Honoring Your Teaching Skills

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minds in motion

The Way You Do The Things You Do

During the early 1960's, a revolution took hold of museums and other similar institutions. It was propelled when Leonardo da Vinci’s painting, the Mona Lisa, was brought from France to New York and displayed at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Suddenly, thousands of people, many of whom had rarely visited a museum before, queued up to get a glimpse of this famous and important work of art.

The museum world was rocked by the enormity of that special exhibition’s success. Until that time, museums made little effort to expand their audiences. The museum community was fairly self-satisfied, and quite comfortable being an exclusive environment — the domain of the educated and the interested. But, the potential power of “blockbusters” and special exhibitions enticed museums to look beyond exclusivity toward the promise of a new level of popularity, visibility, and acclaim.

In order to nourish their plans for expansion and their ambitions for prominence, museums needed money. Cultivating and enfranchising new audiences took on added importance as museums sought higher attendance numbers to support their requests for additional funds from agencies that used “public impact” as a criterion for granting awards.

This shift from insular to popular institution led museums toward a greater dependence upon their education departments. Before this time, many institutions had no education departments, and those that did considered the department peripheral to their institution’s central operations. However, to increase and sustain higher attendance (and, ultimately to gain additional funding), these institutions needed to make previously unaware or disinterested audiences aware and interested.

It was at this critical juncture that education departments, public programming, and the use of docents began to take on a new level of importance within the museum structure.

Up to this time, a majority of museums followed the policy that merely presenting their collections constituted an educational opportunity. Labels provided identification. That was enough. Then, suddenly, it wasn’t. Museums needed programming for school groups, for the general public, and for seniors, as well as ways to interest and involve minorities, audiences with special needs, and others.

From that time, and forward, the burden of expanding and enfranchising audiences fell squarely on museum education departments. Museum docents, who had been “explainers,” essentially parroting back information about the collection told to them by others, were being asked to become “educators,” who could teach these new visitors the skills needed to become interested and comfortble in this setting.

Docents who had signed on to be “tour guides” — pointing and telling — were now asked to serve as “teachers” — challenging visitors to learn by facilitating the discovery process. Institutions that had been self-referential, and which sought to limit thinking to prescribed viewpoints constructed by curators and scholars, now sought to broaden their vision in order to find new ways of demonstrating relevance and making connections.

The more authoritative model employed by curators — that of telling and defining consideration — no longer seemed educationally appropriate. Restricting thought to pre-ordained routes was too exclusive an approach for these new, inclusive institutions. Yet, traditional classroom teaching models also were not a comfortable fit.

Formal education is sequential, progressive, and long-term — skills are taught incrementally over many years — and within each grade there is a high degree of age and developmental uniformity. Teachers get to know and understand their students; docents, on the other hand, teach strangers they do not get to know, and who arrive with many and varied backgrounds, ages, interests, and levels of experience. In addition, traditional classroom studies primarily call upon deductive reasoning skills (going from generalities and moving to specific examples) whereas museum education requires inductive reasoning (looking at specific examples and extrapolating as to generalities).

A highly flexible approach, adaptable to a wide range of people and situations, became essential. No longer were docents speaking...
with people who shared a similar interest and who possessed a skill base that allowed them to absorb and validate (or invalidate) the information presented. Instead of imparting information that was refined and defined for the interested by the interested, docents needed a method for teaching novice visitors the skills of careful observation, discrimination, and organization—a way to harness the museum experience and to put new information into a useful and relevant context. The role of "educator" within museums had grown enormously, and was changing from that of transmitter to mentor.

The hybrid model that worked best, and which offered the greatest flexibility and elasticity, is "participatory teaching." Participatory teaching employs strategies that involve an audience in the learning process. Visitors respond to questions or accomplish tasks that require them to acquire, organize, and use information derived from investigating the collection. These questions or tasks then serve as archetypes for future learning, providing visitors with a process that they can repeat in similar situations.

So, it is relatively recently that participatory teaching, with its reliance on inquiry and involvement, has been introduced into museums, historic sites, zoos, parks, nature centers, and gardens. No wonder this technique seems awkward and unresolved at times. It is a new teaching process that is still being honed and developed.

Inquiry, or the asking of questions that prompt visitors to participate in the learning process, is an art and not a science. Employing it requires practice. The method is not a particularly easy one either, especially because it departs from the more familiar expository and models, such as lecturing or reading from scripts. The reason for reviewing how the role of educator has changed—from tour guide to "teacher," and how participatory teaching became the primary, accepted mode of instruction—is that we must know why we teach as we do in order to improve how we teach.

Concurrently, it is essential that we know what we are teaching. What we hope to impart has changed from pre-determined facts about our collections to skills—ways of thinking within a discipline, methods of gaining information from primary sources, and ways of placing what is learned into a larger, more meaningful context. Perhaps it is useful to think of our collections as a means to an end, rather than the end itself.

We are not simply teaching about the collection, but about learning from objects or living things, and using our collections of objects or living things as significant and important examples.

Once we realize that our educational responsibilities to the public are less those of scholarship or authority, and more those of empowerment and accessibility, we grasp our mission and our challenge. We are no longer satisfied with simply telling people information; we want to employ questioning strategies and activities that challenge visitors to obtain information and construct meaning on their own. And, furthermore, we will understand how our responsibilities as educators differ markedly from those of curators.

In other words, we can begin to sharpen our teaching skills because we understand what skills we need and how we will use them.

Alan Gartenhaus
Publishing Editor
Participatory Teaching: Guiding the Discovery Process

While traditional classroom studies primarily call upon deductive reasoning skills (going from generalities and moving to specific examples), learning from art, history, or science collections requires inductive reasoning (looking at specific examples and extrapolating as to generalities). Quite naturally, therefore, teaching within museums, historic sites, zoos, gardens, and other similar facilities will take on a slightly different "appearance" from the more familiar, classroom model.

Even though inductive reasoning is less a mainstay of classroom teaching than is deduction, induction is a familiar means of learning. In real life, young children mostly learn through induction. For instance, they see at home in their neighborhoods many different color and sized animals, all called "dogs," and from those specific examples they develop the ability to recognize any example of a dog.

Teaching an inductive lesson can feel a bit awkward at first since it requires that a docent lean away from giving an expository type lesson, such as a lecture or "gallery talk," and toward guiding discovery through participation. For instance, rather than tell visitors about the common characteristics of insects, a docent will challenge visitors to make observations and comparisons of a variety of insects on display, say...ants, grasshoppers, butterflies, dragonflies, and beetles. Then, the docent asks visitors to tell what characteristics they have noticed that all the examples share in common. The visitors move from collecting specific information to constructing a general conclusion.

Learning through induction usually requires three steps. First, visitors are asked to make observations through the use of activities. In this stage, visitors are gathering information through the senses and through intuitive impressions. Second, visitors classify their observations into categories or concepts that help to explain the information collected. In this step, questions are asked that challenge visitors to make inferences and to determine commonalities. Finally, students draw conclusions (or make discoveries) that describe the facts and observations. These conclusions are in the form of generalizations.

When generalizations are drawn, the docent or instructor should keep in mind that the final product of induction is probable answer rather than right answer. In an inductive lesson, the conclusion drawn or the inference made cannot be judged on the basis of a predetermined correct answer. The conclusion or inference must be based on, and defensible on the basis of, the data collected. That is why it is often useful to keep more than one discovery or hypothesis in play during discussions.

The introduction to an inductive lesson should arouse curiosity and alert visitors to the tour/lesson's purpose without also telling them what is going to be learned in the lesson. For example, it would be inappropriate to begin a lesson on Cubist paintings by telling visitors those characteristics Cubist paintings have in common. An appropriate introduction might be to ask visitors what happens when artist depict three-dimensional objects on a two-dimensional canvas. In this way, visitors are alerted to the topic to be examined, while the nature of the lesson is not revealed.

The body of an inductive lesson involves having visitors collect data or make observations. This may be accomplished individually, in small groups, or collectively. For example, visitors might be asked to list the many ways that the 18th century kitchen they stand in differs from a typical contemporary kitchen. Then, the docent leads a discussion that challenges visitors to generalize as to what cooking and eating might have been like over 200 years ago.

Phyllis Cooper, a docent at the National Museum of Natural History, in Washington, D.C., shows visitors new findings from the ocean floor.
(If a conclusion or generalization deviates from standard knowledge on a topic, the docent leads a discussion, not of why visitors came to a “wrong” conclusion, but of why their conclusion differs from what is generally accepted.)

The summary of an inductive lesson should return to the generalizations derived from the discovery lesson and reinforce those that are most salient. Often, it is useful to ask the visitors, themselves, to summarize what they have discovered.

Countless studies have proven that listening does not lead to learning. In fact, the vast majority of what is told to us is forgotten within a few short hours. These same studies do demonstrate, however, that learning and retention are strongest when there are opportunities for participation and dialogue. And, since the measure of any educational endeavor is the learning that occurs, rather than the teaching, it only makes sense that docents work toward strengthening their ability to teach in a participatory manner.

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Alan Gartenhaus
Publishing Editor

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Flexibility Demands a Written Plan

Any good realtor will tell you, “The key to success is location, location, location.” A good teacher understands that the key to success in the classroom is “flexibility, flexibility, flexibility.” Flexibility, however, is only possible with a good written plan undergirding the lesson. If you don’t have a plan, you aren’t really being flexible, you are simply flitting around; you are winging it and depending on chance. Being flexible is not the same as being spontaneous. Flexibility implies that you know what you’re doing and have the mental agility to achieve it from a new or different direction.

Like classroom teachers, docents, too, find that a good lesson plan leaves them free to select appropriate artifacts and exhibits and to change their selections as circumstances change. The following is a sample lesson plan used with paintings and sculpture at the New Orleans Museum of Art. Although written for use with a specific museum’s collection, the plan’s flexibility makes it adaptable for use in other museums and with other disciplines.

The Group
- third graders

The Theme
- color is part of the artist’s language

The Goals
- In the cognitive domain: each student will leave the museum knowing that –
  - an art museum has many different kinds of art expressed in different media;
  - an artist uses a special “language” to speak to us; and
  - colors have meaning, and an artist uses color as one way of expressing ideas and emotions.
- In the affective domain: each student will leave the museum feeling that –
  - his or her ideas are worthwhile;
  - an art museum is a pleasant place; and
  - he or she would like to return for a future visit.

The Behavioral Objectives
(Based on Bloom’s Taxonomy)

Knowledge — by the end of the lesson, each student will identify red, yellow, and orange as warm colors, and blue, green, and purple as cool colors; and distinguish between a painting and a sculpture

Comprehension — by the end of the lesson, each student will name at least one color that symbolizes the same thing to most people; and find a color in paintings and/or sculpture that means the same things to most people

Application — by the end of the lesson, each student will tell how he or she thinks the artist chose the colors he or she did; and tell why he or she thinks the artist chose to make a painting rather than a sculpture

Analysis — by the end of the lesson, each student will tell why he or she thinks the artist chose the colors he or she did; and tell why he or she thinks the artist chose to make a painting rather than a sculpture

Synthesis — by the end of the lesson, each student will use color transparencies and an overhead projector to create “pictures” that represent ideas or emotions; and tell what media and what colors he or she would use to produce an art work at school or at home that represented an idea or emotion

Evaluation — by the end of the lesson, each student will choose to “be” a specific color and tell how he or she would feel, walk, taste, smell; and choose to “be” a painting or a sculpture and tell why he or she chose that type of art.

The Lesson

An introduction with the whole group seated in a circle will include the following concepts:
- an art museum has many different kinds of art expressed in many different media

  Where are we? What will you see here? What is the difference between painting and sculpture? Have you made art?
- an artist uses a special “language” to speak to us

  How do you know what I’m saying? How can we find out what an artist is saying?
- colors have meaning and an artist uses color as one way of expressing ideas and emotions

  One of the ways an artist speaks to us is with color. Show colored squares of warm colors. What have you seen that are similar in color to these? If you could touch these colors, would they be...
warm or cool? Repeat activity with cool colors.

Sometimes, we use colors to mean special things. If I say I'm blue, what do I mean? Show a red stop sign shape with the word "Go" written on it. "What's wrong with this sign? Red often means danger or be aware. Besides stop signs, what have you seen that uses the color red to tell us to pay attention?

Dividing the whole class into smaller groups reinforces the goals of the tour, giving children greater opportunities for individualized attention and participation. We are going to divide into smaller groups so we can talk with each other better. When you get a color handed to you, go stand with the guide who is holding the same color. You will be in her group. That guide will take you around the museum. Together, you'll look at both paintings and sculptures, and explore ways that artists speak to us using colors.

The Gallery Tour

- The Window at Nice
  by Raoul Dufy
  Which colors seem coolest in this painting? Which colors seem warmest? Where would you like to be in this painting? Why?

- The White Line
  by Sam Francis
  Which side of this painting would you rather be on? Why? What do you think the white line is for? What do you think the artist wanted us to think about when we looked at his painting?
  Transition: As we move to the next gallery, pay close attention to the colors you see. Which colors do you see most?

- Seated Buddha
  What makes this work of art a sculpture and not a painting? At one time this sculpture, which seems to have very little color, was brightly painted. This very important man wore red robes. Can you think of some other important people who wear red clothes?

- Japanese Ink Stone and Stationery Boxes
  Explain the purpose of these boxes. If you owned these boxes would you use them everyday or mostly on special occasions? What makes you think they may be special? What other special things have you seen that are gold in color?

  Transition: Our next stop will be in a room that is painted red and gold. When you see it, hold up your hand.

- The Good Shepherd
  by Henry Ossawa Tanner
  What time of day do you think it is? How do the colors make you feel? If the artist had used lots of yellows, reds, and oranges in this painting, instead of blues and purples, how might the feeling of the painting change?

- Woman in a Green Hat
  by Kees van Dongen
  The artist chose to paint this woman using some unusual colors for her face. What do his choices tell you about this woman?
  Transition: If you could choose a color to be, what color would you choose? Walk the way your color makes you feel.

Follow-up Projects

Ask students what colors they would use to make a "happy" picture or a "sad" picture. Then, using color transparencies and an overhead projector, have each student create a "picture" that represent an idea or emotion that they explain.

Next, have each student drape a colored cloth over their shoulders. Have them tell how that color makes them feel, walk, and sound.

The Conclusion

All groups should return to the original meeting place where one docent will read a selection from *Hailstones and Halibut Bones*, Mary O'Neil's book of color poems for children. Ask students to tell what colors they saw that were warm; which were cool. Were there any colors that you liked most? In what painting or sculpture did they appear? Why did you like it best? Challenge students to look at the many colors they will see on their way back to school? What colors do they see most?

Though this lesson was prepared specifically for paintings and sculpture in the New Orleans Museum of Art's permanent collection, the goals and objectives could be applied in any art museum. In other types of museums, historic homes, zoos, and botanical gardens, the basic idea remains the same — create goals and objectives first. Then, find objects and exhibits within your collection that are good examples, and that help children meet the objectives. Flexibility in choosing objects (and in guiding conversations) is possible when lessons are built on a solid base of goals and objectives, because when you know what you are teaching a shift needn't throw you off the mark.

Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor
Knowing What’s Expected

Position Descriptions & Volunteer Agreements for Docents

A docent program grows, how can changes in training and touring expectations be incorporated without confusion or conflict? How can a docent program effectively clarify docent responsibilities and privileges and at the same time avoid misconceptions? If there are changes in staff, as well as changes in docent and staff roles, are they clear to all? In 1994, the Docent Coordinator and Docent Council at the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, the two national museums of Asian art at the Smithsonian Institution, addressed these issues. The Docent Coordinator and Docent Council came up with an answer — create a position description and volunteer agreement for docents.

The docent’s position description would contain some elements of a typical job description, clarifying the qualifications and responsibilities required for the job of volunteer docent, as well as listing the institutional privileges and staff support that docents would be able to expect. There would also be a separate voluntary agreement form, effective for one year, that both staff and docents would sign. Unlike a typical job description, this document would reflect the special relationship volunteers have with a museum. (We were aware that this could raise sensitive issues of roles and responsibilities both for staff and docents, since there had never been anything like it in the history of the docent program or the museum.)

A 9-Step Process

Working together from October 1994 through June 1995, the Docent Coordinator and Docent Council created a position description and volunteer agreement in the following way:

1. **Defining the problem** is a crucial first step in developing a position description. What are the issues the document needs to address? If there are difficulties and sources of confusion affecting your organization, analyze how these came about and what the solutions might be. For example, our Freer and Sackler docent corps had grown tremendously over the years, and so had the needs and expectations of an expanded docent program. Problems seemed to stem from:
   a) training differences of new docent classes that led to differing expectations;
   b) change from a volunteer docent supervisor to a professional education department;
   c) growth in size of the group, mandating different management techniques;
   d) inequalities due to lack of clarity with respect to touring and training;
   e) lack of specifically expressed guidelines that would apply to everyone.

2. **Informing and discussing the idea of a position description with supervisors** and, if appropriate, members of the administration can circumvent misunderstanding later. Leaving supervisory staff in the dark can be a political minefield. By involving the administration, you gain their support and prevent future problems.

3. **Reviewing docent job descriptions from other institutions** can be a source of good ideas. After carefully examining materials from Smithsonian and non-Smithsonian organizations, we developed a clearer idea of what would work best for our program.

4. **Developing ideas about what is needed and wanted** helped us clarify our goals.
   A. We thought a position description should clarify expectations and define both staff and docent roles so that problems would be less likely to occur.
   B. We decided the ability to review and revise on an annual basis was critical, since changes in leadership, finances, and programming can occur.
   C. We wanted the position description and volunteer agreement to be sent to each docent annually, and to have a signed volunteer agreement form on an annual basis.
   D. We wanted position descriptions for both Active and Emeritus docent status.
   E. We needed to include a section that described docent benefits or privileges.

5. **Involving docents**, either the Docent Council or a leadership committee representing the docent body, can be tremendously helpful. In our case, the nine members of the 1994-95 Docent Council took on a leadership role in working with the Docent Coordinator, offering sound advice, resolving sensitive issues, and informing the docent corps of the progress of this project. At several docent meetings during the year, the position description and volunteer agreement were discussed, providing every docent the opportunity for questions, comments, and suggestions. Also a series of status letters...
was mailed to docents. Throughout the entire process, the docent corps felt they were being informed and their ideas solicited. This created strong support for the project, and there were no surprises when docents received the final document.

Revising and modifying the original draft as a result of discussions, comments, and editing by a docent leadership group is critical. Having a group such as the Docent Council reviewing the draft can help prevent problems later on. For example, two council members objected to the tone of our draft. One considered the draft to be like a “military manual,” the other objected to words that said “docents must ...” and thought it should be “docents have the right ...”. Basing the draft on a typical job description, in which an employer tells an employee what to do, had resulted in a document that was too authoritarian. Museums and docents have a different relationship, a special relationship based on volunteerism. The draft position description was revised, using warmer language and a warmer tone to reflect this special relationship. The ability of a museum staff member to see both sides of an issue can result in mutual respect and cooperation and fewer problems in the future.

Sending the document for departmental, administrative, and legal review is important at this point. Supervisors should be given the opportunity for review and the addition of comments. Legal counsel is advised. Our legal counsel suggested we use the term privileges, rather than benefits. He felt a docent job description is a valuable document and that every organization using volunteers should have one. This is especially important nowadays when lawsuits can be brought against an institution by a disgruntled volunteer.

Also, without a job description on hand, it is very difficult to “separate” a problem volunteer from the institution.

Final revisions and a cover letter are needed before sending out the document. In addition to final revisions, it is important to compose a cover letter, written in a warm and positive tone, to explain the rationale, process, and benefits of having the position description and volunteer agreement.

Giving the position description and volunteer agreement to docents for signature is the last step. In September 1995, each docent received a copy of the 1996 fiscal year position description and volunteer agreement for signature. Docents returned the signed volunteer agreements, which were placed in their files; a copy was given to each docent. There were no problems and no complaints. A number of docents wrote complimentary letters praising the position description and volunteer agreement.

Lessons Learned

One of the most crucial lessons we learned was how valuable it was for docents and staff to work together. Working together made docents a part of the change, and gave them the opportunity to express concerns and include points felt to be of importance. The Docent Council, representing the docent corps, suggested ideas that the staff had not considered, provided editorial comments, discussed and came to a consensus on sensitive items, and learned of the problems the staff faced in managing the program. The result was greater openness and

Bill Whalen, and other docents at the Freer and Sackler Galleries of the Smithsonian Institution, knew what is expected of them and what privileges and support they are entitled to receive because they have a position description and volunteer agreement. Photo: courtesy of Smithsonian Institution, ImaginAsia Program

Continued on next page.
Position Descriptions & Volunteer Agreements for Docents

less hostility. When the position description was finally presented to the entire docent corps, it did not appear as an authoritarian directive from above, but was accepted as a reasonable document that had benefited from docent input right from the beginning.

Among the important points addressed by the position description was the setting of touring and training requirements. For the first time in the history of the program, yearly touring minimums were set, subject to annual revision by the Docent Coordinator. No longer would a docent be able to give one tour a year and still be considered an active docent! There is flexibility as far as the minimum touring hours are concerned. Inclement weather, leave of absence, personal issues, and other unexpected problems are taken into consideration. If a docent has come to the museum for a scheduled group tour and the group does not show up, the docent still gets touring credit.

Training requirements were also stated clearly, allowing a docent to miss 1/4 of the sessions without penalty and to make-up missed training by listening to audio tapes. The Docent Coordinator can modify items without formal docent input. For example, attendance for training on safety evacuation procedures was added to the position description.

Many programs have different status categories to accommodate a variety of situations. We added an Emeritus Docent position description for docents who have served a long time, but could no longer give tours, and yet want to retain some affiliation with the museum. As Emeritus Docents, they may attend most training sessions and are invited to participate in all docent social and enrichment activities. This status is not reversible.

Another status category was added a year later, that of Adjunct Docent. This position description is based on the format of the Active Docent position description, but training and touring requirements are reduced by half. Only a small number of docents are granted this status. This category accommodates the special circumstances (health problems, family issues, change in employment status) of valuable docents. These circumstances can be limited in time and may change, and Adjunct Docents can request active status again.

Evaluation and Conclusions

So was the development of a position description agreement for docents worth the effort? Would we recommend it to others? Has it made a difference? The answer is an unqualified YES! In the long run it is better for docents and staff to know what they can expect and what is expected of them. Providing a written document, one that must be signed annually, does away with rumors, word of mouth inaccuracies, and ideas that come from the past that are no longer suitable. It establishes a professional standard.

Does a position description and volunteer agreement mean greater conformity, organizational rigidity, more “big government” regulations? NO!!! — it definitely does not. A document such as the one we have developed is only a tool — a tool that helps provide a framework and serves as a guide for docents trying to do their best.

Like so many other institutions, the Freer and Sackler Galleries have experienced changes in organizational leadership, personnel, finances, and exhibitions over a period of more than ten years. In the growth and structure of the docent program, we have moved from a rather informal and autonomous docent corps to one that is on a very professional level. The position description and volunteer agreement is a reflection of the changing role of docents in our museums, and has helped to clarify a number of issues. Nowadays, in so many organizations, volunteers are considered to be no different from other employees. With our position description and volunteer agreement, our organization — docent corps and education department together — runs more smoothly than before, and allows us to concentrate on more substantive matters. What we have developed is a flexible tool that we can adapt over time to accommodate future growth and change. We view the position description and volunteer agreement positively and feel it works for us. Confusion about docent and staff roles and responsibilities has become a thing of the past.

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Tips for Teaching Limited English Speakers

The Docent Council of the Oakland Museum, in Oakland, California, produced a highly instructive text to assist docents who tour visitors with limited knowledge of the English language. Their manual, entitled Expanding Horizons: Art Museum Tour Techniques for Beginning and Intermediate English Speakers, offers recommendations for making your speech more understandable to Non-Native English speakers. They are:

- **Go slowly.** Remember that visitors are translating as you speak. As in any language, many English words sound like other words and have multiple meanings.
- **Punctuate your pauses.** Practice giving out “chunks” of information and then pausing to let visitors translate that which was imparted into their own languages. It is much easier to translate phrases than individual words.
- **Articulate carefully.** Enunciation is important as there are many dialects of American English. Pay attention to articulating consonants which are especially important to understanding English words.
- **Use adequate volume.** In much of our normal conversation, the endings of words and sentences are allowed to drift out of hearing range because the person being addressed knows in advance how the word or thought will finish. This is often not the case with ESL visitors. The sense of your explanation depends on your audience hearing each word clearly.
- **Eliminate slang expressions or idioms.**
- **Use simple verb forms whenever possible.** “We will see several examples,” rather than “We will be seeing several examples.” “This basket was used for gathering plants,” rather than “This basket has been used for gathering plants.”
- **Use the subject — verb — object formula whenever possible.**
- **Use rhetorical questions to repeat information.** “California has a very diverse population. Why did so many different kinds of people come to California? They came from many places for many reasons.”
- **Watch out for proper names.** For beginners, proper names cannot be distinguished from other unfamiliar words. It is better to say, “This artist’s name is Elmer Bischoff,” or “This painting was made by an artist named Manuel Neri,” rather than “This is a Manuel Neri.”
- **Expand your non-verbal vocabulary.** Many concepts can be clarified by using gestures and body language. What gestures could you use to reinforce these ideas: “The red line sets a mood of anxiety,” or “The lines in this painting give a sense of balance”?
- **Practice! Practice! Practice!** Adapting your speech is not difficult but does require practice. As an exercise, work with a partner and select one work of art. Interpret the same work three times, modifying and simplifying your speech each time and incorporate feedback from your partner. Your third presentation will show a marked improvement.

The Lost Museum

During the Second World War, the Nazis had a guiding ambition to assemble for Germany the greatest treasures of European art, as well as to enrich the personal collections of powerful Nazi leaders. In his meticulously researched account of the wartime trade, The Lost Museum, Hector Feliciano chronicles the systematic looting of art by the Nazis, most of which was stolen from the collections of prominent French-Jewish families. Many of the works were returned to their owners after the war, but thousands of them were not. Some of these “lost” art works are tracked down to their present locations in Europe and the United States. More than 2,000 of the works that were looted or sold to the Nazis found their way into French national museums, where they are labeled as “unclaimed.” Still others can be found in Switzerland.

This fascinating book is sure to rivet readers with museum connections and interests.

Learn and Play

Whether a weekend seminar or a 14-day cruise, the Smithsonian Institution’s travel programs combine the best of going to school with being on vacation. Groups are small and led by authorities in their respective fields. Smithsonian Study Tours and Seminars, 1100 Jefferson Drive, SW, Washington, DC 20560. (202) 357-4700 or http://www.si.edu/tsa/sst
When Activities Teach,  
What is the Docent’s Role?

Tim Grove

The emergence of activity-based learning centers in museums across the country poses a challenge to docents who staff these areas. In these “discovery” rooms, visitors engage in activities designed for self-directed learning. The role of the docent becomes that of facilitator, which means interacting with visitors in a less traditional way. How can docents share their wealth of knowledge in a setting that is designed to promote self-directed learning? Within this paradox lies the challenge for docents. When the activities teach, what is the docent’s role? By using a learning center at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History as a model, we can create a profile of the “ideal docent” for such an environment.

The staff of the popular Hands On History Room learning center at the Museum has struggled with the above questions. The Hands On History Room targets all ages, from 5 through adults. Most of the exhibit’s thirty-five activities use reproductions of objects and relate directly to permanent exhibits in galleries. Visitors gin cotton, make rope, decipher a buffalo hide painting, sort mail, explore the life of slaves on a rice plantation, and try their hand at Morse code, among other activities. Between 3 and 5 docents staff the Room when it is open to visitors. Controlled access to the Room is through one door. The enclosed space was planned to encourage a change of pace from the rest of the Museum and to provide an intimate environment where learning is fun. During busy times of the year, free tickets are required for admission. Docents clear the Room every thirty minutes in order to admit the next group.

What characteristics does a docent in a self-directed learning environment need? The following components appear to be key: flexibility, sensitivity to visitor needs, an ability to ask good questions, and knowledge of differences in learning styles.

Flexibility is an important job requirement for all docents, but even more for those who facilitate self-directed learning. Because docents control visitor access to and in the space, they must be able to explain and, where necessary, enforce all of the Room’s policies. Docent responsibilities in the Room also include: monitoring visitor flow, keeping visitor statistics, protecting the collection, tidying up between sessions, and presenting focused school programs.

The number one priority when facilitating the visitor experience is sensitivity to visitor needs — knowing when a visitor needs help with an activity, when a visitor desires interaction with a docent, which activities are most suitable for visitors with various accommodation needs (visual and hearing impairments, cognitive disabilities, etc.), and which activities are suitable for which age groups. Since every activity in the Room is self-directed using clue cards, written and visual directions, or audio directions, visitors do not need docents to have meaningful experiences. Through practiced observation, docents learn to discern

Young visitors try the Hands-On History Room high-wheelers. But, have they learned anything from the experience?  
Photo: Smithsonian Institution
which visitors desire docent interaction and which are content without it. Certain activities, such as the cotton gin and the highwheel bicycles, require docent monitoring for safety reasons. Other activities, such as making rope, harnessing the life-sized fiberglass mule, or using the telegraph station, require several people to complete the activity.

Knowing how to construct and ask good questions is the key to becoming an effective facilitator. When visitors jump right into an activity without reading the attached descriptive text, the docent must get involved to ensure that learning takes place. For instance, visitors in the Room have an opportunity to climb up on a stationary highwheeler and feel what it was like to ride one of those amazing machines. The textual material accompanying the bikes places them into historical context and includes interesting photographs of people riding highwheelers. Many visitors do not read this material, however, and merely climb on and peddle. When they get off the bike and go to another activity, chances are they will not have made any connection to history unless a docent gets involved.

The docent can ask questions to get a discussion started. "Why might the bike have such a big wheel?" "Why do you think the bicycle was designed this way?" "What is missing from the bicycle that we have on bikes today?" These questions lead to others, and often to a fascinating discussion of highwheelers. At the very least, the next time the visitor rides her bicycle, she might think back to this experience, and at best, the visitor might be curious enough to explore more about the golden age of highwheelers on her own.

![Image](image-url)

Learning from experience does not mean learning without guidance or assistance. After completing the task of assembling a piggin (small barrel), this docent helps place the activity into its historical context.

Photo: Smithsonian Institution

Ultimately, the docent can encourage the visitor to see the authentic object in our collection. As naturalist Freeman Tilden wrote in his text, *Interpreting Our Heritage*, the chief aim of interpretation is provocation. Good thought-provoking questions help guide visitors toward making personal connections with history.

Understanding differences in personal learning styles is also essential for working in an environment where self-directed learning occurs. The Hands On History Room is based in part on the theories of multiple intelligences. (Howard Gardner has written several books on this subject.) Docents who recognize that people receive information in different ways and who have a clear understanding of the learning styles related to each activity are better able to assist visitors. For example, visitors who are drawn toward logic usually enjoy learning about an eighteenth-century cooper's craft: putting a piggin (a small barrel) together. This activity shows the skill involved in fitting precisely crafted staves tightly into position inside three hoops without using nails or pegs. Visitors must carefully follow directions to set up the staves around the inside of the smallest hoop. Once they fit the tenth stave into the hoop, they can continue. While this is a challenging activity, it is easy to miss the historical context and to think of constructing the piggin as simply an entertaining puzzle.

A docent can give procedural tips to the visitor, while asking provocative questions. Continued on next page.
When Activities Teach,
What is the Docent’s Role?

Continued from previous page.

questions: “What skills did coopers need?” “How might people have used piggins?” “What objects do we use today instead?” The logical learner will leave satisfied that he met a challenge and mastered the puzzle, while learning something about history. Hopefully, he will remember the experience the next time he uses a Tupperware-type container.

Can docent-led programming work in a discovery room designed for self-directed learning? Yes, but only for certain groups. Morning school programs in our Hands On History Room follow a structured approach that provides focus within the self-directed learning format. Every school visit examines one of five broad historical themes: Life in the late 1700s, Life in the 1800s, Westward Movement, Native Americans, and Invention and Industry. Teachers choose the theme and discuss the content with a docent prior to their museum visit. The program employs three approaches. In part one, a docent leads the entire class through an activity introducing the theme and the importance of primary sources. Part two features docent-led small-group exploration of activities relating to the theme. In part three, the students have free-time to explore the entire space. This format, initiated in the fall of 1996, has been well-received by teachers and docents alike. The thematic focus supplements and reinforces classroom curriculum and gives docents the opportunity for a different level of interaction with the students than they have with the general public.

Docent-led and focused activities have not been as successful with public sessions. Both docents and visitors realized that imposing a docent-initiated structure in an unstructured discovery room is not appealing. One reason that the Hands On History Room is so popular and successful is that the activities allow visitors to teach themselves. Docents can, however, augment the experience by directing and encouraging visitor involvement, and by supplementing textual and visual materials with provocative questioning.

The challenge for docents working in our Hands On History Room is to find ways to help visitors enjoy their visit and have rewarding experiences. From what we read in the visitor comment book, they are successful. “Excellent!” wrote one visitor, “Docents used inquiry skills to take visitors beyond the basic activity to the historical importance of process.”

Tim Grove is an Education Specialist at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, D.C. As program coordinator of the Museum’s Hands On History Room exhibits, he trains and manages a docent corps of sixty.
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Teaching with Wordplay

Art museums are places where people talk about art. The more we can encourage young people on school tours to talk about art, the more they will notice and the more they will remember. In addition, the more they become comfortable talking about the design and meaning of works of art, the greater the likelihood that they will continue to take part in such discussions as they grow into adulthood.

There are all sorts of techniques docents can use to encourage students to talk about art. Here are two examples.

Clues and Questions

Have you ever played the game “20 Questions?” Someone says, “I’m thinking of something in this room,” and the others ask questions that can be answered “yes” or “no” until they can identify the object selected. Clues and Questions is a museum version of that game. It encourages students to look at a group of objects and begin making distinctions among them. Because the game involves categorizing, it works best with students in grades 4-8.

Beginning with a wall or room of maybe 10-12 paintings, the museum teacher says, “I am thinking of a painting in this room (on this wall). Let’s see if you can guess which painting I am thinking of by asking me just five (or 6, 7, 9) questions. Here are the rules. All I will answer is ‘yes’ or ‘no.’ The one question you cannot ask me is, ‘Is it that one?’ In other words, you have to ask me something about the painting.”

Students usually get the idea quickly, and begin by asking category questions like, “Are there people in the painting?” “Is it an indoor picture?” As pictures begin to be eliminated, questions need to become more specific. “Is there a sun in the painting?” Sooner rather than later, students have isolated the one painting selected. Then, a discussion of the selected art work follows before moving to phase two of the game.

This time the museum teacher picks a child to choose the mystery painting from the same group of 10-12 paintings. The new rule in this game is that students may not ask any of the questions that were asked in the last game. The game can quickly become quite challenging as students grope for new questions to begin eliminating paintings and are forced to look again, from a different vantage point, at the same works of art. The classroom teacher’s or museum teacher’s input can sometimes help students develop a new line of questioning, but usually students come up with their own inventive queries.

This is a game children can play anytime they are in an art museum with family friends. Not only do students have fun using skills of description, categorizing, and questioning, they also notice things in works of art that they would have missed otherwise. This is a good activity at the introduction to a tour, demonstrating how much there is to see in any work of art. Its content is open ended and student driven. The goal is to get young people engaged in the process of looking, and to get them talking about art. Both of these goals are enthusiastically achieved by students.
This activity, which works so well in an art museum setting, can easily be adapted for teaching purposes in museums of history and historic sites. The process would be similar, however the objects selected would be artifacts, tools, or machinery from other times (or items found in historic homes) rather than works of art.

**Portrait Autobiographies**

Portraits are pictures of people. Portrait painters try to capture something of the essence of the sitter in the way they paint a face, clothing, the surroundings, etc. In this game, children look at a variety of portraits and write an imaginary autobiography about one of them. The teacher or student then reads the autobiography, letting other students guess which portrait is being described. The activity works well for students grades 4 - 12, but I will be describing the process we use for grades 4 - 8.

In this game we use a complete-the-sentence worksheet to help students think about the character of the person in the portrait. The worksheet looks something like this. My name is ....

I am ... years old.
I work or spend my time as a ....
I am thinking about ....
People usually think I am ....
I like the way the artist painted my ....
I do not like the way the artist painted my ....

Each answer reveals something about the child who wrote it, and something about the painting as well.

When working with kids at very low reading or writing levels the activity can be accomplished cooperatively, letting a group of four students, for example, work together to write an autobiography. One of my most memorable experiences playing this game was with a group of mildly retarded middle schoolers. They couldn't read or write, but there were enough chaperones to assign one to do the reading and writing for each group of 4 or 5 participants. The students came up with wonderfully witty and perceptive things and left with a great feeling of accomplishment.

**Portrait Autobiographies** introduces an important concept in art to its participants — the role of the artist in creating a portrait. The game changes depending on whether you are looking at Colonial American portraits, in which sitters are surrounded by objects that reveal things about them, or the portraits of artists like Thomas Eakins, where only the sitter appears and the paintings seem to be psychological studies. We've even used it with the Pop Art "portraits" of Andy Warhol!

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**Maria Shoemaker** is the Associate Curator of Education for Youth and Family Programs at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. She is the author of numerous articles on museum education and is a lecturer/presenter at museums and conferences throughout the country. Portions of this article were previously published in the Pennsylvania Literacy Network Journal (Vol. 1, No. 1). Ms. Shoemaker has contributed several other articles to The Docent Educator, including "A Guide to Childhood Development" (Vol. 2, No. 1) and "New School Year's Resolutions" (Vol. 4, No. 1).

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*The Docent Educator* Winter 1997-98
Listen to Learn, Talk to Teach?  

OK, so we weren't exactly a typical tour group. Most of us on the tour of the Palacio Real (Royal Palace) and the Prado in Madrid were teachers. Some were high school art teachers, others taught history, and all had some facility with the Spanish language. We had done our homework.

Our guide, however, had a standard tour in mind. She told us things we already knew. She refused to stray from her talk — leaving our questions unanswered and missing an opportunity to add some depth to the information she recited. She didn't listen; she only talked.

When our group arrived at the Prado, we thanked her politely and said we'd tour alone. What a missed opportunity! But, a guide or docent who doesn't listen to her audience is worse than no guide at all.

There is no good reason for a docent to be unresponsive to his audience. Even when a docent tours large numbers of people, it is possible to listen. I saw this demonstrated well at San Simeon, California, when the guides for two different tours both told us that they had no “canned” tour. “We look at those things that interest us, unless you let us know what interests you,” one of them explained. As we entered each of the magnificent rooms in the William Randolph Hearst castle, the guide observed where we visitors moved. Did we look at the paintings? Were the furnishings more to our liking? She asked us questions and answered our inquiries about specific items. She gave us information that might have been included in a pre-written tour, but she also responded to our interests as she listened to us.

Docent training programs almost always include ample background information about the exhibits and artifacts of a particular institution. Time is usually allowed for developing age-appropriate questions and activities. Frequently, lessons in public speaking are included.

Learning to listen, however, is one of the teaching skills often overlooked in docent training, and it is a skill that separates good docent tours from uninspiring guided walk-throughs.

In some tour environments, such as the marble halls of many museums and historic homes, or the wide-open spaces of zoos and botanical gardens, poor acoustics are a major hindrance to good listening. It's always easier to communicate with small groups, of course, but in situations with poor acoustics, small groups are even more important. The face-to-face contact necessary for good listening is also easier when extraneous sounds are minimized. Sometimes this is simply a matter of scheduling (restructuring tour programming during the height of the museum remodeling) or flexibility (avoiding the same intimate gallery where another docent is already holding forth.)

Docents also need to be aware that higher pitched sounds are usually the first to disappear as hearing is lost, and most children's voices are in this higher register. It is doubly important, therefore, that docents working with student groups maximize a good listening environment. This means looking directly at the person talking to you, and even moving your position when needed.

Good listening, however, is not guaranteed by good logistics (and there are times when manipulating logistics is simply beyond a docent's control). This is when it is even more important that the docent create an atmosphere in which visitors feel comfortable offering their views or asking questions. One way to accomplish this is for the docent to think of her tour more as a conversation than a “talk,” and to structure it so that both she and her visitors have real opportunities to engage — where both are participants who ask questions, contribute ideas, and voice opinions.

When planning tours, consider and incorporate some of these basic mechanics of listening.

♦ As visitors speak, think about what they are saying. Avoid thinking ahead to the next exhibit. And, avoid planning your response to their comments or questions before they have even finished talking.

♦ Keep your mind off your watch!

♦ Listen for visitors’ meaning rather than merely to the words they use. “Listen between the lines,” when required.

♦ Reread and rephrase their comments to ensure that you have interpreted them correctly and to let your audience know that you really are listening.
Pull other tour members into discussions by asking them to respond or offer their perspective.

Verbally encourage questions or comments, and receive them with a smile, a nod, or other appropriate body language.

Speaking of body language, learn to "listen" to the visitors' expressions and movements. They speak volumes about the visitors' emotional state (i.e. - interest, boredom, curiosity, confusion, etc.). Do not be so pre-programmed as to be unresponsive to the audience's needs and interests. And, be prepared to move on to another topic, expand your explanation, or rephrase an answer when your audience's body language tells you to do so.

Which leads me to that expression on YOUR face! Yes, it does take time to listen to the members of your tour group. True, you may not be able to say everything you wanted or hoped to say. You may not even be able to show the group as many exhibits or artifacts as you wanted to show them. Just remember that a tour where others talk (even if they don't know as much as you do) may be a valuable use of visitors' time in your museum.

You are, of course, still "in charge." When a child (or adult, for that matter) strays too far from the subject, or monopolizes the tour, you have the responsibility to politely, but firmly, steer them back to center. When working with children, in particular, you must walk a fine line between listening to their comments and keeping them on target. Primary children, for example, will often contribute very convoluted stories to the conversation because they have not yet learned what good conversation is. A simple, "That's interesting," and return to your topic is usually enough to satisfy these youngest visitors. With adults who monopolize the discussion, however, it may be necessary to offer to listen to them later in order to preserve your tour integrity: "I'd like to hear more about that. Could you stay a few minutes after the tour?"

The difference between a monologue and a dialogue is often determined by a docent's ability to be a good listener as well as a good speaker. And, being guided by a docent who is a good listener as well as a good speaker often determines how satisfied visitors will be at the end of their tour of your institution.

Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor
When docents giving our eighth grade local history tour experienced difficulty getting the students to participate in discussion, we looked for other ways of involving them in our tour and lesson. Knowing that their museum visit is a rare opportunity to encounter authentic historic objects, we wanted to encourage them to pay special attention to the artifacts from early Wichita so that these would be memorable during the classroom unit following the tour.

We came up with a “Whatzit?” game, which motivates students to talk to each other about a group of objects that relate to the artifacts seen on their tour. Since these are all either reproductions or modern counterparts to historic items, they can be safely handled.

At a given point during the tour, students enter a classroom adjacent to the exhibit, where they divide into two teams. Each team chooses someone to write down answers as they examine 21 objects displayed on a table. Their first task is to identify each of the items, some of which require some creative analysis. Then, they group those items having the same purpose and decide which would have been used by Native Americans, early settlers, or present day Wichitans.

By the time one team has figured out that the weird-looking, somewhat fragrant, organic pouch suspended by three wooden poles is a buffalo stomach used as a cooking pot, they readily match it to the iron skillet and electric crock pot. Meanwhile, the other team is puzzling over popcorn and hardtack to match with a granola bar. The matching is easy, of course, and the identification process is fun. It is usually difficult to adjourn their team reports in time to catch the bus back to school, so willing are the students to share their findings.

What a far cry from the hesitant, awkward group that entered the museum just over an hour ago! These students leave with an enthusiasm for their newfound expertise at object reading that is rewarding to the docents as well.

Susan Miner
Education Director
Wichita-Sedgwick County Historical Museum

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