Creativity and Innovative Ideas

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Expanding the Ability to Think Creatively • Winging It at the Museum
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As docents and staff educators, we constantly remind ourselves to be flexible. We know success requires us to “roll with the punches” — to adapt and respond to changing circumstances, ideas, and personalities. Reminding ourselves to be flexible serves as a license, granting us permission to depart from the standard text or usual course of action whenever it is useful or necessary, and to come up with our own ways of meeting objectives, resolving controversies, and engaging or encouraging learners.

Whenever we urge ourselves to be flexible — to improvise or think in ways that are not rote — we challenge ourselves to “think creatively.” Few of us ever put it into those words, however, as the thought of being creative makes most of us very uncomfortable.

Much of our discomfort with creativity is rooted in self-doubt. Very few of us believe ourselves to be creative. An additional source of discomfort with creativity stems from our ambivalence toward creative people. “Creative types” are assumed to be flamboyant or highly troubled characters whose behaviors fly in the face of convention, who challenge the very values and attitudes that most of us find comforting and reassuring.

The presumption that creativity is a mysterious talent that only a few wacky people possess is erroneous, of course. In truth, creative thinking is a common part of the human experience, and it is expressed in both everyday and exceptional ways. The discrepancy between our perception of creativity and its reality creates a fundamental misunderstanding of what creativity actually is.

What is Creativity?

Creativity is a thinking skill. It is a component of our problem-solving abilities, and the process by which we generate a range of possible ideas, thoughts, and solutions. The greater one’s creative thinking abilities, the greater the number and range of options a person can produce. The greater the number and range of options, the more likely it is that one of them will provide a path toward solving a problem.

Creative thinkers are problem-solvers, whether the problem is one of invention, self-expression, or education. Creativity can be evidenced in seemingly small things, like improvising in the galleries when an expected object has been removed from display, or in larger accomplishments, such as devising innovative ways to improve one’s communication skills or reach underserved audiences.

Many people assume that creativity is something you are either born with or you are not; however, this is not entirely accurate. As with any skill, some of us will be naturally better at it than others, but all of us can improve our creative thinking abilities. Creative thinking can be practiced, developed, and enhanced. And, those of us who spend time in museums, historic sites, nature centers, zoos, parks, and gardens find ourselves in some of the best places to do so. The objects, artifacts, and environments presented by these facilities excite the imagination and virtually “speak” of possibilities.

How Does Creativity Function?

Educational researchers who studied how creative people generate their ideas found that it is through one, or a combination, of four methods. The first is fluency, or an ability to develop a great quantity of ideas. The second is flexibility, or an ability to develop a wide variety of ideas. The third is originality, or an ability to develop highly individualized or different ideas. The fourth is elaboration, or an ability to embellish and enrich existing ideas.

Knowing how to provoke and stimulate these four forms of thinking can expand your own, personal creativity, as well as the creativity of those you teach. Begin by asking open-ended questions or assigning open-ended tasks. You can design such questions or tasks to elicit more ideas, a broader range of ideas, highly personalized ideas, or very detailed ideas simply by how you construct them. For instance:

- Should you wish to elicit a large number of ideas or thoughts, employ questions or tasks designed to provoke a greater quantity of responses, such as: “How many... can you think of?” or “Develop a list of as many... as you possibly can.” Such interrogatives request fluent thinking.
- When a wider range of options or ideas are needed, try asking questions or assigning tasks that provoke a greater variety of responses, such as: “How else might you consider...?” or “What other kind of answer can you think of...?” These interrogatives invite flexible thinking.
- If you want people to express their individual natures, thought processes, or beliefs, use questions or tasks that provoke highly personalized responses by using phrases such as, “What would you do...?” or “Come up with your very own...?” These can prompt original thinking.
by challenging participants to develop individualized ideas.

To get more detailed responses, ask questions that provoke embellishment by employing such phrases as, "Tell us more about ..." or "What else do you know about ...?" Such interrogatives extract additional information from participants by requesting elaborative thinking.

Remember that questions and tasks designed to stimulate creativity must be "open-ended" in order to be effective. The term "open-ended" refers to questions or tasks that do not have pre-determined, correct, or expected outcomes. When you request creative thinking from others, you must be ready to accommodate many, varied, and highly personalized responses. Keep in mind that the production of possibilities, as opposed to arriving at a correct answer, is the goal of creative thinking activities.

Teaching To Expand Creative Thinking

Perhaps you and your visitors have entered the tropical rainforest exhibit at the zoo. Should you ask a lot of questions of many ideas to be generated you might begin by asking a fluency question, such as, "How many things tell you that this environment is tropical?" Or, should you be touring in a botanical garden, you might ask your visitors to "make a list of all the words you might use to describe this barrel cactus." Then, you could discuss the many ways that these characteristics function to protect the plant from its harsh environment.

If you are examining a Conestoga wagon with visitors, and want them to consider more than just its slow speed, you might ask a flexibility question, such as, "What else besides the length of the trip would you have to consider if you were to move your family two thousand miles in a wagon such as this?" Or, if you are examining a portrait you might ask visitors, "What else, in addition to the physical description of this person, has the artist given us in this painting?"

Perhaps you are looking at an abstract work of art and want to encourage more personalized responses to it. You might begin by asking, "If you had created this painting, what might you have titled it, and why?" This should encourage original thinking and some fairly lively discussion. Or, you could ask visitors in a history exhibition, "If you were a reporter who covered events during this period in time, what would the headline of your lead article be?"

Or, should you be examining a landscape painting and want visitors to imagine more depth in their response to it, you might encourage their elaborative thinking. You could ask them to, "Describe what the artist might have wanted you to hear and smell using details you find in the painting." Or, you could simply ask visitors to "tell us more" about any answer they offer to open-ended questions.

Teaching toward creative thinking is fun and offers endless possibilities. It allows everyone to participate, have opinions, and share their thoughts and reactions regardless of their knowledge or previous experience. Teaching toward creative thinking is also appropriate in museums, historic sites, zoos, parks, and gardens as these institutions recognize the many and varied ways that their collections can be viewed, investigated, and appreciated.

With practice, we can sharpen our potential for generating creative thought. And with knowledge of how to encourage and expand creative thinking, we can construct exercises and activities for visitors that challenge them to do the same. For teaching toward creative thinking is arguably the richest and most involving form of educational interaction.

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Winging It at the Museum

Since the aerospace industry is a central feature of the Puget Sound economy, flight and the basic principles of aerodynamics provide a natural context for teaching about science and mathematics to students in the region. The Museum of Flight in Seattle is a magnificent resource for teachers wanting to make the most of this opportunity. WINGS, a one-day institute for elementary school teachers, helps 25 science teachers establish a dynamic partnership with the museum and with Seattle University.

The inspiration for WINGS emerged from experiences that Edie Lie, a Boeing engineer, and myself had while directing a program for middle school students supported by the National Science Foundation.

For the past three years, students from this program have come to the Challenger Learning Center at the Museum of Flight to simulate a space mission. While there, the students learn how principles of science and mathematics are applied in a highly motivated work environment.

Though the students have always enjoyed the experience, and seem to draw much from it, Edie and I became increasingly convinced of the benefits of preparatory and follow-up activities. To create and implement them, we enlisted aid from Seattle University's School of Education and the Museum of Flight, and secured financial assistance from the Tandy Foundation.

The resulting program brings participating teachers to the campus of Seattle University for a day of in-service instruction. The day begins with a discussion of teaching methodology and is followed by offering teachers a framework for designing and implementing effective field trips.

Our methods are based on constructivism, active learning, and community involvement. Such methods demonstrate that teaching need not be transmitted to students only by their instructors or textbooks. Teachers are shown how to create "learning experiences" for their students that are linked to central concepts in a curriculum, and how to allow students the opportunity to construct their own understandings from these experiences.

We accomplished this by having teachers participate in their own active learning experience. The experience begins with a brief video illustrating the physical forces that enable aircraft to fly (thrust, gravity, lift, and drag). Then, the teachers engage in a series of simple experiments that help them understand how these four forces interact with "control surfaces" in the body of an airplane to affect flight. The experiments enable teachers to draw conclusions and construct understandings about the effects of wind speed and wing angle on aircraft flight in much the same way that their own elementary school students should be encouraged to do so.

Next, the teachers construct balsa gliders from prepared kits as their students might do when visiting the Museum of Flight. By attaching aluminum-foil ailerons, elevators, and rudders to the glider, the effect of basic control surfaces can be observed in test flight. (This same "hands-on" experiment can be carried out by third, fourth, and fifth graders.)

Once the teachers understand how a change in the control surfaces
of the airplane can change its flight direction, they use a Microsoft Flight Simulator to relate this to a pilot's actions. This computer program places the teacher in the pilot's seat, so that he or she can see how an airplane reacts when moving the controls using a joystick. The activity builds on the understandings that emerged from the glider practice to focus on the physics of the airplane.

Following this, WINGS participants travel to the Museum of Flight, where the Youth Program Manager presents a one-hour introduction to the activities available at the museum for elementary students. These include opportunities for young people to sit in an actual miniature airplane that pitches, rolls, and yaws as the controls are moved; to discover facts about airplanes through a prepared scavenger hunt throughout the museum; to don mechanics' jackets and learn how aircraft are flown, serviced, and maintained; to wear lab coats while practicing aeronautical design; and to discuss the advantages of different designs of museum aircraft.

Teachers are better able to prepare their students for a successful field trip after seeing these options demonstrated first-hand.

The in-service day concludes with a wrap-up session in a conference space at the museum.

The purpose is to explore appropriate follow-up activities. Students who know in advance that they will be asked to reflect on what they have learned during a field trip tend to become more focused and more actively involved during the experience.

Follow-up reflections can be expressed in a variety of ways. A class might put together a booklet containing contributions from each student or from teams of students working together. The entries might include not only written reports, but illustrations and charts conveying information in a visual form.

Teachers can create opportunities for students to connect the information learned on the trip to other areas in the school curriculum by using as many forms of activity and expression as possible: further reading and research; verbal presentations; science fair exhibits; dramatizations and learning games; work with a younger class in performing simple experiments such as assembling balsa wood airplanes. Teachers participating in WINGS are invited to submit lesson plans for a science unit on the principles of flight, including pre- and post-field trip activities. As an incentive, the best set of plans is rewarded with a free class trip to the museum.

Among the contributions made by the WINGS program, perhaps most important is that it enables teachers to take better advantage of museum resources while providing a model of cooperation between a corporation, a university, school districts, and a world-class museum all for the benefit of our students.

Dr. Kathleen Sullivan is a Seattle University Professor of Mathematics who earned her Ph.D. in mathematics from the University of Wisconsin and has a minor in Mathematics Education. In collaboration with engineers and scientists from the corporate sector and representatives from the Seattle area schools, she has developed a series of highly successful programs for teaching mathematics and science to K-12 students, including: Jump Start, a computer science camp offered in conjunction with a basketball camp; Project Bridge, a week-long program on environmental issues for middle school students; and Science Splash, a year-long math and science program for rising eighth graders. Dr. Sullivan is herself a former elementary, middle school, and secondary school math and science teacher.

Students learn how principles of math and science are applied in the highly motivated work environment of the Challenger Learning Center at the Museum of Flight in Seattle, WA.
The Bard on Interpretation

We all know of William Shakespeare as a pretty good play wright and poet but, judging from some of the subplots that show up in his plays, he had pretty distinct opinions about how to present his works as well. Perhaps the best known is Hamlet's instructions to the players he has contracted with. In it he offers advice that is still applicable to anyone who speaks to an audience.

There are certain universal precepts set forth that those of us who perform (and we are all performers, in some sense) would do well to consider and follow. After all, who wants the ghost of Shakespeare visiting us on some strange evening right before we go into battle... er... work, deciding our ability to effectively communicate our message, whatever it may be. Here, then, is my interpretation of Hamlet's speech to his players (Act III, scene 2) and how it might relate to our job as interpreters.

Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue. But if you mouth it, as many of our players do, I had as lief the town-crier spoke my lines.

It does no good to know information, yet be unaware of how to effectively communicate it. A common problem is that we don't take the time to listen to how we sound. Often times we don't realize habits that we've acquired over the years that limit our audience's ability to comprehend what we are saying. Accents, speaking too quickly, lazy tongues, volume, and repetition are just a few barriers to our attempts to get folks to understand and appreciate what we are saying. We haven't enough room here to give a complete lesson on vocal skills but here is some friendly advice:

Listen to yourself. Be aware of your limitations (and strengths) and consider what you can do to improve or maintain them. Certain things, like an accent or speaking too quickly, are extremely difficult to overcome, but if you are aware of them, you are more apt to check yourself if you sense you are losing your audience.

Think about articulation and running words together. Do ya fine yerself leavin' ledders out a words? Try this: speak the alphabet and notice where in your mouth your tongue goes to produce the appropriate sound. Generally speaking, the farther our tongue has to go to produce a sound, or the more gyrations it has to go through, the less apt we are to expend the effort. The results are blurred or missing sounds that force the visitor to concentrate on what the word is in the first place and less time focusing on what it means. "D's and "t"s are often dropped; "handsaw," "lantern," and "interesting" become "hansaw," "lanern," and "inneresting."

Odds, did it again. Make sure letters and syllables each receive their due.

You don't have to sound like a diction exercise but make your mouth work. Make sure your tongue hits the front of your hard palate (just behind your teeth) when those "d"s and "t"s come up; make sure your mouth forms well-rounded "o"s and "u"s. You may feel like you're occasionally tripping over your tongue but, in the long run, your visitors' ears (and brains) will appreciate the effort.

Nor do not saw the air too much with your hand, thus, but use all gently, for in the very torrent, tempest, and, as I may say, whirlwind of your passion, you must acquire and beget a temperance that may give it smoothness. O, it offends me to the soul to hear a robustious periwig-pated fellow tear a passion to tatters, to very raggs, to split the ears of the groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise. I would have such a fellow whipt for over-doing Termagant, it out-Herods Herod. Pray you, avoid it.

Now don't get me wrong here; I'll deny implying that our visitors should be considered "groundlings, who for the most part are capable of nothing but inexplicable dumb shows and noise." The point here is to cool it on your use of gestures and movement and to vary your vocal pattern.

Movement and gestures are only effective if they are purposeful; they should add emphasis to your words, not detract from them. When, as infants, we learn to communicate, we start with non-verbal communication. The spoken word is an artificial invention, developed to expedite communication, but it is harder to learn and respond to than the body language we learned first. So don't make it hard on words. Use gestures sparingly and only when you want to emphasize a particularly important aspect of your interpretation. (Sorry, but not every word is a pearl.)

Movement for the sake of movement (wandering) is as bad as standing rooted to a spot. Wandering implies that your message is without purpose or direction as well; standing still suggests a rigidity
that intimidates. Both are tiring to the eyes and distract from the verbal message. When you move, make it purposeful. If you want to talk about an object, move to it (if feasible). If a visitor asks a question or makes a comment, lean or move toward them. Both actions imply a respect either for the object or person.

Vary your vocal pattern. Be aware of your pitch and don’t let it get too high. The higher the pitch, the more distracting the sound and the less the visitor concentrates on the message. Let your volume and pitch mirror the emotions the words are expressing. If, for example, you are interpreting a story that involves something sedulous, lower your voice and slow it down; nothing spoils the mood of a good conspiracy more than a high chipper voice happily declaiming the moral limitations of the central character. Also, be aware of how you end your sentences. Do you tend to let words trail off at the end of a sentence? Do you end declarative sentences the same way you end questions, trailing up in pitch? Well, don’t! Both imply that you don’t have confidence in what you are talking about and your credibility as a knowledgeable educator will go right into the dumper. Well, maybe that’s a little strong, but it will have a negative effect on how people respond to you.

**Be not too tame neither, but let your own discretion be your tutor.**

_Suit the action to the word, the word to the action, with this special observance, that you o’erstep not the modesty of nature: for any thing so o’erdone is from the purpose of playing. . . . Now this overdone, or come tardy off, though it makes the unskillful laugh, cannot but make the judicious grieve; the censure of which one must in your allowance o’er weigh a whole theatre of others. O, there be players that I have seen play . . . [that] have so strutted and hellow’d that I have thought some of Nature’s journeymen had made men, and not made them well; they imitated humanity so abominably..._

Be yourself. Don’t try to imitate someone else. Be aware of your strengths and weaknesses. Play to your strengths, but don’t simply accept your weaknesses; work on improving or minimizing them. Don’t reject a particular interpretive technique simply because “it’s not you.” Give new techniques and concepts a chance and see how you can fit them into your own style.

Above all, project confidence. Interpretation begins with perceptions (both ways). Give your visitors the perception that you know your stuff and that you respect them. Stand straight, look them in the eye, smile, acknowledge their comments with positive reinforcement, appear at ease, and avoid lording your perceived superior understandings over them. Do this and it will improve their ability to appreciate the importance of your message.

“Suit the action to the word, the word to the action.” The right blend of individual style and information results in an interpretation that is focused on the material yet appears personalized to the listener.

*And let those that play your clowns speak no more than is set down for them, for there be of them that will themselves laugh to set on some quantity of barren spectators to laugh too, though in the mean time some necessary question of the play be then to be consider’d. That’s villainous, and shows a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it.*

Author Mark Howell applies his own, personal creativity to extract useful advice about teaching and communicating from one of the world’s greatest literary figures and communicators, William Shakespeare. This portrait of Shakespeare was created by Martin Droeshout, and appeared eight years after Shakespeare’s death.

This article continues on the next page.
We all want to be loved. I can’t imagine a single soul reading this who doesn’t want her audience to like her, right? It is all too easy to put the messenger before the message and, in so doing, we either consciously or unconsciously cheapen the points we hope to get across. We tell a joke, the visitor laughs, and, before too long, the interpretation becomes a string of one-liners and superficial anecdotes and the visitor leaves thinking, “Hey, that docent sure was fun! Uh, did anyone catch what she was talking about? Oh, well, let’s go get some lunch.” You are remembered but you failed to responsibly represent your institution. Never forget, the message comes first!

Lastly, nothing annoyed the Bard more than having actors rewrite their lines. The message here for us is to studiously avoid making things up or making jokes at the expense of history. Is your information grounded in scholarship or is it based on what gets a rise out of visitors? Be true to your information and rely more on “we don’t know” and “current research indicates” than “I heard it said that …” or “I don’t know if this is true or not, but …” or “Well, they told us not to tell this story any more, but I think it’s just darling.” To horribly bastardize another of Shakespeare’s clever quips: “To thine institution’s mission statement be true.”

Go make yourself ready!
Need I say more than that!?

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Mark Howell is Program Manager of the Colonial Williamsburg Foundation’s historic community events, in Williamsburg, Virginia. Among his responsibilities is teaching presentation skills to the interpretive staff. Mr. Howell wishes to thank Bill Weldon, manager of the Foundation’s first-person interpretation efforts, for inspiring the tack for this article.
History “Alive in the Present”

Historic estate gardens often fall victim to a divided constituency — visitors who love plants and spend all of their time visiting gardens and those individuals who are history buffs, mainly interested in family lineage, the mansion, and the historic buildings. In addition, it is often difficult to attract people into the world of early 20th Century American history when a significant number of them were not yet born, let alone have any familiarity with the way of life in the 1910’s and 1920’s.

This past summer, Planting Fields Arboretum State Historic Park and Planting Field Foundation attempted a creative approach to education, launching its first children’s camp. The camp experiences were designed to interest young people (and their parents) in Gold Coast Estate History and our historically significant plant collections. Time Machine: Creative Writing and History was a week-long, four-hour-per-day summer camp for youth aged nine to twelve.

Creative writing was seen as the most promising way to make history more amusing and “alive in the present” for the campers. A local elementary school teacher helped the twenty-two children daily in developing writing and listening skills as Planting Fields and Foundation staff led tours in various historical buildings, greenhouses, and gardens.

As campers gained in-depth knowledge of what life was like for the Coe family on a large country estate in the early 1900’s, they began connecting with the estate’s historical significance. By writing down notes in a rough-draft journal, the children incorporated historical facts with a bit of their own imaginations. Tales about servants, the children’s riding horses, the exotic plants in the greenhouses, and hiding-spots all around the property were a few of the topics the kids wrote about. Poetry, short stories, obituaries, helpful ads, word finds, and mock newspaper interviews with family members were employed by the creative campers in their attempt to fill their final presentation journals.

A table of mixed art media (items already in stock in the Education Department) was available and supplemented the writing in each child’s journal. Photocopies of pictures of family members and buildings (we utilized our Historic Archives for retrieving pictures and documents), crayons, markers, flower magazines, yarn, fabric, ribbon, pipe cleaners, and pressed leaves from plants visited in the garden tours were included in the children’s work.

At the end of the week, a reception was held for parents and guardians. Each child chose one of his/her written creations and shared it with the audience. All journals were set out on display for curious eyes and minds to explore. Parents commented on how the camp had piqued their children’s interest in the Planting Fields estate. Other parents mentioned that they, themselves, were getting hooked on the camp as they heard of the tours and activities the children participated in each day.

One mother pleaded to us to offer the camp for adults so they could also browse through historic documents, hear family stories, and get behind-the-scenes tours! Our initial goals for the camp were met and surpassed. Not only was the response overwhelmingly positive, we managed to expand our youth education offerings and reach a new constituency. Perhaps we have even built a new crop of supporters for our institution. Best of all, both children and adults were exposed to fun ways of learning about and remembering historical and horticultural treasures.

James Burghardt served as Education Intern at Planting Fields Arboretum State Historic Park from June 1995 to June 1996. Educational goals included expanding course offerings in the Planting Field’s adult lifelong learning brochures, reformatting and new design for the brochure, and increasing youth awareness and interest in plants and what is available at public historic garden institutions. Mr. Burghardt has a B.A. in biology and geography from Gustavus Adolphus College, St. Peter, Minnesota, and will begin graduate studies in environmental biology at the University of Melbourne, Victoria, Australia, in February 1997.
"Interpreting Our Heritage"

Just about forty years ago, the National Park Service employed Freeman Tilden to define a foundation of principles for interpretation and interpretive programming. His text, entitled Interpreting Our Heritage, is a classic and, despite its 1957 publication date, remains fresh and useful.

Consider some of the following principles presented by Tilden:

- Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.

- Interpretation addressed to children should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate program.

- Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.

- Interpretation is an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships, rather than simply to communicate factual information.

- The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.

- Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historic, or architectural.

The Value of Nothing

... nothing can convince a zealot to change his mind;
... nothing cures baldness;
... nothing can make children eat their vegetables; and
... nothing is too good for your friends.
Recently, I came upon a wonderful little book that has been useful in my gallery teaching. It is called *The Tao of Leadership*. Its author is John Heider. When this book was first recommended to me, I did not make the connection between leadership and teaching. After reading the text, however, its relevance to teaching seemed unmistakable and most thought-provoking.

Since creativity is reliant, at least in part, on making new connections, I thought this text might be applicable to *The Docent Educator* issue on "Creativity and Innovation." It is my hope that others who enjoy, *The Docent Educator* as much as I do might also find reading this text as interesting and helpful as I have.

Mr. Heider adapted and edited the work of the ancient Chinese philosopher, Lao Tzu. In his forward to the book, Mr. Heider writes, "Lao Tzu's *Tao Te Ching* is one of China's best loved books of wisdom. It was originally addressed to the sage and to the wise political ruler of the fifth century, B.C. It comes down to us as a classic of world literature, and many of Lao Tzu's sayings will be familiar to you. For example: 'The journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step.'"

"As a teacher, I have found the *Tao Te Ching* an indispensable text ... students like it. It is simple and it makes sense."

Personally, I have found this book to be inspirational and a source of new connections to better teaching philosophies and methodologies. For instance, consider the applicability of the following — "Why is the ocean the greatest body of water? Because it lies below all the rivers and streams and is open to them all."

"What we call leadership consists mainly of knowing how to follow. The wise leader stays in the background and facilitates other people's process. The greatest things the leader does go largely unnoticed. Because the leader does not push or shape or manipulate, there is no resentment or resistance."

"Group members genuinely appreciate a leader who facilitates their lives rather than promoting some personal agenda. Because the leader is open, any issue can be raised. Because the leader has no position to defend and shows no favoritism, no one feels slighted; no one wishes to quarrel."

—*Lori Prystowsky*
docent and classroom teacher
Rockville, Maryland

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Creativity and Innovation at Work

Tours for People with Disabilities

by Cate O'Hara

Museums and historic sites are repositories of history, culture, and educational opportunity for all visitors, including those with disabilities. This truth, together with the mandates of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), led the Taft Museum staff and volunteers on a path that resulted in the development of "sensory tours" for people with disabilities, and eventually the publication of a workbook for developing these tours for use by our own docents and those at other museums and sites.

With the passage of the ADA in 1990, the Taft Museum decided to reevaluate its services for visitors with disabilities. Although the museum is housed in a National Historic Landmark mansion built in 1820, the basic requirements for physical accessibility (ramps, parking, elevators, and restrooms) were in place. The very nature of the historic facility would allow for few if any further renovations or improvements in that area. The museum also already offered a large-print guide to the collections in response to the many senior citizens who visit.

However, we recognized that it was possible to go further in creating a spirit of accessibility and a respect for the abilities and learning styles of all people in the way we present information on docent-led tours.

A steering committee was organized to grapple with the challenge. It is led by Madeleine Lame, a long-time Taft Museum docent who has visual and hearing impairments, and includes a journalist who is blind and writes a weekly column on people with disabilities, a teacher of children with developmental disabilities, a teacher and signer from a school for the deaf, and the museum's volunteer and scheduling coordinator. Their mission was to develop specialized tours for visitors with various disabilities.

The first challenge facing the members of the advisory committee was to dispel a number of misconceptions about working with people with disabilities: What is there for a blind person to "see" at a museum primarily devoted to the visual arts? Must our docents learn sign language to communicate with deaf people? What useful information would a person with developmental disabilities come away with from a tour? A better place to start, we learned, was with why we ourselves are drawn to the museum: the art, stories, emotions, history, sense of place, connection, and beauty that are different or have different meanings for each of us and for each visitor.

The insights of the committee and staff were augmented by research that included The Accessible Museum published by the American Association of Museums, articles published in The Docent Educator, and discussions with senior citizens' advocacy groups and organizations supporting the rights and needs of people with mobility, visual, hearing, and developmental and learning disabilities.

It became evident that different groups had both different and intersecting needs. For instance, many senior citizens have some hearing, vision, or mobility impairment. Descriptive techniques useful for interpreting art for the visually impaired also paint a brilliant picture for visitors with developmental disabilities. All benefit from small group tours (often one-on-one) that permit plenty of interaction and the
ability to tailor the tour specifically to the needs of the individual. Touring techniques grew from defining these needs, and guidelines were developed for creating four primary categories of tours: tours for the blind and visually impaired, tours for the hearing impaired and the deaf, tours for senior citizens, and tours for the learning disabled.

After the tours were formatted, docents conducted pilots for members of the steering committee, who in turn critiqued and edited the tours. Their insights provided valuable information about length of tours, usefulness of props, and methods for presenting information to different audiences.

Tours for visitors with visual impairment draw on a range of props and descriptive techniques that create a tactile and mental picture of the art and environment. For example, a scale model of the building permits a literal hands-on tour of the perimeter, the number of rooms, and shape and size of important architectural features in relation to the building as a whole. Other types of props include fabrics and items of clothing or jewelry that reflect those pictured in paintings, reproductions of vases and sculpture, a painted canvas to illustrate various types of brush strokes, and plaster casts of ceiling ornamentation. Cotton gloves are provided when furnishing, works of art, such as sculpture and frames; and architectural detail, such as moldings and mantels, can be safely touched.

Perhaps the most important and most difficult technique for docents leading tours for visitors with visual impairment is that of pictorial description — that is, evoking the mood, emotional content, climate, texture, and meaning embedded in a visual image for someone who may have no visual point of reference. Thus, docents are challenged to describe a picture in new ways.

For instance, a landscape by the Barbizon artist Camille Corot may be described as misty, damp, shadowy, and cool. The docent can evoke the smells of the forest, the sounds of the livestock, and the rippling water of the pond; describe therough clothing of the peasant in the foreground; and discuss the intent of the artist to abandon the restrictions and structures of earlier painting styles to "get back to nature" and accurately describe a place and a way of life without idealizing it. Each of these points can be related to a contemporary experience: the smells in your yard on a wet, overcast day; the feel of soggy earth beneath your feet; contemporary authors or artists who also seek to present a realistic view of life.

Docent Madeleine Lame, who developed the museum's touring techniques and contributed to the resulting workbook, had as her model the keeper of the Hermitage in Leningrad (now St. Petersburg) during the 900-days siege of World War II. "At the outset of the siege, the paintings were removed from their frames and taken to a secret, safe location. During the ensuing Nazi shelling, the windows of the Hermitage were shattered and snow blew into the galleries. The soldiers who were sent to clean up were rewarded by the keeper with a tour of the empty frames. Using only the power of his words and his love of the art, he left soldiers with powerful mental images of the absent masterpieces. That is what we must accomplish for visitors who are blind."

Tours for the hearing impaired and the deaf require less specialized techniques and more of an awareness of how to present information. Tour guides need to learn not to stand in front of a light or window that would render their faces difficult to see for lip readers, to project without exaggeration or shouting, to face the group at all times when speaking, to pause so that visitors can redirect their gaze from the speaker or signer to the work of art under discussion, and to avoid foreign terms and jargon that are difficult to sign and lip read.
Creativity and Innovation at Work
(Continued from previous page.)

Tours for senior citizens incorporate some techniques from both of the above, while adding a sensitivity to possible disabilities. For some older visitors, additional seating helps those who tire easily, while using techniques of projection and clear speaking aid those with some hearing loss.

Lame points out that perhaps the most important aspect of tours for senior citizens is respect for their life experience: “By presenting a tour that includes opportunities for interaction, tour guides can often learn as much as they impart from this valuable resource. Senior citizens are repositories of untold accumulated knowledge.”

Tours for people with developmental and learning disabilities can be the most challenging. Most docents, after all, are not trained special education professionals. Also, the range of development and learning disabilities is much greater than that of other disabilities. As Lame points out, “There are as many degrees of learning disabilities as there are people. Creating a tour for these guests is challenging, because you must assess and reassess their interests and abilities at the moment of greeting and throughout the tour. Most importantly, you must not patronize anyone. You do not know what thoughts or feelings are there but cannot be expressed.”

Although the most challenging, these tours also offer the most room for creativity, which can in itself be a challenge for docents who may be accustomed to working from a standard script. Props of all sorts, including dolls and toys, music, fragrance, poetry, and stories are all ways to bring alive a work of art or historical fact for a visitor with learning disabilities.

Games are also useful for encouraging interaction and imparting relevance to art works and artifacts. Try asking open-ended questions. How would you feel if you were inside that painting? Would you want to live there? Why or why not? How do the colors in the painting make you feel? A game in which a visitor tries to guess which object a docent is describing may also be effective for honing the skill of looking and thinking about works of art.

Not surprising, the techniques used for developing tours for people with disabilities have had an impact on how the museum’s docents present information to all visitors, just as existing touring techniques informed the sensory tours. School groups, for instance, make use of the various props that lend immediacy and dimensionality to flat paintings. All visitors benefit from additional seating put in place with senior citizens in mind.

As Lame points out, “A successful tour for any visitor starts with creativity and imagination. The particular challenges of creating a tour for visitors with disabilities can free us from rote learning and propel us to see anew the wealth of beauty, art, and history that first brought us to our museum or historic site.”

To share our successes with the larger museum field, the Taft Museum has adapted its own tours and published the manual 

Please Touch: Sensory Tours for People with Disabilities, a Workbook

This publication combines information in a practical outline form with worksheets that can be adapted to any public site that offers tours for visitors with disabilities. It is available from:

The Taft Museum
316 Pike Street
Cincinnati, OH, 45202
513/241-0343, extension #17,
for $5 plus $2 shipping and handling. Ohio residents must add 6% sales tax.

Cate O’Hara is Public Affairs Manager for the Taft Museum in Cincinnati, Ohio. She contributed to the manual Please Touch: Sensory Tours for People with Disabilities, a Workbook as a writer and editor and is a frequent writer on contemporary art. She has a B.A. in English and French from Illinois State University and an M.A. in English from the University of California at Berkeley.
### Previous Issues of The Docent Educator Are Available!

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### Minds in Motion Workshops

Participatory workshops for docents held, on-site, at your institution!

- **Interactive Teaching** - a general introduction to inquiry learning and participatory teaching techniques
  
  *Allen Gartenhaus, instructor.*

- **Questioning Strategies** - an examination of open-ended questioning, language use, and ways to respond
  
  *Allen Gartenhaus, instructor.*

- **Creative Thinking** - provoking visitors' interest, participation, imagination, and expansive thinking
  
  *Allen Gartenhaus, instructor.*

- **Get Real! Using Objects to Teach Across the Curriculum** - using your collection to teach all subjects
  
  *Jackie Littleton, instructor.*

- **Little Ones** - successful touring techniques and teaching methods for pre- and primary-school visitors
  
  *Jackie Littleton, instructor.*

- **Learning Styles** - discovering differences in the ways people learn and how to accommodate the range
  
  *Christine Cave, instructor.*

Workshops can be scheduled for up to four hours in length and will incorporate the collection of the hosting institution. For further information write to The Docent Educator, or call us at (808) 885-7728.
"Is Miss Foster Receiving?"

by Rebecca Hoskins

Louise Scribner, you were one of Miss Foster's best friends and a member of the wealthy Scribner family of publishing fame. Miss Nina Howland, you were the belle of Morristown and helped found the Morris Country Golf Club, one of the few golf clubs in the country founded by women. Mr. Marshall Mills, you were Miss Foster's "beau," but her father never allowed you to marry her. Mr. Revere, you were a great-grandson of Paul Revere, the Massachusetts patriot, and son of General Joseph Revere, builder of this house. I'm sure you'll remember the house — you grew up here.

These are a few of the introductions our guides use at Fosterfields Living Historical Farm in Morristown, New Jersey, to educate our visitors to the life and times of benefactress Miss Caroline Foster. Fosterfields is a living historical farm, the first to be so designated in New Jersey. It reflects both the farming practices of the 1900 era as well as the social standards of the time.

Visitors to the Foster home — The Willows — which is on the property, get a 'visitation card' as their ticket to the house. On the front of each visitation card is the name of one of Miss Foster's actual friends from the Morristown community in 1900. On the back of the card is a brief biography of that person. Thus, visitors get an understanding of Victorian social ritual of visitation and a better feel for the local community and friends of the Foster family at the turn of the century.

Miss Caroline Foster was a colorful figure in Morristown during her lifetime. She lived and worked on her farm from 1881 to 1979, when she died at the age of 102. She grew up in an era of Victorian restrictions for woman — her father would not allow her to go to college, nor did he consent to her marrying as he was afraid of losing his only daughter after having lost his wife and two sons to disease. Thus Cara, as she was known, helped her father with farming, machine repair, and general farm overseeing while she enjoyed the social functions of Morristown society. At that time, Morristown rivaled Newport and Long Island in its claim to millionaires. A country village 40 miles from New York City, Morristown was home to hundreds of millionaires who commuted to the city to make their fortunes. Cara knew them all.

The publishing Scribner family, the wealthy social belle of Morristown, the great-grandson of Paul Revere, and many others known to Caroline Foster contributed to the local history of the area and are part of the interpretation of our site. And, they become a bit more "real" when visitors take on the roles of these people while touring the house.

We do not ask that our visitors role-play these friends of Miss Foster throughout their tour. Most visitors would be uncomfortable fulfilling this kind of expectation. However, as visitors gather on the front porch of The Willows we do ask who their cards say they are. We embellish the information they have on the card, telling them a bit more about their characters. It's a wonderful way to break the ice, and some really get into it. "I'm finally a millionaire!" some have proclaimed. Others say little or nothing, but brighten as they begin to understand who they represent.

How have our volunteers responded to this type of interpretation? Most are open to new ideas and love learning new methods of educating the public. A few are hesitant and do little to elaborate on the visitation cards given to visitors. In order to make this form of interpretation more palatable to our volunteers, we began with a training meeting where we provided research materials on all the Morristown visitors, and we had volunteers role-play these individuals based on the research findings. This proved to be extremely helpful. As an appropriate ending to our training session, we went to a local cemetery, where most of these Morristonians, as well as the majority of the Morristown millionaires, are buried.

Reaction to this interpretive technique has been positive. The education staff hopes to expand use of the technique in their new self-guided brochure, allowing visitors to role-play the part of a farm worker employed by Charles Foster during the early 1900s. This allows all visitors an opportunity to understand the daily operation of a farm in early 1900 in a thought-provoking way. It also provides another perspective — that of a worker, rather than of a wealthy socialite.

Louise Scribner, Nina Howland, Marshall Mills, Augustus Revere, and others live again through our visitation card interpretive program.
Visitors to "The Willows," home of the Foster family, are given entrance tickets with the names of some of the actual friends of Miss Caroline Foster, who lived in the house until her death in 1979. She, and her friends who are pictured here, observed such Victorian social behaviors and traditions as presenting calling cards when paying a visit.

Rebecca Hoskins is curator of education for Historic Sites at the Morris County Park Commission in Morristown, New Jersey, which owns and operates Fosterfields Living Historical Farm and Cooper Mill in nearby Chester. Ms. Hoskins holds a Masters degree in history and has worked at several living history sites in the country in an educational capacity. A native of Morristown, Ms. Hoskins knew Miss Foster and wishes she had known Miss Foster's many friends.
They're Made for Each Other!

**Math and the Museum**

Teachers understand that the school-museum field trip connection is a real “no-brainer.” You teach science? You take your class to science museums, aquaria, zoos, and nature centers. You teach social studies? You visit historic houses, sites, and history museums. You go to the art museum if you teach art, or if the museum in question schedules an “everybody should see it” blockbuster.

If you teach math, you stay at school. Unless, of course, you happen to hook up with an innovative museum, zoo, nature center, or historic house that helps you bring math out of the classroom and math textbook and into the real world. School artificially separates academic subjects; museums can help teachers creatively recombine them.

**Art Museums and Galleries**

One way to bring math into the art museum or gallery is to use the elements of math to create art. For example, a study of Renaissance painters such as Raphael leads naturally to student experimentation with perspective and symmetry. Vasarely and other Op artists of the twentieth century are the perfect foil for a geometry class at the art museum, where real people really used squares, circles, and triangles to create art, and students can, too.

Another way to use the visual arts to study math concepts involves seeing past the aesthetics of a piece of art and viewing it as an object. By calculating the relationship of sculptures to actual sized people, horses, etc., or by comparing small reproductions to larger paintings, students can practice working with ratios, measurement, rational numbers, and decimal fractions.

**Science Museums, Zoos, Nature Centers, Gardens**

Institutions dealing with the sciences are great places for students to work with graphic math. From the simple pictorial graphs kindergartners might make to show how many lions, tigers, and bears they saw at the zoo, math students can learn increasingly more complex ways to display and interpret graphic data. Computer-generated graphics used by such institutions to track growth, food consumption, etc. can be used to help students see that such math is used outside the classroom in the real world. Year-long museum-school collaborations help students understand how tables, graphs, and charts are used to predict behavior, growth, and other aspects of plant and animal life.

**History Museums, Sites, and Historic Houses**

Time lines are math-made-to-order for institutions that deal with history. Such institutions can provide significant dates in their history, or they can help students generate such dates, as a basis for designing and studying time lines for first hand experience with such math concepts as range, intervals, and measurement. If time lines already exist as part of an exhibit, students can create parallel time lines to help them put the specific exhibit into a larger time frame.

**Creating a Math Connection**

It is essential that museum educators work with classroom teachers when creating a program that correlates with the school math curriculum. Without teacher input, the museum may design an exciting and challenging math connection that will never be used! Unlike science and social studies teachers, most math teachers are not "programmed" to take their students on field trips. Even in elementary schools where subject matter is not departmentalized, teachers may have to be trained to see the museum as an adjunct to their math instruction.

In addition to consulting teachers and the prescribed math curriculum for an individual school system, museum program designers should make the program consistent with the published Curriculum and Evaluation Standards for School Mathematics. In March, 1989, the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics officially released the Standards, designed to strengthen the mathematics curriculum in kindergarten through grade 12. The Standards include four interrelated, unifying themes that should be incorporated into any effective math program.

The first theme involves mathematics as problem solving: learning and applying mathematics from problems developed within familiar contexts, as well as in stories and from math itself. It is within this theme that museums and other such institutions can provide real-life problems and offer students opportunities to create solutions.
Example: In a history museum, students use paper cut-out geometric shapes to create quilt blocks. Individual blocks are then combined with those of other students to create a class “quilt” before viewing how quilts from the collection were designed.

Another theme — mathematics as communication — gives students experiences in talking and writing about their experiences with math; reading number sentences, as well as reading graphs, tables, and charts; and listening to others’ explanations of their solutions to problems.

Example: In an aquarium, students are asked how much space each fish has in a particular tank. Individuals may measure and calculate the volume of water in the tank, count the number of fish in a sample area, estimate the space per fish, or solve the problem in a totally unexpected way. The important part of the problem is discussing individual solutions.

Mathematics as reasoning, the third Standards theme, allows students to observe and defend their solutions, to question and experiment with math. The open-ended questioning inherent in a good museum program invites such reasoning.

Example: In an art museum, students are given $1 million in play money and instructed to “buy” pieces of art from the collection. As they defend their choices, they discuss relative value as well as the meaning of “one million.”

Finally, the Standards suggest mathematical connections, and it is here that museums, zoos, historic sites and homes, nature centers, and botanical gardens can creatively help teachers connect math to other disciplines. Additionally, because such institutions really do use math in a variety of ways, they can assist in guiding students to see the interrelatedness among number theory, geometry, algebra, probability, etc.

Example: In a historic house, students measure and graph the area of pendulums of varying lengths before examining a collection of antique clocks to see, literally, “what makes them tick.”

Fighting Math Fear

The greatest hurdle to overcome in creating a museum math program, however, may not be in developing the program, but in activating it.

Many museum educators, staff as well as volunteer docents, may suffer from “math phobia.” Most docents are of an age, gender, and generation that was taught math without the benefit of the hands-on inquiry teaching now more common in math classes. Consequently, their fear of math comes from never having had positive classroom math experiences. The same people who maintain their family’s finances, increase recipes to feed 20 instead of 6, and accurately buy rooms full of expensive carpet and wallpaper will insist that they don’t understand math!

Invite a good classroom teacher to lead docents through the math they will need in order to present your new program. Having the same kind of fun with math that the students will have will help banish any residual math fears and insure the success of math in the museum.

Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor
A Summer Seminar for Docents

A picturesque New England college town in the rural mountains of Williamstown, Massachusetts, and a distinguished art museum famous for its works by French Impressionists provide the setting for a special week for docents from art museums across the country.

The Summer Seminar in Museum Education was organized by the Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute in Williamstown five years ago. Now entering its fifth year, the seminar is directed by John H. Brooks, the Clark’s Associate Director, who shares the presentation and workshop leadership with Rika Burnham, his colleague at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

The goals for docents attending the week-long seminar are: to explore the general tour and its presentation; to hone visual skills and sharpen interpretive techniques; to experience many of the Berkshire’s special cultural resources; and to forge new friendships and relationships with docents from other museums.

This year’s upcoming Summer Seminar session will be held during the last week in July (July 27 - August 2). The tuition is $495 for all expenses during the week. The deadline for applying will be mid-April, although the course usually fills up long before that time.

To receive a letter explaining the entire program and an application form, please contact:

John H. Brooks
Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute
225 South Street, Williamstown, MA 01267
fax (413) 458-2318
phone (413) 458-9545.

Next issue: More Tough Topics
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