Teaching Adults and Families

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Active Learning and Adults

People learn best by “doing.” Need proof? Consider how most of us learn to use a computer. We don’t just read the instruction manual, memorize it, and then turn the machine on. We learn in a series of back-and-forth steps, where something we want to do compels us to find out how to do it.

In museums, historic homes, aquariums, and other institutions where collections are protected and visitors are kept at a distance, people usually do very little. They stroll, they gaze, they pause to read labels (often spending longer to read a label than to look at what the label describes), and they browse at the gift shop. Truth be told, most people don’t really know what to do when they are in our institutions.

That is one reason why the inquiry method of teaching is such a useful technique for touring. Questioning gets visitors doing things — actively pursuing answers through the process of careful inspection, analysis, and reflection.

Questioning allows visitors to engage in an active learning experience. And, as the old adage goes, “experience is the best teacher.” It is the reason school children are assigned homework; graduate students write papers and theses; tradespeople apprentice; and doctors endure residencies. Active learning experiences teach us in ways that simply hearing about things cannot.

Learning by doing is not new; it is at least as old as our use of tools. Formally, however, it can be traced back to the inquiry method of teaching developed by the philosopher, Socrates. He taught his students by asking them questions. When his students responded, Socrates took their responses, gave them a slightly different spin, and threw back even more questions.

Questioning creates a dynamic situation where people actively discover how to learn, as well as what to learn. Sounds great, doesn’t it? Oh, but there is one tiny complication, most adults want docents to lecture. They do not want to be asked questions. Questioning makes some adults feel put on the spot.

The fact that a majority of adults dislike or distrust situations where they must answer questions creates an educational dilemma for museum docents and staff educators. How do we get adults involved so that they, too, have a lively and enriched learning experience, without forcing them to participate in something they find uncomfortable or worse?

One way to engage adults in active learning is to remove the risks inherent in questioning — to provoke adults into action in ways that do not put them in a situation of perceived vulnerability. There are several ways to accomplish this, each of which can be easily incorporated into adult tours.

- **Provocative Statements**

  Sometimes, statements can serve the same function as rhetorical questions. They can request that visitors participate by developing a mental response, even though a verbal response is unnecessary.

  For instance, you take a group of adults into a gallery of contemporary art. Guide them toward a work that often evokes thoughts of violence, or pain, or discomfort. Before attempting to discuss the work or the artist, begin by saying, “I am often asked if the artist meant for this painting to be so upsetting and confrontational,” or “The artist of this work left it untitled. However, I’m certain that each of you could come up with a descriptive title of your own for it.” After each provocative statement, pause. The pause serves as an unspoken cue to visitors that they should look, consider, and reflect.

  In an entirely different setting a provocative statement might function like this ... you are heading toward an area of the zoo that exhibits gorillas. As you approach this environment, say to your adult visitors, “Many people have the
mistaken notion that gorillas are aggressive animals, or even mankillers. But then, remember how most of us got our impression of gorillas.” After an appropriate pause, continue by saying, “It certainly wasn’t through personal encounters or practical experience.”

- **Anecdotes and Stories**

“Once upon a time” are magic words that weave their spell upon people of all ages. Adults, as well as children, enjoy hearing anecdotes, folktales, or stories when they are well told. In addition to the pleasure they bring, stories activate participation and engage listeners by prompting them to envision, imagine, and embellish what they hear.

Perhaps you are touring a group of adults through a garden. You begin by telling the group, “I once read a story for children that relates to what we will see in the garden. It was about the beginning of time, when all the plants on Earth were challenged to go without sleep throughout the night.

“Every plant agreed to try, each confident of its ability to remain awake. But only a few hours after sunset, the smallest of the plants became weak and drowsy, and soon drifted off into sleep. Most of the flowering plants also became tired and could not stay awake. One by one, they closed their flower petals and fell fast asleep. Before dawn, even many of the tallest trees had fallen asleep. Only the hardiest of the plants remained awake by the time morning came … plants like the holly, the hemlock, the cedar, and the pine.

“These plants had won the competition. For winning, they were told that they need not lose their leaves in winter, but could remain “ever-green” all throughout the year. And, to this day it is the evergreens that keep their leaves, providing us with beauty and greenery even in the coldest days of winter.

“While we tour the garden, I will point out some of the evergreens planted here. Evergreens serve an important function in our garden; they give it structure, especially during the months when the other plants are dormant.”

- **Inviting Questions**

Inviting visitors to ask questions allows them an opportunity to pursue interests and to satisfy curiosities. It is also a wonderful way to permit your guests to set the agenda and determine the tempo of the tour.

When the tour begins, let visitors know to ask questions as they arise, and not to wait until the tour has ended. Then, after looking at something in depth, invite them again to ask questions. Should questions begin to overwhelm your tour, simply reign things back in by telling visitors of your time constraints while offering to answer the rest of their questions at the conclusion of the tour.

If, on occasion, you are asked questions to which you do not know the answer, don’t be rattled. When that happens to me, I admit my ignorance, and then thank the questioner for stimulating me to consider something familiar from an entirely new vantage point.

Engaging adults through a process of asking rhetorical questions, making provocative statements, telling stories, and inviting their questions is not only an effective method of teaching, it is a more satisfying way to teach. Everyone wins.

Visitors enjoy a higher quality experience through personal involvement, as they imagine, discuss, and pursue areas of personal interest, while docents experience the satisfaction of having succeed at an educator’s two most important goals, nurturing curiosity and fostering an enthusiasm for learning.
The “Ask Me” Program

Imagine standing next to a work of contemporary art. The work is particularly perplexing. You find the work difficult to comprehend, and yet it is your responsibility as a docent to explain it to others who wander by.

“I could do that; why it this thing in an art gallery?!” “I can’t believe anyone would pay money for that!” “That’s not art.” “I know what I like and I don’t like that!” “What does that mean?” How would you respond?

At the Art Gallery of Ontario (AGO) in Toronto, Canada, comments such as these are heard regularly by staff and docents of the Ask Me program, an innovative method of gallery touring that helps visitors better relate to contemporary works of art.

The Ask Me program was created in response to the Gallery’s mandate “to bring art and people together.” Currently, this is achieved three afternoons a week, when docents interact with visitors on a one-to-one basis in the galleries, initiating discussions and answering questions on a range of art-related topics. They listen to visitors’ reactions, offer information on the works and the artists, provide strategies for dealing with contemporary art, and refer visitors to resources for further learning. In this, Ask Me helps to increase visitors’ confidence in viewing contemporary art by validating their reactions and responses to it. In addition, it engages them directly with the Contemporary Collection in a lively and stimulating way.

Education staff, curators, and docents worked in teams to conceptualize and implement this program, the debut of which coincided with the re-opening of the AGO after extensive renovations. Summarizing the development of this program may encourage others to consider the applicability of this approach for their own institutions.

The origins of the Ask Me program lie in discussions that took place between educators and curators at the Gallery, as plans were being made for the re-installation and educational enhancement of the AGO’s Contemporary Art Collection. All agreed that a human presence in the galleries was of ultimate importance in engaging visitors with the contemporary works, which would be on permanent exhibit for the first time in years. While the Gallery’s touring program was well-established, the linear approach and structured timing of a traditional tour was not seen as the best way to meet the needs of most adult and family visitors. Instead, an approach called “ani-mateur-ing” seemed better suited to meeting the diverse needs of visitors and dealing with the complexities of the works on display.

Historical sites have utilized an approach similar to “ani-mateur-ing” in the past, which they refer to as “interpreting.” It involves having staff or docents on hand to interact with visitors by initiating discussions or answering questions about objects or sites. The method allows responses to be geared directly to the visitors’ needs, based on age, knowledge, and learning style.

At first the task to develop and implement such a program seemed daunting, especially in light of staff and budgetary limitations. But the project proved manageable with the formation of a team of educators and docents who built the program collaboratively. To test the results of this collaboration, the team decided to conduct a five month pilot to assess the willingness of docents to adopt this new methodology, and to evaluate visitors’ responses to it.

Before the pilot was implemented, AGO docents interested in joining the program attended four special training sessions to learn about the works in the Contemporary Collection and to practice strategies needed to properly interact with visitors. These sessions included lectures about the artists; artworks and installation strategies in each gallery; problem-solving and role-playing exercises; independent research and reading; and first-hand viewing of the works. Curators collaborated by providing information on the works and the installation rationale, and experienced docents shared their knowledge about the artists and previous visitor responses to the works. Each participant was also expected to deliver a short talk about a work in the collection to fellow docents, to practice instigating
A visitor is examining *Untitled (Basel)*, by artist Robert Ryman. The work consists of five white paintings, all of equal size and shape. The quizzical visitor is approached by an Ask Me docent, who initiates an encounter.

**Docent:** It looks like this work interests you. May I ask what you think of it?

**Visitor:** To be perfectly honest, I was just wondering why these paintings are hanging in here; my children could have painted them!

**D:** It’s true, from a distance, they do look like they were simple to make. But have you had a close look at the way the artist put them together?

**V:** I think they were painted on wood or plastic, and there’s also some cardboard underneath each one. They do look more complicated to make when you look at them up close.

**D:** This is one of the artist’s intentions -- to get you to look closely at their construction.

**V:** Okay, but I still don’t get the point. Why are they important enough to hang in the art gallery?

**D:** Well, try comparing this work to more traditional paintings you have seen before. How is this work similar or different?

**V:** They aren’t like other paintings at all -- there aren’t any colors or pictures. Just about the only thing that is similar is that both are made out of paint.

**D:** Exactly! The artist, Robert Ryman, wanted you to focus on the basics of painting, without being distracted by colors or pictures. He wanted viewers to focus on what painting is ultimately about -- the physical act of putting paint onto a surface. When this series was made in the late 1960’s, many artists were interested in exploring the basic tenets of art-making by focusing on the true nature of their materials.

**V:** But his paintings are so simple that anyone could have made them!

**D:** But not just anyone did; and for me, this is one of the most interesting aspects of his work. Artists like Ryman make us focus on the ideas behind the art. They force us to be creative. This work generates lots of ideas from people who view it, which is one reason why it is considered important to include in our collection.

**V:** Well, I’m still not sure how I feel about this work, but I do think I understand it better now. Thanks for your help!

**D:** If you want to discuss any other artworks during your visit I’ll be available -- just Ask Me!

**A Typical Interaction in the Ask Me Program ...**

Discussions, and to hone her "animateuring" skills.

The docents who worked the first few shifts were apprehensive and uncertain. What would visitors ask? What if they were asked questions they didn’t know the answers to? What if they were ignored? But, as the first weeks passed, these fears melted away. Initial responses were enthusiastic and encouraging; visitors openly welcomed the opportunity to discuss the works and voice their reactions to the new installations. In turn, docents found the interactions challenging and exciting.

A reporting system tracked docents’ experiences over the first three months, and served as an informal means of communication for the group. Further training sessions also acted as forums for exchanging information and sharing successful strategies. Changes were made to methodology as necessary, and information sheets on the artworks and on "animateuring" strategies were produced. Some of the strategies docents found most useful were:

- starting an interaction with a smile and an open-ended question about the work, such as "What do you think?" or "Would this be something you would put in your home?"
- developing a sense of trust quickly by asking visitors for their opinions or reactions to a work and listening carefully to their responses;
- signalling accessibility by avoiding "art jargon" and showing a sense of humor;
- allowing the conversation to go in the direction visitors wanted (rather than trying to lecture or deliver a specific set of information);
- responding to questions with enthusiasm and interest, and being honest when you don’t know an answer;
- recognizing that you can learn as much from visitors as they can learn from you.

While these strategies may appear straightforward and based on common sense, the docents found their new roles very different from touring. They found it challenging to spontaneously interact with visitors without the safety net of a prepared script, but also refreshing in that each encounter held something new and

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Those Annoying Audiences

Remember those times in the galleries when your temperature rises in response to a tour participant? How annoying; they just don’t get it. They can’t see your point. Their behavior seems off track, picky, flaky, rigid, out of touch, or unresponsive. How irritating.

Perhaps what you have experienced is simply a difference in style. I’m not talking about the usual learning styles that first come to mind (auditory, visual, kinesthetic), but rather preferences in the way of focusing, informing, deciding about, and structuring experience that have been outlined through an instrument called the Myers-Briggs Indicator.

Created in the 1950’s by educators, and based on Carl Jung’s theory of individuation, the Myers-Briggs is an excellent means of exploring different ways of approaching the world and learning. It reveals what comes most naturally to us as we deal with our internal and external experiences. All ways are valid and work well within various contexts. But, amazingly, many of us assume that our own style is best.

Try folding your hands together, interlocking your fingers. (You may want to put this publication down for a second and give it a try.) Which thumb is on top? Either is fine, but one way of folding your hands is your “automatic pilot” response. Now, cross your hands again with the other thumb on top. How does that feel? It often feels “odd” or “different.” That is the experience we have when we operate in what the Myers-Briggs terms “against preference.” We can do it, but it does come as naturally.

As docents, it is important for us to know our automatic pilots because they give us information about the way we will most naturally present information on tours and, to an extent, the way we will assume that our audiences will receive it. That is why those jolts from our listeners can be so helpful. They throw a wrench into our automatic pilots, set off flashing red warning lights, and beg the question “are you addressing what this person’s style requires?”

What are these styles I’ve referred to? The Myers-Briggs describes four; each is a different arena. They cover areas of focus, gathering and giving information to the world, making decisions, and structuring the world. They look like this:

- **Extroversion ↔ Introversion** (focus)
- **Sensing ↔ Intuiting** (information)
- **Thinking ↔ Feeling** (decision-making)
- **Judging ↔ Perceiving** (structure)

Each person prefers to operate closer to one end or the other of each scale, resulting in a combination of preferences that make a rich, yet distinctive view of the world. This abbreviated explanation simply touches the snow on top of the iceberg.

Before becoming a bit more specific, I caution you not to get caught up in the words used to label the scales. They can sometimes bring connotations that are not correct within this context, so if you can come to them as neutrally as possible, that would be helpful.

**Extroversion – Introversion**
*(where a person likes to focus attention)*

Extroverts will focus their attention outside into their environment, be verbal in the way they make decisions and talk about information, bounce ideas around, and do their processing of information outside themselves in discussion with others.

Introverts will focus their attention inside, taking their thoughts into themselves and rolling them around with their own experiences, not talking to others much about them, and bringing them out into the open once they have been formulated. Or, they may just as easily keep to themselves and be content with that.

**Tour implications:** Seventy-five percent of the population are extroverted, and as with other preferences, the more we meet people “like us” the more we assume everyone is that way. We may, therefore, gear our gallery talks on our automatic pilot of extroversion. This would be to hope for interaction within the group, in posing questions to want our visitors to respond verbally.

**Style clash:** As an extrovert, you will experience an introvert as withholding or, perhaps, shy. As an introvert, you will view an extrovert as being a bit aggressive, or demanding of your thoughts or reactions.

**Sensing – Intuiting**
*(the way we like to receive and give information)*

Sensors like to have their information come in through their five senses, in a manner that is concrete. They enjoy focusing on facts and numbers, and prefer looking at details rather than getting a sense of the larger implications or overall view. They prefer the known, and like to do things in the ways they have been done before.

Intuitors prefer to look at the large picture, draw implications, and look for relationships between the parts that form a larger whole. They are interested in the big picture, the theory, the overall context. They like to approach things in a new and different way, and often like the innovative.

**Tour implications:** Again, 75% of the population are sensors. Sensors may want to focus on particular works or objects rather than periods of time or...
contextual information. They may notice details, colors, as information itself without needing to move to implications. They may want things to relate to something within their own experience.

On the other hand, intuitors may want more context, history, theory, and the bigger picture of the pieces you are showing. They may want to have the sensation of something new, a "cutting edge" experience that differs from previous ones.

**Style clash:** Intuitors will experience sensors as being dull, plodding, and often boring. Sensors will experience intuitors as being pretty flaky and not down-to-earth.

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**Thinking - Feeling**

(criteria used to filter information for decision-making)

Thinkers tend to use a filter of logic when organizing information and using it to make decisions. They will make a rational response based on their analysis and the logical implications.

Feelers use a filter of individual values as a way to make their decisions. They will use criteria such as what is the importance to me, what is the importance to other people, when deciding.

**Tour implications:** On this scale, there is a 50-50 split in the population between thinkers and feelers. Thinkers may be impressed more with the way things work, or the way something was created, and the logical progression of technical processes.

Feelers are more likely to be impressed by the emotional content and implications of what they look at. They are liable to consider things in terms of individual experiences.

An important point on this scale is the issue of taking criticism personally. If a docent is a feeler, criticism may be seen as a personal attack rather than an analysis of the tour. Feelers also prefer not to have conflict in their lives or during their tours. It is important to note that for thinkers, criticism is not directed personally at all, it is simply a logical statement of information. And for them, conflict is fine, there is no personal reflection associated with it. So if two of your visitors argue energetically, you may have two thinkers just enjoying themselves in the difference of opinions. Certainly, you will find the way that works best for you to deal with these circumstances, but know that not everyone in the group may be experiencing the discomfort that a feeler might.

**Style clash:** Thinkers will see feelers as overly emotional and irrational. Feelers will experience thinkers as cold and uninvolved.

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**Judging - Perceiving**

(structures and preferences for decision-making)

Judgers like to have structure and predictability. They like to decide things quickly so that they don't have to feel the discomfort of not knowing.

Perceivers like to be spontaneous and take things as they come. They like to gather lots of information, and can feel squelched when they feel pushed to come to a decision concerning something.

**Tour implications:** Again there is a 50-50 split between judgers and perceivers among the population. For judgers, make sure your tour begins and ends as you have said. For perceivers, let someone know where the tour will be in case they want to join up with you. Perceivers will appreciate your making room for them to leave and/or return as they need to. The judgers will probably (if engaged) stay with your whole tour. They like to have finished projects. Your leavers may simply be perceivers who have found something else that has drawn their interest. You may want to remain open to shifting if there is an object of interest and changing the structure of your tour. Perceivers will appreciate your flexibility. Meanwhile, the judgers won't know that you planned to do something else and are changing.

**Style clash:** Perceivers will experience judgers as rigid, while judgers will see perceivers as being uncommitted and unreliable.

As with all tours, you will want to accommodate the various ways of experiencing information. Let extroverts talk about the information, let introverts ponder their responses silently. Give sensors details and specific information while broadening the big picture for intuitors. Thinkers will appreciate your logical approach in the tour structure and your transitions, while feelers will be glad to see the emotional and individual implications of what they are seeing. Judgers will thank you for your promptness and for staying within a timeframe, and perceivers will appreciate your flexibility.

Even with this awareness in mind, there will still be moments when you feel your fists ever so gently begin to clench as your visitor suggests other ways or ideas than the one you are using. But now you can breathe easier. Run through Myers-Briggs scales in your mind, and thank your visitor for reminding you that you were operating on your own automatic pilot.

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Why do we as museum educators and docents believe fiercely in the value of gallery talks with adults? Simply stated, because we have seen them work. We have had visitors tell us that having someone “explain the objects” or show them “what to look for” has changed their lives. Such dramatically positive reactions, though not daily occurrences, have convinced me that nothing can replace an experience in front of the actual object. But why are such experiences important?

My basic premise has always been that if we can get people involved in looking carefully and thinking critically, taking a tour becomes an active rather than a passive endeavor, and thus a powerful learning experience. In order to create an active learning environment, one must entice the audience into looking and thinking. Begin by briefly describing the object in front of you, thus encouraging your visitors to notice both details and overall effects. Help them to read the objects’ meaning or importance from what they can see. Once your visitors have focused on the tangible object and begun to view it as something that encourages them to feel and think you can expand the discussion by bringing in history, biography, etc.

How else can you keep your audience involved? Set out for them at the beginning of your tour what you intend to do, what the purpose of the tour is, and what you want them to learn. Also, let them know questions are welcome. In an unfamiliar setting where they may feel somewhat ill at ease, people often need to be encouraged to ask for more explanation. Then be sure to repeat questions so that the entire group feels included and benefits from your answers. If you prefer to take questions only after you’ve made your points, tell your audience. But, remember to invite their questions at the appropriate time.

An effective tour is well-organized, with only three or four important ideas to communicate. Briefly summarize those ideas to reinforce their importance as you conclude each discussion. Transitions, that is, commentary that links ideas or effects already discussed to what is yet to come, are useful educational devices and also give a nice polish to your tour.

By making visual comparisons to works seen earlier, you can encourage your audience to look carefully, and to analyze what they see. Asking visitors to recall something they’ve already seen encourages them to remember and apply what they’ve learned. Discovering differences between objects makes each one’s characteristics more pronounced. And, as we all know, one of the most important goals of a good tour is to help visitors develop the confidence and ability to look and discriminate on their own.

Museum educators and docents should talk about objects in terms that everyone understands. Make comments without using jargon. If you use a specialized term, define it clearly and concisely. Also, offer analogies to methods or objects that are common in most people’s experiences. For instance, referring to the fact that an “x-ray” of two very different works might reveal similarities in their underlying structure – their use of horizontals and verticals – could be useful when explaining composition.

Sadly, museum settings encourage visitors to consider only final, finished objects. In fact, many people are also interested in process. On a tour, you can describe technique. You can even compare techniques, verbally. To show some of the artist’s tools and materials makes this imaginary process more...
tangible. Some museums include displays of such things or make them available at least to children. But to demonstrate the process involved in creating some of our objects offers insights that cannot be reached in any other way. Recognizing this, we inaugurated a new program, “Anatomy of Art,” at the National Gallery last fall. The “Anatomy of Art” intends, through demonstrations by artists, gallery talks with lecturers, curators, and conservators, and even slide lectures and films when possible, to explain technique. This year we focused on the painting techniques of Renaissance and Baroque masters. A great deal is known about different artists’ techniques through research of curators and conservators. The most acclaimed parts of our program, however, were the discussions and displays of artists’ materials and, in particular, the recreation of certain paintings. To literally see how Titian built up an image of Venus offered an understanding of both the painting’s tangible existence and on what its greatness is based. We hope to make this month-long program an annual event, ultimately offering sessions on drawing, printmaking, sculpture, and other methods of painting.

Visual analysis in front of objects, discussion of context, concise information, comparisons, references to contemporary life, and consideration of technique are some, but certainly not all of the perspectives that qualify tours as powerful tools of museum learning. At the National Gallery, the object-adult visitor connection brought about through lecture and discussion is a long-standing tradition, ever expanding and constantly reconstituting itself.

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F.Y.C.
For Your Consideration

Expect More Museum-School Partnerships

The 1994 U.S. Congress made $100 million available for school and community partnerships, as part of its Goals 2000 legislation. Created to improve the quality of education as we move into the 21st century, the legislation encourages schools to take advantage of museum resources and connect learning in the classroom to the community at large. As a result, American museums, historic sites, zoos, parks, and botanical gardens should expect to see, and should seek, increased interaction with their local school systems.

Equity Versus Excellence?

"Does equity threaten excellence? Are education and scholarship, interpretative vitality and intellectual rigor, community and collections truly at odds?"

These are questions examined in the Winter 1995 issue of Excellence and Equity, the newsletter about public service issued by the American Association of Museums.

Answers were solicited from six curators and two directors. While most of their answers seem enlightened and "educationally sensitive," cynics might wonder if they weren't skewed due to the audience and prompted by the educational nature and theme of the publication.

Statements included this one by Mark Richard Leach, Curator of Twentieth Century Art at the Mint Museum in Charlotte, N.C. “As curators, we need to remember that the museum's mission is not simply to produce knowledge or care for collections, but to transmit knowledge and to engage and enlighten the community.”

Leonard Krishtalka, Director of the University of Kansas Natural History Museum, in Lawrence, KS, observed that, “Too frequently, differences in status within a museum — with curators often holding higher status than educators — breed differences in perception about the value of staff and their contributions to the museum or its mission.”

Maud Lyon, Director of the Detroit Historical Museum, said, “I think the tension between education and collections is healthy. The problem may be that we allow staff to take pure positions. But an educator is richer for knowing the principles of conservation. A curator is richer for knowing how people learn. Perhaps the way out of the dilemma is less specialization — and realizing that the power to change comes from admitting that you do not have all the answers.”

While stimulated by this discussion, and intrigued that issues relating to education’s rank within museum priorities are being examined in a more direct manner than in previous years, editors of The Docent Educator did find it a bit baffling that not one staff educator, docent, tour guide, or public programs officer was asked for input or for a point-of-view. Hopefully, this is not an ironic twist, and that the observations and thoughts of educators will be forthcoming.
Kevin Sorrow, a 19-year-old freshman at the University of Georgia, passes by the Georgia Museum of Art, located in the historic quadrangle of the university, every day on his way to class or downtown Athens. Although he had been curious about the museum since he started his college career over six months ago, he never found the time to peruse its galleries until his Freshman English instructor arranged a tour for his class. "I liked the tour a lot," commented Sorrow. "I had no idea that the exhibits changed or even what was in here until my class came here as a group."

Like most university-affiliated museums in the United States, the Georgia Museum of Art, in its mission statement, has designated the immediate academic community as its primary target audience. The task of reaching the university community seems relatively simple, considering the fact that there are more than 28,000 students roaming this campus and only one art museum. But, despite the surplus of students and lack of significant competition, drawing university students into the museum remains one of the most difficult challenges the Department of Education faces. In fact, it is almost easier to serve elementary and secondary school groups, senior citizens, and families, all of whom are eager to take advantage of the museum as a free, educational community resource.

There may be several reasons why more students attending the University of Georgia never venture into the museum, including heavy course loads, part-time employment, and active social lives. Curriculum-structured tours, catered specifically to academic needs, have become the route for creating greater student visitation.

The museum's education department developed curriculum-structured tours targeting Freshman English classes. Because over 80 sections of Freshman English are taught at the university each quarter, the museum's education staff considered this course the best vehicle of reaching the most students. In theory, if each section of Freshman English visited the museum, the majority of incoming students, regardless of major, will have at least visited the museum once during their educational careers. Some students may even be exposed for the first time to the idea of art, art history, or museum studies as potential majors. But most importantly, with the curriculum-structured museum tour, each student has the opportunity to make correlations between literature and the visual arts.

During the fall of 1993, the Department of Education toured over 30 Freshman English classes through the special exhibition American Impressionism in Georgia Collections. The students, many of whom were visiting a museum for the first time, looked at paintings first from a literary perspective and then from an art history perspective. Docents used terms familiar to English students — character, setting, narrative, mood, or plot to analyze paintings.

For example, in the portrait by Isabel Vernon Cook of an unidentified woman entitled A Thoughtful Moment, students discussed the sitter's character: her slumped shoulders and fidgeting hands conveyed insecurity; her slightly ducked chin gave her the appearance of being shy. As they investigated the work further, the students responded to questions such as, What is the sitter's mood? disposition? social status? purpose? How does the colorful, floral background influence your interpretation of her character? Why do you think she posed for this portrait?

Likewise, students looked at landscapes, such as Fall in New England by William Lester Stevens, in terms of setting. They contemplated questions such as: How has the artist described this place? What times of year and day are represented? How has the artist invited viewers into the painting? Each analysis of a painting in literary terms leads to a

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Students

Adult Students Take a “Hands-On” Approach

by Karen Janovy

Each year, the education department of the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln provides tours to approximately 1,000 first-year students enrolled in a program entitled University Foundations. The University Foundations program is a course designed to develop "the student’s ability to master the University environment and to utilize its resources fully."

The greatest percentage of students enrolled in this program are from rural or non-metropolitan areas. Many Foundations students find entering the art museum intimidating, and yearn not to be perceived as interested in such esoteric topics as 20th century American art. These first-year students, therefore, can be quite challenging.

After struggling with a number of these tours, our education department developed an innovative technique that has proven to be extremely successful with this “difficult” audience. Quite by accident, we received a cache of duplicate periodicals containing images by artists represented in our collection. Rather than simply file these images away, we decided to clip and laminate them, and hand them out to students as they arrived. We wondered what might happen if the students were asked to peruse the permanent collection galleries looking for an image by the same artist as the one in their hand. Would having such a task enhance their experience and lessen their inhibitions and discomfort?

These laminated images offer no written clues, such as an artist’s name; therefore, students must look at the works of art to make matches rather than simply read labels. After a few minutes, the students are asked to tell how they made their choices. As the discussion leader, the docent utilizes questioning strategies to augment discussion, channel information, and direct the group as is necessary in order for all to participate.

Student responses varied, but the exercise afford an excellent opportunity for each student to discuss relevant issues based on his or her own individual experiences. Ordinarily students begin by discussing the elements of art, or the principles of design, without actually realizing they are doing so. Students frequently begin to identify more significant and timely issues by delving more deeply into what they actually see within specific paintings or sculptures that led them to discover similarities between “their” laminated image and their “matched” image. The discussions are enriched significantly as a result of the divergent thinking that takes place.

Among the many benefits of this program are:

1- an immediate engagement with the students by placing in their hands something they can actually touch, while at the same time making a point of the reasons art objects are not normally touched in the museum setting;

2- an increased ability on the part of students to expand their vocabulary by verbalizing their reasons for determining the connection(s) between ‘their’ image and the one in the gallery;

3- a significant increase in interest among students to investigate works more closely, and to recognize and discuss works of art within our permanent collection; and

4- an interest on the part of students to return to the museum because they determined that the museum was an environment in which they could feel comfortable looking at, and discussing, works from their own unique perspectives.

Foundations faculty have praised the educational value achieved through this new approach. One of the instructors wrote, “The activity that you did with the students, giving them a reproduction of a work by an artist and sending them on a search for similar works, is both innovative and effective. In post-tour discussions, both classes agreed that personal involvement made it a much

(Continued on page 12.)
discussion of the painting in the visual arts vocabulary of light, color, composition, and artistic technique. One of the primary aims of the tour is to help students realize that similarities are inherent in the visual arts and literature, and that writers and artists often tackle similar questions and issues.

Freshman English instructors have been enthusiastic about using the museum to expand their curriculum, and taking an interdisciplinary approach to writing. Many of the instructors use the tour as a basis for a writing assignment. While some students simply completed a journal entry, describing the painting they enjoyed the most and telling why, others wrote descriptive, comparative, or argumentative paragraphs based on a painting or a pair of paintings. Still others composed fiction or poetry using the paintings as springboards for their creativity and imagination.

One student who decided to write a short story chose a character from a portrait, placed her in a setting represented in a landscape, and had her character engage in the activities represented in a narrative painting. Several instructors scheduled tours following a unit on censorship in fiction, journalism, and the arts. Much to my personal delight, some students wrote papers on controversial photographs, defending the work as art.

In addition to English courses, curriculum-structured tours may be written in conjunction with courses in anthropology, history, religion, music, classics, drama, mathematics, and the natural sciences. But the primary goal must remain to make instructors in the community, whether they are affiliated with a high school, community college, or university, aware that the museum is available as a valuable teaching resource. Furthermore, instructors and students alike need to be taught that a museum’s collection, whether art, history, or science, need not be viewed in isolation or as only pertinent to one academic area.

The Department of Education staff at the Georgia Museum of Art hopes to expand its programming in the months to come to include more intensive docent training and increased endorsement from faculty and administrators. But the best route for stimulating the program to grow is through the testimonies of supportive students and instructors who have participated in the past.

“I think the Freshman English tour idea is a good one,” commented Sorrow. “It’s nice to be invited to come here and to feel welcome.”

Kacey Brown is Curator of Education at the Georgia Museum of Art at the University of Georgia in Athens. Formerly, she was the Curator of Education at the Monroe County Historical Museum in Bloomington, Indiana, and Assistant Curator of Education at the Indiana University Art Museum. She holds an M.A. in art history from Indiana University and a B.A. from Florida State University. She is currently working toward her Ph.D. in art history at Indiana University.

Adult Students Respond to a “Hands-On” Approach
(Continued from page 11.)

The reference to showing the evolution of one artist’s work involves distributing reproductions of works by one, single artist, from both the early and later stages of his/her career. Students then show these images to their classmates in chronological order revealing how one artist’s work progresses. This also allows us to discuss how the permanent collection is installed, and can be understood, historically.

The success of this technique with university students has inspired some docents to use it with other adult groups. It seems that most novice museum visitors, regardless of age, appear to appreciate the type of museum learning that allows them to participate.

Karen Janovy is Curator of Education at the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery and Sculpture Garden at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln, where she also teaches in the Museum Studies program. She serves as faculty and co-director of Region 2 of Prairie Vocatons, Nebraska’s statewide consortium to implement “Disciplined-based Art Education.” She received her MA degree from UNL, and a BFA from the University of Oklahoma, as is co-author of The American Painting Collection of the Sheldon Memorial Art Gallery, 1988, University of Nebraska Press.
The Bowdoin College Museum of Art, located in Brunswick, Maine, is an integral part of Bowdoin College, a four-year co-educational liberal arts institution established 1794. The Museum’s art collection is encyclopedic in scope ranging from classical antiquities to significant holdings of American and European paintings, sculpture, works on paper, and decorative arts.

As part of their formal training, all beginning Museum of Art docents are required to audit an introductory survey course of Western Art. Most of the Museum’s docents continue auditing courses on Baroque, Renaissance, Asian, and American art.

Since the fall of 1992, beginning docents, auditing the introductory survey course of western art, were “initiated” by a requirement to give their first public talks to the students enrolled in the course. (All entering docents were informed of this requirement in advance, so there were no surprises.)

Students are asked to attend four, 20-minute talks during a five-week period. Three days a week, six times a day, six to nine of the 70+ students enrolled in the course meet a docent in the museum for a “visual analysis talk” provided by the docent. The docent can choose any object in the permanent collection or temporary installation. Weeks 1-2 focus on objects related to one particular historical period. The second talk compares art works from at least two distinctly different periods or cultures.

After each docent presentation, students receive questionnaires to complete and submit to their professor. The responses are shared with the docents and the museum’s education department. These questionnaires become useful, evaluative tools.

As one new docent commented, “the entire experience was very meaningful to my understanding of my role as a docent.” Consensus agreed that the collaboration heightened research and public speaking skills. The talks also allowed beginning docents to meet informally with students in their class, and it gave them an eye-opening preview of the tours they would later give in the spring semester. A few docents, soft-spoken and reserved, learned quickly that students wanted them to speak up and to show their enthusiasm for the objects examined. The experience was certainly new for everyone, but at the same time, it fostered confidence among the docents and gave the students an informal look at the College’s art holdings. Indeed, for some of the students, it was the first time they had walked into the building!

Helen S. Dubé
Coordinator of Education Programs
Bowdoin College Museum of Art,
Brunswick, ME

Each quarter I look forward to my copy of The Docent Educator and appreciated this (Winter 1994/95) issue’s focus on Multiculturalism. However, as a Jewish Museum educator, I need to correct a common misconception. In your piece entitled “Museums Showcase Multicultural Resources” you list The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum as a resource for Holocaust Lessons. While I applaud educators who teach about this dark, historical period, I must stress that the Holocaust does not comprise a multicultural study of Jewish life and culture.

Educators who teach the Holocaust as a way to include Judaism in their multicultural curriculum are mistaken. The Holocaust is an historical event and must be treated as such. Educators who wish to engage in a study of Judaism should teach about Jewish rituals, holidays, traditions, and customs as they are observed in Jewish communities around the world. While studying the Jewish religion, students may encounter the joys and beauty of another culture while discovering connections to their own experience, an important goal of multicultural education.

Throughout the United States, there are hundreds of Jewish Museums like the Spertus Museum, in Chicago, which are dedicated to welcoming students from all backgrounds to their galleries, using collections to introduce basic themes in Jewish religion and culture to enrich multicultural programs. Educators who would like information about Jewish Museums in their area should contact the Council of American Jewish Museums, National Foundation for Jewish Culture, 330 Seventh Avenue, 21st Floor, New York, NY 10010.

Paula Chaiken
Education Coordinator
Spertus Museum
Chicago, IL

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Sharing successful techniques and ideas.

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Recent research on families and museums, as well as my work at the Oakland Museum of California, confirms that it is the family visit, not the school field trip, that influences whether or not a child will grow up to be a museum-visiting adult. But museums must do more than merely open their doors to families to ensure a positive experience. Museums must provide families with every opportunity to learn together in an environment that is supportive and engaging. One of the best resources a museum has to achieve this goal is a docent.

**What Makes a Fun Family Museum Visit?**

Before docents can effectively work with family groups, they should have an understanding of how this audience learns and what goals families have in attending a museum. Families see time spent together at a museum, zoo, or other such facility as recreational. This means that these institutions compete with other forms of entertainment, such as sporting activities, shopping malls, movies, etc.

In addition to enjoyment, social interaction is of great importance. Family members want to be with one another and to discuss what they see in the exhibits. Family visitors are most comfortable when the environment allows children to express themselves freely, to be relatively physically unrestrained, does not require strong disciplining on the part of the parent, and is not intimidating to the child or adult.

**No Two Families Are Alike**

For purposes of this discussion, the only common characteristic shared by a group called a “family” is that it includes at least one child and one adult. Families today rarely resemble the traditional nuclear family description (two parents and a shared child) of the past. Docents who respect the uniqueness of the families they work with will gain a true advantage.

For instance, one family who toured a photography exhibition was made up of a single mother, a grandmother, a family friend, and two children. The mother helped further the docent’s communication with her children, the grandmother shared her own memories of the period in history depicted, and the family friend contributed her knowledge of how a camera works. By welcoming the participation of the other adults, the docent created an interesting and personal tour for the children and provided a chance for the adults to be positive role models.

**Constructing the Family Tour**

Docents are often unsure who to address when touring families — the adults or the children? The answer is both. On an evaluation of a family program that included a tour, one parent wrote: “Our docent spoke only to the children. I was disappointed because as an adult I am interested in sharing and learning, too.”

Giving a tour that meets the needs and interests of both parents and children is a challenging task. Layering the information is the best technique when working with a family group. Start with the most basic concept and build on it, adding more complicated information gradually. After a docent tour that layered information a parent was noted as saying, “He (my son) was really looking at paintings and sculptures. I loved it myself. I never took any art classes so I also benefited by having my attention brought to objects, colors, and textures.” To ensure that most enjoyable tour possible docents should strive to include all family members, both in the tour content and in participation.

Another component to a successful family tour is flexibility. Unlike a school group where children must follow the docent, family visitors have a sense of independence from the group. Docents should not be offended if a family suddenly walks in a different direction while on a tour. As a rule, docents should acknowledge the straying family by explaining that it is acceptable to leave the group, and letting them know where they can catch up should they wish to return to the tour. This prevents parents from having to “police” their child into paying attention, allows children to take immediate delight in what interests them, and lets a docent continue giving a tour to a group that is truly interested and engaged.

One docent who had not yet toured families expressed concern because often when parents accompany school groups as chaperones, their children are the ones most likely to act out. Generally, this is not the case with children visiting in family groups. Children visiting with their families seem to feel more secure and are not tempted to “show off” as when in front of school mates.

**Catch And Release**

The best tactic for working with families is not unlike fishing. Docents can use a “lure” to attract families (a hands-on example, replica, game, or special information). Once they catch the family, they can engage members in discussion and shared discovery. After a brief conversation, the docent can give them a special task to accomplish (i.e. - see how many different kinds of lizards you can find; which paintings have animals in them?) then release them to find the answers. By giving families special tasks to accomplish on their own, docents will be sure to have a group that is interested, participating, and eager to return and share what they have learned.
Touring Aides

Not unlike other groups of learners, families learn best when they are actively engaged and are able to use all of their senses. Depending on the collections and exhibits, some museums will lend themselves to this more easily than others. When tour content is age/group appropriate and touring aides are used, even a "hands-off" exhibit can be exciting and memorable for families.

Any exhibit can be made more interesting for families. For instance, at the Oakland Museum we decided to create a family program in conjunction with our special exhibit, The Arts and Crafts Movement in California: Living the Good Life, which consisted of decorative arts and furniture. Rather than focus conceptually on the big idea of the exhibit — "the Arts and Craft style in California" — we choose to work with the simple theme of "pattern." Touring aides and activities were developed, such as postcards of ceramic tiles with patterns that could be matched to the originals in the exhibit; ceramic tiles with patterns that children could experiment with by rotating, and miniature model rooms that children could decorate using magazine cut-outs of Arts and Crafts furniture and decorative pieces.

By choosing a simple theme, including several tactile experiences, and providing opportunities for sharing, this program turned out to be one of our most successful ever. Families left the exhibit deeply satisfied by what they had learned, entertained by the experiences they had, and delighted to have been formally exposed to the Arts and Crafts style, which is a style that exists in many of their homes and neighborhoods. In addition, families were now equipped with a new awareness of pattern that they could apply to other art exhibits, to different environments, and to life in general.

Another example of a successful family program was one developed in conjunction with our special exhibition, Seeing Straight: the f.64 Revolution in Photography. This exhibition consisted mostly of still life, black-and-white photographs and proved to be a wonderful opportunity to introduce photography to both young visitors and their parents.

Again, rather than focus on the overall historical or conceptual message of the exhibit, docents chose the rather simple topic of "framing" for their tour theme. They used touring aides such as flashlights to help show the effects of light and shadow, empty slide frames to help families frame their own views and compositions, and three post cards each with different views of the Golden Gate Bridge to show perspective.

Children and adults actively participated in this tour and when finished had a new or greater understanding of the choices photographers make beyond just pushing a button.

The Oakland Museum has art, history, and science galleries. The two examples I have given were both from our art exhibits, which are often most challenging for families. History and science exhibitions are somewhat easier to tour with families. Families enjoy learning about things that are relevant to their own lives, so what seems to work best with history exhibitions is when parallels are drawn between how we live, eat, work, and play compared to a family of the past. Docents touring science exhibits have the advantage of being able to enhance their tours with experiments and hands-on objects from nature. These touring aides make learning more enjoyable, especially when they reveal how a chosen theme relates to our everyday lives.

Though museums must compete with other popular forms of entertainment, they continue to have a special draw that few other weekend attractions can offer: they provide children and adults with opportunities to see something new or special, and to learn about it together. Docents are the icing on the museum cake. They can help families take their museum experience one step farther and provide families with new ideas of how to learn from exhibits. When docents encourage active participation by all family members, provide a sensory or hands-on component, and allow families time for independent discoveries and interaction, docents will have a tour that is sure to inspire young museum visitors to become museum visitors for life.

Christie Davis is the Family Programs Coordinator and School Programs Coordinator for Art at the Oakland Museum of California. She received her M.A. in Museum Education from John F. Kennedy University. Her projects at the museum include working with staff to develop family programs for art, ecology and history, coordinating the museum’s well established school programs for art, and working with community groups to create relevant cultural programs.
Family Touring Tips

Over the past ten years, there has been a major movement in museum education departments to address family audiences. As museums increase the number of special events, self-guided tours, workshops, and activities designed specifically for families, docents must master touring techniques for groups composed of both adults and children.

Family tours have a distinct dynamic, one that differs greatly from both tours designed for adults and those designed for school groups. Adults taking a museum tour are interested in gaining knowledge. They appreciate facts, figures, and detailed information that give them new insights and verify their own knowledge. Adults can stand for longer periods of time and generally have longer attention spans than children. If they are not interested in the information they are receiving, they are independent enough to leave or rejoin the group later. Adults may share children’s enthusiasm and natural curiosity, but they have a tendency to show more restraint in their reactions. For this reason, it is often difficult to gauge their interests and know when to shift gears.

In school groups, the children are of similar ages and they know each other. This makes them comfortable speaking out and participating. Field trips often relate to, or reinforce, concepts in the classroom curriculum. Even though students are in a different environment and may participate in alternative learning methods, a certain decorum is maintained because they are still grouped with children of their age and grade level. Because of this, interactive teaching techniques are particularly effective with school groups. Worksheets and games can be designed for specific age ranges or grades. Although a teacher and chaperones accompany the school group, the students are the main audience the docent addresses.

✔ Why Families Visit?

Families visit museums and other such facilities so that they can learn together and be together. Family tours should provide plenty of opportunities to do both and to enjoy a common experience.

✔ How to Tour Families

Parents may be novices in your particular museum, and any information that the docent directs toward the children may be new to the adults as well. After giving parents some basic information or explaining a task, they will enjoy participating and becoming helpful allies to the docent. Parents are often more enthusiastic and responsive when they are learning with their children in a fun and informal environment.

The type of information you present should be appropriate for the children’s developmental level and interest. Focus on questions that they can answer from observing closely or through speculation. Avoid detailed information that will not be of interest to children. If you are successful at keeping the children engaged and happy, the parents will also enjoy themselves.

✔ Getting Started

Greeting and orienting the families in your group initially sets the tone for the rest of the tour. A first visit anywhere can be intimidating, disorienting, or overwhelming and your tour may be the first experience the family has ever had in your institution. You can alleviate much of the anxiety by establishing a warm welcome, expressing your delight that the families have chosen to visit your facility, describing the focus and length of the tour, and discussing what families might expect to see and do.

Keep in mind that a tour of your institution is only part of a larger family agenda that typically involves a visit to the museum shop and cafeteria, as well as some free viewing time. A little league baseball game, movie, or birthday party may also be planned the same day. Information at the beginning of your tour will help families allocate their time according to their own schedules.

✔ Expecting the Unexpected

The family tour docent must expect the unexpected. Unless the tour is pre-registered, the family audience is always the great unknown. You may have
anticipated teaching families with children 6 to 12 years old, only to find that most of the children are preschoolers. Often younger siblings must accompany the rest of the family, but rather than breaking up the family it is preferable to take everyone. Tell the group before departing that the tour is geared to a particular age group and that if younger children become restless, they may need a “time out” with an adult that is away from the group. Give families permission to leave your tour if necessary. A crying child can be very distracting for you and for the rest of the group. If permission to leave has already been expressed, then parents usually will not feel obligated to remain.

✓ Encouraging Participation

Encourage participation from the beginning of your tour by asking children if they have been to the museum before, what they expect to see, and what they think are the most important rules. The questions you ask and the responses you receive in the first five minutes can help you assess your group and adjust your tour accordingly. Choose your route carefully in order to accommodate strollers or wheelchairs. Knowing your resources and collections well will enable you to be flexible, and should help you to select age appropriate activities.

Choose a theme or a specific area of the museum to give your tour cohesiveness, and do not feel obliged to teach everything you know or planned. You might prepare for eight stops but only have time to make four. Seeing fewer objects but exploring them in depth promotes greater understanding and is particularly satisfying.

✓ Staying on Track

Once you have assessed your group and updated your route, remember to keep your primary goals in mind. My personal goals when teaching families include encouraging families to see and respond to selected objects, facilitating personal connections to what is being observed, promoting family interaction, and imparting the idea that learning together can be fun. Another important goal is awakening a sense of curiosity, enthusiasm, and awe (the “oh, wow” effect). If the tour is well planned, the docent can be flexible enough to shape the information, activities, and length of program to meet the overall goals.

✓ Promoting Family Interaction

Adults, as well as children, learn by doing. Plan for a variety of activities. It is tricky to find activities that will pique the interest of both kids and grown-ups.

At one stop you might have families compare two objects, at another stop you might have them manipulate materials, such as measuring their height against the leg of a dinosaur or sketching what they see on a piece of paper. At another stop, you might have a directed looking discussion that focuses attention on an object by having them respond to provocative questions. You might pass out pencils and an activity sheet that includes basic background information (which empowers parents) and questions that can be answered by looking at the objects. Then have families share what they have learned. By varying the activities from stop to stop, you touch on different learning styles. As families interact together, you can give assistance and encouragement to individual family units. If you are successful in facilitating this kind of intimate interaction among families, you have reached the primary goal of your family tour.

✓ Enjoying the Rewards

In interviews, adult museum visitors frequently mention that childhood visits to the museum with their families are the primary factor influencing their decision to visit the institution as an adult. Facilitating positive family interactions in your institution is challenging and rewarding.

I have found the family audience to be open, forgiving, accepting, and appreciative. I find the rewards in repeat visits by families, in the nods and appreciative smiles from parents, and the little squeals of delight when children proudly share a discovery with an adult. Your love for the subject you are teaching and your enthusiasm for families and their discoveries will be contagious!

Amy Jared is the Coordinator of Family Programs and Children’s Art Classes at the Philadelphia Museum of Art where she has worked for the last ten years. She is also responsible for developing all special events and outreach programs for families. Ms. Jared is actively involved with both national and local community arts organizations.
The Two Faces of Eve, or ...

How I Learned to Love Teaching Teachers

Your new class is before you, notebooks and sharpened pencils at the ready. Attendance has been recorded, and you are poised to begin. Some of the faces turn toward you with enthusiasm; some appear to have skipped breakfast and a good night’s sleep. You open your mouth to begin. A disturbance at the door as a tardy student bustles in, all apologies and confusion. A couple in the back row continues a conversation begun when they entered the room. You’d really like to send them to the principal’s office, but you can’t. It’s Saturday, and the students are all classroom teachers in your museum for an in-service workshop.

Helping teachers understand your institution and how to use its collections is one of the most important aspects of museum education. It is through teachers, and the students they bring, that your museum, zoo, historic site, or nature center builds future audiences. However, teachers can be among your toughest audiences.

Teachers come to your in-service events on a weekend (when they should be doing laundry), or after school (when they should be grading papers), or in the summer (when they should be mowing the lawn). They attend, on average, 25-30 hours of in-service per year and they are skeptical learners. And, worst of all, they come to your workshop with a split personality — as teachers and as students. Helping them resolve both personalities is, perhaps, the greatest challenge you face with teacher tours.

Before the Workshop/Tour

Plan your agenda. If teachers are receiving in-service credit from their school system for attending your workshop, they are required to attend for the entire 1, 3, or 6 hours. But, reality being what it is, consider that they may arrive tired and stressed. Begin and end on time; don’t punish those who arrive on time by waiting for latecomers.

Welcome your guests with refreshments if possible; create breaks at appropriate times within the program. Include time toward the end for questions and for evaluations. Post the agenda and workshop goals, and check off items as they are completed. And, to address the teacher/student schism, from time to time, ask your class to comment on such teaching techniques: “Would it help your students to have the museum visit activities posted and checked off as they occur?”

Collect Useful Materials. Check the materials you need for your presentation and place them in the order of their use in the program. Highlight their use in your notes so you won’t forget to include something. Be certain to have enough handouts for every teacher; run a few extra just in case! Plan for the distribution of handouts. Do you want all the materials distributed at once? Do you want to pass out every page as you come to it in your presentation? Either strategy is fraught with perils! As you distribute materials, ask the teacher/student: “What is the best way for us to distribute materials to your class when they come for a visit?”

Make Nametags. Each teacher should have a nametag, and so should you! It is impossible to create real group cohesiveness without names. Additionally, use different museum symbols on the nametags to assist in dividing into smaller groups; everyone with the same symbol will be in the same group. Groups of four or five work best; if you are expecting 25 teachers, use nametags with four or five different symbols. Ask your teacher/students: “Would you rather we use this technique to divide your class into groups for their tour, or would you prefer to establish small groups before you get to the museum?”

Arrange the Room. Choose a well-lighted, well-ventilated, quiet room for your class. Make sure it’s large enough to move around in and for get-acquainted activities, and has space for small group work. If your institution doesn’t provide such a space, consider asking to use one of the galleries or exhibit areas. Place chairs in an arrangement that encourages interaction — circles, semi-circles, tables.

Post signs or guides at the entrances. Don’t make those who attend your in-service work to find where it takes place. Explain where each part of the tour will take place when they bring their class to your institution. Help them locate the bathrooms, drinking fountains, and checkrooms their class will be using. Ask, “Do you see any problems that might arise from this physical layout of your class’s tour?”

During the Workshop/Tour

Break the Ice. A get-acquainted activity is important for several reasons, including, of course, getting acquainted! Inviting your teacher-students to get up and move around shows them that the workshop will be participatory and that they will have fun. Use an activity that you might use with their class. Explain, “We always start our tours with an ice-breaker to help the children relax and get to know us better. This is one we might be using with your group.”

Encourage Active Participation. As you teach your group of teachers, remember to use the same techniques that make your school tours so successful. Keep the lecture portion of your presentation brief; ask open-ended questions; provide hands-on activities. When possible, take the class into the exhibit space and simulate the kinds of activities you will use with their students. “I’d like you to pretend you’re a ten-year-old for this next activity,” always gets a good laugh and a few “ten-year-
old” comments, but it gives your teacher-students permission to interact without losing their “adult” dignity.

Evaluate. Close your class by reviewing the posted goals and asking for questions. Whether it is a school-system requirement or not, use a written evaluation form at the end of your workshop and provide time within the agenda for questions and completion of the form. “We love to get letters from your classes after they’ve visited the museum. Please encourage them to tell us what they liked and didn’t like about their visit,” will help your teacher-students see that evaluation is an important part of your museum’s commitment to education. This is also an appropriate time to provide information regarding tour reservations. After the in-service event, use the evaluations to identify strengths and weaknesses of the presentation. Immediately make note of your own suggestions and those of the teacher-students for improving future classes.

Acknowledging that the teacher-students see your institution with two “faces” will allow you to present in-service events that put them at ease, address their needs, and demonstrate your understanding of their responsibilities.

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Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor

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Vol. 4, No 4

THE DOCENT EDUCATOR
The “Ask Me” Program

(Continued from page 5.)

unexpected. Perhaps the most enjoyable facet proved to be their own on-going learning, as interactions with artists, curators, and writers continuously introduced them to fresh perspectives on the works.

Preliminary feedback from the public in this period came via the docents, as visitors expressed enthusiasm, gratitude, and relief for having someone on hand to discuss the challenging objects on display. However, in the final month of the pilot, a formal evaluation of the program was conducted to document and analyze the types of experiences that visitors and docents were having.

The results were overwhelmingly positive. Users of the program declared very high levels of satisfaction with their involvement and with their visit to the Contemporary Collection in general, which contrasted with lower levels for those who did not use the program. Many users wanted a similar service offered in other collections areas, and even non-users declared their interest in participating in the future. Docents were similarly positive in their responses; many enjoyed the informal and spontaneous nature of their interactions with visitors, and all reported a high level of satisfaction with their involvement.

Hilary Inwood co-developed the Ask Me program with Elizabeth Topp, who is Docent Co-ordinator at the Art Gallery of Ontario. Ms. Inwood heads Inwood and Associates, a consulting firm in Toronto, which develops educational programs and resources for museum and school environments. She holds an M.A. in art history from York University and is working toward an M.Ed. at the University of Toronto.

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