Open Forum

Various Topics of Interest to Educators

- Communication Skills are Key
- The Docent and the Wheelchair
- The Challenge of Touring Home School Groups
- Don’t Let “Mission” Blinders Turn Your Path into a Rut
- Audio Guides: Must They be a Menace?
- Rubrics: An Evaluation Alternative
For over twelve years, every issue of The Docent Educator has examined a specific topic of concern to those who teach in museums, historic sites, aquariums, zoos, parks, libraries, and gardens. These topics are intended to provide each issue of the publication with focus and give the content of each issue cohesiveness.

From time-to-time, we receive an insightful article that we simply cannot publish because it did not address the theme of an upcoming issue. That led us to create this issue, which we call "Open Forum." In this issue are articles that examine a range of ideas and concerns that do not necessarily relate to a single theme, but do pertain to the many challenges we face as volunteer and staff educators.

Communication Skills are Key

To successfully implement inquiry teaching, docents must master the skills of communication. They must be particularly sensitive to how their words will be received and understood, and acutely aware of the intentions and meanings of words used by their visitors.

Though the goal of an inquiry lesson is determined in advance by the docent and/or the education staff, the strategy for achieving that goal is based largely on a back-and-forth style of communication. The docent asks a question to initiate thought and conversation. Visitors respond, presenting the docent with verbal cues that must be understood and appropriately used to move the lesson forward.

If effective communication is to occur, techniques must be employed to ensure that a minimum of misunderstanding and confusion and a maximum of understanding will take place. Language is an abstract set of symbols whose meanings are in some measure unique to the individual expressing the symbol. Docents must recognize that the words they use, and the words visitors use, have meanings that may be "individualized," or unique to the individual who is speaking.

Since lessons during a tour tend to be incremental, even words that were understood in one context may be misused when applied to the next. Consider a toddler standing on a street corner with his father. The child points to something moving down the street, and his father says, "Car, Billy, car." The child says "car" and receives a smile and positive reinforcement. Then, when something else moves down the street the child responds with "car" but receives the comment, "No, Billy, that's a truck."

The usefulness of words for communicating depends upon the extent to which they symbolize approximately the same thing for the persons with whom the docent is communicating. When teaching inquiry lessons, docents use words to ask questions about objects or life forms with which visitors are unfamiliar. Then, docents expect visitors to respond to those questions using words they may rarely employ.

This presents many opportunities for miscommunication. Such opportunities are compounded the further the conversation moves from simple description. For instance, think of the controversies and differences of opinion that surround the meaning of such philosophical words as "fairness," or "patriotism," or "justice," or "happiness."

Adding to the complexity of communication and comprehension is the need to discriminate between words that communicate information and words that communicate feelings. Among the trickier aspects of distinguishing between statements conveying information, or objective description, and those conveying feelings, or personal judgments, is that the two can appear very similar in their construction.

Consider the following two sentences.
"A lizard is a reptile."
"A lizard is creepy."
The construction of the two statements is nearly identical. Both are stated in the declarative form we commonly use for
conveying information. However, while the first sentence does just that, the second sentence masquerades as a report of fact, but is actually the expression of a feeling or judgment.

Since the inquiry process involves the docent becoming a facilitator to aid visitors as they generate and test ideas and interpretations, it is not a process whereby the docent tells visitors what is right or wrong, but challenges visitors to discover such meaning for themselves. To do so, it is essential that the docent develop sensitivity to the nuances of effective communication.

S.I. Hayakawa, who was a professor of linguistics and a United States Senator, broke words down into three types of communication. His categories are very useful for those of us who teach with institutional collections. Hayakawa’s three categories are “report words,” “inferential words,” and “judgmental words.” Knowing how to distinguish among the three, and when and how to use them, can be of great assistance when teaching.

Report Words

Report words are used to describe what a person has seen, heard, or felt. They are accurate descriptions of a personal observation or measurement. They are verifiable. They exclude, as far as possible, inferences and judgments.

For instance, a report statement might be that “this painting is a landscape that is expressed mostly in blues and greens” not “this painting is a beautifully rendered landscape that uses an expressive array of cool colors.” Even the novice can verify that the painting is a landscape and that the colors are mostly blues and greens. One cannot necessarily verify that a painting is “beautifully” rendered (which is a judgment) or that the colors are expressive or cool (which infers that the listener knows how the colors are expressive or why they are considered to be cool). Indeed, the word “cool” itself could be subject to multiple interpretations depending upon the listener’s age, background, education, and experience discussing works of art.

Another report statement might be that “this historic home is much larger and has more conveniences than most houses of its time period” but not that “this home is a grand and glorious example of the best produced during this time period.” For, what is grand or glorious to one person may seem antiquated or even intimidating to another. And, if you have little awareness of what else was produced during the time period, you will have few resources with which to understand how this house is among “the best.”

Inferential Words

Inferences are statements about the unknown made on the basis of the known. In other words, perhaps you know what you mean, but others may not. For instance, stating that “this painting shows the obvious influence that photography was having upon artists at this time” is an inferential statement. It infers that listeners have knowledge about the evolution of painting and about photography’s influence upon it. This is knowledge your visitors may or may not possess, and a concept with which they may or may not agree.

If, however, you stated that “the artist has captured people who are only partially within the frame of the picture, not unlike how you might see the scene if you were looking through the viewfinder of a camera,” the inference is translated into report language and is more comprehensible. Then, such an inference about the influence of photography upon this work can be understood and evaluated.

Inferential words can be highly ambiguous or have personalized

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meaning for the person speaking that are not appropriately understood by the listener. Consider the differences among understandings that might occur when hearing a statement such as, "The invention of the internal combustion engine changed the face of the planet." Or, the misunderstandings that could arise when hearing a statement such as, "Life was slower during the 19th century."

Judgmental Words

Statements expressing approval or disapproval of occurrences, objects, persons, or other living things are judgments. Such statements as:

- "Tobacco transformed rural Southern life for the better."
- "The finest piece of pottery in our collection is this bowl." or,
- "The Japanese people are very polite."

These statements offer judgments because they attribute a positive value to something without relating the reasons or behaviors on which those attributes were based. Likewise, such negatively valued statements as,

- "These people were primitive"
- "Prairie dogs are a scourge"

are equally obscure.

Judgments transfer either positive or negative pre-judgments (or prejudices) to those who we are hoping to draw their own conclusions. Thus, the use of judgmental language is counterproductive. It often inhibits understanding and leaves open the possibility that visitor responses will be constructed to be consistent with the docent's attitudes.

Language Use and Inquiry

While all conversations will not remain within the realm of report words, it is useful to construct questions and break down responses into report words whenever possible. This is especially true for the younger or less experienced visitors. Requesting that visitors make observations or comparisons will usually keep the discussion in report language. If asked, "how is the manta ray different from other sea creatures we've looked at?" visitors will automatically speak using report words that reference size, shape, color, texture, movement, etc. Should a visitor respond using judgmental words, such as "the manta ray is more frightening than the other fish," the docent can move the conversation from judgment into report by following that statement with the question, "what about the manta ray's appearance seems frightening to you?"

Whenever possible, docents should refrain from using inferences as they disenfranchise visitors. By their very nature, inferential words emphasize the gulf between those who know and those who do not. When visitors respond to questions with inferential words of their own, they should be asked to clarify using report words. For instance, should a visitor state that "the Plains Indians
dependent upon the buffalo," the docent simply needs to follow up by asking, "in what ways did they depend upon the buffalo?" Then, the visitor will usually shift into report language, saying such things as "they used buffalo skins for tepees and clothing, and they ate the meat for food."

While docents will not want to transfer judgments to their visitors, and should avoid saying such things as "this painting is among our finest" or "here is one of the finest animals in our collection," a docent may intentionally employ a question that involves judgmental words. In such instances, it is important to shift back to report words as soon as possible to ensure clarity and comprehension. Should a docent ask, "What about our garden tour did you enjoy the most?" the appropriate follow-up question after a visitor responds is "What specifically about that plant/landscape did you like?"

**Promoting Clarity and Comprehension**

When we communicate with each other, and especially when we teach, it is useful to remember that our common words may not evoke the same images or thoughts in someone else's mind as they do in ours'. Knowing this, we can help improve communication by being as specific as possible in the way we use words and respond to the words used by others.

Assuming that other people know what you are talking about, or that you know what someone else is talking about are two common causes of communications failure. For this reason, docents should invite their audiences to ask questions when they are confused, uncertain, or need clarification. And, docents should follow up visitors' responses to questions or tasks with questions that help to break down communication into report words, which are the most easily understood by others.

To promote clarity and comprehension, try paraphrasing — restating in your own way — what a visitor's remark conveys to you. You will learn if that jibes with the visitor's intended meaning.

Effective paraphrasing takes more practice than it might seem. Consider the following verbal interchange.

*Linda:* "Betty should never have become a teacher."

*Fred:* "You mean teaching isn't the right job for her?"

*Linda:* "Exactly, teaching is not the right job for her."

Instead of simply rewording Linda's remarks, Fred might have asked himself, "What does Linda's statement mean to me? What is an example of the meaning of her statement? If he had thought about meaning, the interchange might have sounded like this:

*Linda:* "Betty should never have become a teacher."

*Fred:* "You mean she is too strict or controlling to be a good teacher?"

*Linda:* "Oh, no. I meant that she has such expensive taste that she can't ever earn enough money as a teacher."

*Fred:* "Okay. I see. You think she should have gone into a profession that would have paid better."

*Linda:* "Exactly! Teaching is not the right job for Betty."

Since the purpose of teaching, like that of communication, is the transference of information, ideas, and meanings, it is essential that docents and other who teach use language appropriately and with intention. While having in-depth knowledge about your institution's collection may be admirable, it will not make you a good teacher. Knowing "tons of information about your collection" is just not enough. An effective docent will be effective because she is in command of strong communication skills and because she has an ability to reach her audience.

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*Alan Gartenhaus*

*Publishing Editor*

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Choosing words appropriately and with intention is only one of several aspects of effective communication. Another very important component is communicating in a manner consistent with the age and experience level of your audience. For instance, most children under the age of ten have little understanding of historic time. Even though dates and the sequencing of events may seem of utmost importance to studying art works, historic objects, and scientific discoveries, such things will not translate to these younger students.

I remember thinking that I could get a young group of students to become aware that some dates are important and are worthy of remembering. To make the point, I asked one second grade child, "When is your birthday?"

"August 12," the young fellow answered.

"And, what year?" I continued.

"Every year!" the child responded.

His answer was appropriate; it was my question that was not.
The Challenge of Touring

You've seen them tumbling into the museum—bundles of energy packaged in all sizes, trailed by moms pushing strollers and a few dads in jeans. In they come, and they want a tour! A tour for all, ages six months to 55. Maybe you, dedicated educator and part-time magician that you are, can call upon a docent skilled in intergenerational touring to provide them an appropriate experience—or, maybe not. In any case, home school groups usually require special advance planning to prepare both visitors and guides for a successful museum tour.

At the Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Museum we offer tours of specific exhibits for each grade level, and we require teachers to prepare students by using the free materials we provide. Because our facility is small and full of delicate objects that may not be handled, we cannot turn groups loose without proper supervision, and we have learned that proper supervision means careful preparation and staff presence. Because our docent group has few members in its ranks, and is available on a limited basis requiring advance scheduling, we are not able to offer guided tours to walk-in visitors. So home schoolers, like formal school groups, must follow certain procedures for reserving tours. But, it takes a lot of time and flexibility to work with these groups and families to make possible a visit that meets their needs.

By trial and error we have streamlined our process as follows: 1- Identify a central contact person who will be responsible for communications between the museum education staff and the home school parents in the group. 2- Establish a schedule for completing the tour arrangements, delivery of materials, student preparation, and return of confirmation forms, evaluations, and any other required paperwork. 3- Make teacher materials available both from the museum's website and in print form by mail. 4- Notify the contact person of any missed deadlines in time to remedy the situation.

Although there is as much variety among home school groups as among traditional classes, some general characteristics seem to pertain. Many choose this approach to educating children due to their child's special needs or a parent's political or religious viewpoint.

✔ Home schoolers tend to be accompanied by more parents and pre-school age siblings, while tours are usually developed for one age group.

✔ Although they are accustomed to working at home with siblings of different ages, it is sometimes difficult for home schooled children to adjust to touring in the museum with "classmates" from other families with whom they may not be well acquainted.

✔ The range of abilities and maturity may be wider among home schoolers than a typical classroom group.

All these variables and factors can affect group dynamics and response to tour content. These variables must be taken into account when considering gallery space, possible distractions, pacing and movement through the building, as well as in the amount and types of supplies used for any follow-up activities.

Docents need to be ready to handle everything from the eleven-year-old boy who won't stand near anyone else, to the mother whose "creationist" beliefs prompt her to object to making reference to fossils in the limestone of the museum's façade. Parental involvement in tours for home schoolers is often greater. These parents are accustomed to being "the teacher." In addition, the parents are often both interested themselves and highly invested in their child's performance. While such involvement can be good, a parent's intervention can prevent the student from participating fully. When this occurs, the docent should be prepared with diplomatic reminders such as "This time I would like to hear from a student," or "I hope you'll be able to discuss that more at home, but since our time is short we need to move on now."

Since we expect students to be familiar with vocabulary and concepts basic to the tour, we have found it wise to use the pre-tour gathering time to engage these visitors in a conversation that allows us to assess their readiness and, if necessary, provide a brief review. This goes for museum manners, tour logistics, and orientation to the facility, as well as specific tour content. While this
Home School Groups

may be a technique you already use for all your tours, it can be especially important with visitors as varied as most home school groups. Establishing the common ground on which you will be working together before you begin is certainly easier than regrouping later when you discover that you aren’t all on the same tour.

As is true of all tours, each home school group experience will be distinct, both for them and you. We have found meeting the challenges of adapting our program to their needs to be rewarding. It continues to be a learning opportunity for us all. And who knows? You may even get a handwritten and illustrated “thank you note” with a basket of home made cookies, as we did recently.

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How Do You Serve Home School Groups?

Thursday mornings at the Mint Museum of Art and the Mint Museum of Craft and Design in Charlotte, North Carolina, are reserved for parents with children ages 6-15, most of whom are home schooled. A series of four special workshops highlight different aspects of the museums' collections. The programs are free for parents. Each of the workshops includes a tour and hands-on art project as a follow up.

What approach has your institution taken to accommodate and serve home schooled children? What worked and what hasn’t worked? Please write to us, at The Docent Educator, and let us know what your experiences have taught you about teaching and touring groups of home schooled children and their chaperones.

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The Docent Educator Winter 2002-03
Don't Let "Mission" Blinders

Most of you history docents know that, in the not-too-distant past, horses were often fitted with blinders, a pair of leather flaps attached to the bridle to limit their side vision and, hence, their distractions. Blinders made it easier to keep them on the path. Blinders worked so well, in fact, that today some of those same paths are clearly visible as ruts across our western prairies. In museum education, the “mission” can sometimes limit vision, serving as a sort of this that can put your programming into a rut. How can you work within your institution’s mission without staying on the same path too long?

Of course, the purpose of a mission statement is just the opposite of the purpose of blinders. It is intended to present a broad view. A good mission statement articulates the museum’s reason for being. It defines the focus of the museum, and it is around the mission statement that a museum’s governing body, staff, resources, collection, programming, and activities are organized. The American Association of Museums requires a “formally stated mission” for accreditation, and further declares that “... every action and activity of the museum should support the purpose set forth in the mission statement.”

How, then, could such a benevolent guide occasionally encourage an education staff or docent to work themselves into a rut?

Mission statements vary, from the deceptively simple (“... to collect, preserve, and interpret ...”) to the incredibly detailed, such as the Field Museum’s multi-page structure. According to the AAM’s Accreditation Commission, however, a “clearly delineated” mission statement should have three key elements. The statement:

1- identifies the market, customers, clients (audience), or those for whom services are provided;
2- expresses the end or goal toward which services are delivered, and
3- enumerates what services are going to be provided.

If we examine each of these elements more closely we may discover how our interpretation of the mission may unintentionally limit, rather than expand, our vision.

The Market

Usually, the mission identifies a museum’s clients as “visitors” or some equally broad group of people. An education department can assume that they are reaching all their mission-defined clients when they typically offer school tours, walk-in tours, and outreach programming. In an effort to wisely use limited resources, an education department can focus on a particular grade and/or subject area for their school tours. A history museum offers tours for the fourth and eighth grades because those grades study state history. A science museum, naturally, offers tours for science classes. An art museum designs a special after-school program for at-risk high school students to help them use art media to learn positive ways of expressing teenage angst. All of these are worthy goals, all within the institution’s mission. Without careful examination of their goals, educators can trot along, comfortable in the knowledge that the path they’ve chosen reaches the clients identified by their mission statement.

On the other hand, history museum educators might take a slightly different path, working with high school English departments to gather oral history from residents of a local senior citizens’ center. Docents might teach oral history techniques, perhaps using museum artifacts as “prompts” as they facilitate interaction between generations. In addition to the “logical” clients — fourth and eighth grade students — a different path might uncover additional clients, such as students in humanities or civics classes, or senior citizens interested in connecting to their past.

A science museum, in addition to offering the “mission-statement” tours for science classes, might look for other clients in math classes. Data collection and analysis, a logical extension of the work of science museums, nature centers, gardens, and zoos, are also logical skills for docents to teach and for math students to learn in real-world situations. Computer networks between and among schools and science institutions can help both facilities share data. Creating such programs may draw into the docent corps men and women in the community whose technical specialties have never been used by the museum before — another new client base.

After-school art programs for teens, a most worthy and appropriate path for art museums, are not the only “socially conscious” path. A reading readiness program, designed for stay-at-home moms and their
Turn Your Path into a Rut

The Goal

Traditionally, the portion of the mission statement that says "interpret" is the portion allotted to the education department. And, "interpret" is a word that has led many museum educators into a tour rut.

Most dictionaries define "interpret" with some variation of the Encarta definition found on the internet: "... to establish or explain the significance or meaning of something." With this definition, and a clearly established mission, docents lecture away. They learn the significance or meaning of the art, artifact, or specimen in their institution's collections from the curatorial staff, from independent study, from college and university classes, and they happily share that information with visitors on their tours. They may soon tire of their repetitious lectures about the permanent collection, and they look forward eagerly to special exhibitions so they can learn new material to "interpret" for their audiences.

Many docents and education staff, however, don't depend solely on the literal definition their institution's mission statement implies. In order to keep their tours fresh and their clients coming back for more, they find ways to help visitors determine their own interpretations of art, artifacts, and specimens. They engage their audience in conversation, in mutually satisfying dialogue about mutually interesting objects. They guide their guests to observe, analyze, and make determinations based on knowledge they impart, as well as knowledge the visitors bring with them. They ask questions. They don't lecture, so tours are always new, both to them and to their audience.

The Services

Most museum mission statements enumerate two "services" they will provide: exhibits and programs. In the best of situations, educators are involved in the development of exhibits so that educational programming is "built in" from the beginning. In some institutions, unfortunately, educators are still forced to "retro-fit" their programs. In both cases, however, it is the very nature of the word "program" that sometimes leads docents and other museum educators into those comfortable paths that can easily become ruts.

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The Docent Educator Winter 2002-03
How to Peacefully Co-exist with Interpretive Technology

by J. Marshall Adams

One of the central missions of a dynamic collecting institution is the interpretation of objects it displays. Constructing the information and methods of transmission typically falls to the institution's educators, who are completely and desperately dependent upon the (often volunteer) services of docents, who personally impart this to members of the public through group tours, public gallery walks, and other means of direct interaction.

But, there may come a time when your institution plans to create or agrees to host an exhibition that has requirements that are overwhelming for a typical docent corps. Perhaps it is a "blockbuster" exhibition that for financial viability will require huge numbers of patrons in a steady 8- to 10-hour day for the next six months. Perhaps the institution's director, realizing that not everyone learns from printed texts or objects, seeks an alternate vehicle for interpretation. Or, perhaps the complex content of the exhibition or collection seems more appropriately conveyed with academic authority when an "expert's voice" leads visitors on their difficult intellectual journey.

There can be many reasons why your institution may choose an audio guide for a particular exhibition, collection, or aspect of the institution. But when this interpretive technology is contemplated in place of trained docents, hurt feelings and fears of obsolescence can suddenly come to light. Take heart! Co-existence is possible!

Control the Message (or at least be aware of it)

First, if your institution is considering creating this audio guide itself, find out how much input educators can have in the content and interpretive approach the audio guide's script will use. Or, if the audio guide is a pre-packaged exhibition tour originated by another institution, find out how much involvement educators had in its development.

While curators or other information specialists deal with facts, educators deal with how facts are communicated. When communicating interpretive information, one size rarely fits all, and it is educators and well-trained docents who are the experts in reaching diverse audiences.

Determine the approach the audio guide script will take ahead of time to help understand and manage the direction that interpretation will take. Does the script take the visitor on a connoisseur's tour? Does it take an interactive approach, actively engaging the visitor with guiding questions? Is it heavy on names and dates, history, or technique? Does it provide a narrative, storytelling experience? Having some involvement or control in the crafting of the script will help in achieving early "buy-in" and ownership of the final product.

The audio guide script's interpretive approach will largely depend on the exhibition or collection, but should also be dependent upon the institution's anticipated audience and its needs. The approach should be the agreed-upon basic interpretive experience that, at a minimum, you want every visitor to have.

Planning the Interpretive Strategy

Once you have determined what the content and interpretive approach for the audio guide should be, establish that as the foundation of your interpretive strategy. "Foundation" is the key word here, because it will ground you but by no means must limit the interpretive variations that are possible or required in various situations. The approach is only the beginning.

For instance, if the audio guide is a curator's inside look at the works on display, don't be concerned that she or he is an expert and has the last word on the subject. Fashion a tour based on connections that you discover between the objects, or based on knowledge that you possess. Or, perhaps you might elaborate upon a side-theme suggested by the exhibition and make that the centerpiece of your own interpretation. There are many directions you can explore once you know where "home base" is.

If possible, try to obtain in advance copies of the script just as you would an exhibition catalogue, gallery text, or signage, and study it as your primary resource. (If a script is being created from scratch, or you are the first venue in a traveling tour, a good audio tour production company should offer early and ongoing communication with the client regarding script development, and can provide draft copies along the way.) Knowing what is not being covered in an audio tour can focus your approach, too.

Audio Guides:
Must They be a Menace?

Deus ex Machina versus Vox Humana

Fears of obsolescence are common in today's fast-paced, computer-literate world. Ever since the dawn of the Industrial Age, people have been fearful that technology might replace them. The gallery of the 21st century is no different in this respect than the factory of the 19th century. It is easy to view the unseen decision-making power in the adoption of these machines as a threat to the personalized, voice approach docents have in fashioning their own tours.

As fascinating and instructive as audio guides and other interpretive technologies can be, they cannot provide the depth and personal interaction that a well-trained individual can offer. Only a human interpreter can size up the particular needs of an audience, and make the subtle and individualized adjustments in approach necessary to ensure a positive, growth experience for the visitor. Only a docent can ask informal pre-tour questions of a group and later incorporate their responses into the gallery discussion in a way that activates the group members' personal information base and ignites their interest.

That being said, audio guides have their place and satisfy ever-more common challenges faced by institutions every day. If we need to have between 100 and 200 people circulating through an exhibition every hour, yet there is 1:20 docent/visitor ratio, can we expect 5 to 10 docents to perform tours every hour on the hour for 4 to 6 months? Audio guides do "amplify" an institution's interpretive reach, can provide bi- or multi-lingual tour experiences, and empower visitors who might prefer to make their own viewing choices or learn at their own pace.

A Case in Point

When American artist Andrew Wyeth approached the Mississippi Museum of Art in 2000 to produce a landmark exhibition of his works, the planned audio guide caused increasing unease among the docent corps.

The institution had an eight-year history of using audio guides, having adopted the mechanisms for logistical and marketing reasons. Docents had previously learned to live with these devices based on the mechanisms' limited use, and the weaknesses of the technology (in the days of portable, cassette players).

But, when the audio guide script took an early and decisive turn away from the dry formalism and technique-laden jargon one could expect from the standard art history discussion, the dissonance caused a growing fear. The audio guide was now focusing on the magical and powerful stories discovered about the subjects of this exhibition of portraiture. The compelling narrative was designed to draw listeners into the deep integrity and sensitive vision of an artist who transcended societal and racial boundaries.

And, the talented actor and director Morgan Freeman lent his voice to the guide, weaving elements of aesthetics, technique, and art history into a warm, comforting, and uplifting account.

When the docent corps heard the final version in the days prior to the exhibition's opening, and discovered that Betsy Wyeth the artist's wife, was moved to tears by its affecting intensity, their fears intensified. How could they compete with the wealth of emotional and factual detail, not to mention the magnificent narration by a popular celebrity?

Then, it happened. The docents' role began to clarify itself. Visitors to

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the exhibition, many of whom had never seen or heard of Andrew Wyeth, were transfixed by the images, and by stories of the artist and his subjects. The power of the depictions affected viewers deeply, and many visitors wanted to talk about their responses. Who better to speak with than a sensitive educator, who might guide visitors along this deeply emotional journey? 

The docent corps, equipped with the exhibition book, audio guide script, and additional resource materials, found its role and discovered that it had not been displaced. Docents offered something to the audience of an incalculable worth — a personal, human approach. The situation proved to the museum staff, the visitors, and the docents themselves that docents were a critical and indispensable component of this, or any, exhibition.

Co-existence Tactics

So, how can you ensure that the addition of interpretive technology will ultimately strengthen and not detract? The following are some practical tips to keep in mind when introducing audio guides where docent interpretation is already present:

✓ If there is only one audio guide choice for patrons (for instance, an adult version), make sure your institution markets docent-led tours toward other audiences (such as students, children, and families).
✓ Offer regular, standing walk-in tour appointments for the general public and advertise them. Select times when visitor traffic is heaviest, and be flexible enough to accommodate a variety of ages and interest-levels. Make the tours, and the visitors being toured, feel special.
✓ Some patrons will be lured by the Gee Whiz! Factor and want to try out the audio guide. Make certain that the person who books tours can explain the benefits of docent services, such as personalizing the tour.
✓ If your docent corps is trained and prepared to do so, offer its services to teachers and student groups that have specific, curriculum-based learning objectives that pre-existing audio guides do not address. This applies equally to adult groups with a special interest, for instance garden clubs or veterans groups, whose focus might not be dealt with by the audio guide.
✓ When accommodating a tour group, do not give them the option to receive a docent-led tour and the audio guide. This will give group members uneven experiences and diminishes the importance and value of the human contact.

Determine with the group specific needs and recommend one or the other, but not both on the same visit.

Be Not Afraid

Frequently, visitors need something to mediate their visual experiences in a gallery setting. That mediator may be a gallery handout or wall text. It may also be a docent.

Audio guides can never supplant a vigorous docent program or the value of the personal connec-

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Rubrics: An Evaluation Alternative

by Katherine Darr

The very idea of being evaluated seems to create anxiety among members of a docent corps. It is especially uncomfortable when evaluation is perceived as a judgmental process. The challenge, then, is to create a method that defuses these concerns and provides docents with a useful and positive tool with which to assess and fine tune their touring techniques. A well-conceived evaluation plan provides docents with both guidance and validation. To this end, consider developing a rubric that serves as a framework, and which clearly outlines the museum’s standards for the content of docent-conducted tours and the criteria to be evaluated. The criteria are familiar; it is the format that is new. By using a rubric to present the tour criteria succinctly and in a structured form, a greater objectivity can be applied to the evaluation process. Docents know, at the outset, what the museum’s expectations are in its tour program.

A Rubric Defined

A rubric is an assessment method that is an excellent choice when performance-based skills and a demonstration of abilities are being evaluated.

“Rubric” is a Latin word meaning “red clay” which, in ancient times, was used to identify something important. As an evaluation tool, a rubric...

- offers evidence of improvement over time
- provides an understanding, in advance, of how an evaluation will occur.

A rubric provides guidelines for improving skills, is useful for demonstrating competency, and stimulates personal growth. Classroom teachers have been using rubrics as a means of assessment for over 20 years.

Constructing a Rubric

In constructing a rubric, the first consideration is the components to be evaluated. A grid is then developed with the components listed in the left-hand column. The next step is to determine the ideal for each component. These are listed in the far right column. The intermediate stages of proficiency are then inserted into the middle columns moving from left to right as complexity of each component increases.

Putting the Rubric to Work

In our museum, to introduce this new assessment method and to prepare docents for evaluation using the rubric as a guide, a refresher course of four weekly half-day classes was scheduled and the rubric distributed and explained to the docent membership. The course focused on applying the rubric to the evaluation process, using one of the museum’s popular permanent collections as the gallery where the tours for evaluation would take place. Class work specifically addressed how to prepare a thematically-based tour, first by breaking it down into its various components and then reconstructing it into the basis for a tour plan. Written materials and homework assignments supported each session’s considerations. The education staff served as mentors, coaches, and, sometimes, cheerleaders while providing guidance, support, and encouragement.

The Evaluation Process

Following the refresher course, docents prepare for their one-hour demonstration tours by submitting a written tour plan to the education department. Such tour plans must contain a theme:

- goals and objectives; a greeting and introduction;
- questions, information, and internal summaries; transitions; and
- a summary and conclusion for a tour of five-to-eight works.

Individually, each docent meets with the education curator responsible for evaluation in order to review, critique, and strengthen the tour plan before the demonstration tour is scheduled. In the end, the docent’s delivery style and ability to read the group and employ flexibility are the only remaining variables.

The Tour

Observations of docents’ demonstration tours for certification were scheduled for regular “public highlight” times. In addition to the walk-in public, docents invited friends and other docents to participate, ensuring a responsive group that was sensitive to the docent’s goals.
| INTRODUCTION                                | > Introduces self  |
|                                           | > Welcomes group   |
|                                           | > Asks questions   |
|                                           | > Takes charge of group |
|                                           | > Discusses museum rules |
|                                           | > Describes what will happen during tour -- length of time, where, why |
|                                           | > Invites divergent thinking; no “right” answers |

| THEME: GOALS AND OBJECTIVES                | > States well the concept of what will be explored, what should be learned (goals), and why |
|                                           | > Contains big ideas that are rich in structure but with useful parameters |
|                                           | > Maintains focus throughout the tour |
|                                           | > Interrelates with other works in tour plan to elaborate on defining theme and to construct meaning |

| OBJECTS CHOSEN                             | > Chooses appropriate number and variety |
|                                           | > Organizes good flow through the galleries |
|                                           | > Remains related to theme throughout the tour |
|                                           | > Interrelates with other works in tour plan to elaborate on defining theme and to construct meaning |

| PRESENTATION: INQUIRY                      | > Asks “open-ended” questions |
|                                           | > Avoids cognitive questions |
|                                           | > Uses procedural questions |
|                                           | > Gives visitors time to respond |
|                                           | > Listens to everyone and acknowledges responses |
|                                           | > Asks follow-up questions to enlarge upon responses |
|                                           | > Asks progressively higher-order questions |

| PRESENTATION: INFORMATION                  | > Weaves inquiry throughout at appropriate times |
|                                           | > Relates to theme |
|                                           | > Relates to work being discussed |
|                                           | > Advances theme |

| INTERNAL SUMMARIES                        | > Reviews what was discussed at a specific stop on tour |
|                                           | > Keeps tour on track |
|                                           | > Leads into transitions |
|                                           | > Connects what was learned to theme |

| TRANSITIONS                                | > States transitions at appropriate time to keep group engaged |
|                                           | > Tells group where it is going next |
|                                           | > Tells what will happen next and why |
|                                           | > Relates to theme |

| CONCLUSION                                 | > Signals tour is ending |
|                                           | > Asks what is remembered best |
|                                           | > Summarizes what was learned |
|                                           | > Places new skills/ideas into context |
|                                           | > Reminds visitors of big idea they take away with them (objective) |

The Docent Educator Winter 2002-03
and objectives. The positive and supportive environment this generated furthered the probability of a successful outcome.

**Follow Up and Follow Through**

Following each tour and using the rubric as a measure, a discussion between the docent and the evaluating curator continued the evaluation process by identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the presentation. The tours provided participants with an engaging, enlightening, and enjoyable experience. The principal benefit of this process is that our docents are thinking about and discussing art in new ways and are feeling empowered as they put their newly acquired skills into practice.

Katherine Darr has been the associate education curator at the Boca Raton Museum of Art, in Boca Raton, Florida, since 1998. Prior to that, Ms. Darr served as a docent for six years at the Museum of Art, Fort Lauderdale, FL, before joining the museum’s staff where she worked for ten years as assistant curator of education. Ms. Darr has also been a consultant for the education departments of other area museums, including The Graves Museum of Archeology and Natural History in Dania, FL, and The Old Dillard Museum in Fort Lauderdale, which is a museum of black history.

"A well-conceived evaluation plan provides docents with both guidance and validation. To this end, consider developing a rubric that serves as a framework, and which clearly outlines the museum’s standards for the content of docent-conducted tours and the criteria to be evaluated."

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Many of the people who have the time and the interest to become museum docents are those who are retired from an active business or professional life. That being so, it occasionally occurs that a qualified applicant is disabled or an active docent suffers an illness or accident that limits his or her independent movement through the museum.

It seems a shame that the expertise and the energy of these docents should be subtracted from the museum environment. And such subtraction seems even more unfortunate since it need not occur provided that the museum is accessible to those using a wheelchair or walker. The following examples demonstrate how, with a little flexibility and some adjustments, these disabled docents can function as active tour leaders.

I recently had a chance to consider ways of responding when the docent is no longer able to move about the gallery easily. I had seen the situation modeled when one of our docents developed severe back trouble but wanted to continue with gallery tours of our exhibits. She had physical therapy for several weeks and then asked the physical therapist to help her with a process for returning to the Art Center.

What the therapist and docent came up with was a rolling walker with a seat and a basket attached. The docent used the walker to move around the galleries and the basket to keep her “hands-on touchables” (for demonstrating textures, color combinations, etc.) within close reach. Her therapist also taught her how to fold the chair without hurting her back and how to put the chair into her car and take it out without involving or damaging her back.

She continued as an active docent after the initial healing period and the first part of her physical therapy, and the Art Center retained the services of an experienced teacher.

When I had to have foot surgeries that left me in a cast and a wheelchair, at first I gave up touring. Then, when the healing process began taking longer than I expected and involved additional surgery, I became impatient. I decided to try using my wheelchair to tour in the galleries. (My husband got very proficient at inserting the wheelchair, and me, into his van.)

Since most of the tours at the Palo Alto Art Center are connected with the children’s art education program, I was moving with groups of ten or twelve children throughout the gallery. I started by letting the children know that a doctor had done some work on my foot and that I couldn’t step on it. I then asked them to follow my chair since I couldn’t move quite as fast as they could. Usually, they want to push so that we could go really fast, but they were very good about accepting my wish to move at my speed.

Each time we stopped to look at, and talk about, an artwork, I asked them to sit down so that I could hear and see them. This had the added advantage of focusing their attention on the works more directly. They did not have the tendency to wander about and look at other neighboring artworks as they sometimes did when standing in a loose circle near the docent. They looked at the art and me; I looked at the art and at them, and we exchanged thoughts, opinions, comments, and questions.

I found that we could visit the works I had chosen to feature during my tour (some designated by the director and some that I chose myself) and still arrive for the follow-up art project in the studio at the same time as the other docents and their groups.

Moving around the studio to encourage students and answer their questions was a little more difficult. Eventually, for one project, I chose to join the adult table where adults were helping to prepare materials for the next class. This worked well and had the advantage that there was someone to encourage the adults and to answer their questions about the preparation process. Other docents took over the task of moving about the studio to speak with students.

After six months in and out of a wheelchair I graduated to a walker with a seat. I used this like the wheelchair in that I sat down and had the students sit down while we looked at and talked about each artwork. Students also followed me very readily when I asked them to line up behind me and to move at my pace so that I wouldn’t get lost. Smaller children turned me into a locomotive and puffed along behind me or designated us as “parade” or “going for a walk as a line” so they had no trouble whatsoever accepting that I could not move as easily as they did.

Teachers and students alike were accepting of a docent who was in a wheelchair. Many teachers expressed their enthusiasm about having children see an adult in a wheelchair lead a tour and share an enthusiasm for art with them. And, children who came from the orthopedically handicapped unit of the hospital were delighted to find a companion at the Art Center.

Some of the children had made trips to the Center and toured with me before I had the surgery. They wanted to be sure that I would
and the Wheelchair

be okay eventually, but otherwise they thought both my wheelchair and my walker were "cool."

Eventually, I even led several adult groups through the exhibits. They were not as apt to ask "what happened to you?" as the children were, but they were equally happy to have an explanation. They also were very curious about my bright red and black walker. They all preferred to stand around me as I sat and talked about the exhibits and about specific examples of artwork. This worked very well since they would often connect the piece we were near with another one elsewhere in the gallery. When they asked about the second one, I could discuss the two pieces together, thus expanding my tour without my having to take the time to move from one place to another. They were free to listen and then step over to the second art piece to examine it more closely.

On balance, I believe the wheelchair tours were as effective as any other tour. Depending on the art activity set up in the studio, I could sometimes assist individual students as they worked on their hands-on projects. When this was not possible, I found that there were always opportunities to respond to questions. I felt that my contribution as a docent was not impaired while being in a wheelchair.

Having a director who was willing to be flexible and who permitted me to experiment allowed the Art Center to have an additional docent for touring. And, I was able to stay informed about the exhibitions and to continue experiencing the joy of introducing groups to works of art. It made my convalescence feel less constraining and gave me continuity with our docent program.

Now that I am back on two feet and, while somewhat limited, ready to move back to a more conventional tour, I continue to reflect upon my experiences while infirm. I am also far more aware of how much one can do even when presented with some physical limitations. Using all effective volunteers, regardless of their mobility constraints, made us all — the docent, the visitors, and the institution — better for the experience.

V. Gwen Weisner joined the Palo Alto Art Center, in Palo Alto, CA, in 1989, after retiring from the Palo Alto Unified School District. After twenty years in education, Ms. Weisner wanted to do something different and decided to learn about art, though she had no formal artistic training. Today, she continues to learn about the art and artists in the Art Center's changing exhibitions, while giving tours to both children and adults.
Don’t Let “Mission” Blinders Turn Your Path into a Rut

Educators who rely on only one of the definitions, “... a series of classes or lectures ...” are content to provide a standard tour and, perhaps, a docent-narrated slide program for schools; occasional Sunday afternoon tours for walk-in visitors; and special tours for adults during special exhibitions. They’ve met the mission statement requirements.

A broader definition of “programs,” however, removes the blinders and allows educators to see that “classes and lectures” are too limiting and can easily lead to those safe, secure ruts. *Encarta* has another definition that’s more useful: “... a system of procedures or activities that has a specific purpose ...” Using this definition, museum educators look beyond the standard tour and develop an entire system of activities that advance the mission. In this case, “programs” can include interactive computers and readily-available reference materials; docent facilitators to help with hands-on discoveries; role-playing in docent-led re-enactments; or question-and-answer sessions at the end of a self-guided tour.

In addition to school tours that begin at 9 a.m., this sort of programming looks at different time slots as a “system of activities” are created. Afternoon mini-classes for senior citizens. Evening language classes for new immigrants that use the museum’s collection to teach English. Or, as the Field Museum puts it, “Exhibits are augmented by people-mediated programs and a visitor-oriented museum-wide staff which reaches out to assist all visitors.”

*Re-Visiting the Mission*

The Oregon Trail worked. One wagon followed another across the plains, through mountain passes, and into the broad valleys of the Columbia and Willamette. No one got lost; everyone was as safe as they could be given the circumstances.

Carefully following a limited interpretation of your museum’s mission works, too. The path is comfortable and safe, and the programming works. The deeper the rut you’re already following, the more difficult it will be to break out. But, taking the time to look beyond the “letter” of the mission and into its broader vision opens up new and exciting vistas. You, and your visitor constituents, may find the expanded path a much more rewarding one.

Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor

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