Recently, several friends and I went on a camping trip on the island of Maui, in Hawaii. The trip lasted four days and each of us was responsible for carrying all our own food, water, shelter, and gear. The hikes were challenging, especially considering the heavy packs, but they were also rewarding — filled with amazing distractions, from fascinating scenery to exotic plants and birds found only in Hawaii.

The first day of our trip was particularly demanding for those of us who are in the fifty and older category. The hike was eleven miles on fairly rough terrain with an elevation change of over 2,000 feet. Of course, our packs were also at their fullest and heaviest, too. We arrived at our campsite tired and a bit sore, but excited and satisfied that we'd made it.

After setting up our tents, one fellow announced that he had a "surprise" for all of us. With a bit of fanfare, he pulled out a plastic flask filled with an expensive, single-malt Scotch whisky that he had brought to celebrate the occasion.

Now, I don't particularly like Scotch, and do not choose to drink it, but I truly appreciated the gesture. This guy had thought enough of all of us to purchase the costly Scotch, decant it into an unbreakable vessel, and carry the added weight of his "gift" both into the crater and out (you must pack out what you've packed in). All of us, those who like to drink Scotch and those who do not, were most appreciative of his thoughtfulness and effort.

I share this brief tale to illustrate the difference between liking and appreciating. It is an important distinction, and one that is worth reflecting upon, especially since it has a direct bearing on teaching.

Words Matter

While the words "liking" and "appreciating" are frequently used interchangeably, their meanings are different. "Liking" refers to one's personal preference. "Appreciating," on the other hand, refers to an objective esteem for something's intrinsic value, sentiment, or nature. For example, you may not like to weed in your garden, but you can appreciate the need for doing it.

The difference between "liking" and "appreciating" can be significant especially if you, as a docent, are working to have your audience "like," rather than "appreciate," your institution's collection or resources. Such confusion can derail your teaching goals and, thus, your objectives. ("Goals" and "objectives," by the way, are two additional words often misused or incorrectly thought of as interchangeable).

Perhaps, you have fallen into the trap of wanting your audience to "like" the objects or specimens you've selected to share with them. I know I have. It isn't a bad thing, just misdirected. You like looking at natural history dioramas of waterfowl depicted in their habitat so you want your visitors to like them, too. This seems benign enough, but it can be counterproductive. The most apparent problem would be that you might spend an inordinate amount of time focusing on such dioramas even though your audience has either dismissed or become bored with them.

It is appropriate to promote an appreciation for the objects and specimens of your institution, whether visitors find them to their personal liking or not. Our institutional collections are important and worthy of appreciation. They are meaningful and significant, and we want visitors to explore them, make discoveries, and learn from the process.

Avoiding Judgmental Language

The language used when teaching makes a difference. For instance, asking visitors to discuss "meaning," "significance," or "relationships" can serve to build appreciation. On the other hand, asking visitors to discuss "likes," "dislikes," or "preferences" may not. The reasons for this is that one's likes and dislikes are not necessarily affected by exposure and learning, but one's appreciation often is.

Even after learning about the Victorian-era furniture in your historic home, some visitors may not like it or want it in their homes. But, hopefully, during the course of your lesson they will gain an appreciation for what Victorian design expresses about the values, tastes, and customs of the era and for the craftsmanship inherent in its aesthetics and construction.

Communicating your own "likes" and "dislikes" can even be destructive to the learning process. As the tour leader and representative of your institution, visitors view you as an authority. So, if you tell visitors
— An Important Distinction

that something is “the best,” “your favorite,” or “your least favorite” item in the collection, visitors are faced with choices. They can concur with your personal taste, and feel smart (even though they may not know why they were so clever). They can disagree with your personal taste, in which case they can feel uninformed and insecure about their assessments and comprehension of other items beyond this one. Or, they can disagree with your personal taste and take that as license to reject your assessments or statements about all the other things you will examine together.

It would be my suggestion, therefore, that docents refrain from using judgmental language or asking visitors for judgmental responses to institutional collections. Rather, it is more appropriate to ask questions that request objective observations.

For instance, instead of asking visitors, “What do you like about Egyptian art?” ask them, “What might we learn from looking at Egyptian art?” Instead of asking visitors, “So, did you enjoy looking at Egyptian art today?” ask them, “What will you remember most about the Egyptian art we looked at today?”

While it may take a bit of forethought and, on occasion, some restraint, it is best to resist employing judgmental language when asking questions or making statements. Once you get the hang of it, it’s easy. Rather than ask visitors, “How many of you like abstract art?” try asking them, “What can works of art that are abstract communicate that others may not?” Or, instead of telling visitors, “I am sure all of you find air travel interesting,” try telling them, “I am sure you can think of many ways life would be different today if we couldn’t travel by air.”

Just keep in mind that your goal is to get visitors to discuss and ponder the objects, specimens, or sites you tour, not to like them. Certainly, there are historic homes whose design you won’t particularly like and wouldn’t want for your home, but you can still appreciate them as windows into an earlier era. Probably, there are plenty of paintings, sculptures, and other works of art that are not particularly suited to your personal taste but you can appreciate their power to communicate, their emotional content, or the way they challenge us to think about things.

And, most likely, there are exhibits in science museums that can hold your interest far less than others do that are more to your liking.

As educators, we should refrain from transferring our biases — well founded and informed as they may be. And, we should work to prevent the visitors’ biases from limiting their exploration and consideration. It’s not unlike what our parents told us about tasting foods, “you don’t have to like it; but you do have to try it.”

Alan Gartenhaus
Publishing Editor
Eight Ways to DISCOURAGE

1— Ask closed-ended questions.
   Asking visitors questions that have pre-determined answers is a form of testing and can discourage participation by making visitors aware of what they do not know. It also can inhibit additional exploration, as it reinforces the erroneous notion that there is a correct way to view, interpret, or comprehend some thing, some place, or some event.

2— Teach using judgmental language.
   Speaking about “likes,” “dislikes,” or “personal aesthetics or preferences” closes down consideration from a variety of perspectives, can put visitors on the defensive, and will reduce the value of appreciating subject matter that may not be to an individual’s personal liking.

3— Insist that visitors hold all questions until the end of your talk.
   Sometimes, questions will come up that, until answered, make visitors unable to follow a lesson. Waiting to ask questions is problematic. Trying to remember questions can shift a person’s focus off the discussion. In addition, it may be difficult to remember relevant questions after waiting too long.

4— Criticize visitors’ responses, thoughts, questions, or observations.
   As the institutional “authority,” any negative comments you make will discourage the group from feeling safe and reduce their willingness to interact with you. Docents should focus upon, and credit, the attempt made when visitors give voice to their thoughts. In addition, docents should ask questions that do not require corrective retorts.
5— Resist being flexible in your teaching.

Giving the same tour to all groups regardless of age, grade, level of previous exposure, etc. will ensure that your tour is either too challenging or too elementary for your group, and can turn visitors off. Similarly, refusing to shift your focus to accommodate group interests will make your tour less interesting while making you appear to be a rigid and less capable educator.

6— Use technical language or jargon.

The entire point of teaching is to communicate effectively. Using language that is either incomprehensible or irrelevant to learners may impress them with your knowledge, but will do little to further their knowledge.

7— Be overly concerned with behavioral issues.

While it is essential that visiting groups be considerate of others, stressing such things as order and control over educational issues such as involvement and exploration is a misplacement of emphasis. Keep in mind that the younger the students, the more verbal and kinetic participation they require for learning. (Need a reminder? Try visiting various grade levels in an elementary school.) And, with all groups, regardless of age, never lose sight of the fact that learning in museums, historic sites, zoos, gardens, parks, and aquariums should be fun as well as informative.

8— Tell visitors what they might otherwise discover on their own.

Involvement, exploration, and appreciation are fostered by active participation. Listening is usually a passive endeavor. Promote “ownership” of what is discovered by allowing visitors to learn rather than to merely receive the benefit of what you have learned.
Eight Ways to ENCOURAGE

1- *Ask open-ended questions.*

Asking open-ended questions encourages visitors by allowing them to examine and respond to objects and specimens at whatever level of knowledge and awareness they may have. These questions demonstrate what visitors are capable of learning, even with little prior information.

2- *Be aware of your audience’s needs.*

A lesson must be appropriate for its audience. Such variables as age, grade-level, background, and previous experience should be built into the activities and vocabulary used. Sensitivity to, and accommodations for, such “special needs” as mobility impairments, visual or auditory disabilities, health-related concerns, and mental or emotional challenges are also essential for proper learning to take place.

3- *Engage your visitors in active thinking.*

Since all visitors learn and retain information better if they are actively engaged in acquiring information, a range of involving activities should be offered. This can be accomplished through questioning, searches, games, and other activities. Listening to stories can also be an active experience, if listeners are enticed to use their imaginations.

4- *Offer multi-sensory experiences.*

Our five senses are the portals through which information is gathered. Find as many ways to engage senses beyond sight in the learning process. Have samples, reproductions, fabrics, pelts, or other materials available for handling. Incorporate music, or have visitors listen for sounds. Ask for olfactory observations. If sensory experiences beyond the visual are not practical or possible, ask visitors to use their imaginations.
Exploration and Appreciation

5—*Allow for diverse perceptions and responses.*
Welcome various points-of-view and perceptions. Remember that there is no single way to look at, or reflect upon, anything. No matter how concrete or finite, objects and specimens can be experienced differently through such variables as themes, academic disciplines, generational differences, previous experiences, personal opinions, perspectives, etc.

6—*Relax and have a sense of humor.*
If you enjoy your audience and teaching, they will respond in kind. If you are relaxed and having fun, your visitors will, too. If something funny or silly happens during your tour, laugh along with your audience. Learning in museums, historic sites, zoos, parks, gardens, aquariums, etc. is supposed to fun, as well as informative. (Keep in mind, however, that humor should never be at someone else's expense.)

7—*Give demonstrations.*
People like to see things happen. Demonstrations, such as using tools and implements, observing chemical reactions, encountering animals, and watching as methods or techniques are used will enhance your visitors' intellectual involvement and encourage their appreciation.

8—*Provide follow-up activities.*
To ensure that exploration continues after a tour ends, suggest or offer follow-up activities. Give teachers reading lists for their students. Suggest activities (and provide materials when possible) for making, doing, or experiencing something. Encourage visitors to read maps, make timelines, examine ecosystems, create art works, compare buildings, etc. Activities anchor information to experience and further understanding.
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Imagine seeing Washington National Cathedral for the first time through the eyes of an eight-year-old. After stepping off the school bus, you walk along a curved path through well-manicured grounds towards a great edifice with majestic flying buttresses and soaring towers reaching several hundred feet. Inside, you enter a colossal space filled with massive limestone piers, grand arches, brilliant stained glass windows, and elaborate stone carvings.

Although there is much at the Cathedral that captures the imagination and invites exploration, the immense size and often unfamiliar architecture can leave a child feeling overwhelmed and disoriented. How do you put children at ease in this new and different environment? From an educator's perspective, with such a variety of teaching opportunities, where do you begin? How do you stimulate interest and arouse curiosity among students without overloading them with information?

One approach adopted by the staff of School & Family Programs at the Cathedral has been to develop a multi-visit program organized around tightly focused themes.

Designed for fourth grade students in the District of Columbia public school system, the Cathedral Adventures program offers students a meaningful educational experience outside their classroom. Students visit the Cathedral three times exploring a different topic each visit: art, architecture, and inspiration. Designed for fourth grade students in the District of Columbia public school system, the Cathedral Adventures program offers students a meaningful educational experience outside their classroom. Students visit the Cathedral three times exploring a different topic each visit: art, architecture, and inspiration.

During the program's first year in the 2002-03 school year, nine fourth grade classes from six different schools throughout Washington, DC, participated in the program. Cathedral Adventures begins with a visit to the students' classroom by a Cathedral educator to introduce the program. Sharing pictures of the Cathedral with students before their first visit and talking with them about what they will be seeing helps build their enthusiasm for the program. And also eases feelings of concern or confusion that children can experience when visiting a new place. Additionally, during this introduction to the program, every student receives a handbook that contains pre-visit activities to be completed before each visit along with pages for students to record their reflections about their experiences at the Cathedral. Appropriate preparation for each visit during the program is key. The more knowledgeable students are about the theme being explored that day, the more they are able to assimilate and participate during their visit.

“Art and artisanship” is the focus of the first Cathedral Adventures lesson. Students study three different art forms found at the Cathedral: mosaics, stained glass windows, and stone carvings. The goal for this portion of the program is to teach students how to recognize and appreciate each type of art and to encourage them to share their reactions and thoughts about what they see. Working in small groups, the children are led by adult guides down stone arcades, through an outdoor cloister, and into a crypt chapel to examine Cathedral art. Often the walk from a stained glass window to a gargoyle to a mosaic is...
a Multi-Visit Program

as much of an adventure as seeing the art itself. Students relish the opportunity to explore and compare different parts of the building, and it is easier to hold their attention by moving around than remaining in one place for an extended period.

Back in the classroom, students take a moment to write in their handbooks about what they have seen that day. The stained glass windows make them think about fireflies, sunsets, and Christmas lights. Active imaginations wonder whether the stone gargoyles come alive at night when it is dark outside and the city sleeps. The final activity for the day is a craft project. Mimicking the process of a real stained glass artisan, students make their own stained glass window using colored pieces of acetate and adhesive backed leading strips.

The theme of the second Cathedral Adventures lesson is “architecture.” Studying the structural environment with its many complexities can be somewhat daunting for children, particularly when learning about a building as large and elaborate as the Cathedral. Rather than showering students with a barrage of difficult and obscure Gothic terms such as *clerestory* or *triforium*, the adult guides emphasize several basic elements of architecture that can be applied to all buildings. This encourages students to relate what they learn at the Cathedral to other buildings with which they are more familiar. By considering such questions as “What is a building made of?” and “How does a structure stand up?” students learn how to look at a building through an architect’s eyes. Additionally, the use of hands-on activities to examine different aspects of architecture allows children to take a more active role in the learning process, engaging their interest and exciting their curiosity.

Working in the same small groups as the first visit, students rotate among four “activity stations” throughout the Cathedral with their guide. A different aspect of architecture is considered at each station: size, building materials, shapes, and structure. The topic of size is explored by having the students measure the perimeter of different sized piers in the nave. After recording their findings in their handbooks, students discover that the size of a pier is determined by how much weight it has to carry. At the building materials activity station, students make rubbings of some of the materials used to construct and decorate the Cathedral. They also discuss reasons why certain materials were chosen over others. Using a set of colored foam shapes, the children examine three different areas of the building looking for shapes and patterns in the Cathedral’s architecture. Familiar shapes, such as triangles and rectangles, are spotted along with more unusual shapes like octagons and quatrefoils. The hands-on activity relating to structure begins in the classroom where students use building blocks and a wooden model of a flying buttress to explore how the Cathedral supports its own weight. Outside in the shadows of real flying buttresses, the students use their bodies to make a pointed arch supported by two flying buttresses (classmates) on either end.

Continued on the next page.
During the third and final lesson of Cathedral Adventures, students explore the notion of “inspiration.” Building upon their experiences during the first two visits, the children contemplate how the Cathedral’s art, architecture, and grounds make it a place of inspiration. The objective for this visit is for students to gain an appreciation for the inspiration it took to build the Cathedral, the ways in which people who visit the Cathedral are often inspired, and the meaning of being inspired themselves.

Similar to the second lesson about architecture, the students rotate in small groups among four “inspirational” places at the Cathedral with their guides. One of the highlights of this visit is seeing different views of the Cathedral from the Bishop’s Garden, the West Balcony, the Observation Gallery in the south tower, and a crypt chapel. The guide begins at each place by having the students sit and remain quiet for an entire minute, allowing them time to look around and to think about the space that surrounds them. Beyond encouraging students to be reflective, this moment of quiet also helps settle rowdy children by having them focus their energy on practicing good observation skills. After the minute is over, students share thoughts and feelings that the space evoked in them. Additionally, the group discusses what aspects of the space make it a place of inspiration, such as its height, its aesthetics, its silence, or the presence of nature.

During the culminating activity for this lesson, students make an inspiration box. Each child decorates his or her box with drawings, writings, and a photograph of the Cathedral. Then as a group, the class brainstorms different uses for the boxes. One suggestion made by the program leader is for students to write down their goals, dreams, and happy thoughts to put in their boxes. Then, in times of frustration or disappointment, students can look in their boxes for encouragement and comfort.

Designed to enrich the educational experiences of DC Public
School children, the Cathedral Adventures program introduces students to the wonder of the Cathedral and its grounds. From the program's earliest stages of development through its first year of implementation, several key aspects have contributed to the program's success:

- Clearly defined learning objectives supported by tightly focused activities
- Comprehensive pre-visit materials and the cooperation of teachers to fully prepare their students before each visit
- A similar format for each of the three Cathedral visits
- Inquiry-based teaching methods.

Perhaps the biggest challenge of designing Cathedral Adventures was the difficulty of selecting information to share with students. Local curriculum standards and teacher comments on evaluation forms were helpful for providing ideas for appropriate program themes. Once the themes for each visit were identified, the next step was to establish clearly defined learning objectives. Specific activities for each visit were then developed to help support each learning objective. Cathedral educators found that lesson plan focused around several major concepts gave children a framework for receiving and understanding information without being overwhelmed. A concerted effort was made to avoid inundating students with too much information.

Throughout ongoing training for the Cathedral Adventures program, guides have been discouraged from showing children aspects of the Cathedral that are unrelated to the program's learning objectives. Excessive information can easily confuse, distract, or bore a child.

Cathedral educators also learned that a multi-visit program requires a significant commitment from the classroom teacher. Students who have completed the pre-visit activities before each visit gain a lot more from the program than those who have not. Ensuring that students are prepared for each visit is largely the responsibility of their teacher. It helps to work with teachers who are fully committed to the program.

Further, to provide continuity between visits the format for all visits are similar. Each Cathedral experience begins with an introductory session before the children are divided into their small groups. Students are kept in the same small groups for each of their three visits led by the same adult guide. This allows both the guide and the students to get to know each other better. At the end of each visit, the entire class gathers back together for a group review of what was learned that day.

Finally, all Cathedral Adventures guides are trained to use inquiry-based teaching methods while leading children around the Cathedral. Students are encouraged to answer questions and to think for themselves instead of being lectured, allowing them a more active role in the learning process. Likewise, children are also encouraged to explore how different works of art and different views of the Cathedral make them feel. More emphasis is put on learning how to respond to art and architecture rather than merely learning a series of facts about these topics.

By the end of the Cathedral Adventures program, most students feel a personal connection to the Cathedral. Most understand the building's purpose and why so many people come to visit every year. Some have new dreams of growing up to be architects or stained glass window artisans. Moreover, what had once looked like a combination of giant stone structures has now become recognizable parts of a building. Ultimately, Cathedral Adventures encourages not only an understanding of the Cathedral's art, architecture, and history, but also an appreciation for exploring the visual world around us.

Mary Carolyn Voght is the coordinator of School & Family programs at Washington National Cathedral. Ms. Voght graduated from the College of William and Mary with a bachelor's degree in history and English. She received her master's degree in Public History with a concentration in Museum Studies from the University of South Carolina.
History, a museum was a seat or shrine to the muse, those nine who inspire art and science, history, poetry, dance, and song. The muse is the guide to creativity, to the joy of learning, and to discovery. As museum educators and docents we have a similar role in our modern day temples to art, history, and science. It is our job to lead visitors to the inspiring contents of our institutions. But the museum must be activated within us before we can inspire others.

The Muse and Velcro

Storytelling, an inspired art, is one of the most effective tools we can use when we serve as muse to our visitors. Storytelling works because it helps the visitor create a narrative frame on which to hang the facts and images encountered. It's like a structure made of Velcro just waiting to grab facts and images onto itself. Story structure is an innate part of human consciousness and central to the way we organize knowledge. The visitor does not have to create something new or external to integrate the knowledge transmitted through story. Storytelling takes away the stress of learning and creates receptivity and emotional readiness. When we activate the story mechanism in our listeners, we serve as the muse.

Story Circles and Community

We co-authors are all storytellers who have worked in museum contexts and know the power of storytelling as an inspirational interpretive tool. We observed that many docents and museum educators were drawn to story, but had no idea how to begin integrating it into their tours. We also saw that the docents in our local museums, parks, and gardens were often isolated from each other, even as they were struggling with similar problems. We decided, therefore, to create a series of inclusive multi-institutional story circles where people from various interpretive settings could come together to learn about and practice their craft.

Our goal was to provide docents with the opportunity to experience story first hand. We were confident that exposure to stories, plus some basic storytelling instruction in a familiar environment, would increase the use of this ancient skill in our local facilities. We knew that docents needed a safe place to learn about, and to practice, storytelling. They also needed a chance to network and collaborate with other museum docents and staff that used storytelling in their work.

Over a two-year period, we held a series of story circles and workshops at fifteen institutions in the Phoenix metropolitan area. Each two-hour session started with refreshments and networking. Next followed a demonstration or short workshop and an opportunity for the participants to tell stories and invoke the muse. Some of our favorite techniques for involving the visitor through story, follow.

Touch Cart Stories

One of our first story circles was facilitated by Sandy Oglesby at Pueblo Grande Museum. She demonstrated how to use story to engage visitors with the objects on a touch cart. The cart that Sandy rolled out had several objects, but the most provocative one was a large stone hand axe used by the Hohokam people who lived in the Phoenix area about a thousand years ago and who designed the canal system still in use today. Sandy told three different types of stories each with the axe as their focus.

The first was the story of the object's discovery, told from the archaeological point of view. In the second brief story, Sandy made a personal connection to the object by describing how her brother had used just such an axe to chop down a tree at a wilderness survival camp. She recreated a dialogue between her brother and herself that detailed how effective the object was. "Sissy, I cut down a whole tree with an axe just like that. It was hard work, and it really helped me understand how skilled the Hohokam had to be to survive."

The third story was Sandy's imaginative, two-minute re-creation of an event in the life of the person who had used the axe —

Our family had been walking for days. We carried only those things that were most precious and powerful. A dry wind stung our faces and sapped our energy as we trudged through the desert. Our goal was to find relatives and a new home. At the top of Greasy Mountain* we saw the beautiful valley below and the green snake of trees that promised water and a new life. When we finally reached the river, we drank and splashed our faces with relief and joy. But suddenly Father straightened himself and raised a hand to silence us. A large man was approaching us from the opposite bank. Mother and the girls retreated quickly up the bank and into a shelter of trees. I stood with Father
Invoking the Muse

and reached for a mesquite limb floating near us. Just as suddenly, I felt my Father relax as he and the other man shouted a family greeting. The large man came into the river where we were standing. He and Father spoke their clan names and their fathers' names, too. Mother and my sisters rejoined us as our relative handed my father a beautiful stone axe head.

"We have been waiting for you and offer you this gift as a sign of welcome." Father accepted it, and then laughed as he saw I was still holding the branch like a weapon. "That will be the handle of our new axe," he said.

("Greasy Mountain is the original name of South Mountain in Phoenix.

When Sandy finished this story there was a moment of shared silence before the spell broke, and we all came back to the real world. Talk about a teachable moment! The participants had experienced for themselves how quickly they could be brought into the sphere of the object and the powerful emotions that could be evoked. Of course, the immediate response was, "But she is a storyteller! I could never do that!"

We sought to prove them wrong. At a subsequent story circle at the Heard Museum, Esther Doetsch prepared touch carts with a wide range of objects. The participants were invited to select an object and ponder it for a few moments. They were then asked to turn to another person and tell them something about the object:

✓ what they had chosen it,
✓ what they liked about it,
✓ something they already knew about it,
✓ a connection to their own lives, or
✓ an idea or emotion that it inspired.

We encouraged them to use story-speak about the object, telling expressively and elaborately — in a way that evoked feelings and images. Within half an hour, the whole room was buzzing with stories. A few volunteers were persuaded to share their brief new stories with the whole group.

Personal Stories as Frames

We may be at our most muse-like when we use our personal experiences to help visitors relate to an object, an exhibit, or to the museum as a whole. When telling about our own lives we have to open the doors to ourselves, just as the museum must open its doors to visitors. The stories of our history with an institution, or our personal motivations to work in a museum setting can not be overlooked or regarded as irrelevant. Through our own commitment and passion we model for our visitors how to relate to and interact with the institution and its mission.

One of our story circles focused on how to identify and craft a brief personal experience to use as an introduction to the museum experience. Such stories invite the visitor to feel a connection to us — and thereby to the institution.

We asked the participants to ponder their connection to the institution they worked at and then to share that with another person. These pairs then joined another pair and each told her story again. We then asked them to think about story structure — beginning, middle, and end — and to find a new partner and tell the story again. Volunteers from the workshop then told their stories to the whole group. Within half an hour, everyone was telling stories. Through this process, one docent from the Heard Museum reconstructed for herself and her listeners how a trip to Chaco Canyon had inspired her desire to serve as a docent at the Heard Museum. The muse was invoked and a storyteller was born!

Other brief personal stories can serve as frames. Such story frames literally bracket the museum content to be shared with visitors and invite them to relate to the content in a similarly personal way.

One docent at the Arizona Historical Society Museum in Phoenix related a brief experience from his farming childhood in Texas to help explain a piece of farm equipment on display in the museum. The story was short, featured his faithful dog and a similar piece of equipment, and had a good ending. The children were captivated.

"I liked the dinosaurs, but I really like your stories best."

In several of our workshops, we taught the participants methods for finding and developing folktales that could be told effectively within the context of a tour. Topics included techniques for learning a story quickly, adapting a story from a children's book, and ways of fostering participation during the telling of a story.

The biggest issue for telling a story on a tour usually comes down to timing. The stories have to be short if they are to be told within the tour itself. This can actually work to the advantage of the docent who is just learning to tell stories. It is not necessary or desirable to memorize

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a story just as it is written. Most stories can be distilled to a short list of essential points and enhanced through judicious inclusion of gestures, dialogue, or participation, and be a very effective and still brief addition to the tour. This, of course, takes practice, which was one of the functions of the story circles. In some of the institutions that we worked with, a storytelling station was created as part of larger and longer tours. For example, at The Arizona Historical Society Museum in Tempe, when a large group of children comes in one of the stops may be 20 minutes with a storyteller. This gives the children more focused exposure to stories relevant to the museum experience. At the end of a similar storytelling session at the Mesa Southwest Museum, one of the authors was told by a child, “I liked the dinosaurs, but I really liked your stories best.”

Invoking the Muse

As the project evolved, we realized that the role of the docent is parallel to the role of the storyteller. When a great story, a storyteller, and an audience all come together the interaction produces a magical synergy. Something similar happens in an effective interpretive moment, when the guide, the exhibit, and the visitor connect. That spot of overlap where the three spheres intersect is the spot that every storyteller and every docent wants to inhabit. That is the spot where creative and imaginative energy are flowing for both the docent/storyteller and the visitor/listener. When that happens, the muse is invoked and invited to her namesake, her temple—the museum. Training in storytelling, and getting the opportunity to practice with supportive colleagues, can increase the likelihood that such magic will happen more often.

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Getting Down to Basics

A fidgety third grader; a bored teenager; an absent-minded husband — dragging you and your wife along on their planned visit to your historic, 18th century building. How can you make a successful tour of the site? Have you already planned the route and carefully arranged the itinerary? Have you paid attention to the needs of your visitors and made sure that your tour is an enjoyable experience for them? If not, you might be creating an environment that is not suitable for many of your visitors. It is all too easy for your visitors to get bored, frustrated, or frightened by your tour. To avoid these situations, it is important to consider the needs of your visitors and plan your tour to meet their needs. This will ensure that your visitors will have an enjoyable and educational experience.

Abraham Maslow published his “Hierarchy of Needs” way back in 1954. This landmark theory of human motivation remains a definitive text. It emphasizes two types of needs, which must be met in order for a person to reach his potential, or, perhaps, to appreciate “the finer things” in our museum.

The first four, Maslow defines as “deficiency needs.” Until these deficiency needs are met, growth cannot take place. Information and activities that do not directly connect to satisfy these needs are simply ignored. For both classroom and museum educators, this means that we must help our “students” satisfy these basic needs before we can expect them to explore and appreciate what they encounter in our institutions.

Physiological Needs

When I hear a museum educator remark that “the water fountains are off-limits to school groups,” I cringe. Equally appalling is the idea (even though it bears a grain of truth) that “we don’t let the second graders use the bathroom. If one goes, they all want to go and we just don’t have time.” At the base of Maslow’s hierarchy are those things that make a human physically able to participate in, or enjoy, a learning experience.

Being realistic about these needs may mean offering a snack break for children who’ve traveled a long distance to visit your institution before touring them. It certainly means allowing them to use water fountains and bathrooms. It also means being aware that some school children are used to eating lunch as early as 10 a.m. Trying to interest them in your favorite painting as their lunchtime draws near is an exercise in futility.

One of the most underestimated of these basic needs is the need for water. Thirst is a big distraction. Especially in outdoor environments such as zoos, gardens, and nature centers, visitors should be encouraged to bring bottled water or water should be provided. Of course, a long ride on a hot school bus can produce the same effect, and all museum visitors should be given access to water fountains. One of the first symptoms of dehydration in young children, whom it affects more quickly than teens and adults, is “fussiness.” Before you decide to re-design your tour, offer your visitors a drink of water.

Safety Needs

Once physiological needs are reasonably well-satisfied, a new set of needs emerges. Maslow called these “safety needs,” and they include such things as security, freedom from fear or anxiety, and a need for structure and limits. In the museum setting, safety needs can be addressed in a variety of ways. Certainly, a friendly greeting as visitors meet their docent guide and a recitation of the expectations of the tour begin to allay fears for children and inexperienced museum-goers. Adults may want to know the approximate length of time the tour requires, and if they are free to leave the tour or re-join it should they decide to do so. With children, especially, it is important to outline the structure of the tour and to assure them that they will be taken care of until it is time to return to their school. Where uniformed guards are present, it is often useful to explain their protective presence, as some children are fearful of such authority figures. Questions about security cameras, metal detectors, and other such devices should be answered so as not to increase a child’s fear, but to assure him that he is in a safe environment.

Children are frequently afraid of getting lost, consequently, a floor plan and/or map of the facility is a good visual tool to use in explaining where the tour will go and what it will encompass. Young children may be afraid of having “accidents,” and should be assured that they will be given time for bathroom and water breaks. A brief explanation of the goals, routes, and methods of the tour can reassure teens who might be fearful of “doing or saying the wrong thing” and being publicly humiliated.

Another very important aspect of the “safety needs” is a child’s confidence in the person who is leading them. Docents who do not have control of their group or tour can create fear in a child that will make him unable to learn about, or appreciate, what he is seeing. Adults, too, fail to learn in situations where they have little or no confidence in their instructor. A docent...
who is confident and who leads a well-structured, well-ordered tour can help her charges move beyond safety needs and into the third level of Maslow's hierarchy.

**Belongingness and Love Needs**

Realistically, of course, a docent leading a 45-minute tour isn't going to be able to fulfill a visitor's needs for belongingness and love any more than she will be able to feed all the hungry children or bring about world peace. However, recognizing that the need to belong and be loved is as strong as the need to be fed, or to feel safe, a docent can take actions that make it easier for her audience to connect with her and her tour.

Visitors need to feel a part of the group, if only for a little while. Therefore, we need to ask questions that are inclusive, that allow everyone to feel that they can participate. We need to welcome diversity (of people, points-of-view, and response to the collection), and applaud creativity. We need to find something to like about everyone in the group (even the rebellious teenager, who may be demonstrating a need for approval and attention).

Since love and belonging are needs that work both ways (the defined need involves both giving and receiving affection), allowing visitors to feel a part of the group has immediate results. A visitor who feels that he or she belongs will respond in kind. Children and teens, particularly, who do not feel a part of your group will cling to any group that accepts them. Creating a welcoming, embracing climate will satisfy the need to belong for most visitors and will take them a step closer to being able to appreciate what you have to say and show.

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Getting Down to Basics

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Esteem Needs

The last of Maslow’s deficiency needs is the desire for self-esteem and the esteem of others. Visitors to our institutions who already feel self-confident, worthy, capable, and useful nevertheless must have these feelings validated in order to be ready to explore and appreciate the new experiences we offer. Visitors who lack these qualities, like many teenagers, will require additional feelings of safety and reassurance.

The techniques of inquiry teaching and active learning are especially valuable in promoting or validating self-esteem. When appropriately constructed, open-ended questions that allow for multiple answers, for example, give visitors the freedom and confidence to participate in discussion when they don’t have all the information, specific knowledge, or background. Carefully structured questions that demonstrate to visitors how to observe, compare, analyze, and evaluate objects or specimens will provide them with skills and processes that build their self-confidence. Visitors learn that they are able to learn and that their thoughts have validity.

Self-Actualization

Fulfilling this final one of the deficiency needs, according to Maslow and later writers, makes it possible for an individual to move on to begin to act upon the growth needs. When he first proposed his hierarchy, Maslow identified only one growth need, that of “self-actualization,” and he characterized self-actualized individuals as:

1. being problem-focused;
2. incorporating a continuing appreciation of life;
3. a concern for their own growth; and
4. the ability to have peak experiences.

Later, he added two lower-level growth needs that are of particular relevance to museum educators. They are cognitive and aesthetic needs. It is in these areas that museums and other such facilities offer visitors the first best steps toward realizing their full potential as human beings.

Using the authentic objects of our collections, and helping visitors develop the critical thinking skills necessary to explore and appreciate such objects, can satisfy both cognitive and aesthetic needs. It is in these areas that docents are typically trained. We construct tours that help our visitors demonstrate cognitive skills and knowledge they already possess; we teach them the process of knowledge construction by helping them learn to observe, analyze, and evaluate what they are seeing; and we guide them in generating knowledge that is new both to us and to them. As we help them develop greater cognitive skills, we also bring them to an aesthetic appreciation of history, art, and science.

In other words, after we’ve met those pesky deficiency needs, we can do what we’re trained to do. Only then can we help our visitors explore and appreciate our collections ... important steps as they seek individual self-actualization.

Jackie Littleton
Assoicate Editor

Next Issue: Planning, Executing, and Concluding

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