Planning, Executing, and Concluding

From our defining events led me to create *The Docent Educator*. Two happened nearly 30 years ago, while I was working for the New Orleans Museum of Art.

The first occurred when one of the terrific NOMA docents stood up and challenged me to tell her, precisely, how and why “teaching” differed from “telling.” That moment set off an avalanche of ideas about education in museum settings. It was then that I came to understand that docents needed (and were entitled to) instruction in education and teaching methods, in addition to information about subject matter content.

The second event was meeting Jackie Littleton. Jackie was NOMA’s volunteer coordinator, and asked to join its docent corps. Even then, when she was my student, she gave me the confidence to attempt things that I had no reason to expect that I could do. And, ever since, throughout our many collaborative projects, she has remained a great friend and an inspiring teacher.

The third was being recruited for a position at the Smithsonian Institution, assisting museums, zoos, parks, and historic sites in developing stronger education programs for schools. Working with facilities in communities throughout the United States gave me a broader view of education in a variety of disciplines, and allowed me to make many important friendships. Those perspectives and contacts would lay an invaluable foundation for producing a pan-institutional publication and locating the initial contributing authors (to whom I remain most thankful).

The fourth event was receiving a Dow fellowship to write *Minds in Motion*, a text that explored how the collections of museums and other such facilities could expand thinking, accommodate divergence, and encourage individual creativity. That wonderful opportunity taught me a lot about personal discipline and focus, and gave me a “voice” with which to speak to my colleagues in this exceptional field.

Each of those events was crucial to the development of *The Docent Educator*. And, since the very first issue, *The Docent Educator* has continued to be a collaborative effort. It has been driven by each and every reader, subscriber, and contributing writer, and fueled by your many comments, suggestions, and supportive letters.

Please allow me to express my gratitude for the privilege of speaking with you over these past thirteen years. Though *The Docent Educator* concludes with this issue, the field of museum education continues to move ahead. And, like you, I eagerly look forward to learning what happens next in this important and dynamic endeavor.

*Alan Gartenhaus, Publishing Editor*
When meeting visitors and beginning a tour, do you feel obliged to give them everything you’ve got, to fill them in as much as possible about your institution and its collection? Do you hope they will experience the benefits of all the books you’ve read and experts you’ve listened to? Do you want them to know that you speak with some authority? And, are you all too aware that this brief encounter may be your only opportunity to accomplish these tasks with this particular audience?

If you have these feelings, I sympathize. I, too, am experiencing many of these emotions as I approach writing this, my final article for *The Docent Educator*. There is so much to cover, and I want you to receive it all. Nevertheless, I realize that yielding to this imperative (or worse yet, teaching to satisfy it) will seriously denigrate my effectiveness. I will overwhelm you, and myself. Quite probably, I will lose focus and cohesiveness. But, most importantly, I will have lost sight of what teaching is truly about.

Simply put, teaching is not about the instructor and what he or she wants to give — it is about students and what they are to learn. And, with that shift of focus, planning a tour is an entirely different and far more constructive process.

**Planning to Plan**

In order to serve visitors (a.k.a. “the students”) best, a docent (a.k.a. “the teacher”) must know who they are and be able to make some generalizations about their needs from that profile. If, for example, those on a tour are second graders, the docent must make certain that his language is appropriate for seven and eight-year-olds, that his demeanor is warm and accessible, and that his lesson moves quickly and is consistent with their limited attention spans. If, on the other hand, his audience will be college students, he must make certain that he challenges and provokes them, that his demeanor is one of respect and openness, and that his lesson has depth and interest commensurate with their current educational experiences.

A docent should know if his visitors have any special areas of interest or reasons for visiting? Perhaps they are part of a social studies class studying the settlers’ push into the American West. Then again, they could be coming as members of a garden club. Such distinctions will make a profound difference in what is taught and could also determine which exhibitions are focused upon and which may not even be viewed.

The docent should also know if members of his audience have special needs. If he knows of visual or auditory problems, he can work to ensure that everyone will see or hear. If he knows of mobility challenges, he can plan appropriate routes and/or allow extra time for moving from one place to the next. And, if he knows of emotional or intellectual challenges, he can ask their teacher or group leader how to best work with such visitors while meeting the needs of the other audience members.

**Planning**

Most of us have a strong desire to be liked. That is why, when planning a tour or lesson, I begin by reminding myself that I am not trying to get the audience to like me, or even the collection for that matter. I am trying to get the audience to learn. After arriving at this point, I confront two essential questions, “What should students learn?” and “How will I know if they’ve learned it?” It is by tackling these two questions that I begin planning my lesson.

“What should students learn?” goes directly to the heart of the matter. Intuitively and intellectually, I believe that students should learn something from the collection that furthers their understanding of the subject matter. That leads me to the theme or “big idea” that learners should consider, wrestle with, and reflect upon. The theme serves as my instructional goal, but offers no information about how this goal is achieved. For that, I must construct instructional objectives. Instructional objectives unambiguously communicate how learning will occur in ways that can be demonstrated and evaluated.

For instance, an instructional goal might be “to have visitors examine and comprehend 19th Century paintings of the American West.” While this goal is clear, it does not tell how this will be accomplished.

When constructed properly, instructional objectives clarify what students will do to demonstrate that they are learning. For instance, such an objective might be that “students will identify three attributes common to 19th Century paintings of the American West.”

Now, I know what I am teaching, because I know what visitors must do. (Note that I have not pre-determined the outcomes. I have not said which attributes they should find. I only know the minimal level of identifying attributes, which is three.)
To implement this instructional objective, I will ask open-ended questions that call upon thinking skills. Such thinking skills are ones of: observing, comparing, classifying, summarizing, interpreting, hypothesizing, imagining, and deciding.

"Identifying" requires observing or looking carefully with a purpose. Therefore, I will ask questions that challenge visitors to inspect paintings for the purpose of describing them. Such a question might be: "How would you describe this painting to someone who could not see it?" or "What words might make appropriate captions for this painting?" To answer these questions, visitors would have to look, gather information, and justify their answers based on what they discovered.

Since identifying attributes found in common involves comparing, I will also ask students to note which attributes they find in several of the paintings. Examples of questions requesting comparisons might be: "If you were to put all the paintings we've looked at into one book, what might you title that book?" or "What are some qualities or messages that seem to be present in every work we've looked at?"

By asking these questions, students must spend time looking, considering, and comparing. That fulfills part of the instructional goal. By assessing the range of answers I receive, I can tell if they are truly learning to comprehend and draw some meaning from these works, which if successful would fulfill the rest of the goal. And, if I find that they are not able to respond to these questions in appropriate ways, I know that I must revisit my questions and how I lead students in their exploration of the works. So, I also have a mechanism for evaluating my teaching.

Good planning is truly the key to an effective delivery and useful evaluation. Unfortunately, many docents do not do this form of preparation. Rather than think their lesson through, down to writing out instructional goals, instructional objectives, and open-ended questions supporting those objectives, they just wing it. But, those who teach in such a haphazard manner do so at the risk of appearing unprepared, inconsistent, and unprofessional. Furthermore, they rarely know why they taught well one time, but not the next. They simply assume it is the audience, when often it is not.

Good teaching is not scripted, nor is it formulaic, but it does require good planning. A planned lesson is a coherent one. It allows for diversions because the instructor knows what students must ultimately do and, therefore, ways to keep digressions productive and to the point. Good planning supplies both the instructor and the learner with a roadmap, relieving learners of the responsibility to sort through new information in an attempt to determine meaning. It places that responsibility squarely where it belongs, with the teacher.
A Model for Planning

This past November, my sister and I had the pleasure of planning and hosting our parents’ 50th wedding anniversary. Over the several months prior, we initiated e-mail and phone conversations with eighteen family members to bring the upcoming celebration to the forefront of their minds. We determined what we needed and how we could best meet the needs.

Our cousins had hosted their parents’ 50th anniversary the previous November, so we had a successful model to use for planning purposes. However, with a vision of what would make our celebration a unique expression of our parents, as well as goals for this multi-family get-together, my sister and I collaborated on a plan of action to make it happen. We figured out how to manage the process, and we recruited help, assigned tasks, provided instructions, and thanked profusely. Feedback both during and following the event—comments, cards, and e-mails—was heart-warming. We congratulated ourselves on what we did right, and made mental notes about what we might do differently for the next family gathering.

Without realizing it, my sister and I had implemented all seven stages in the National Association of Partners in Education’s (NAPE) Partnership Development Process, demonstrating that a good solid process is invaluable and broadly applicable within a wide range of contexts. Perhaps you will find NAPE’s Stages of Partnership Development helpful whether you are starting a new docent program, invigorating a current one, or launching a new initiative within the context of an ongoing program.

Following, I have adapted NAPE’s process specifically for docent purposes:

1. Create a Climate for Success: Awareness

   In this foundational stage, the docent program’s champions — those most enthusiastically committed to its success — initiate an exploration of a potential program/initiative intended to address a particular issue or set of issues.

   In order to create a climate in which the program can take root and flourish, a group of key stakeholders should be gathered together as an advisory body. Individuals representing any groups that will be involved in or affected by the docent program/initiative — or whose support/approval is necessary — should be identified as “stakeholders,” and, as such, should be included in awareness-raising. Stakeholders might include museum staff, trustees, representatives of organizations from which docents might be recruited, representatives from the primary constituent groups served by your organization, and/or, if this process is aimed at a new initiative for an existing docent program, current docents.

2. Identify Needs, Resources and Models:
   a) Needs

   Next, the advisory group should assess each of its member’s needs in relation to the program/initiative. A thorough needs assessment generally employs multiple methods such as interviews, observations, focus groups, and even community forums, as appropriate. Program champions may initially assume that the need is obvious and one-dimensional, e.g. the institution is in need of docents to lead tours in the galleries. However, once the needs of all stakeholders have been assessed, the real need will likely take on more texture, subtlety, and complexity, as it is defined from multiple points of view.

   For example, far from solely providing tour guides, docent programs serve a wide range of needs, both the individual docent’s and the institutions. Therefore, a needs assessment may reveal that docents are interested in the program largely because of the training provided by the museum staff, while trustees may value the program largely for the ambassador role that the docents fulfill on behalf of the institution.

   b) Resources

   A skillfully planned and facilitated needs assessment process may begin to reveal both resources and models. (Models are program designs that have worked for others when addressing similar issues.) As needs are expressed, a clearer understanding emerges of the resources needed to meet them in both the near- and far-term. The advisory group should consider human, financial, and material resources.

   c) Models

   When researching effective models, it is wise to cast the net wide, considering not only those efforts that have worked effectively in museums, but also in other educational institutions, non-profit organizations, businesses, government, and the military. Though the final design of a museum’s docent program/initiative should be based on local needs, resources, and relationships, adaptations of existing programs often prevent the duplication of effort and
the inefficient use of time associated with "reinventing the wheel."

3. Develop Vision, Goals and Objectives
At this stage, the advisory body "gets real" about what the docent program/initiative will accomplish, keeping in mind alignment of their desired outcomes with that of the museum overall. It is important for these stakeholders to understand the difference between visions, goals, and objectives. According to allianceonline.org, a vision statement is a reality-based, guiding image of success formed in terms of a contribution to society. Usually there is an affective dimension to a "vision," around which people can be motivated to work together. While a vision statement answers the question, "What will success look like?", a goal is a broad statement of purpose, and an objective is a measurable and specific statement of intent.

4. Develop an Action Plan
The action plan, put simply, is the "who, what, when and where" of the docent program/initiative. It should be closely aligned with the program's/initiative's visions, goals, and objectives. Keep in mind that each set of goals and objectives may require the development of a corresponding action plan, which is most effective if stated in writing.

5. Develop a System for Maintaining and Managing
In order to achieve the desired goals, there must be, in addition to a written action plan, an organizational chart, job descriptions for key participants, a set of administrative procedures, and a budget. These too should be put in writing and reconfirmed or renegotiated on a regular basis.

6. Recruit, Assign, Train and Recognize Docents
Implementation of the new docent program/initiative will likely begin with recruiting docents or by recruiting current docents for new or expanded roles. When recruiting, the advisory body must decide how narrowly or broadly to target its efforts, e.g. notification in the docent newsletter, the museum newsletter, or the town's newspaper. Once docents have been recruited, they need to be assigned a specific role and oriented to it within the setting in which they will perform it.

    Adequate training must follow and should provide the docents with both knowledge and skills, as well as opportunities to practice the delivery of significant content using the skills they have acquired. In terms of recognition, those who manage docent programs should generally ensure that there are both small, on-going recognition of docents' contributions, as well as a major annual and more public recognition. Keep in mind that effective assignment, training, and recognition are very closely linked to retaining satisfied docents.

7. Monitor, Evaluate and Improve
This stage completes the cyclical volunteer development process. Formative evaluations are on-going assessments that occur during the year and, as such, allow for mid-course corrections. Summative, or end-of-year, evaluations need to be compared with baseline data gathered at the beginning of the process to determine whether the program is making progress toward accomplishing the stated goals and objectives. A simple, but effective, evaluation instrument widely used within our school system is the "Plus/Delta." To create this instrument, divide a page into two columns. Give one column a "Plus" heading, and the other a "Delta." Under the former, list all of the positive aspects of the program/initiative. Under the latter, rather than listing the so-called "negatives," list instead what you might do differently next time. (Though the distinction is subtle, it is significant in terms of keeping the tone positive.)

The results of both summative and formative assessments should be shared with the key stakeholders in order to celebrate progress and garner additional support. Finally, regardless of whether the results match expectations, they should be used to guide the next cycle through this seven-step process with an eye toward making necessary modifications and building on achievements.

As you read through these seven stages, I would imagine that you were reminded of occasions when you, perhaps inadvertently -- like my sister and me with the anniversary party -- were engaged in the seven-step two-step. And, regardless, perhaps the next time you tackle a challenge, whether it be an entirely new program or a new initiative within an existing program, you will find that the framework provided by NAPE's seven steps will assure that you don't misstep on your way to success.

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The Big Change

The Desert Botanical Garden in Phoenix, AZ, decided to offer guided tour experiences to school students five days a week, October through May, expanding the two-week tour program already in place. The restructure of the tour was also a part of the plan in order to better meet the Arizona State Education Standards and ensure that the messages about desert plants were consistent for all students.

Increasing the number of tours also meant recruiting, training, and integrating more guides as well as recruiting and retraining the guides who had been doing a different tour for several years. Every step of the change in the overall program was included in the planning. Here we will focus on developing the new tours and the training.

The Challenge

Develop two new student tours that focus on particular aspects of desert plants and meet the Arizona Education Standards for grades K-6. Each tour will accommodate 60-90 students and will be conducted on a themed side trail to relieve congestion on the busy main trail.

The tour plan includes the following:
- Investigate the Arizona State Standards for grades K-6
- Identify the major messages to be conveyed by each of the two tours and develop a theme to tell the story and carry the messages.
- Identify the concepts and teaching points that will deliver the messages.
- Identify the specific objects that will demonstrate the concepts and teaching points, and for each teaching point assign a designated stop on the tour.
- Develop an activity for each stop that helps students discover and understand the specific concept (teaching point) and meets the state standards. (All our tours are structured to help people understand conceptual ideas not just plant L.D.s).
- Develop an introduction to the tour’s theme, to be presented to the entire student group, that reiterates the pre-visit lesson.
- Develop a concluding activity that will summarize and help students remember the teaching points from the tour.
- Develop and implement training for volunteers and staff.

One example from this plan:
- **Major Message** - For one of the tours the major message is that plants living in the harsh desert conditions have specially adapted features in their stems, roots, leaves and seeds that help them to live in that environment. The theme for this tour is the *Secrets of Desert Plants.*

- **Teaching Points and related objects**
  At each stop the teaching point shows students the specially adapted “secret” of the individual plant example. For instance:
  - **Stop 1** - the “secret” of the cactus (object 1) is that cactus can store water (when it rains) in special cells in its stem to use during the long periods when there is no rain (concept 1).
  - **Stop 2** - the “secret” is that some plants, like mesquite trees (object 2), have specialized roots for finding and collecting water (concept 2).
  - **Stop 3** - many desert plants like shrubs (object 3) have leaves that are small, light colored and often have various types of coatings to protect them from intense sun and water loss (concept 3).
  - **Stop 4** - Some plants, like wildflowers, only live a short while while conditions are just right and their plentiful seeds (object 4) hide in protected seed-coats in the soil for the next year that the conditions are good for them to grow (concept 4).

- **Activities**
  - For the cactus stop - the “secret” of storing water in its stem, the activities include:
    - looking at and touching the cross section of a succulent stem of a cactus
    - using a sponge and water to physically see the concept of how the tissues absorb water and hold it.
    - comparing water conserving ability between 1 cloth with a waxy coating, and one cloth without to demonstrate how the skin of the cactus with its wax-like coating helps the plant hold and store water.
    - forming a circle with the children holding hands and stretching way out as “water” is added to the “stem” of
A major restructure of a program that depends upon many people to implement requires a more complete plan. The more complete the master plan, the easier it will be to implement and the more predictable the results.”

Student tours are modeled for docent volunteers-in-training. The docents are inspecting a piece of cactus, touching the succulent tissues and waxy skin. The sponge (on a stick) is used to demonstrate how the tissues of a cactus absorb water and hold it.

photo: courtesy of Nancy Cutler and the Desert Botanical Garden

Continued on the next page.
The cactus they are pretending to be. As the water is used by the plant and removed from the stem they move close together arms stretched inward like an accordion. This helps them understand how the pleated skin on the cactus works to expand and contract without bursting.

A discussing with the guide how all these activities relate to the cross section of the cactus the students were able to see and touch.

Each of the stops has one or more activities that demonstrate the teaching point. Five groups rotate through five stops.

**Introduction and Conclusion** -

The group *introduction* reiterates (or in some cases introduces) the concepts from the pre-visit lesson/activity about what are the challenges for plants that live in the harsh conditions of the desert.

The concluding activity asks students to choose and draw their favorite plant and its desert “secret.” This activity is meant to have students review in their minds the teaching points/concepts of desert plant survival, which helps them to remember.

The planning also required designating the stops on the trails and any landscape modifications necessary to make the area usable for the activities, and getting these areas approved and created by the institution.

**Delivering the Training** –

Training includes modeling the entire tour on the trail using all activities as well as strategies for enticing students to observe specific parts of the plants for each stop, make comparisons and come up with their own questions and discoveries about the plants and their secrets. The trick is to pique students’ curiosity and stimulate them to ask the questions that lead to finding out the answers to the “secrets.”

Guides are well equipped to answer the students’ questions after 32 hours of training in content about the desert and desert plant adaptations. This content class is also interactive including labs, discussions and outside reading that gives a fairly decent background of knowledge to answer questions.

Guide training also includes several activities that demonstrate the value of learning in an experiential manner. This helps guides use the hands-on items and questioning strategies rather than just lectures, making it fun for everyone.

**Delivering the tour** –

The student tours are “guided discovery tours”. The specified stops and activities give the guides a framework and the tools they need to convey the teaching points and meet the state standards. However, since you can never plan for all contingencies, instead of giving a canned or
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A Museum and Adult School Join Strengths

by Nancy Calzaretta Watt, Mark Manocchio, & Robert Brasier

We, who were long-time docents for the Palm Springs Desert Museum, helped ourselves to the farewell potluck lunch that the Palm Springs Adult School students had prepared for us. It was the last day of our art appreciation class and we felt regret at its ending and exhilaration about its results. This, for us, had been a teaching experience far beyond any we had known in our two decades as docents.

The series of eleven morning classes we presented had been developed for adults using as its basis an outreach program that the Museum presents to fourth and fifth-grade students in the Palm Springs Unified School District. That program focuses on the basic elements of art and introduces students to painting and sculpture, both historic and contemporary.

Adapted for an adult audience, the concept was introduced to the Adult School principal, Dr. Virginia Eberhard, and teacher, Gerry Johnson. They were receptive and interested in expanding the Adult School’s involvement with the Museum. For the last seven years they participated in a writing project called Mitos, Imagenes, e Idioma (Myth, Images, and Language). In this program, students created a work of art and wrote a poem or short essay based on their experience. Their past experience with us had taught the Adult School that they could count on us to take curriculum requirements seriously and focus our efforts on verbal and writing skills learned through exposure to works of art. The content for the new program was then cleared by the Museum’s education department and a schedule set that included a series of slide presentations, a visiting artist demonstration, hands-on exercises, and a morning at the Museum with tours conducted by experienced docents.

The students at the Adult School ranged in age from their late teens to sixty-plus and all were working toward their high school or general equivalency diplomas. Some of them struggled with English as their second language while others had difficulty expressing themselves effectively on the written page. And, while a high school diploma requires units in art appreciation, ironically, stringent budget cuts have eliminated art from the curriculum of most California public schools. Few of the students had any past exposure to art appreciation. Here, then, was the ideal opportunity as well as challenge for the Museum and the Adult School to join their strengths for the students’ benefit.

For us, this was a unique opportunity. The students were there because they wanted to learn and were eager to give us a try. Throughout the class we had included personal facts and anecdotes about the artists and also about ourselves, and the students responded in kind.

For instance, at one point Fredy, a man from Guatemala, jumped up from his seat and rushed to the screen, pointed to the rim of a Mesamerican pot, and said, “I know this! These are Mayan glyphs!” For him, we weren’t talking just about art, we were talking about home. Another such moment occurred when Angelina brought in an impressive stack of nine books to share with her class. They were a series on masterworks of art and the class examined them in intense little groups looking for images they might recognize, looking for color, looking for nudes, looking for oddities . . .

looking! When we asked how she happened to have the books, Angelina said that her grandmother had willed them to her, “but, I’ve never looked at them before.”

In short, the chemistry for all involved changed over the eleven weeks. We and they were more relaxed, had more fun with the information, and felt as if we had really learned something — not only about art, but about each other as well.

It also must be said that the involvement of Gerry Johnson, the classroom teacher, was crucial to the success we all felt. She sat in on all of our presentations, followed through with assignments we left for the students, and added greatly to their enthusiasm. She even initiated a collage project that resulted in an exhibition throughout the halls of the school.

We attended their graduation ceremony, which was especially moving. Dr. Eberhard spoke about our program to the audience of proud students, their relatives, and members of the Board of Palm Springs Unified School District. We could not help but feel this formal recognition, not to mention the potluck earlier, was somehow reversed. The students had already given us so much.

Our hope is to give them back something more this year with an expanded program, an evening class for GED students with day jobs, fresh content, and as much enthusiasm as we can muster. They deserve no less.

Nancy Calzaretta Watt and Mark Manocchio have both been docents at the Palm Springs Desert Museum, in Palm Springs, CA for about 20 years. Robert Brasier recently became the museum’s docent program manager.
How Does Your Teaching Feel?

Do you have sesquipedalia? Those who teach should be on the alert for this terrible scourge, which can diminish one’s ability to communicate effectively and maintain an audience’s interest.

The warning signs may include: using jargon excessively, speaking in the least concise and most convoluted manner possible, or using exceptionally long words to impress one’s visitors or students.

Teachers, docents, interpreters, and guides, be on the lookout for this highly destructive trait! Work tirelessly to prevent it from overtaking your effectiveness! Remember that an ounce of anticipatory obviating is worth a pound of restorative counteraction.

Two Thoughts to Consider

“The child is in me still and, sometimes, the child is not so still.”

Fred Rogers
Mister Roger’s Neighborhood

“Having a wonderful tour should mean providing a tour that is full of wonder. To wonder is to ponder, explore, reflect, and discover.”

Alan Gartenhaus
Publishing Editor
The Docent Educator

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Signage can be confusing. Take docent-led tours.
Question, learn, ask, and grow!
(Haleakala National Park, N.P.S. — Maui, HI)
Planning, Executing, and Concluding." That's the theme for this final issue of The Docent Educator. As we conclude this publication, I'd like to go back a bit to the beginning. Our first issue appeared in the autumn of 1991, and on the front page of the "little-bit-smaller-than-now" magazine was this statement: Every issue of The Docent Educator will present valuable information and practical techniques applicable to a docent's professionally-sized challenge and commitment.

We believed then, and we believe now, that docents are the key to object-based, inquiry learning ... the key to making the collections of museums, zoos, nature centers, and historic sites accessible to the public. In fact, although technology has made significant in-roads in such institutions, we still believe that nothing can replace a good docent.

A few things have changed in the 12+ years we've been putting this magazine together. More and more museums are replacing lecture-style presentations with inquiry learning. More museums are using some form of evaluation in order to professionalize their docent staff. More museums offer training for their docents that doesn't focus on the "what" as much as the "how." And, we don't usually have to explain "docent" anymore.

When I worked for a small history museum in Tennessee, my goal in life was to get the newspaper to write the word "docent" without putting "tour guide" in parentheses after it. Of course, we still have an occasional problem with the word. I visited our local zoo to borrow a drawing and explained that I was from The Docent Educator. Before I could finish the sentence, the education director interrupted, "We don't have any docents. All our educators are paid."

At a natural history museum, I was once told that "docent" was a dirty word to them. "We call our educators 'guides' or 'facilitators'. "Docent is a snobby word," he continued. "You know, a docent is one of those art museum people who bore you to death telling you everything they know."

Actually, we are quite fond of the word "docent." We don't think it's snobby. We think it's perfect, especially if you know what it really means. In 1915, Benjamin Ives Gilman, who was director of the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, first used the term to identify a group of specially trained volunteers of the museum's new education division.

He said, "A museum performs its complete office as it is at once gardant, monstrant, and docent." He elaborated that as a museum preserves (gardant) and exhibits (monstrant), it also must fulfill its duty of "sharpening the spiritual sight." It was this duty to which he gave the name docent.

Literally, of course, the word means teacher. Docents today follow the tradition of discovery learning established by the Boston museum. They facilitate learning by helping visitors make personal connections between the objects collected in their museums, historic houses, zoos, science centers, and botanical gardens. They "sharpen the spiritual sight" by allowing visitors to experience the past, to experience art, to experience living creatures through sensory contact with these objects in their institutions. They help take the mystery out of objects without destroying the wonder.

A year or so ago, Reader's Digest magazine had a great anecdote that illustrates my point. Outside the Noah Webster house at the Greenfield Village historical park in Dearborn, Michigan, a father was trying to explain to his young children who Noah Webster was and why the emergence of dictionaries was so important. He seemed ready to give up when, with a flash of insight, he explained, "Noah Webster was the grandfather of spell check.

Immediately, the kids nodded and smiled, the connection suddenly made clear in their modern-day world. Docents do this every day.

When I was a little girl growing up in Austin, Texas, my family spent at least one Sunday afternoon a month at the Texas State Museum. I loved those outings. I never grew tired of the enormous Olmec heads down in the basement or the taxidermied coyotes, bison, and other animals of our state. My favorite part was the historic dioramas — tiny, three-dimensional re-creations of events in Texas history from pre-historic times right up through the Alamo and Texas Independence.

When I started to school, my family continued our monthly trips to the museum, but I can't remember ever taking a school field trip there.

As a matter of fact, I can only remember one field trip in my entire school career — my fifth grade class took a walk to a nearby creek to study the creatures that lived in it and those that had left their footprints in the limestone when it was only a muddy creek bottom. Even though Mr. Gilman's museum way up in Boston had docents, I was well out of school before I ever encountered one.

So, why do we need docents?

For one thing, that trip to the creek is one of the most vivid
Leads to a Good Conclusion

memories of elementary school — still remarkably fresh after over fifty years. My parents did a lot of things right — they took me to Austin’s museums, and to the San Antonio Zoo and all the museums in that museum-rich city. They read the labels to me when I asked them to; they asked me questions about what I saw; and, most importantly, they gave me lots of time to interact with the objects on my own level and at my own pace. Today, too many parents have neither the time nor the inclination to take children to museums. And, when they do, they may only take their preschoolers, or they become talking labels because they don’t have all the information they need to help children make meaningful connections with the exhibits they’re seeing. Some parents, too, take their job as “purveyors of the culture” so seriously they can kill any innate interest their children might have in the objects they’re seeing.

I watched a family in the Smithsonian’s Air and Space Museum once. As they entered, the young mother dutifully guided her husband and two children to the first exhibit case and began to read and explain. She moved to the next case, but her husband was beginning to drift, and, although they were still looking at her, the kids were glancing over their shoulders at the “other stuff” across the room. By the time she reached the third case, she’d lost them all. Of course, the kids would have been in grade school by the time she finished the first floor at the rate she was going.

In addition to having more information about the collection and about how to best present it than do most parents and teachers, docents can help their visitors select wisely and to see things from a different perspective. And, of course, docents also learn to see things from a different point of view when they pay attention to their visitors.

What docents do best is provide the real thing. Docents have two huge advantages over the classroom teacher. One, of course, is that both the docent and the kids don’t have to be in the museum; they’re there because they want to be. The biggest advantage, though, is that docents have the real stuff — the butter churn, the impressionist painting, the lion. Docents and their visitors don’t have to read about them in a book. They can see the real thing.

Docent means teacher in Latin, but a docent is different from a classroom teacher in some really special ways. Docents work with the “real” stuff. They help visitors connect objects to concepts. They ask the right questions. Docents help visitors learn skills they can use with other collections and in other contexts. One of the most valuable parts of a docent’s job is to help visitors, especially our youngest, to know that the art, the history, and the flora and fauna of this world belong to all of us … and that life is much more than a job. Docents do that best because, in addition to teaching about and with objects, they teach with their lives. By being a volunteer — by sharing a passion for the institution in which they volunteer — docents show children (and adults) that vocation is more important than job.

Forgive my getting personal, but this is the last article I’ll write for a magazine that has been a particular passion of mine for 13 years. I hope you know, and that we’ve been able to convey through the years, how valuable you are, and I hope your museum tells you so in a hundred different ways. I hope you save those funny little letters you get from children who’ve been on your tours. I hope you understand that you are making a difference in the lives of children and adults by your willingness to give your time and your knowledge.

By the way, back to this issue’s theme. In concluding a tour, a docent restates the goals of the tour, summarizes the learning that should have taken place, and tells her audience how glad she is to have spent some time with them. That’s what I’ve tried to do in this article. I hope I was successful.

Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor
minds in motion workshops will continue to be available!

Host a participatory workshop for docents and staff held, on-site, at your institution, using your collection! Choose from one of the topics listed below, or tell us about a specific need and we will create a customized workshop for you.

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- **Questioning Strategies** - an examination of open-ended questioning, language use, and appropriate ways to respond to visitors. Alan Gartenhaus, instructor.
- **Creative Thinking** - an advanced docent workshop focused on provoking visitors’ interest, participation, imagination, and expansive thinking about art, history, or science collections. Alan Gartenhaus, instructor.
- **Get Real! Using Objects to Teach Across the Curriculum** - a cooperative in-service event for your area’s classroom teachers. Jackie Littleton, leader.
- **Little Ones** - successful touring techniques and teaching methods for pre- and primary-school visitors. Jackie Littleton, instructor.

We also conduct docent performance and/or programmatic evaluations upon request.

For further information write, call, or e-mail *Alan Gartenhaus* at:
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Judith Landau  
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Beth Maloney  
Laura Mann  
Melinda Mayer  
Museum Education Roundtable  
Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago  
Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland  
Museum Partners Consulting, LLC  
Diana Musslewhite  
Elisabeth Nevins, seed/ed consulting  
Ayumu Ota  
Lauren Patton  
Sandbox Studios  
Roger Sayre  
Susie Severson  
SFMOMA Research Library  
Arthur Smith  
Ellen Soares, Peabody Essex Museum  
The Softtalk Apple Project and  
FactMiners.org Developers Community  
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