Concluding Tours and Following Up

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Recently, I followed a docent who was touring visitors through an historic home site. She was terrific ... until the end. During the tour, she did everything right, keeping her visitors focused, interested, and engaged. But, when she and her visitors arrived at their last station, she concluded the tour simply by stating, “And that's our history facility. I'd like to thank you for coming.” Her conclusion felt totally out of character with the rest of the tour; so much so that the ending seemed abrupt.

While it's understandable that great personal energy is spent getting started, and that even more emphasis is placed on the content and conduct of the tour, concluding and following up should be considered more than stylistic elements. They provide opportunities to reinforce learning, to conduct evaluations, and to encourage further participation with your institution and its resources.

Reinforcing What Was Learned
Concluding remarks, questions, and/or activities should be consistent with the participants' age, background, experience, and interests. Childhood is not one, seamless event. It is a series of developmental stages. Children cannot be considered little adults and, conversely, adults are not simply big kids. Every element of a tour should be age-graded and appropriate to its audience. A tour's conclusion must be no exception.

For very young children, conclusions offer a time for repetition. Since pre-schoolers and kindergartners have limited attention spans and retain little about their visits to museums and other such facilities, repetition is a good way to ensure that some aspects of their visit will be remembered. Questions at the end of a touring experience, such as “What noises did we hear the ducks make?” “What toys did children play with long ago?” and “Which colors did you see in the rose garden?” will help remind youngsters of what they saw, said, and did while on their visit.

Elementary school-aged children are primed for organized learning, but remember best if provided with an opportunity to apply what they explored and discussed. Hands-on projects are particularly useful for this purpose. After examining portraits, have students write out a list of the things that they would want to be surrounded by if they were going to have their portraits painted. Following an exploration of traditional masks, give children pie plates, scissors, crayons, and other art supplies, and supervise them as they make masks of their own. After looking at a time in history, let the children try on clothing or hats from the same period. Or, have students draw the animal, dinosaur, plant, or object they saw on their tour that most interested them.

Adolescents and teens in secondary school can be asked questions that challenge them to summarize their tour experiences or that permit them to express their opinions in a constructive context. For instance, at the conclusion of a tour, these students might be asked, “Of all the things we discussed, which aspect of leaving the East and joining the Westward expansion seems most memorable to you?” or “After looking at his work, in what ways might this artist be thought of as a radical?” or “Is there one thing we looked at today that you found most noteworthy?”

Adult visitors should also be given opportunities to chat about their experiences. Productive concluding conversations might begin with questions such as, “Are there aspects of our tour that you would like to discuss further?” or “Of the things we talked about and looked at, did anything surprise you?” In addition, a docent might use her conclusion to mention the many other resources the institution offers that could not be explored during the time limits of the tour.

Evaluating
The importance of evaluating cannot be overstated. No teaching program should proceed time after time without feedback on delivery, execution, content, and effectiveness. Failing to evaluate is as unfair to the docents who are attempting to teach well and generate interest as it is to the visitors who are participating in the program.

Casual evaluation can take place during the conclusion of a tour and will inform the docent as he strives to make shifts, change emphases, and engage his audience. Asking visitors questions such as, “What is the one thing you will remember most from your visit to our museum?” will give the introspective docent reams of information. If he listens carefully, he will hear what was learned as opposed to what was taught, if peripheral details overtook content,
and if the theme of the tour remained pre-eminent.

Regular self-evaluation can take place as a follow-up at the end of a touring day or cycle. Docents might be provided with a written checklist or a list of questions to help them review and reflect. Or, docents could come together to discuss their tours, share their achievements and frustrations, and give each other suggestions for improvement.

Formal evaluations should be conducted periodically as follow-up to multiple touring experiences. Whether evaluated by staff, peers, an outside consultant, or any combination of these resources, formal evaluations based on observation and assessment are an essential follow-up for every program striving to excel.

Furthering Participation and Learning

While many institutions send docents to classrooms and organizations in order to prepare visitors for upcoming tours, few send docents to follow up on touring experiences. Follow-up visits by docents could go along way toward ensuring that information is retained, and would communicate that the museum, zoo, aquarium, park, or garden is truly a “partner” in educating and not just interested in boosting attendance numbers and admission fees.

Post-touring activities such as “junior docents” programs, family days, and displays of student work inspired by visits foster interest in the subject matter and increase involvement with the hosting institution. Offering follow-up to tours has the added benefit of extending an institution’s impact, potentially reaching the visitor’s family, friends, and community.

Concluding Remarks

For most groups, a tour’s conclusion marks the end of their guided visit. If these visitors have an effective docent, they will experience a useful and appropriate tour conclusion that reminds them of what they examined and learned and that tells the docent of his or her effectiveness. Should visitors have additional opportunities to participate in follow-up activities once the tour ends, they can go further — building upon what they learned and increasing their involvement with the subject matter.

The vast majority of visitors on docent-led tours do not see an entire institution, nor do they consider a collection from all possible vantage points. Conclusions and follow-ups offer opportunities to encourage visitors to reflect upon what they have learned while inviting them to return and explore again, in greater depth.

Alan Gartenhaus
Publishing Editor

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Writing Through the Arts

Somewhere between toddler and teenager, most young people misplace the wondrous creative drive that impels them to draw on every available piece of paper, dance around the room, and invent songs and stories. Yes, many of them still love to dance, draw, act, sing, but for the majority, “art” is for some other kid. Getting high-schoolers to reclaim their creative enthusiasm – especially in the face of the current emphasis on standardized academic testing – is a major challenge for docents.

The Neuberger Museum of Art, located on the grounds of Purchase College, State University of New York, has responded by developing a program called Writing Through the Arts, which integrates art museum experiences with high-school curricula. The Neuberger is fortunate to have a large collection of 20th Century American painting and sculpture, plus the only collection of African art in Westchester County. There are also several temporary exhibitions presented each year. The program’s goal is to introduce students to a broad scope of artistic expression and to help them articulate their perceptions of those art forms in poetry and prose.

We have been working with high-schools serving populations of diverse racial, ethnic, cultural, and economic backgrounds. Each of the eight schools in the program has a liaison docent, whose first job is to bring a slide presentation into the classroom before the museum visit so that the students will be prepared for what they’ll be seeing. The 30-minute show might briefly cover some art history and then display images of some works in the exhibition the students are coming to see. The high-schoolers can see how the old relates to the new. They also become familiar with some of the paintings and sculpture and greet them as old friends when they see them in the museum. We sometimes quote Dorothy Parker’s great epigram, “A reproduction is exactly like the original, except in every respect.” Questions and comments are invited, but responses come quicker and better in the museum and the follow-up program.

When the students come to the Neuberger Museum of Art, their tour lasts an hour and a half. This sounds like a long time, but a remarkable number of them end with “Do we have to leave now?” “Can we come back?” For an hour, we have some didactic information, open-ended questions and discussions, note-taking, and brief activities; the last half-hour is kept for a writing activity.

Especially at first, the students are more comfortable doing activities in pairs, and prefer talking to each other rather than to a docent. They are adolescents, after all, which also means they’ve got to be cool — and showing a lot of enthusiasm definitely is not — and often will stare off into the distance pretending to be somewhere else. But they do indeed listen and very quickly form opinions, and they are at their best when these opinions are paid attention to and respected.

For the last part of the tour, we often use an activity where students, working in small groups, are given a quotation and told, “You may agree or disagree with this quotation. Choose a painting that expresses your opinions about this quote. Describe what you found in this painting that supports your opinion.” The authors of these quotes have included Aristotle, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, and Eugene Delacroix. Sometimes the teacher has a writing activity she’d like her students to do in the museum and then develop back in the classroom. Sometimes the students just look around on their own (radical, dude!) and take notes.

Throughout the entire tour, the docents have emphasized the idea that we “read” paintings, not necessarily “understand” them — that the artist’s language has a very limited vocabulary, consisting only of color, line, shape, texture, space, while a writer has thousands of words at his/her disposal. Some of the many similarities between writing and the visual arts are discussed. And the activities are all carefully designed not only to increase appreciation of the art they’ve seen, but to develop visual literacy and learn to articulate written as well as spoken responses.

This experience is followed up by a visit to the classroom by people professionally involved in the arts. They discuss their own work and/or that of the students; they talk about the creative process; and they encourage the students to ask questions and voice opinions, something some of them are reluctant to do in the strange environment of a museum. The large range of visitors has included a performance artist, a musician, an African “Djellebah” (storyteller and drummer), printmakers, poets, and painters. And finally, the teacher will give out writing assignments. The high-schoolers have produced modern legends and folk tales after seeing African art; stream-of-consciousness poetry to reflect a morning of...
abstract art; critical essays for a newspaper; personal responses to a particular work; or comparisons between what they're reading in school and what they've seen on the walls of the Neuberger Museum of Art.

Three museum visits will produce a rich variety of prose and poetry, and a great deal of effort by the teachers goes into this aspect of the program; it requires a lot of encouragement and a lot of tactful editing, both of which take many hours of their time.

At the conclusion of the school year, the Neuberger hosts an award program for all the participating students and teachers. Their families are invited, refreshments are served, stories and poems are read aloud, prizes are awarded. Each student receives a Certificate of Achievement, and each school publishes a book of all its students' writings, sometimes accompanied by sketches or computer graphics.

And the students, we hope, go home feeling that they have participated in a program that has empowered them not only in terms of intellectual development, but in their ability to recognize new relationships between language arts and the visual arts.

Tamara Greeman has served as a docent at the Neuberger Museum of Art for over 15 years. The Neuberger Museum of Art is part of the State University of New York and is located in Purchase, New York.

During the Neuberger Museum of Art's Writing Through the Arts award presentation, English teacher Daniel Lanzetta and Mount Vernon, NY, High School students read a dramatic dialogue written by students who participated in the writing program. The topic was censorship and contemporary art.  photo: Elaine Urbina

The Neuberger Museum of Art's Writing Through the Arts award winners, teachers, and museum personnel gather after the presentation of Certificates of Participation at the year-end award ceremony.  photo: Elaine Urbina
An Experiential Exhibition offering Follow-Up

The Los Angeles County Museum of Art (LACMA) is presenting an exhibition of 11 original installations by California artists designed specifically to engage children and their families. Made in California: NOW is the inaugural exhibition of LACMA Lab, a new experimental research and development unit within the museum that tests innovative ways for visitors to access, interact with, and respond to art.

Made in California: NOW provides visitors with a wide variety of artistic experiences—from high-tech video immersion, to architecturally inspired gathering spaces, to installations that evolve during the exhibition through audience participation. The 11 artists selected to participate in the exhibition were all given the same charge: create experiential, interactive installations that provoke public response and incorporate feedback; consider LACMA’s permanent collection as a resource; and involve children in the planning, fabrication, and testing of the installations when appropriate.

On view through September 9, 2001, Made in California: NOW functions as an introduction and follow-up to the exhibition Made in California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900–2000 (on view through February 25, 2001), which explores how the arts have shaped or contributed to California’s identity over the past century. Made in California: NOW appears in the Boone Children’s Gallery at LACMA West, and admission is free to all visitors.

How It’s Done Elsewhere

In its September 22, 2000 edition of “Weekend” magazine, The Washington Post newspaper, surveyed Washington, DC area museums using volunteer docents, and provided details about their programs. In their list they cited:

• Corcoran Gallery of Art. Docents volunteer four hours a week. There is an on-going need for docents, but training is in the fall. Some people, however, are taken throughout the year.
• Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden. Docents are required to lead tours for 35 hours and participate in 35 hours of continuing education annually. Docents lead tours of the museum and do outreach to schoolchildren and senior citizens.
• Library of Congress. Docents volunteer for one shift a week, the longest of which is 3-1/2 hours. The library currently needs docents. Training begins in September, but the library continues to take applicants.
• National Air and Space Museum. Docents volunteer four hours a month in addition to completing two or three hours of continuing education per month. Training runs January through June. Currently recruiting for docents to fill spots on weekends, for school tours, and at their new facility at Dulles Airport.
• National Archives. Does not need docents at present but will in the future for its Washington and College Park facilities. Docents volunteer once or more a week.

• National Building Museum. Training occurs once every two years. Two shifts of two hours are required every month; continuing education is not required but is highly recommended.
• National Gallery of Art. The museum provides nine months of introductory training in addition to continuing education. Docents are required to give 20 tours per academic year.
• National Museum of African Art. No need for docents at present, but current docents are required to give 60 hours of tours a year and participate in 20 hours of continuing education. The museum keeps a list of people who are interested on file and fills its needs in September and January during the year.
• National Museum of American History. Weekday docents volunteer one five-hour shift during the week; weekend docents volunteer two five-hour shifts per month.
• National Museum of Natural History. Docents volunteer a half-day per week. The museum takes about 50 docents a year and currently needs them.
• National Museum of Women in the Arts. Weekday docents staff the information desk and give guided tours once during the week; weekend docents volunteer once every other weekend. Training begins in September. Docents must commit to two years.
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A Participant Shares Her Experiences in a Follow-Up Program

"Artstars"

by Miya Elizabeth Bernson

The Artstars combine their passion for art and their acquired information and skills to lead young people on interactive and dynamic tours unlike anything young people might expect from a museum — an institution that many of them characterize as boring and "stuffy." In their tours, the Artstars have set about to convince everyone that museums are vibrant, interesting, fun, and most of all, welcoming, even to younger audiences. After all, says museum director and creator of the Artstar program Mimi Gates, "why not take risks, have fun, and empower youth?" In the five years since its inception, the Artstars program has done just that for both the students who have toured the museum and the Artstars themselves.

Who are the Artstars?

Recruiting new Artstars is a year-round process that culminates in application and selection in early fall. Potential junior docents find out about the program through a variety of sources, from word-of-mouth and local newspapers to museum membership and teacher education mailings. Fred also contacts Seattle public school principals and maintains connections with teachers around the city, many of whom frequently bring their students to the museum for Artstar tours. Prowning the impression Artstar tours make on their audiences, some Artstars-to-be (myself included) first became interested in the program by being part of an Artstar tour audience. After filling out an application with short essay questions, applicants are invited to a group interview. Finally, fifteen students are chosen to bear the title of Artstar.

The Artstars represent a variety of ages, schools, races, and backgrounds. Ms. Gates believes "engaging youth from diverse communities broadens and enriches the museum, grounds the museum in the community, and creates an enthusiastic audience." In the case of Preya Afman, it was a desire to explore her Asian roots that brought her to the program. Adopted from India, volunteering at the museum is a way for her to learn about Asian culture and "what’s important in their societies versus what’s important in ours. Their view on life is reflected through their art."

Training: Physical, Emotional, and Intellectual

Artstar training is intense — three hours every other Saturday from September to May — but Artstars make the commitment, some coming to the museum from as far as two hours away. During a typical Saturday training session, the group may, for example, learn from a guest lecturer about Hinduism, look at Hindu sculpture, tell stories of Hindu gods to incorporate into tours, do yoga in the "Garden Court" (the Indian sculpture gallery), and then snack on Indian foods. Fieldtrips to Buddhist monasteries, other local museums and art galleries, and Seattle's Japanese garden enhance the training experience, as do the veteran Artstars who return to help new students and continue their own learning.
Bring Young Visitors Back

Pieter Zilinsky, the touring and public speaking guru for the Artstars, uses the Indian concept of “rasa” to describe the Artstar philosophy for both training and touring. Rasa refers to art eliciting a physical, emotional, and intellectual response in the viewer. To produce a physical response, the training sessions emphasize “doing: hands on, noses and knees wet, elbows greased.” Artstars learn calligraphy, embroidery, painting, papermaking, and many of the other techniques used to create the art objects they will describe in their tours, including ceramic workshops at a pottery studio.

Pieter says of the Artstars, “If they’re so very successful, very enterprising, very daring, it’s because on a physical level the Artstars program allows the [docent] to do things with the materials. So when you come into a porcelain gallery, the Artstar has had his/her fingers, and nose, and elbows in those materials and speaks in a physical-colored relationship about those objects.”

Intellectually, Artstar tours stress imagining, looking at, and understanding rather than just knowing about an object. Fred says, “If you tell people ‘This is what I imagine,’ you don’t have to stick to facts.” However, carefully chosen facts are an important key to understanding. Therefore, the training sessions always include learning activities: listening to guest lecturers talk about Asian religions; reading information on Chinese history; learning about the development of written Korean; or just looking at the labels on favorite pieces.

An emotional approach to experiencing art is instilled in Artstar docents from the very beginning of the training.
Artstars receive instruction in yoga, while surrounded by Indian sculptures, as part of their training to become docents.


Photo: courtesy of Miya Elizabeth Bernson

the training, when the docents choose their favorite piece and then explain their reaction to it. Pieter stresses how essential provoking a reaction is. Even if a third grader doesn't know anything about underglaze techniques and can't imagine physically creating a ceramic bowl, if he says "I would not have that in my bedroom," the tour has been a success because the student is participating actively in his own tour experience by looking at the art and responding with a personal opinion.

Audiences and Tours: Making Connections

The usual Artstar tour audience is approximately fifteen children, anywhere from age 8 to 15, from a local elementary or middle school. Artstars connect with their audiences by recognizing the characteristics of a young audience, touring in pairs, making tours interactive and fun through stories and activities, and tying the tour together to encourage understanding and interest in the art both during the tour and into the future.

Recognizing the rewards of touring with children, Kasia glowingly describes their energy, creativity, curiosity, and especially active participation: "When you're in elementary school, even if you don't know the answer you want to raise your hand and get in there, and the older you get, the less you want to raise your hand." Kasia and Preya love the questions the children ask. Ranging from serious to silly, each reflects a genuine fascination with the art and an attention to detail and meaning that most adults do not express. Several galleries have statues with missing arms, or heads displayed separately from headless torsos. Preya remembers, "One kid asked me if the reason the statue was broken was because I dropped it." The children's understanding of the art is much more imaginative. Ask them to imagine a certain object upside-down or backwards or windblown or in flight to prove a point about the meanings of shapes, and they can do it, sometimes seeing things in ways the Artstars had never tried before. Kasia says of the kids, "They're just right on. They know what it's about."
The Artstar docents and their approach to tours are ideally suited to their audiences. Closer in age and experience, Artstars are less intimidating to children than adult docents and, Kasia notes, are more likely to "let loose and have fun" when giving tours. Pieter says, "They are able to engage them on a level that is not too distanced from their own experience.... They go in with their listeners as partners, and not as stars or docents or authority figures." From training and instinct, Artstars know how to get in tune with their audience, and are flexible enough to adapt.

The saying "two heads are better than one" is nowhere more true than in an Artstar tour, always led by a docent pair. This setup is beneficial to both audience and guides, as the dynamic relationship between two Artstars creates visual and intellectual interest for the audience while allowing greater confidence and spontaneity for the docents themselves. Sometimes it's a matter of endurance; giving the usual two consecutive hour-long tours requires more stamina than most docents have alone. Also, a partner is there to "catch you when you fall," says Preya, and fill in information you don't know. One Artstar may love to talk about Japanese tomb figures while the other is more confident talking about painting; however, more often the combined tour pair is more than the sum of its parts. Pieter believes the "confirmation of a successful pair Artstar tour is when one Artstar starts a sentence and the other Artstar finishes that sentence and the audience has discovered something new."

Audiences love having two tour leaders. The visual stimulation of seeing two people waving their arms or acting out a story is important. More important to the success of the Artstar tours is the intellectual component of pairs touring the public in an open dialogue about the visual arts. Artstar tour leaders talk to each other as well as to the audience, and this exchange not only makes giving information less "preachy" and one-sided, it also encourages students to see touring the museum as a dialogue. Pieter describes the parallels between what audiences experience on a tour...
and how they will approach the art when they return to the museum unguided. What he poetically calls the "dialogue from star to star" suggests the dialogue that visitors can have in their own minds when viewing art. Encouraging dialogue between Artstars and between audience and guide is the first step in establishing an interaction and an understanding between audience and art. In this respect, Pieter sees a function of the Artstars as "animated catalysts."

One of the main manifestations of the "Artstar-as-catalyst" is being a storyteller. Stories hold younger children's attention, engage their minds, and impart information and understanding without lecturing. For example, the story of Vishnu's rescue of the Earth Goddess is a favorite. The children sit in a circle on the cool stones of the Indian sculpture gallery and listen to a tale of magic, trickery, animals, and defeating evil demons — while being introduced to the gods and themes of Hindu mythology. Instead of a lesson on the beginnings of Buddhism and abstract concepts like enlightenment, the story of the handsome prince named Siddharta Gautama, and his achievement of enlightenment as the Buddha, sparks young imaginations to envision the prince turned holy man.

Best of all, the stories have illustrations: the art objects, and the Artstars themselves.

An Artstar tour, like an Artstar story, is a physically interactive experience. Artstar training emphasizes attention to the physical aspects of being a tour guide, so Artstars will often be found demonstrating yoga poses, flailing imaginary swords against imaginary demons, and miming how to use a potter's wheel. In turn, the touring students are often invited to "act out" the art, forging a connection to the viewers' senses that makes them look closer. One of the most amazing experiences I have ever
had in the museum was stopping my tour at a Japanese screen that shows dozens of black crows engaged in flying, fighting, and cawing. Taking a chance on an improvised activity suggested by another Artstar tour, I told the students that they could disregard the museum rules for just five seconds. However, in those five seconds, they had to be one of the crows on the screens. We spent a moment each choosing which crow to be. At my signal, the quiet gallery erupted into a tumult of hoarse cawing, hopping, and pecking. The students had become crows, flapping their wings madly; one student even pulled his arms into his jacket and waved his sleeves as very convincing wings. After five seconds and a few puzzled looks from the security guards, we stopped. The children were beaming, having seen more potential for interactive fun and imagination in a museum than they had thought possible. I had noticed during the melee one child standing alone, quiet and still, and I asked him afterwards why he hadn't chosen a crow to imitate. "I did," he said, and pointed. Sure enough, he had noticed the one crow in the entire screen that was standing silently.

While Artstar tours revolve around improvisation and imagination to connect the audience and the art, each also incorporates several elements to tie together the different parts of the museum. The most important is a theme, chosen by the Artstar pair before each tour (Artstar tours are completely student-created and unscripted). Some general themes focus on different materials used in the collection or comparing the art associated with different cultures or religions. Themes can also be tailored to the specific audience: gods, warriors, and weapons for a group of energetic young boys, or ceramics for a group that has just worked with clay at school.

Beginnings and conclusions, starting at a certain important object and ending at another object that gives a new understanding of the theme, give the tour completion, while transitions give it direction. To transition between rooms, you compare and contrast objects—"Does this piece use the symbol of the mirror differently than the one we just saw?" To transition between exhibits, you draw the audience's attention to the change—"We are leaving China and entering India. Do you see any of the same people we saw in the Chinese Buddhist gallery?"

The most engaging way to guide the audience as they move through the museum is to treat each tour like a scavenger hunt. As Fred says, "Plant an idea... look for something as you go." Suggest at the beginning, "Let's count the different kinds of animals we see," and for the rest of the tour, students will be saying, "I saw a dragon! A dog! A chicken!" They will scour every object in every gallery for animal figures, rather than walk passively by. Then, tie that small idea to a bigger idea, a major theme, "Why do you think these cultures used so many animals in their art?" Drop clues: "And in the other side of the museum, we will see this same object made of different materials. Will you find it?" They always do.

Our purpose as Artstars is simple: in our tours, we plant a "set of experiences" in our young visitors, which will bring them back. That's our motto and message for every tour, for every activity:

"Come back. Bring them back to the museum." What keeps young audiences coming back for Artstar tours is the fun and interactive approach of the Artstars. Artstars imagine and improvise their own realities, encouraging kids to do the same during tours. By using their five senses, audiences experience the art rather than just being told about it. By hearing and seeing Artstars perform stories, museum-goers incorporate magic, mystery, and wonder into the reality of a stone statue.

Finally, by being encouraged to open their minds, ask questions, and follow their imaginations, students in the museum create worlds of heroes and tigers from the art they see. In these worlds, a silent boy can be a silent crows. Wherever that crows flew when the schoolbus pulled out of the museum parking lot, he will one day decide to rejoin his cawing brothers on the painted screen — and that boy will return to the museum.

Miya Elizabeth Bernson is a junior at Lakeside High School, in Seattle, WA, and a four-year veteran of the Seattle Asian Art Museum's Artstar program.
Tour Evaluations -- Taking a Collaborative Approach

How can organizations that rely upon volunteers be assured that the quality of tours given for the public is of an appropriate caliber? How can tour evaluations be accomplished with a limited staff? How will docents react; and how will their concerns and anxieties be addressed?

In the summer of 1996, the docent coordinator of the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery raised the issue of evaluating docent tours. The docents at the gallery had never been systematically evaluated, and the questions stated above were of deep and immediate concern.

As in most institutions, staff was limited and each staff member had heavy workload. Could peer evaluators be the answer? Docents were skeptical about the idea of evaluation, feeling it was unnecessary and disruptive. Would evaluations be fair? Would people be "weed-ed out" by evaluation? Would another docent be qualified to judge a peer? Evaluation by a staff member seemed bad enough, but a peer evaluation could be much worse.

Collaborative Decision-Making

With both staff and docent issues in mind, a collaborative approach was proposed. Roca Harding, the docent coordinator, organized a project team made up of two staff members (herself and the tour scheduler) and eight docents. The team, in a series of monthly meetings over nine months, worked together to research and develop a tour evaluation system. After researching twelve institutions nationwide, we found that many had an evaluation process on paper, but never found the time to implement it without the use of peer reviewers.

Our project team agreed on some major features of the evaluation process.

✓ There would be a mixed system of tour review with both staff and docent evaluators.
✓ Only staff familiar with both the collections and touring techniques would review tours (i.e. the docent coordinator, but not the tour scheduler).
✓ There would be an evaluation of an entire adult tour with museum visitors. It would not be a tour for fellow docents or a 15-minute tour segment.
✓ Docents would be allowed to select the type of tour to be evaluated (walk-in, reserved group, thematic tour).

School tour evaluations were deferred for a future time.

✓ The goal was to assess the touring skill of each docent to ensure quality and professionalism.
✓ This was not a process to "weed-out" anyone, but instead, to identify performance problems that could be corrected with training, enabling each docent to give the best possible tour.

Developing Methods and Materials

Members of the project team spent a great deal of time discussing ideas and issues of tour evaluation methodology and materials development. A "Tour Self-Evaluation Checklist" covering every aspect of touring was developed for docent use. It was not intended as a blueprint for any single tour, but was a reminder of all aspects of tour-giving.

A "Tour Evaluation Form," to be used by the evaluators, was less detailed than the Checklist, but included major headings such as accuracy of information, group management, touring techniques, tour organization, and communication skills. It provided space for evaluators to write comments rather than to check off items.

The "Tour Evaluation Methodology Sheet" was a thoughtful and useful document that set forth evaluation criteria and rules. This document went a long way toward reassuring docents concerned about this process. One docent commented, "I was against the whole idea of tour evaluation, especially the use of docent peer evaluators. But, when I read your Tour Evaluation Methodology, my fears were laid to rest because you had thought through every contingency."

What were the concerns of docents that had been addressed?
✓ All evaluations would be confidential and conducted in a professional and sensitive manner.
✓ Names of peer reviewers would be solicited from the docent corps, but the docent coordinator would make the final selection based on both touring and interpersonal skills. Before a candidate became a peer reviewer, he or she gave a tour that was evaluated by staff.
✓ A docent could ask for a staff, rather than a peer, reviewer. Alternatively, a docent could decline to be evaluated by a particular peer reviewer.
✓ Each docent was informed of the evaluation date, time, and name of the reviewer at least three weeks in advance.
Approach to Following Up

“A Tour Self-Evaluation Checklist’ covering every aspect of touring was developed for docent use. It was not intended as a blueprint for any single tour, but was a reminder of all aspects of tour-giving.”

Informing and Preparing Volunteers for Evaluation

Docents were informed at every stage of the planning process, and as a result, by the time we were ready to implement the evaluation, docent anxieties had lessened. The docent corps learned about the upcoming evaluation through our docent newsletter, memoranda from staff, docent meetings, and a binder that contained all the pertinent information.

To refresh touring skills and build confidence, docents were given the opportunity to attend an optional Evaluation Training Workshop that focused on the major components of a successful tour. A large majority of the docents attended this workshop and found it useful, not only in reinforcing skills, but also in reducing anxiety.

Preparing the Peer Reviewers

By contrast, docent peer evaluators were required to attend a Coaching Tips Workshop on Assessment and Interpersonal Skills. This two-day workshop covered topics such as: making docents feel at ease; how to be a good listener; how to offer suggestions positively; how to deflect negativism; how to take notes positively; and how to handle potential problems. Reviewers were instructed to pass serious problems on to the docent coordinator.

Implementing the Tour Evaluation

From March through May 1997, a majority of evaluations was completed, with the few remaining evaluations accomplished over the summer. Five peer reviewers and one staff reviewer evaluated forty-three (43) docents. All but one docent completed a successful tour on the first attempt. Staff reviewed the one docent that was asked to give a second tour. Another docent needed some improvement in touring techniques and was asked to work with a touring coach.

In the post-evaluation survey, 91% rated the actual tour evaluation as excellent or very good; 94% felt the objectivity and sensitivity of the evaluators was excellent; and 98% rated the preparatory handouts and workshops, as well as the evaluation methodology, to be excellent or very good.

Continued on next page.
Lessons Learned

✔ Collaboration between staff and docents when developing methodology for evaluation gave everyone a sense of fairness and helped allay fears and anxieties. Both docents and staff gained deeper insights into the problems and issues of concern to the other.

✔ After some discussion, we decided to use the term “tour evaluation,” rather than “observation,” “assessment,” “appraisal,” or “performance analysis.”

✔ For any organization planning an evaluation of volunteers, it is important to think through and articulate the objectives, the methodology and the criteria used in evaluating touring skills and to communicate that information well in advance to the volunteers.

✔ It is useful to prepare for as many contingencies as possible. Lack of visitors or too few visitors, illness, inclement weather — these are some of the things the must be foreseen.

✔ An advance call by the evaluator was critical, as often the docent to be reviewed had questions, misunderstandings, or some confusion about the process. The docent could not ask the evaluator to listen to or comment on the tour ahead of time. The docent could ask advice from a touring coach.

✔ The two-day Coaching Tips Workshop for Peer Evaluators was time well spent. The peer evaluators were taught to be positive and tactful, to hold post-tour discussions in a low-keyed atmosphere, and to focus on no more than two negative points. As a result, docents found the post-tour evaluation discussion and comment form to be helpful, not threatening.

Conclusion

In any project involving volunteers, it is critical to develop a well-thought out project plan and to bring docents "on board." An entirely staff-directed process of tour evaluation might have been quicker, but could very well have presented serious morale problems. The collaboration of staff and docents in sharing research, exchanging ideas and concerns, developing methodologies, and evaluating tours produced an extremely successful evaluation process.

We feel that there are three keys to the success of our evaluation process:

✔ a collaborative and cooperative approach,
✔ an effective and sensitive project manager, and
✔ the motivation and dedication of all those involved.

Rocah Harding has been docent coordinator for the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC since 1992. Ms. Harding has contributed several articles previously to The Docent Educator and has been an advisor to international and American museums and organizations on the utilization and management of docent programs. Ms. Harding can be reached by e-mail at: rocaharding@hotmail.com

for services as a consultant or for training on topics related to docent issues, touring and communication skills, and volunteer management.

Marlyse Kennedy has been a docent at the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery since 1992. She was chairman of the 1999-2000 Docent Council.

Lois Raphl has been a docent at the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery since 1989. She was chairman of the 1994-1995 Docent Council. Marlyse Kennedy and Lois Raphl presented this topic at the 1999 National Docent Symposium, which was held in Philadelphia.

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The Docent Educator Winter 2000-01
As a follow-up to docent training and on-the-job experience, many docents and staff have asked if *The Docent Educator* could provide a bibliography for further reading about teaching — its aims, processes, and procedures. Therefore, we have assembled the following, highly idiosyncratic, annotated bibliography for your convenience and use.

As you scan this list and note the publication dates of some works, it may be tempting to dismiss them as old and therefore no longer relevant to current concerns about teaching and thinking. On the contrary, most of the related readings included below are considered “classics,” and the ideas presented in them are rich and substantial.

A thorough and detailed analysis of thinking by an eminent psychologist dealing at length with experiments in the mental processes of interpolation and extrapolation. The author delineates everyday thinking and adventurous thinking, the thinking of the artist, and the thinking of the experimental scientist.

An attempt at classifying the goals of teaching: knowledge, comprehension, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

An inquiry into the processes of categorizing and conceptualizing, demonstrating how we group things in order to learn and understand them more readily.

The author offers a historical approach to the understanding of science hoping to acquaint the non-scientist with the methods of science.

The author presents ways of helping children learn to think imaginatively. The materials have easy application to elementary-aged students.

This book is an educators “bible.” It was a pioneering and systematic examination of thinking, the method by which things acquire significance, and its relationship to teaching and learning.

An exploration of creative thinking and its application to museum visits, including activities for use with art, history, and science-oriented collections.

Hayakawa places heavy emphasis on semantics and problems of communication, analyzing language as the expression of thought.

The author describes how to make the education process in schools more thoughtful and reasonable, and how to teaching using inquiry so as to encourage higher order thinking.

A fun and, indeed, whacky text that speaks to unlocking one’s mind and encouraging creative thought, while presenting sound educational philosophy, activities and exercises, and stories.
W e've composed them. We've received them. We've probably even coerced our children into writing them. However, many of us in the museum field may have overlooked the educational possibilities of thank you notes. For docents, they can be a reality check. For classroom teachers, student-written thank you letters can reinforce important language skills and help evaluate objectives.

Share Them

Thank you for a wonderful morning of learning. It was such a treat for our children to participate in your programs.

One of the best uses of thank you letters is as a morale booster. There's nothing quite like the unfeigned gratitude of an enthusiastic visitor to bring a smile to a docent's face. Everyone likes to be thanked for a job well done. Most student letters are so sincere in their delight that it is impossible not to feel good when you helped to create their enjoyable fieldtrip experience.

Some letters are addressed to a specific docent and should, of course, be given to that docent. Others can be posted on a bulletin board in the education department offices or docent workroom.

Thank you letters can also be shared as a "public relations" tool. Room should be made to include some of the "best" in the museum publications that are sent to members or on the museum's web site.

In addition to sharing the good news of successful education programs, such letters also may serve to enlist new volunteers and reinforce for board members and others the importance and impact of educational programming. Of course, for the sake of children's safety, when letters are published or exhibited in public areas, care should be taken to conceal the identity of the writer and the writer's school.

A bulletin board or similar space at a gallery exit can provide a vehicle for visitors to write instant thank you notes (or critiques) of an exhibit or tour. In a children's museum I visited recently, for example, visitors were offered small "sticky notes," a writing space, and a box of pencils and encouraged to respond to an exhibit about family holidays. The notes were displayed on blank walls surrounding the exhibit exit. It was almost as interesting to read about others' family holiday memories (some, unfortunately, quite painful) and to share their thank you messages as it was to visit the exhibit. At any rate, it added a new dimension to the experience.

Learn from Them

Dear Bill,

Thank you for teaching me the way to remember the colors of the spectrum.

Do you remember me?

My name is Roy!

When reading thank you letters, look for patterns that may offer useful information for planning or refining tours. Are some docents mentioned by name? This could indicate that a personal connection has been made between that docent and her audience. It takes more than a nametag to inspire children to remember an adult's name! What does that docent do that makes children respond to her? Is it her inherent personality, her friendliness, or is it the way she makes children feel comfortable when interacting with her during the tour? Whatever her "secret," it could be worth sharing with the rest of the group.

Are particular activities, artifacts, or exhibits mentioned more often than others in the thank you letters? What makes that activity, artifact, or exhibit so memorable? Was it the inherent curiosity of the object, or do the docents use some special techniques in allowing their visitors to "discover" that particular object? Conversely, are there important aspects of the tour lesson that are never mentioned in letters? Perhaps visitors aren't "learning" what we're "teaching."

Respond to Them

Please tell your students how much all the docents here at the zoo enjoyed their questions. They really made us think!

For years, my sixth graders and I enjoyed plays at a children's theater among our annual field trips. When we returned to the classroom, our first assignmament was a thank you letter. Because we each had copies of the playbill, the students and I were able to write quite specific letters. Having seen many of the actors in the repertory theater in other roles, the students often compared their current performance to previous characters they played. The class was always
More Than Good Manners

thrilled to receive, a few weeks later, a poster from the play on which each of the actors had written a response to the letters. Museums, zoos, parks, aquariums, and gardens, too, can respond to thank you letters in some intriguing way.

If, in the course of a tour or thank you letter, children have asked questions that require further research on the part of the docents, those questions should be answered in a follow-up letter.

Museums and other facilities that publish exhibit posters could send a poster signed by the docents. Some institutions follow up thank you letters by sending a free admission ticket inviting students to return with their parents. In one museum in which I worked, the local ice cream parlor gave us coupons for a free milkshake that we sent in response to thank you letters. Of course, children don't need a "reward" for having sent a thank you letter, but an acknowledgement from the hosting institution that the letters were appreciated can serve to reinforce their importance.

Encourage Them

Mrs. Smith's class is a credit to your school. Their behavior and their obvious interest in the exhibits during their visit yesterday make the experience a pleasure for all of us. We look forward to having them at the museum again.

Thank you letters, like some other niceties of manners, are making a comeback, but still need to be encouraged. It is perfectly acceptable to include thank you letters among the suggested follow-up activities for teachers to use in their classrooms. Class time used in preparing to write letters provides an opportunity for children to discuss what they learned from the tour. Such discussions allow teachers to correct misunderstandings and reinforce important information.

Letters are also places to practice good writing skills — spelling, punctuation, handwriting, grammar, and composition. All these basic language skills are an important part of most states' standards of learning, and teachers are ever on the lookout for authentic ways to incorporate their use in classroom lessons.

Considering how difficult it is for many teachers to arrange field trips in these days of tighter school budgets and greater concern for student safety, a thank you letter to a teacher and/or principal who uses your educational resource is also appropriate. Like volunteers, teachers enjoy the "compensation" of knowing their work is appreciated.

Writing and using thank you letters is a simple, but effective, way for museum educators to enhance the learning experience in their institutions.

Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor

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Docents at the Indiana University Art Museum follow-up on their comradeship and work as educators by publishing a literary magazine. The Docents' Luncheing Society Writes! includes opinions, experiences, images, poetry, and "thoughtful trivia." This poem, which appeared in that magazine, was submitted to The Docent Educator by its author.

N'est-ce pas?

The museum's a nice place to visit, n'est-ce pas,
For classical sculpture or doo-dads Dada,
For paintings and gew-gaws and etchings and such,
For things made by Frenchmen and some made by Dutch.
There's stuff that is Roman and stuff that's Chinese,
Stuff that will anger and stuff that will please;
There's stuff that is forthright and stuff that will baffle.
(You wonder if some wasn't won in a raffle.)
We're challenged by shapes and by hue saturation;
Some things that we see give us grave consternation.
"I understand this piece, but why's that in here"
And look at that lady with no clothes -- oh dear!
We're lured in by thousands to trudge through the halls
And stare at the things hanging there on the walls,
Things up on pedestals, things in glass cases.
Oh, what's the allure of Matisse and Greek vases,
Of African masks and of celadon glazes?
We look till we're dizzy; our knees buckle under.
Will our feet hold us up through the last room, we wonder.

So why do we come to this palace of art?
Just what is the wisdom its objects impart?
The answer's a mystery, at least so to me,
But it matters not anyway, don't you agree?
What matter the reasons (I'm sure there's a lot)
It's a cool place to hang out on days that are hot.
It's a place where there's pleasure, a place you can learn,
A place you can go when there's no place to turn.
It's a temple, a haven, psychiatrist's office,
A place where you see the humanity of us.
So whether we're youthful or whether we're old,
Whether we're paupers or rolling in gold,
Whether we're Einsteins or persons less brainy,
Whether we're somber or so-so or zany,
The museum's a nice place to visit, n'est-ce pas,
For classical sculpture or doo-dads Dada.

Paul E. Lane, docent
Indiana University Art Museum
Bloomington, Indiana
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