention than others. We have every right to expect appropriate behavior on a tour, and to correct students who do not comply. However, when correcting a child, make clear that it is the behavior that is unacceptable, and not the child. Criticizing children for being who they are — liking to run, being loud, or joking with friends — is really unfair. On the other hand, with a clear explanation of what is expected, it is fair to tell students you expect them to comply with the rules of being in a museum, no matter how limiting they may seem. A brief explanation of why certain rules exist often makes students more willing to cooperate.

Another kind of behavior problem is rudeness. If students are rude to you, it is not a personal attack, they don’t even know you. They are acting out for their friends or because they resent authority of any kind. You can choose to ignore side comments, or to ask the person please not to talk that way around you. Many of the students who behave the worst have very low self esteem. You may find that if you can draw that child into answering a question correctly, you will go a long way toward improving the behavior. One last thing to remember, if all the students are getting fidgety, they may no longer be interested in the discussion or activity. Move on to something different.

7 I will keep my sense of humor!

Giving tours to visitors in museums involves a delicate balancing of the needs and desires of a great many individuals. Keeping a good sense of humor both about the students and yourself will allow you to roll with the punches and celebrate your successes. Allow yourself to see the humor in the dumb jokes kids make, even if you wish they were more serious. If a tour goes poorly, try to think of things you could have done to improve it, or talk about with your colleagues. Then, forget it and remember that the next one will probably be better. If you can communicate your enthusiasm for the objects in your collections, and your genuine interest in the students, you will have a lot more hits than misses.

Our institutions are settings of informal learning. The questions we ask should be interesting, and require students to examine objects. We don’t have to test kids.

photo: Lynn Rosenthal, Philadelphia Museum of Art

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Interpreting Portraits

The Attributes Game

Every art museum has its share of portraits, but sometimes it’s hard to get school visitors engaged in looking carefully at this genre. We want them to move beyond the cheap thrill of noticing “how the eyes follow you when you move around the room!” We want them to work towards an interpretation of the image — an understanding of who the sitter was, as well as the choices the artist made in presenting that sitter.

As part of the Ackland Art Museum’s school outreach program, we developed an activity to teach some of the skills needed to interpret a portrait. We call it the Attributes Game, and we have had lots of serious fun “playing” it with kids in grades 3 - 5. The activity has been effective in both the galleries and the school classrooms we visit, as a way to reinforce the vocabulary and interpretive strategies introduced during a lesson on portraits.

The Lesson (20 - 30 minutes)

During the course of your lesson, you will need to set up the Attributes Game by introducing certain key vocabulary words and concepts. Explain that a PORTRAIT is a work of art that represents a specific person. That person, called the SITTER, is the artist’s main reason for making the painting, and the goal is to introduce the sitter to the VIEWER.

The viewer has to look for the clues the artist provides, in order to learn who the sitter was (or is). Major clues may be found by considering the sitter’s FACIAL EXPRESSION and POSE. (This will be a good moment to let the kids experiment with their own facial expressions. Try linking them to particular emotional states: ask them to make joyful, jealous, lovable, sneaky, furious, lonely, and snobbish faces!) Note that in many traditional portraits, the artist made an effort to show the sitter in a characteristic expression. All of us develop a basic understanding of “body language,” and most artists become real experts!

Older kids can discuss some of the issues central to the portrait genre. What are some of the problems inherent in making an artist representation of a person? How would the sitter have wanted to be shown? Who was the portrait intended for? Did the artist and/or sitter produce a formal portrait, a public image, or something more intimate? Do you think the sitter really looked like that?

Depending on the particular portraits you are looking at, you may want to introduce the idea that important clues appear in the SETTING. You may teach additional vocabulary — SELF PORTRAIT, GROUP PORTRAIT, MINIATURE, and so forth — or discuss style — REALISTIC, ABSTRACTIVE, "NAIVE," etc.

With most groups, you should resist the temptation to cram it all into one lesson, however! Beginning viewers ought to go away feeling that they can understand a portrait by looking for clues in the sitter’s facial expression, body language, and ATTRIBUTES (those objects that are closely associated with, or owned by, the sitter). We want beginners to feel competent in the ability to look, and to enjoy looking, at portraits.

The Game (15 - 20 minutes)

Gather a selection of ATTRIBUTES, such as distinctive hats, household items, sporting gear, uniforms, and so on. Try to collect items that can be sensibly combined to create a personality type or character. The objects might be associated with a particular profession or activity, as are many of the attributes found in portraits. (Examples contained within our large canvas bag are: a white chef’s hat, an apron, and a wooden spoon; a paintbrush, beret, and palette; a white lab coat and a microscope — you get the picture!) You will need a POLAROID CAMERA and film. (Even amid today’s technological triumphs, instant photographs seem like magic! The cameras are inexpensive and simple enough for kids to use.)
1) While the students are seated, introduce the game by pulling the attributes out of the bag at random. Go slowly enough for the children to see and identify each item, as you set them on a table or the floor.

2) Choose volunteers, two at a time. One student will be the sitter; the other is the artist.

3) The sitter chooses two or three items from the assorted attributes that s/he thinks go well together, then consults with the artist about possible facial expressions and poses.

4) The artist, who has the camera, is instructed to look through the viewfinder, choose a point of view, and snap the portrait photo. (You may need to encourage the artist to consider close-ups and unusual composition possibilities.)

5) Repeat the process with new volunteers. (You may wish to involve those children who were most quiet during the lesson.)

6) If there is not enough time for everyone to be an artist or sitter, identify some children as viewers and ask them to explain what the finished Polaroid portrait tells them about the sitter, and to identify the relevant clues.

**Summary and Closure (5 minutes)**

Ask the students to think about how they would present themselves if they were having their portraits painted. What attributes would they choose that would tell other about themselves? What settings would they select? What pose and facial expression would they assume?

What attributes, pose, and expression would be appropriate for a portrait of the President? What about a glamorous movie star? (You could suggest that teachers follow up on this idea by discussing journalistic images of famous people and how we interpret them. This kind of visual literacy and critical thinking is so important in our culture!)

When it is time to say good-bye, ask the students to pose for a group portrait — thinking about their facial expressions, of course — then, take one last photograph and give it to their teacher. You'll be leaving them with a handful of snapshots, memories of a good time at the art museum, and some serious practice at interpreting images!

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**Joseph-Siffred Duplessis**
*Portrait of an Artist, 1787*
Ackland Art Museum, U. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Ackland Fund

**Archibald John Motley, Jr.**
*Mending Socks, 1924*
Ackland Art Museum, U. of North Carolina at Chapel Hill
Burton Emmett Collection

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Ray Williams is the Curator of Education for the University of North Carolina's Ackland Art Museum. He received an M.A. in art history from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and an Ed.M. from the Harvard Graduate School of Education. In addition to his administrative responsibilities, he teaches regularly in the galleries with members of the Ackland's team of docents. He is particularly interested in using the museum as an environment for developing critical thinking skills and enhancing cross-cultural understanding.
## Survival Skills for Student Discipline

Though successful strategies for control of student discipline problems (and for maintaining order) will differ from one situation or student to the next, the following are some suggestions for influencing students toward appropriate behaviors.

- Communicate institutional rules for behavior, such as “objects should not be touched,” simply and clearly at the beginning of student visits.
- Minimize the attention. There are times when ignoring a student who is vying for attention is all that is needed.
- Give “The Eye.” Silently looking directly at the offender with a disapproving expression can communicate “stop it.”
- Walk toward and stand close by a misbehaving student while you continue your teaching.
- If the students are wearing name tags, or if you can learn the offending student’s name, interject it into your lesson. Here’s what this might sound like: “This house – Jeffrey – was built in 1746.”
- Each time you pose a question, ask the offending student to respond first. Then, move on to someone who wishes to participate.
- If an offending student’s behavior cannot be quelled, ask the teacher or chaperone to remove the student from the tour.

As you consider these possible routes toward inhibiting inappropriate behavior, remember to account for some possible “root” causes.

- Some people are very extroverted and talk their thoughts out loud. Be a good eavesdropper. If the conversation is connected to the topic being discussed, perhaps the side conversation isn’t as inappropriate or rude as it seems.
- Occasionally we say or do things that are just plain funny. Don’t be so concerned with control that you forget to have a sense of humor. When something silly happens, laugh!
- You cannot make people learn, but being interesting and enthusiastic helps. Are you simply lecturing to the students? Do you provide them with no opportunities to participate beyond asking them if they have any questions? Have you examined your teaching methods and style of presentation lately?

## Gifting Issues

The editors humbly suggest that gifting a subscription of *The Docent Educator* to docents who have served for a certain length of time, or who have given an extraordinary number of tours, makes a terrific and appropriate reward. Gift subscriptions are also fun to give to your docent friends. Just tell us about the gift, and we will inform the recipient!

## Sharing Science with Students

**Sharing Science with Children:**

*A Survival Guide for Scientists and Engineers,* is a terrific brochure produced by the North Carolina Museum of Life and Science in Durham. Among its useful teaching tips and words of advice, are these:

- **Involve the students in doing.** Use an attention grabber if you can. Keep in mind that your goal is to arouse curiosity, excitement, eagerness to know more. When possible, let students handle models, equipment, samples, plants, prisms, stethoscopes, rocks, or fossils.
- **Stimulate thinking by asking questions.** Questions that ask students to make a prediction, to give an explanation, to state an opinion, or to draw a conclusion are especially valuable. Be sure to allow time for each student to THINK before anyone gives answers.
- **Use language the students will understand.** Be conscious of vocabulary. Try not to use a difficult word when a simple one will do. Define words students may not know.
- **Make what you are talking about real to students.** Show the students that the area of science or technology you work with is part of their everyday lives. How does it relate to what they are learning in school?
It Works for Me ...  
Sharing successful techniques and ideas.

Docents can make humor work for them, especially with children's tours. A laugh together early in a tour establishes rapport and friendship between the group and the docent.

What are the benefits of humor? Most of all, it makes children (and the adults with them) feel good to laugh. It relaxes them, breaks down barriers, and loosens them up physically. Humor encourages participation. It lets children know you are accessible — that they can ask questions — that their docent will provide some variety to an otherwise serious discussion.

Laughter can unify your audience. Laughter demonstrates to each child that others are having a good time, and invites them to join in the fun. It also adds to the anticipation of touring with you. "What will our docent say next?"

When using humor, we must choose our humorous anecdotes carefully. Children do not cope well with cynicism. Remember that humor must fit with the audience and the occasion.

I have found that the best humor comes from personal experience. If you think it is funny, they will also. How do you discern things in your own experience that fit with the exhibition you are touring children through? I suggest "negative fondness" — an experience that you cherish, but that also went awry. For instance, when showing children the cramped quarters of a pueblo at our museum, I talk about the time my family and I vacationed in a tiny trailer and I had to ask everyone to crowd onto the beds so that I could get food out of the cupboards.

What do you do when a child or teacher offers a tasteless joke or makes an ethnic or sexist remark? I try to ignore them, but sometimes have said, "Not all of us agree with your viewpoint." Then, I quickly move the group on to a new topic.

Smiling, steady eye contact with everyone, and joyful approach to teaching are helpful for you, and for the children on your tour. Incorporate humor into your arsenal as you capture converts to the joys of learning.

Jody Bates, Docent
Texas A & M University Art Galleries

(P.S. — Ms. Bates requests that docents send in humorous things that have happened on docent-led tours. It could result in an article and would make for delightful reading!)

1995 National Docent Symposium

The eighth National Docent Symposium, hosted by the docents of the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles County, will take place in Los Angeles, CA. on April 2 - 4, 1995.

The National Docent Symposium is a terrific opportunity to learn and to exchange information. Due to popular demand, attendance at this most important event is limited to one education staff member and three docents per institution. The registration fee is $260 per person. The deadline for registering is December 1, 1994. For further information, please call (213) 744-6925.

Back issues of The Docent Educator are available!

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The “Now & Then” Approach

Teaching History to Younger Students

To take children’s knowledge where you want it to be, start with what children already know. That’s the concept and basis for the Museum of the Cape Fear’s “Now & Then” tour for students in grades K - 3.

The Museum of the Cape Fear, located in Fayetteville, North Carolina, is a branch of the North Carolina Museum of History located in Raleigh. The museum’s galleries interpret the history of southern North Carolina and include exhibitions about Native Americans, early exploration and settlement, Scottish migration, the Revolutionary War, the Antebellum period, transportation, the Civil War, textiles, a pottery exhibit, and a turn-of-the-century general store.

The museum’s education unit, charged with developing programs, believes that “history did not happen in a textbook,” and although programs and tours are designed to coincide with school curriculum, the museum is able to lift history from the textbook pages. The “Now & Then” tour compares the way students live “now” with the way people of earlier times lived “then.” “Then” could be a time focused on the lives of Native Americans, early European settlers, slaves, yeoman families, and so on. Touch items are used to enhance the “Now & Then” tour and to allow students opportunities to interact with history.

All tours begin with an introduction to museums. The docent explains the purpose of museums and how our museum got its name. As a result, new vocabulary words are introduced: preservation, artifact, region. The tour then proceeds with the story of southern North Carolina.

Starting with what children know “now,” docents ask them to describe the kind of houses we live in today. Students typically respond with such answers as, “My house is made of brick” or “I live in a mobile home.” As dialogue and discussion ensue, we learn that houses today contain several separate rooms, indoor plumbing, large electrical appliances, and climate-control units that heat and cool our homes. After this exchange, the docent describes the type of structures in which Native Americans of this region lived “then.” (The museum is located in an area of the state densely populated by Native Americans, who today live in the same types of structures as everyone else, and we do not want to give any other impression.)

Food is another example of how we compare lifestyles. When asked what kinds of foods Native Americans ate, students respond with the typical, textbook-learned answers: corn, beans, deer, bears. The docent then reaches for a cob of corn and a bear fur, passing them around for each student to hold. Other touch items such as gourds, baskets, and seashells aid students in visualizing the life of these first peoples of the Cape Fear region. It is this type of experience that lifts history from the textbooks.
As the tour proceeds chronologically, the next discussion centers on the exploration and settlement by Europeans. The docent asks students what it means to explore and why we do it? The students’ responses lead into the docent’s interpretation of why and how Europeans explored and settled our area. While describing an early settlement, students can compare not only their own lifestyle to that of the early settlers, but also the lifestyle of Europeans to that of the Native Americans. The students learn, for instance, that Native Americans used gourds (as well as pottery) for dishes. They compare that with the delware and earthenware used by the European settlers, which they can see in the exhibit.

A key principle of interpretation is making the tour relate to the visitor’s own experiences. This is particularly important when interpreting with children. When discussing the antebellum period in North Carolina, we compare the student’s daily routines “now” with children’s daily routines “then.” Since their daily routine is mostly attending school, the docent talks about children who would have received an education, and those who would not. This gives us an opportunity to discuss the value of education. They learn that children of wealthy parents were sent to one of North Carolina’s many academies, or the parents themselves taught their children how to read and write. As discussions continue, the students see that education certainly meant more opportunities for the future.

Furthermore, students become aware of how labor intensive life was “then” and how modern conveniences make life easier “now.” (Many students claim they would like boiling soap, dipping candles, and doing chores different from their own.) We compare and contrast using touch items—a box of ivory soap with lye soap, candles to light bulbs, and irons we use “now” with sad irons used “then.”

One of the museum’s exhibits addresses the topic of transportation. After defining transportation, students are asked to tell the docent of the many modes of transportation we have “now.” The docent interprets transportation “then” by comparing it with the forms of transportation the students offered. A re-created plank road in this exhibit usually grabs the students’ attention. After talking about how roads are made “now” compared with how they were made “then,” students are asked to imagine what it would feel like riding in a horse-drawn wagon on a plank road. Would they prefer riding on a plank road or a dirt road, which might be muddy or dusty?

The next topic of discussion on the tour is textiles. The docent defines the word, or if the group seems to have recognition, asks if anyone in the group would like to offer a definition. The main difference discovered about textiles from our exhibits is that “now” students buy their clothes, while “then” they grew the cotton or sheared the sheep, spun the thread, wove the cloth and sewed the clothes. A workable loom sits at the beginning of the exhibit area, reminding docents to tell students how the textile industry, so important in North Carolina, started in the home. A rag rug, which was woven on the loom, is passed around to each student. The rag rug, noticeably different from carpets “now,” provided the only floor coverings “then.”

An area of southern North Carolina is known for its pottery. The museum’s pottery exhibit includes a working treadle wheel. Again, we compare not only the uses of pottery, but also the way pottery has been made through the centuries, starting with the Native American coil pottery, to kick wheels, to the electric potter’s wheel. The Native American coil method is particularly familiar to children who play with modeling clay or playdough. Students make long snake-like coils similar to the way Native Americans did. Examples of Native American hand-built pottery are compared to pottery thrown on the treadle wheel. Students can actually hold pottery shards and discover differences in texture and color.

A turn-of-the-century, re-created general store completes the tour. The store is filled with artifacts. We ask students to do a visual hunt, looking to find certain items, such as an old toaster, an old sewing machine, coffee grinders, and other items. For those artifacts that they cannot identify, the docent explains what they are and compares them to modern equivalents, if they exist. If they do not, the docent explains why these items are no longer used. Then, we talk about the way that shopping malls “now” serve a similar purpose to the general stores North Carolinians relied upon “then.”

The “Now & Then” tour is a useful introduction to history for younger students who are just learning the concept of historic time. The tour accomplishes several important goals, including:

- putting students in a time line, and giving them some idea about the progression of events and technologies;
- making the past relevant;
- enhancing what they are hearing and learning in the classroom;
- allowing interaction with history through touch items; and
- giving students a better understanding of, and (hopefully) an appreciation for, museums as institutions.

Given the abbreviated attention spans of children ages 5 through 8, the “Now & Then” tour lasts only 45 minutes. In that time, the docent reveals a whole new world to students and provides them with a foundation from which they can continue to build. Start with what students know “now,” “then” you can take them where they need to be.

Leisa M. Brown is Education Coordinator at the Museum of the Cape Fear in Fayetteville, N.C. She has been employed with the North Carolina Department of Cultural Resources for over 7 years, working at three state historic sites before joining the museum staff. As Education Coordinator, Ms. Brown is responsible for recruiting and training docents, developing tours, programs, and special events, and aims to create a close partnership with the local school system.
High School Docents

This fall marks the fourth year of an innovative “high school docent program” at The Friends of Photography in San Francisco that empowers young adults by making them leaders in a public setting. Bringing in high school students to serve as an integral part of a museum changes the institutional climate dramatically - in ways positive and wonderful.

A program of this kind takes a large amount of time and commitment on the part of museum personnel. In addition to recruiting and training students, museum staff must phone student-docents to remind them about tour dates, supervise tours, handle payroll, and write letters of recommendation.

In our program, high school docents are paid for their time during training and when giving tours — encouraging and enabling participation by young adults of all economic levels. For many, this position is their first work experience, and a reference could be a valuable resource for future employment opportunities.

What can a museum gain by having high school docents?

▲ The museum enfranchises an age group rarely incorporated into leadership roles in the museum field.

▲ The museum builds a core of active individuals, who are visually literate, and who may continue some relationship with museums after high school.

▲ High school docents can pair with a museum’s regular docent corps, establishing a mentoring relationship. These rich intergenerational relationships can be very beneficial to both groups, and allow experienced adult docents the opportunity to share their expertise with greater depth.

What can high school students gain by being docents?

▲ High school students build self-confidence, improve public speaking skills, and gain valuable work experience.

▲ Students learn more about how museums function and come to realize possible career opportunities in museums.

To recruit students for the docent program, a letter outlining the program was sent to art and photography instructors teaching in the public high schools in the area. Included with the letter was a brightly colored flyer for teachers to post in their classrooms. The flyer listed the date for an informal orientation session at the museum and stressed that students needed no prior public speaking experience to participate. It turned out that the students who had no previous art historical knowledge were some of the most effective and engaging docents.

Students who expressed a commitment to attend all training sessions were admitted into the program. They were expected to attend training sessions two Saturdays a month from 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. for three months to acquire a base knowledge in photography and to learn the techniques of giving tours to the public. Fifteen students from five public schools participated in the program this year.

Training

The training program began with an introduction to the Center and an overview of the program. Our first photographic activity gave students an overview of history, and served as an “ice-breaker” for having students work cooperatively. In teams, students explored photography from its beginnings in the 19th century to the invention of the snapshot, using a game that included vintage examples of daguerreotypes, tintypes, and other early processes combined with clue cards.

The Friends of Photography was founded by Ansel Adams, and many visitors come hoping to learn something of the photographer’s life and work. Therefore, we also spent some of the first sessions giving students a solid background in his life and career. At the end of the first training session, students were sent home with one of three readings on Adams and accompanying questions.

The next time we met, students formed teams, joining with others who were assigned the same reading. Each team prepared a presentation for the rest of the group. They used Adams’s photographs to illustrate their presentations. The emphasis on teamwork helped to build a sense of camaraderie among the students and was a more comfortable way to practice speaking to an audience.

Another group activity was planned in conjunction with Day Without Art, an international day of mourning and response to the AIDS crisis. After answering a series of open-ended, thought-provoking questions, students created banners reflecting their ideas and feelings about AIDS. These powerful banners were exhibited over our gallery entrances.
A high school docent discusses the early history of photography with museum visitors in the Education Gallery.
photo: Ansel Adams Center for Photography

Now that they had some background information about photography and Ansel Adams, and had practiced working together, students were ready to approach their first exhibit. We began with Wendy Ewald’s *Retratos y Sueños*, a collection of images made by children in the Chiapas region of Mexico. Students completed a “Visual Analysis” of two images and shared their responses. The assignment was designed to get students thinking about such basic terms as subject, composition, content, portrait, landscape, diffused, ambient and artificial lighting, in addition to prompting personal responses to the images. Sample questions were:

- Would you say that this photograph represents an artistic expression or is a straightforward document of a person, place or time? Explain your answer.
- What type of lighting did the photographer use in this picture, and how does that affect the subject?

After filling in the Visual Analysis individually, students had their first taste of giving tours in the exhibition space by leading each other through the show and sharing their responses. This exercise helped students gain confidence in interpreting photographs and in their public speaking skills.

After students repeated this process using different photographs, we added other elements of leading a tour. Together we created an outline for touring:

- Greet the public and give them an introduction to the museum (introduce yourself, describe the show you’ll tour, state touring time)
- Physically and verbally lead group to first selected image
- Explain each selected work, give time for comments or questions, lead group to next image.
- Describe the other exhibits in the museum briefly.
- Invite people to look around and ask questions; thank them for coming.

In subsequent training sessions, the student-docents continued to practice giving tours to each other, incorporating a visual analysis of three or four images to the tour components listed above. This time students toured the newly installed *Flesh and Blood* exhibition, a collection of “family album” photographs by more than 50 well-known photographers. Students used worksheets that were designed to elicit students’ interpretations of the photographs as family portraits:

- How does this picture represent the concept of family?
- What kind of family relationship is portrayed?
- What makes this picture more powerful than a “standard” snapshot?

During all training sessions, students critiqued each other and offered suggestions for improvements. During one of the final training sessions, the director of the Center gave the students a guided walk-through of the exhibition, answering questions and giving tour advice.

The final training session put all the pieces together. A “dress rehearsal” was held, as student-docents conducted their completed tours. Now, they were ready to go public! High school docents gave their well-received tours to the public on Saturday afternoons throughout the school year.

**Tributes**

The success of the program can be heard in the students own voices —

“The program has changed the way I think about photography. Before I thought art was art and photography was photography, but now I see that photography has art in it.”

Damon Tanner, 16 years old

“Some of the most positive aspects of the docent training program are that you get paid for something that is interesting and fun, and you provide a service that people are thankful for.”

Rita Mae Habegger, 18 years old

by Julia Brashares and Kristi Farnham

Julia Brashares is the Education and Workshop Coordinator at The Friends of Photography. She assists the Director of Education in the planning and execution of the teen and adult docent program, workshops, and outreach to schools. Her professional credentials include a B.A., Art History and Criticism from the University of California, San Diego, and an M.A., Museum Studies with a specialization in Museum Education, from San Francisco State University (to be completed December 1994.)

Kristi Farnham is an English and photography instructor at Arroyo High School in San Lorenzo, California. On Saturdays during the school year, she teaches the high school docent training sessions at The Friends of Photography. Her professional credentials include an M.A., English Literature, and Secondary School Credential in English, with supplementary Credential in Photography, all from Mills College, Oakland, California.
Can we talk?
Some of my teaching colleagues have only two requirements for a successful field trip — their kids don’t embarrass them and nothing (animal, vegetable, or mineral) gets broken.

Some of the docents in your museum also have only two requirements for a successful tour — the class gets to the museum on time and they leave promptly.

Of course, we’re not like that, so let’s talk about our requirements! I think we both want the class to have such a positive experience in your museum that forever after they will seek museums and museum-objects as sources of pleasure and personal expansion. How do we work together to provide that positive experience? We have to start by communicating.

What’s happening?
You’ve examined the curriculum I’m required to teach, and you and the other members of your museum’s education division have designed tours that complement that curriculum. You’ve studied developmental stages of school-age children and incorporated that information into the school program. You even invited some teachers to help you develop the tours, so they are well aware of how effective your institution can be in furthering our educational goals. However, how do you communicate that effectiveness to the rest of the teachers in our school system? How do you make certain that the teacher and the class who can most benefit from your program know of its availability? There are a number of ways!

First, start at the top! Arrange a visit with the superintendent of your school system. Explain your museum’s education program and ask if you may join the next meeting of the system’s principals to share the program with that group. All field trips must be cleared by school administrators; having them on your side is a major plus.

While you’re in the superintendent’s office, ask for a directory of school personnel. This book will give you the information you need to direct exhibit and tour information to specific individuals, the best way to ensure that the teacher and the class get the word!

Next, choose where to send notices of exhibitions, schedules, calendars, and announcements. As a courtesy, it’s always a good idea to send a copy of any information going into a school to the principal or headmaster (they hate surprises!). The same information should then be directed to the people most likely to use it ... and that varies from school to school and from exhibition to exhibition.

The best way of notifying individual teachers is, of course, to send a copy of your announcement to each teacher. This is prohibitively costly in many cases; this is where that personnel directory becomes most valuable. Target a specific discipline most likely to use your resources or tour and notify the curriculum supervisor for that discipline, the subject or grade leader in each school, or the media supervisor in each school with a cover letter asking that the information be disseminated. Of course, if you can afford it, send each school enough copies of your exhibition calendar to distribute to every teacher in that school. Send them in August so teachers can include you in their year’s plans.

What can I expect?
Okay, I know about the great new program your museum is offering, and I’ve called and made arrangements for my class to come. Now I’d like to know what you’re really planning to do with my class. Oh, I know what it says in the brochure, but I want to know what you will do. I want to know how well my students need to be prepared ahead of time — I don’t want them to act like dodos, but I don’t want to steal your thunder, either!
I want you to know that they haven’t studied this topic before; you’re their introduction. (Or, I want you to know that they are quite familiar with the subject, and you’ll lose them if you are too rudimentary.) If I tell you the main concepts I want them to know, will you be able to make sure they’re covered? Will you reinforce the vocabulary that we’ve studied in class? Are we both on the same theoretical ground?

Do you want me to divide the class into smaller groups or is that part of your get-acquainted activity? Do you want the adults to stay with the groups or disappear? Do you have a hand’s-on activity planned — I hope it isn’t one I’ve already done! I’ve talked to the education director (or maybe I’ve just talked to her secretary), but I’d really like to talk to you — the docents who’ll be working with my class. Could you please give me a call?

One of the unique facts of school life is that most of the time teachers are required to be with their students. We don’t have office hours or a secretary, and our “planning period” (if we have one) is usually taken up with a parent conference, an unplanned bloody nose, or a stack of 30 essays to read. In other words, we’re hard to call! But, not impossible!

Call anytime during the school day and ask for my schedule. The office staff can tell you when I have a planning period. If you leave a message, I’ll call you back when I have time. Sometimes I don’t have time until you’ve already left the museum. If I may call you at home, please leave that information with the school secretary. I really do want to talk with you.

What can you expect?

During our conversation, we’ve discussed the concepts the tour will cover. We’ve agreed on the “when’s” and “where’s.” You may even keep a card file that helps you understand me better — I hope there’s a note there somewhere saying: “Littleton, sixth grade, brought class to archeology program in Sept. each year since 1990, small classes, good discipline, students usually well prepared, teacher tends to coach too much, but means well.” I have a list of docents who’ve given my class good tours before, and I ask for them when I schedule a tour. There’s one more item, however, that we need to come to terms with. It’s rather “touchy.” I’d almost rather not mention it, but it is important. Who’s the boss?

I do expect you to be in charge of my class from the moment they step into your museum until the moment they leave. They will be aware of that split second when authority passes to you; you and I must be aware of it also. I will not relinquish my authority until I understand that you are ready to take over. If I feel that you are not in charge, I reserve the right to reclaim my class. Remember, I have to spend the rest of the year with these folks!

You have the right to expect their attention and respect, but you must know enough about your subject and my student’s development to deserve attention and respect. If I get caught up in the excitement of your tour and begin to “participate” you must (gently, I hope) remind me that there should be “no coaching from the audience, please.” You may and should ask for my help in any activity in which you want me to participate. You should also ask me to intervene if you have a problem with any of my students.

If a docent demeans a student or gives consistently incorrect information, I will, as politely as I can, reclaim my class. Of course, that will not happen on your tour because you’re not that kind of docent. And, besides, we’ve had the opportunity of sharing our goals and expectations beforehand. I feel so much better after our little talk; don’t you?

Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor

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Vol. 4 No. 1
The Role of Art in Education

What value does the art gallery experience have in an already crowded school curriculum? From my view, it is that art is one of the most powerful forms of self-expression available to the human mind. Art can explore anything, from the literal to the spiritual.

The very existence of a work of art implies an individual, a process, a culture, a society, and a time period. In this sense, the skill of perceiving works of art becomes the skill of perceiving life itself.

Where art seeks to imitate nature, for instance, it stimulates viewers in their perception of nature in all its minuitiae. Looking at a landscape by the Australian artist Fred Williams, with its minimalized symbolic elements of trees and hills, adapts eyes to detecting such forms in nature. In this function, art "vivifies the particular," heightening awareness for finding the extraordinary in the "ordinary" things of life.

Art, too, reveals the character of societies. Roman art, with its triumphal monuments, portrait heads, and narrative murals of war and mythology, was an art of propaganda. This is also true of the revolutionary art of Neoclassicism or of Social Realism. Each served as a vehicle for transmitting political messages to the wider public of its times.

A museum or gallery offers much that cannot be gleaned in classrooms or from books or television. The gallery is a special space created and encapsulated within a building that differentiates itself from the world outside its walls. This space is designed and arranged specifically for displaying and contemplating art objects. It provides a unique environment where students can have close experiences of texture, size, color, and form. It is a place where the "real thing" — a work of art — can be discovered in a world that offers few originals.

An understanding of the devices employed by artists in all genres teaches students perceptual skills that can be used, not only on art, but on the whole of life. Such perceptual abilities bring with them a fuller awareness — an ability to see into and beyond the simple appearance of things. Skills acquired through gathering and comprehending the insights and messages of art are thus an essential contribution to the schema of a well-rounded human being equipped to cope with the vicissitudes of life.

Visits to the art gallery also reinforce messages of continued learning. A place where students can see adults continuing to perceive and learn after leaving the formal classroom behind, the art gallery also offers young people constructive alternatives for filling leisure time and for pursuing personal interests.

Margaret Love has been a voluntary gallery guide, or docent, at the Art Gallery of Western Australia in Perth since 1978. She recently earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts degree at the University of Western Australia. In conjunction with her honors dissertation, Ms. Love conducted an international survey of art docents. The results of that survey appeared in an article she authored for the Spring 1994 issue of The Docent Educator.

Next issue: Multi-culturalism!

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Digitization of *The Docent Educator* was generously sponsored by museum educators from around the globe through their support of Museum-Ed’s 2014 Kickstarter campaign:

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