Teaching Challenges and Solutions

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Here's an old trick that's worth repeating. Interlace the fingers of your two hands. Look and see which hand's thumb is on top. Now, unlace your fingers and interlace them again, but this time place the opposite thumb on the top. How does it feel? If you find it "awkward," or "uncomfortable," or "strange" you are like most people. Each of us has a proclivity to do (and to view) things in a certain routine way that "feels" normal and predictable to us.

The same propensity to do and to view things in predictable and comfortable ways persists when we teach. That is why, when training nascent docents, I like to introduce them to a collection from a variety of vantage points before presenting specific information offered by the curatorial staff. Such broad exposure gives new docent recruits a chance to experience one of the greater rewards of teaching in museums, zoos, historic sites, parks, or gardens — the many ways collections can be approached, experienced, and appreciated.

Labels such as "art," or "history," or "science," tend to focus consideration and, thus, teaching. One contemplates sculpture as a work of art at an "art museum," or a fossil as a scientific specimen at a "science museum." But such views do not carry the weight of law, and are often transgressed by less knowledgeable visitors who may look at the sculpture as an intriguing sedimentary rock and the fossil as a captivating thing of beauty.

Docents should recognize that among the reasons our collections are highly significant is their intrinsic ability to convey a myriad of stories and to reveal a wide variety of information and truths. For instance, an historic home can tell visitors more than mere history. Beyond being a house built in a certain year and owned by certain people, it is a reflection of culture, values, lifestyles, artistic expressions, architecture, engineering, physics, mathematics, construction methods, occupations, resources, materials, and more. The academic labels of art, history, science, and so forth are simply concocted contrivances, created for cognitive convenience and categorization.

The persistence of such labels can have the unintended consequence of pre-determining THE WAY we think we are supposed to approach our collections and implement our teaching. That is why I enjoy using these labels in a less anticipated manner. When beginning a training session, I take docents into a gallery space or defined area of a zoo, park, or garden and, then, pose each of the following questions one at a time.

- If you were an artist — a person who has an ability to create things that display form, present perception, and/or communicate meaning — what might you be interested in when looking at this collection?
- If you were a biologist — a person who observes, studies, and examines life forms in order to formulate a systematic, objective understanding of them — what might you be interested in when looking at this collection?
- If you were a chemist — a person who is concerned with the physical compositions, properties, and interactions of substances — what might you be interested in when looking at this collection?
- If you were a designer — a person who plans and carries out skillful arrangements of things or spaces based on forms and functions — what might you be interested in when looking at this collection?
- If you were a mathematician — a person who calculates quantities, magnitudes, and forms using numbers — what might you be interested in when looking at this collection?

Then, after going through this exercise of interpreting using these offered perspectives, I ask the docents to make a list of what they, themselves, are interested in knowing or learning about from this collection. I conclude by telling them that each of their visitors will have their own personal interests and concerns when they come to this facility and explore the collection.

It is at this juncture that I speak with docents about the differences between classroom teaching and teaching in museums, historic sites, zoos, parks, and gardens. Though most of us expect to teach as we experienced being taught — the way it was modeled for us by classroom teachers in school — and while those of us who teach in museums share the title of "educator" with our classroom counterparts — our objectives and
Expansive Teaching

methods are considerably different. Rather than working toward a series of anticipated responses by focusing a learner's thinking, docents strive to expand thought. Rather than being concerned that learners know one particular set of facts, or names, or dates and are able to recall them when tested, docents work to provide multiple routes for encouraging interest in, and exploration of, objects or specimens that are imbued with unlimited potential.

Docents need not test visitors, nor do they labor under the same form of accountability that classroom teachers do, therefore they can enjoy far greater freedoms. They can make inclusiveness and expansive consideration a major component of their instructional methodology.

Since a docent's goals are to stimulate interest, convey significance, and encourage self-directed learning, he or she should employ a different approach than used in traditional classroom methods. A docent's approach ought to be one that is more open-ended and flexibly-oriented than classroom teaching often is.

Once a docent experiences learning from institutional collections in an inclusive manner, rather than as the exclusive domain of a particular subject area, the use of an inquiry approach when teaching through open-ended questioning begins to make sense. Questioning allows viewers to explore collections in ways that preserve their individual perspectives and confer legitimacy to their personal points-of-view. When properly employed, questioning also allows docents to build upon visitors' responses and introduce facts, information, and academic perceptions as additional ways to consider or understand. This approach makes presenting such facts, information, and perceptions less threateningly authoritative and conclusive than lecturing can.

The greatest challenge to employing the inquiry method of expansive teaching is that it is rarely modeled for the very docents who are told to embrace it as a method of instruction. Even the staff who supervise docent programs often do not employ inquiry when providing training to docents. The solution to this challenge is apparent — inquiry should be used in educational training sessions from the very start, and in a variety of contexts, so that its purpose becomes more explicable to docents and its methods are more clearly modeled and understood.

Alan Gartenhaus
Publishing Editor
Experience is a Powerful Teacher

Over the years, I have sought resources that would help docents and other educators understand more fully the positive impact of teaching through direct, personal experience. I hoped to find something that demonstrated how much more compelling that method of teaching is than is the technique of lecturing. Though some folks recognize the usefulness of “doing” over “hearing” when teaching, and others are willing to give it a try even if they are skeptical, many museum educators simply reject the notion or do little to actually incorporate it into their instructional methodology.

While some museum-types protest that an experiential approach is less academic or less focused than scripts, lectures, or docent-led talks, I believe those arguments are incorrect and diversionary. It is my opinion that such rejection is based primarily on issues of “comfort zones.” People are most comfortable teaching as they were taught (even though their experiences were in classrooms rather than galleries, houses, zoos, parks, or gardens) and most comfortable when content parameters and personal behaviors are at their most predictable.

Teaching by allowing others to do something, find something, or otherwise make discoveries does have an element of unpredictability inherent in its process. Anything can happen, although things usually happen within an anticipated range of possibilities. Nevertheless, the mere chance that visitors might sidetrack an educator’s linear train-of-thought can be threatening, especially to those whose first concern is orderliness and predictability.

Recently, however, I rediscovered a powerful advocate for experiential teaching. It was a broadcast on the PBS show, “Frontline.” The program was entitled “A Class Divided,” parts of which were originally aired on March 26, 1985, in an ABC television documentary called “The Eye of the Storm.” The Frontline broadcast, with its additional footage, was presented in February of 2003.

If you have not seen either program, I highly recommend you obtain a copy or a transcript and experience it for yourself. (It is available from PBS.) Both programs are strong, provocative, and riveting. And, while I believe it is best to get a copy or version of your own, I will attempt to summarize the programs and review their lessons in the paragraphs that follow.

The year was 1968. It was the day after Martin Luther King, Jr. was murdered. The location was Riceville, Iowa, a rural town that had no blacks, non-Christians, or other minorities among its population. A class of third graders came to school upset and confused by the tragic event. Dr. King had been their “Hero of the Month” during the previous month, and the children couldn’t understand why he had been killed.

Their teacher, a woman named Jane Elliott, could have simply told the children about prejudice and bigotry, but she felt this would have had little impact or long-term effect. Prejudice and bigotry were unfamiliar to these children and outside their realm of personal experiences.

Therefore, she believed that talking about the subject would not be fully understood or appreciated, and would have little real consequence. Instead, Ms. Elliott planned a daring “experiential lesson” for her students— one that would allow the children to experience prejudice and bigotry and to draw their own conclusions after having done so.

Jane Elliott began by conducting a brief discussion of prejudice, asking her students if there were people in the United States who are treated differently because of their skin color. The students replied that black people and American Indians were sometimes treated differently.

Then, Ms. Elliott asked her students, “Do you think you know how it would feel to be judged by the color of your skin?”

The children all replied yes, they did know. Ms. Elliott continued, “I don’t think you’d know how that felt unless you had been through it, would you? It might be interesting to judge people [in class] today by the color of their eyes … would you like to try this? The children responded with an enthusiastic “yeah!”

Then, Ms. Elliott tells her students that, since she has blue eyes, she thought maybe the blue-eyed people should be on top the first day. When asked by one child what that meant, she responded, “I mean the blue-eyed people are better people in this room.”

When several children protested this, Ms. Elliott continued, insistently. “Oh yes they are — blue-eyed people are smarter than brown-eyed people.” Then, she told her class that the blue-
eyed students would get five extra minutes of recess, while brown-eyed people would have to stay in. And, the brown-eyed people would not get to use the drinking fountain. They would have to use paper cups. And, she continued, blue-eyed children shouldn’t play with brown-eyed children because they aren’t as good as they are.

Then, Ms. Elliott told her students that the brown-eyed children would wear special collars so that people could tell from a distance that they were brown-eyed. It was at this point that the lesson began to truly take hold. She asked her students who should go to lunch first. The children responded “the blue eyes.” Ms. Elliott agreed, and then said, “No brown-eyed people go back for seconds. Blue-eyed people may go back for seconds.” When one child asked why the brown-eyed children couldn’t go back for more, the teacher asked, “Don’t you know?”

That child answered, “They’re not smart. They may take too much.”

As the lesson progressed, the children began to divide into two camps, the blue-eyes and the brown-eyes. Tensions between the two groups mounted, and they began to call each other names at recess and distrust one another, even among children who had, until that day, been good friends. Jane Elliott states, “I watched what had been marvelous, cooperative, wonderful, thoughtful children turn into nasty, vicious, discriminating, little third-graders in a space of fifteen minutes.”

The next day, Ms. Elliott reversed the lesson. She told her class, “Yesterday, I told you that brown-eyed people aren’t as good as blue-eyed people. That wasn’t true. I lied to you yesterday. The truth is that brown-eyed people are better than blue-eyed people.” Immediately, the blue-eyed children became upset and concerned.

When asked why, Ms. Elliott began by pointing out that a blue-eyed child had forgotten her glasses, but no brown-eyed children who wore glasses had forgotten their glasses. Then, she had the brown-eyed children take off the collars they had to wear and give them to the blue-eyed children, who were told to put them on.

Ms. Elliott verbally rewarded brown-eyed children for such things as their good posture and being well behaved. And, she reprimanded the blue-eyed children for things from wiggling to having shorter attention spans. She began to call the brown-eyed children “the superior people” and the blue-eyed children “slow” and “wasteful.”

Once again, teasing and taunting took place, only the reverse of how it had the day before. When Ms. Elliott told one child, “I hate today.” He answered that he, too, hated it. Ms. Elliott said she hated it because she was blue-eyed, and the child said he hated it for the same reason.

There were other consequences beyond the nasty exchanges that took place between children of different eye colors. Those children whose eye color group was on top actually tested higher that day and tested lower on the day when life, for them, was reversed.

Following lengthy discussions by both groups of children about how it felt being on the “bottom,” Ms. Elliott lead a “de-briefing” type discussion. She asked the children, “Should the color of some other person’s eyes have anything to do with how you treat them?”

The children responded with a very emphatic “NO!” Then, she asked the youngsters if you should judge people by the color of their skin? Again, the answer was an emphatic “NO!”

Jane Elliott asked if it made any difference whether people’s eye color or skin colors were different than their own. Was that how to decide if a person was good or bad? Again the answer was an emphatic “NO!” The students had learned the lesson — firmly, concretely, and personally — through experience.

Ms. Elliott told her children to take their collars off and asked them what they wanted to do with them. To a child, they wanted to throw the collars away. Some even proceeded to try and tear them apart. “Go ahead!”

“Teaching by allowing others to do something, find something, or otherwise make discoveries does have an element of unpredictability inherent in its process. Anything can happen, although things usually happen within an anticipated range of possibilities.”

Continued on the next page.
she told them. "Now you know a little bit more than you knew at the beginning of this week about prejudice." The children answered, "Yes … a lot more!"

In the 1985 interview, after watching the 1968 filming of her classroom activity, Jane Elliott was asked for her comments. She said, "I knew the night before (when Martin Luther King was shot) that it was time to deal with this [racism] in a concrete way, not just talking about it, because we had talked about racism since the first day of school. I decide at that point that it was time to try the eye color thing, which I had thought about many, many times but never used."

The students of that 1968 class were brought back together for a reunion, which was filmed for the 1985 documentary. They spoke of how the lessons of that day in third grade had been unforgettable; how the emotions and discoveries of that lesson were indelibly embossed in their minds; and how they still retained the message and emotions of that lesson so many years hence.

Least you think that this form of learning is only effective for youngsters, you should know that experiential teaching — teaching by having learners engage in direct experience, or doing something — is equally effective for older students and adults. The eye color lesson, and the experiential method of teaching about prejudice and racism that makes it so powerful, has been applied to adult audiences. Ms. Elliott was hired to use it to sensitize prison system employees of the Iowa Department of Corrections. And, though the lesson needed to be adapted slightly to fit the conversation level and demeanor of the adult group, it was taught in a similar fashion. Even with an adult audience, learning through direct experience and personal discovery conveyed the lesson more powerfully and memorably than a lecture or an instructor-led talk would have.

Jane Elliott was a classroom teacher who recognized a teaching challenge and developed a solution that was both useful and important. Along the way, and incidental to its reason for creation, she proved the power of teaching through student involvement and experience. Educators in museums, historic sites, zoos, aquariums, parks, and gardens should take note. The opportunity to visit your facility may be an experience unto itself and, therefore, memorable. But, to ensure that students remember more than just going to your facility — that they learn from your resources and remember learning from them — a powerful and dynamic teaching encounter is required.

The experience of "doing something" and responding to doing it creates such a powerful encounter — far more powerful and memorable than mere listening or looking at things. Though developing and conducting such learning experiences may seem more challenging than lecturing, they aren’t. They simply require a change in the approach a docent takes.
Have visitors imagine packing a small bag to bring on a journey from the East Coast to the American west if traveling by wagon during the early 1800’s. What might they have to leave behind? What personal items would be important and portable enough to bring along?

After looking at an abstract painting or sculpture, ask visitors how they might defend it to a group of skeptics who were used to viewing works that were very realistic?

Hand out different types of snake skins, animal pelts, and/or other sample props to the visitors in your group. Ask them to use their senses to describe for the others how their prop looks, feels, and smells.

Arrange for visitors to look at specimens through microscopes or magnifying glasses. Have them discuss how the enlarged views differ from those seen by the naked eye.

Let students decide how they might re-organize the art works, historic objects, plants, or scientific specimens in a gallery, exhibition hall, or given space. Have them discuss what concepts or attributes guided their re-organization.

Ask groups of visitors to brainstorm a list of the many chores that might be required to maintain a historic property, mansion, zoo, park, garden, or aquarium. Discuss the items on their list, embellish each item with further details, and offer additional chores or responsibilities they may have overlooked.

Challenge visitors to make a list of attributes they might ascribe to a culture whose artifacts are being examined. Then, ask them to show you the evidence they used to make their assumptions.

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Alan Gartenhaus
Publishing Editor

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The Docent Educator Summer 2003
The Challenges of Creating and Running

A s educator at the Early American Museum in east-central Illinois, most of my time is spent conducting school field trips through our facility. Every program I present has two basic challenges: educational content and logistics. The educational needs of the teacher include those of her students, school, district, and state. These must mesh with our museum's mission "to collect, preserve, and interpret the history of east central Illinois, specifically Champaign County, for the education and enjoyment of present and future generations."

Logistical concerns become routine and, therefore, minimal. Of course, any day or group has the potential of dumping the unexpected at your feet, throwing routine out the window. Over time and through experience, most docents and staff grow comfortable with their daily challenges. They acquire sufficient tools or solutions to present good quality programs most days and become adept at solving on-the-spot problems.

A specific program often presents its own unique set of challenges, and finding its equally unique set of solutions is simultaneously frustrating and exciting. This situation arose several years ago when my supervisor and I wanted to create a program incorporating our district's three education entities.

Champaign County Forest Preserve District is comprised of three distinct educational sectors: environmental, horticultural, and historical. We wanted to collaborate to produce an in-depth education program for 3rd through 5th graders that addressed Illinois learning standards in social sciences, science, language arts, and physical education. The result is a program we call "Prairie Adventures," which has been running for over four years now, and that keeps the same strong skeleton while continually pursuing solutions for remaining challenges.

As it was conceived, the program would be held at our district's Lake of the Woods Park. Our "outdoor classroom" was an acre in a small botanical garden that bordered the Early American Museum, a greenhouse, an office building, a small prairie patch, a one-room schoolhouse, and further gardens.

Our overall objective was to provide a quality learning experience where a student will come away with a better appreciation of the interdependency of the animals, plants, and people of east-central Illinois prairie in the mid-to-late 1800's.

During the planning stage, both the educational and logistical components of this project were addressed. Each educator needed freedom to develop her program as an individual unit, while at the same time fitting it cohesively with the other two. The physical and natural characteristics of our site needed to blend with both the visitor's and educational needs of the program.

Formatting the educational content began with brainstorming. What specific information did each educator feel was imperative to include? What common threads were apparent among these? How much content overlap is valuable versus redundant? While designing our individual programs, continual communication among all three educators resulted in a truly integrated whole.

Environmental education focuses on relationships within the prairie food chain. Students role-play various animals, forming "human" food webs. They engage in an insect scavenger hunt in a small prairie patch.

A relatively long walk through the park's larger prairie stand gives hands-on opportunities for plant identification in the horticultural portion. Children learn about plant lore and adaptation, climate and soil conditions, and experience the "Prairie Chicken Stomp!"

There's corn a-plenty in the historical education segment. Students compete in a corn shock-building contest, shell corn, and make corn husk dolls. A selection of farming implements and kitchen artifacts form an indoor "What's It?" activity.

Although presented individually, these three components of prairie life, i.e. - animals, plants, and people are intricately entwined. How could we most effectively help students understand this "piece of the whole pie" concept? We agreed that some visual and physical reinforcement was required.

Each student's name badge has a triangular cyclic flow icon with spaces for three stickers. Each educator affixes an appropriate sticker to the cycle at the end of her presentation. This icon/sticker concept was our solution to two major challenges.

1) It enables all educators to easily summarize and review what the class already learned and flow into the next segment. The students have a visual
Environmental education focuses on relationships within the prairie food chain. Students role-play various animals, forming “human” food webs.

connection to each sector’s educational content. The icon reinforces the interdependency of the animals, plants, and people of the prairie.

2) Logistics-wise, it greatly aids those of us running the program. Any educator can instantly tell who a child’s teacher is, and where he or she belongs.

The stickers worked well, but we wanted more. Maybe something the students did at school to help prepare them. Voila! In year two, “Prairie Puzzle” was born!

We designed a poster to include the animals, plants, and human activities collectively discussed and transformed it into a large (30” x 40”) 12-piece puzzle. One pre-visit requirement for each class is to color their puzzle piece, research the related question on the flip side, and bring it along. Sometime during the Prairie Adventures experience an educator helps them fit their piece into the whole. A ribbon connects the teacher’s name to the class’s piece. The completed puzzle dominates the museum’s bulletin board.

This program requires a fair amount of teacher/student preparation time. The pre-visit packet has several pages of instructions relating to their visit day. Cross-curricular activities provide potential enhancement for both teacher and student. General and specific information is updated annually.

General prep activities include:
1- completing provided name tags according to included directions;
2- conducting puzzle piece-related activities; and
3- gaining familiarity with the logistics of the day, i.e. - arrival time, lunch/restroom schedule, rainy day needs, etc.

Each educator provides information specific to her program. Included are items such as vocabulary, seat work activities, recipes, general

Continued on the next page.
Background information, post-visit activities, etc. A few minutes into the day it becomes obvious who's prepared!

Logistics provide at least as big a challenge to this program as does educational content. How do we physically organize this five-hour day, balancing time to rotate through three educators, gulp down lunch, and cope with limited bathroom breaks? With most of the program outside, how do we handle noise interference or a rainy day? What happens when a bus is 30 minutes late?

What ultimately makes this work is precision timing. Everyone sticks to the schedule, NO exceptions. It is truly a well-oiled piece of clockwork.

Classes are asked to arrive approximately 10 minutes early for a prompt 9:00 start, with departure back to school at 1:45. Each class rotates through the three mini-programs according to the day's prescribed schedule, spending 1-1/2 hours with each educator. There are two rotations prior to lunch and one afterwards. The only scheduled bathroom break is during lunch. If a group is late or must depart early, their first or last rotation is adjusted accordingly.

Ensuring reasonable eating time and bathroom use for 120 people in 1/2 hour took some doing. Each teacher brings handi-wipes, as requested in pre-visit material, for hand washing. Restroom use rotates on 10-minute intervals. We added port-a-pots in year 2 and 3, but concluded they were not worth the expense. Educators share lunch duty and assist with general needs. In case of rain, lunch is in the museum.

Each class has four picnic tables that serve as their “camp.” Balloons mark their spot, color-coded to match their name badges. Upon arrival, lunch coolers are moved to camp, where classes may leave personal belongings. We are not responsible for lost articles, and the only missing items to date have been “squirreled” away!

One concern we all had was the effect that a day-long, “close quarters” would have on everyone. Surprisingly, the combined visual and auditory stimuli provided by nature, a nearby highway, park/public passersby, and the other two groups have virtually no negative influence. It's amazing how happily-involved children and adults tune out potential intrusions.

We offer this program four consecutive days in early fall, accommodating three classes each day. The biggest challenge of this whole event is how to most fairly select the participants. We have tried several strategies, but a happy solution remains elusive.

We used a straight lottery draw in year 1 and 2, accommodating
approximately 2/3 of entrants. Was this fair? It left us feeling unsettled. Is a teacher automatically denied because her school requires a bus be filled and we only draw one name at a time? How about the home-schooled group with only 15 children? Do we want one repeat teacher to provide continued evaluation for us? Should we aim to serve as wide an audience as possible, thereby limiting repeat participants?

In year 3, we adjusted the lottery draw somewhat. We put all the “special needs” requests in one draw and those who previously attended in another. Any teacher who had attended both preceding years was first on the waiting list. More or less fair?

We increased our audience by combining two small classes to form one “group,” and by splitting one class into two small units, both to join another mid-sized class. This enabled us to reach about 45 more students. At week’s end, we unanimously decided this was necessary to try, but definitely would not be repeated. In the Fall of 2002, we drew school names instead of teacher names.

The program’s popularity has had the unfortunate result of allowing fewer of the total entrants to participate. Every year we discuss the feasibility of running Prairie Adventures for a second week. At this time, however, our energy level and the time needed for other educational programs doesn’t allow for this.

Following selection of our participants, all responding teachers are notified by phone of the results of the drawing. Pre-visit packets are either hand-delivered or mailed to those who are coming that afternoon. The waiting list is readied in case of cancellations, which presents the additional problem of forwarding the selected teacher’s packet to the new user.

Evaluation was particularly important the first year, so we used two out-of-house observers. One was in the business field; the other was a long-time district volunteer and retired science teacher. We were fortunate to have both their services free-of-charge. Since the educators couldn’t witness the entire event in operation, their evaluations were immensely helpful. They also supplied us with impressive written documentation to pass on to our board of directors.

We self-evaluate at the close of each day. How was your day? Any problems? New needs for tomorrow? Friday’s evaluation is more comprehensive, and we usually go as far as to put suggestions and reminders for next year on paper.

Our 2002 rendition of Prairie Adventures saw two new challenges. In late Spring, the horticultural educator position became vacant and would not be filled prior to the start of the program. One solution, deleting the plant section, was not even considered. The environmental sector would take it on with a minimal extra effort, and by mid-summer that was well under control. All seemed ready until the head environmental educator had her baby four weeks early. Nevertheless, co-workers banded together and became excellent problem solvers. Participants had no idea of the scrambling going on just prior to their arrival.

Even though we are thoroughly exhausted by the program, the thought of another year of Prairie Adventures remains attractive. It has been the best all-around educational program any of us have had the pleasure to be involved in.

Its rewards have always outweighed its challenges.

Sandy Osborne is an educator at the Early American Museum in Mahomet, IL. She contributed an article to a previous issue of The Docent Educator. That article, entitled “Weaving Artifacts into Stories,” appears in the Summer 2000 issue (Vol. 9, No. 2), which focused on the theme of “Presentations and Demonstrations.”
Using Case Studies to Meet Challenges

by
M. Christine Castle

Interpreters and docents often work in isolation and are rarely able to share practical experiences, beyond the exchange of “war stories” in the staff room. Such stories are important, but to identify problems and learn from their own experiences, interpreters and docents need skills that will help them to reflect on their practice, both independently and in small groups. At the same time, trainers need to acknowledge the role that interpreters and docents play in identifying and resolving the problems of teaching. None of us comes to the museum or gallery as a blank slate. The trainer’s task becomes one of coaching the docents or interpreters to transform their existing understandings, rather than to form new ones. Docents and interpreters look for help in integrating their personal knowledge and experiences with what is being taught to them by the museum, gallery, or park. One solution to this dilemma is to use problems or case studies drawn from actual teaching practice in our own institutions.

How do we begin the process of identifying, reflecting upon, and sharing the critical incidents in our teaching lives? The following guidelines, based upon Selma Wasserma’s Getting Down to Cases: Learning to Teach with Case Studies (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), offer a useful place to start.

Framing the Problem
First, choose the “problem.” Which problem has the greatest potential for self-discovery or increased understanding or professional growth? Does the problem still have “emotional power” for you?

Did it present a dilemma that you were uncertain how to resolve?
Did the problem require you to make a difficult choice?
Did the problem require you to respond in a way that feel unsatisfied with and are still thinking about? Did the problem have ethical or moral implications?
The important thing is that you want to write it up.

Describing the Context
Think about when the incident first caught your attention.
What happened next?
How did the chain of events begin?
What was the context?
What was your initial response?
What were the physical factors?
Set the scene.

Identifying the Players in the Problem
Every story is enriched by a group of characters who assume active roles contributing to the event.
In writing up your problem, identify the key and the secondary players.
Who were the key players?
What were their relationships with one another and with you?
Consider the feelings of each player.
What were their motivations, goals, and expectations?
Do not forget to include yourself in the list of players.
Look at your own role.
Examine the assumptions you made.

Reviewing the Problem and Your Response to It
As the events unfolded, a crisis occurred in which the incident reached its climax. What happened?
What choices were open to you as you considered what to do?
What risks were involved in making those choices?
How did you respond?
What is there about the event that still troubles you?
What is there about your response that still troubles you?

Examining the Effects of Your Actions
Every action (or non-action) that an interpreter makes results in a series of reactions. What were some reactions to the response you made?
What was the impact of your response on the group?
On the climate in the room?
On yourself and your teaching?
In what way did you feel better or worse about yourself?
What remains unresolved for you about this incident?

Revisiting the Problem
As you revisit the problem, how do you see events differently?
What is different about how you see the players? Your own role?
The risks?
The consequences?
If you had this to do again, what would you have done differently?
What now allows you to consider a different choice or response?
What insights about yourself as a teacher came out of this process of self-examination?

These questions are meant to be guidelines only. The writer is the final arbiter of how the problem is to be constructed and what it should finally contain.

Reflecting, Reconsidering, Rewriting
When you have completed the first draft of your problem, put it away for a couple of days to allow yourself some perspective. Then, reread it and examine what you have written in light of these considerations:
✓ assumptions you have made,
✓ where you may have attributed motives, causes, preferences, feelings, attitudes, authority, responsibility, and other human strengths and weaknesses to others,
in Museums, Galleries, and other Sites

✓ "extreme" statements you may have made (e.g., terms that permit no exception, like all, none, always, exactly the same, no difference, never), and
✓ value judgments.

Consider the extent to which you have been able to go beyond the surface of the event and look into the deeper, more complex issues. As you reflect on these questions, make notes. You are the one in charge of editing your problem.

Interpreting and Analyzing
Before you begin writing your interpretation and analysis, think about the following questions. You may want to make notes as you think.
✓ What do you see as the central teaching issues of the problem? List them and identify the most critical one.
✓ Who are the players? List them. What feelings do you think each one has? What motivates them?
✓ What did the incident teach you about yourself as a teacher?
✓ What questions about teaching did this case raise for you? How would you go about gathering more data to answer these questions?

"Workshopping" the Problem
Using this process to identify and write about a teaching problem can be therapeutic for an individual interpreter or docent. However, there is a danger that we may use such an exercise simply to affirm our teaching decisions, rather than to question and improve them. I have found it useful to identify and share teaching problems with other docents or interpreters in a workshop setting. Well before the workshop date — sometimes as much as six months beforehand — I form a small group of interpreters or docents. Each member of the group is invited to identify, develop, and write up a problem, using Wasserman's guidelines. Usually the problem is related to some commonly agreed-upon issue such as discipline on school tours. Then, as a team, we hone each written problem, both to clarify the main points the writer wants to make and to edit it to a workable length (about two paragraphs seems right). Throughout the process, the writer retains ownership of the problem and is consulted regarding any editing the group may recommend. However, the anonymity of the writer is preserved as much as possible by obscuring identifying details of time, place, participants, etc., so that when it is taken to the workshop the problem is not attached to one person. This preparatory stage concludes with a printout of four or five problem statements containing a description, an interpretation by the writer, and the same four questions for the reader that were posed to the writer of the problem:
✓ What do you see as the central teaching issue of the problem? List them and identify the most critical one.
✓ Who are the players? List them. What feelings do you think each one has? What motivates them?
✓ What did the incident teach the interpreter or docent about himself or herself as a teacher?
✓ What questions about teaching did this case raise for you? How would you go about gathering more data to inform these questions?

These problem statements are then presented to the group as a whole in Part One of a two-part workshop. In four small groups, participants read and discuss one of the problems. Recorders summarize the discussions and report back to the group as a whole. Common themes are identified. We also talk about the relationship of these themes to key points in museum literature on the issue. Museum and gallery teachers want to reflect upon their own processes of inquiry so that they can compare and contrast them not only with those of their peers, but also with formal theories of education and museology. We bring theory and practice together through our own teaching experiences.

Each participant is then asked to identify and develop his or her own teaching problem. I schedule a week between the two parts of the workshop in order to allow sufficient time for writing and reflection. Since, as a consultant, I am not available on site, participants are invited to contact me by e-mail if they have questions or desire feedback on their work.

On the second day of the workshop, I invite everyone to move into small groups, where each participant's problem statement is shared and discussed. This is an important step and one not to be omitted. The time allotted to reveal problems honors not only the time and effort required to write up a problem, but also acknowledges that each one of us can make mistakes. The trick is to learn from them. Once everyone has shared his or her problem, I invite the group to identify and list the central issues raised and then to brainstorm and develop one or two strategies to address each issue. Finally, I ask each group to choose what they feel is the most critical...
issue and to create a brief role-play that demonstrates both the issue and their strategy to address it. After each role-play has been performed, I invite the members of that group to explain why their issue is an important one and how and why the teaching strategy was chosen. Discussion is then opened to all. We begin with other teaching strategies that might work well in tackling this issue, discussing why, and end with strategies that would not work and why. All of this information is recorded. Ultimately, a “tip sheet” noting all of the recommendations produced and distributed to the members of the group, which is an important contribution to the literature on the issue.

The challenge now is how to maintain this problem-solving approach once the interpreters and docents return to their separate teaching lives. Staff meetings offer one opportunity for such interaction, but often they are too few and far between to establish a habit of identifying and reflecting together upon teaching problems. Two other tools that have proven successful in encouraging on-going reflection and change are learning journals/diaries (both individual and shared) and learning partnerships, in which two or three docents or interpreters meet on a regular basis to discuss their problems, using Wasserman’s guidelines.

Naming and acknowledging our teaching problems exposes our uncertainty, our value conflicts, and our vulnerability, but at the same time it brings us together as docents, interpreters, and educators, in our never-ending search for solutions.

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Many students—from elementary to college age—sometimes appear intimidated upon entering the "grandeur" of our museum (designed by I.M. Pei), and then fall into bewilderment at the array of objects competing for notice in the galleries.

Recognizing this problem, I have developed stories that relate the historical and social forces driving a culture that produced the objects we see. Explaining the geographical and historical background of a given object brings it closer to comprehension—a tiny sculpture, say, from prehistoric times, or a mosaic from Roman Antioch, or a Renaissance painting.

Typically, during a tour of ancient cultures I might present the tiny golden statue in the shape of a bull from the Hattian Culture. What is so special about it? Nothing, except that it is the original sculpture created by a worker in the service of a long-gone prince or princess in Anatolia. It remains unchanged, exactly as the craftsman intended it to be. Over thousands of years, this tiny bull of solid gold has retained its original form, and here it sits, safe in our care.

Alternatively, to provide perspective, I might mention the Gilgamesh, or the Iliad or the Odyssey. Ideally, we would need to know the ancient languages these works were written in to understand the original texts. But, for convenience, we prefer reading these writings in our native language. Preserving the essence of the original work is a difficult and challenging task. Can we be sure that the translated text before us accurately reflects the original work?

Looking at an altar painting created in a 15th-century Cologne workshop, I point out that the Master and his apprentices conceived the idea for the three-panel painting some 500 years ago. It came about almost in the same era of Christopher Columbus' voyage of discovery. That information alone can help register the painting's time period in most students' minds.

Quite a number of Renaissance painters remain unknown. However, in recent decades, a newly developed technique, infrared reflectography, allows us to see behind the colorful surface of a panel painting, revealing its underdrawing. This underdrawing is sometimes considered the "personal handwriting" of an artist and has led to a more accurate categorization of a particular painting. Photos of such "detective" underdrawings are informative and always enhance a tour of Renaissance religious paintings.

Also, interesting stories can come forward in response to the often asked question, "How did this artwork come to be in the museum?" Usually an accompanying caption offers but scant information—the artist, its dates and its provenance. Omitted are the passions of the original collector(s), his or her connection to a particular culture, or to an artist's/craftman's work, or its chain of acquisition. Such tales do exist. At my home institution I sometimes have the opportunity to meet a collector and to hear his story or lecture.

Details drawn from these accounts do much to enliven and humanize a tour presentation. Determine from your education staff whether weaving an artwork's history or a donor's personal story into your presentation is appropriate for the audience. Adding these touches contributes to a wider understanding of the art I present.

Helga Keller, docent
Indiana University Art Museum
Bloomington, Indiana
Keeping It Fresh

A number of years ago, one of my sixth grade students asked me, "Mrs. Littleton, don't you get tired of being in the sixth grade forever?" I was able to answer, quite truthfully, "No, I love being in the sixth grade because it's different every year." Some of the ways I answered the challenge of keeping sixth grade interesting for myself and my students for almost 30 years may be of use to docents trying to keep their teaching fresh.

Teach People, Not Subjects
Of course I taught subjects. During my classroom career, I taught every subject in elementary and middle school except music. But, one of the keys to successful teaching is to start with the students, not the curriculum. Curriculum is mandated by state edicts; shaping and delivering that prescribed curriculum to fit the needs of a classroom of children is the primary job of each individual teacher. In my case, this meant understanding the developmental stages of children in general and of each child in particular. It meant giving children the process skills, as well as the academic knowledge, they would need to succeed.

What does this mean to a museum docent who only has 45 minutes or so with each group of visitors? She cannot possibly know each child or adult in that brief time. She can, however, have a basic knowledge of the developmental stages through which children move. She can have some information about generational theory to understand how the expectations of the Boomers in her audience will differ from those of the GenX'ers. She can use this information to shape her tours — which artifact to focus on, which techniques to use, which questions to ask — to be most effective. And, she can ask each new audience questions that will give her a glimpse of their interests, backgrounds, and needs. Most importantly, she will understand that "one size doesn't fit all" and that people, not artifacts or specimens, should be the focus of the visit.

Learn about Everything
It's no surprise to people who know me to find that "Jeopardy" is my favorite television program and "Trivial Pursuit" is my favorite game. I know an incredible amount of "stuff." I've been accused of having a mind like a grocery cart — I pick up a little bit of this and a little bit of that wherever I go. Most of what I know is probably pretty useless except when I watch my favorite television show or play my favorite game. But, some of it actually comes in handy when teaching.

For instance, when I sent my science students to find the derivation of the word "gymnosperms" while studying plants, they learned that the word came from the Greek for "naked," or plants whose seeds are not enclosed in an ovary, i.e. — conifers. Later, when we studied ancient Rome, they remembered the root word and dug around under they discovered the connection between the word "naked" and the way that Romans exercised. (Nothing like a little titillation to interest a sixth grader!) Sometimes, knowing a lot of "stuff" helps you to help others make connections between seemingly unrelated items and events.

As a docent, then, be willing to go beyond the information you're given about a collection. Put what you're interpreting in its social, political, and historical context. This can be through exhaustive study, or simply via a brief visit to an encyclopedia. Become a mini-expert on all aspects of the collection.

(According to my personal definition, a mini-expert knows a little bit about a lot of things!) How was it created? Who used it? How was it used? Where did it come from? What purpose did it serve? What else was going on when it was created? Did its creation cause a "stir?"

Then, don't be satisfied to focus your learning on the collection you're interpreting. Read widely in a variety of print media. Attend lectures, films, and discussions on subjects that seem to have little or no relevance to your museum work. Be open to insights from your visitors, and don't hesitate to use them in subsequent tours if they are valid. Use the experiences you've already had, and the knowledge you already bring, to see each object in new ways. Don't be afraid to put a familiar object in an unfamiliar juxtaposition and see what happens.

Of course, the danger of knowing everything is the desire to share it all with your visitors. They don't really want to know everything you know or have learned. They want you to help them make their own discoveries, themselves. Don't cheat them out of having that experience. Guide them toward discovery and facilitate it!

Learn from Everywhere
Because my undergraduate degree was in journalism, with minors in English and history, I had a broad base of knowledge in the humanities before I started graduate work in education. I specialized in math education at the graduate level and tried to expand my science knowledge on my own. Elementary teachers in the early 1960's, when I started my education career, had to be generalists. I never became an expert at anything, but I could hold my own in any classroom on any elementary subject matter.
Teachers are required to attend a specified number of in-service programs and/or courses and to continue to upgrade their education. In addition to allowing me to keep up with cutting-edge research in education, rules in some of the districts where I taught allowed me to “count” classes in any subject and to include travel to meet the requirements. Because I was not required to always take “education” classes, or “reading” or “math” I was able to broaden my base of knowledge into areas that, at first glance, might not have seemed relevant to my teaching. Somehow, however, they always were, and new insights helped me keep my classroom activities fresh and exciting both for my students and me.

Docents, too, can keep their teaching fresh by learning from everyone and every place. A factory tour might offer new insights into how to engage an adult audience, or how to meet the challenge of a less-than-perfect auditory environment. An art museum docent might learn a lot about hands-on experiences in a science center. A visit to a botanical garden might explain the size and shape of certain tools in the collection of a historic site or history museum.

Change Something Everyday

I taught for 8 years with an excellent teacher whose modus operandi, nevertheless, would have driven me crazy with boredom in short order. She taught exactly the same thing every year . . . right down to the same bulletin boards, the same books, the same field trips, the same seating arrangement. Although she wrote “new” lesson plans each year, every year’s plan book looked exactly like every other year.

On the other hand, my students and I used to play a sort of “accidental” game . . . they often spent the first few minutes before classes began

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guesing what I'd changed in the room since the day before. It might be something obvious, like a new arrangement of their desks or the addition of a strange object for us to write about, or something more mundane such as a pencil holder on top of the bookcase instead of on my desk. Such “silliness” taught them to be good observers and helped keep us from getting into ruts.

My lessons, too, changed each year and, often, from day to day. While goals and objectives were usually fairly constant, ways of achieving those objectives varied with the needs of each new group of students, with what I'd discovered over the summer, and, sometimes, with what was happening outside on any given day. I may not have been as organized as my teaching friend, but I had a whole lot more fun.

Change is a very effective tool for docents, too. A new path, different artifacts, and untried teaching techniques should become part of a docent’s response to the challenge of keeping tours fresh.

Try to replace at least one object in your tour each year with one you've never used before. Add at least one new technique each year … tell a story, ask a new question, add a prop, or try something recommended in one of your docent training sessions or from a totally different venue. Borrow a technique from a fellow docent whose work you admire, and let her have one of yours.

**Laugh**

Teaching is serious business, so one of the most important ways I found to keep “at it” for thirty years was to look for humor every day. Sometimes I found it in my own foibles (laughing was more useful than anger when I got to the workroom without the test I had come to duplicate) and mistakes (I should have never shouted “There they are” when I spotted the escaped gerbils). I often found it in the students’ reactions (you should have been there when the frogs we ordered burst out of their packing box) and observations (when I remarked that it was such a beautiful day I hadn’t wanted to come to work, one student said she didn’t know I had a job).

Docents, too, need to look for fun in their job. Don’t think the art on the walls or the documents in the cases are so important that laughter isn’t sometimes the most appropriate response. Giggleing at a nude painting may just be nervous, but it may also be an honest reaction to an overly dramatic scene that appears ludicrous to 12-year-olds. Laughing along with them may be the best way to help them develop an understanding of a different time with different values.

Every day won’t be fun and games, and there will be mornings (even in a volunteer job) when bed sounds better than work. There will be more of the good times, however, if you do your best to keep your teaching fresh.

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**Jackie Littleton**
Associate Editor

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