Demonstrations and Presentations

- Talking the Talk
- Thinking Outside the Box
- Weaving Artifacts into Stories
- Adding Flare to Guided Tours
- Docents Design Investigation Stations
- Finding and Using “Clear Proofs of Ability”
- Storytelling Ignites Experience
Talking the Talk

If there is one characteristic that distinguishes those who excel at giving presentations or demonstrations it is proficiency in public speaking. Public speaking, like most skills applicable to teaching, is not a simple matter. It requires understanding how to engage audiences and how to hold their interest while stimulating reflective thinking.

The “mechanics” of public speaking can be concisely stated and accounted for. The “performance” aspect of public speaking, on the other hand, is more difficult to define because it is a struggle to pin down such things as passion and style. (The ability to understand and harness the performance qualities of public speaking may be innately stronger in some people than others, but everyone can understand, develop, and improve, with effort, over time.)

For the purposes of this article, presentations are defined as talks where the presenter is the main focus for an audience. Eyes and ears are primarily fixed on the person speaking. Presenters need very strong speaking skills to maintain their audience’s attention and interest. Those who provide demonstrations also need strong speaking skills, but they can rely (at least partially) upon an activity, object, specimen, or living creature to serve as the main focus of their audience’s attention.

Taming Stagefright

During his stand-up comedy routine, Billy Crystal would tell audiences that he always got the “jitters” before going on stage. “It’s not unusual,” he noted. “The fear of public speaking is the most frequently named fear there is. It was mentioned even more often than the fear of death, which was second.” After pausing, he’d continue by saying, “I guess that means the greatest fear imaginable would be speaking at your own funeral!”

It’s true that most of us will experience feelings of stagefright whenever we speak before an audience. Over time, however, such feelings become more familiar, and as such, less debilitating. In other words, while stagefright may never completely leave us, it can be tamed.

Though I’ve taught workshops for docents and staff educators for more than 25 years, I still feel adrenaline course through my veins each time I stand before a group. While this is happening, I find it useful to remind myself that I am providing the audience with a service; that I am eager to share my interest in, and enthusiasm for, the topic; and that the audience realizes that I’m human. I’ve come to consider nervousness an ally — increasing my energy level, heightening my awareness, and reminding me to be a lively and informative presenter.

The Mechanics of Public Speaking

Whether you provide presentations or demonstrations at your institution, these are some general rules that may assist you:

✔ Outline your talk. Don’t deliver a speech verbatim, or memorize a talk. Such presentations usually sound “canned” and have far less vitality and spontaneity. In addition, should you lose your place or thoughts while delivering a memorized presentation you will have to reconstruct everything on the spot. If you lose your train of thought during an outlined presentation, you still have the gist of your conversation, know the direction and major points you are trying to make, and can continue.

✔ Modulate your voice and speak casually. Controlling your voice can be an exceptionally challenging task; however, it is essential as your voice can hold or lose an audience’s attention. Even the most interesting information sounds boring if delivered in a monotone. Strive to be expressive.

✔ Try to relax. Breathe! A nervous voice is thinner, more shrill, and harder to understand than a relaxed one. Enunciate, and speak casually. Avoid talking in a formal, clipped, or academic manner as this tends to be off-putting. Pace yourself. When nervous, most people begin to speak faster, and some more softly. Neither of these qualities — faster or softer — are appropriate when speaking before an audience.

It is always revealing and often very useful to record your talk and listen to it. When you do, try to ignore the content while focusing on the sound of your voice. Also, ask a fellow docent or staff member whose public speaking skills you respect for his or her feedback.

✔ Make eye contact with your entire audience. Look at the people before you. As you speak, work to establish contact with everyone, not just with one or two people. Allow your eyes to peruse faces. If possible, move around so that you can see everyone. Be aware of those people off to the sides or in the back.

✔ Be seen and heard. Be certain that everyone can see and hear you (and see a demonstrated activity/object/specimen/animal). Ask your audience if they can see and hear.

The Docent Educator Summer 2000
As a courtesy to members of the audience who may have difficulty hearing, it is often best to use sound amplification.

On occasion, shift your audience’s physical relationship to things. When appropriate, ask people in the back to come forward. Move around and through your group when possible. Be sensitive to your audience’s perspective. Remember that few things are more frustrating or discouraging than not being able to see or hear.

The Performance in Public Speaking

As previously stated, the “performance” inherent in public speaking is more subjective and less easily defined than are the “mechanics,” but it is no less important.

✓ Involve your audience.
Don’t allow your audience to remain passive. During presentations, people develop “listeners’ fatigue” fairly quickly. Bring your audience out of passivity. Invite them into your talk. Ask them open-ended questions. Have audience members share their thoughts, experiences, or ideas. Ask them to offer opinions. Even rhetorical questions (questions meant to provoke thought rather than oral responses) will involve and stimulate people.

When giving demonstrations, have your audience make observations “How would you describe this?” “What are its main attributes?” Have them make comparisons. “How is this different/similar to ...?” Ask for hypotheses “What do you think will happen?” Give audience members opportunities to participate by employing the same types of open-ended questions you might use during a gallery tour.

✓ Be lively. Enthusiasm is contagious. But, then again, so is ennui. Surely you’ve experienced how yawning makes others yawn. Ignite people’s curiosity and interest by expressing your own interest and enthusiasm. If you sound tired with your talk or demonstration, your visitors will pick up on it. If enthusiasm is something you must manufacture, then manufacture it! If you can’t, then it is time for a new assignment.

✓ Let your personality come through. Be yourself; don’t be scripted! Allow your own personality to weave into your “performance.” If you have a good sense of humor, laugh. If you just love the mathematics involved in something, revel. Remember that audiences make note of, and enjoy, speakers who convey an easy, approachable personality. So, cultivate your own style and share it while you perform your teaching responsibilities.

✓ Practice, practice, practice.
Public speaking takes plenty of practice. With practice, your level of comfort will grow. As comfort grows, so does confidence. With confidence, we can shift our focus from the mechanics of public speaking to its performance. And, through a strong performance, your speaking will be at its most effective and memorable.

Alan Gartenhaus
Publishing Editor
Foods for Thought

In addition to offering basic and advanced courses for adults in gardening, landscape design, floral design, botanical illustration, and plant studies, The New York Botanical Garden has a wide selection of food-related classes. The following have been among their offerings:

- **Wild Foods of Spring** examines forests, wetlands, and native plant gardens and information on safe and responsible foraging.

- **Mushroom Mania** surveys the great variety of mushrooms grown in the New York City area. Students learn the basis for successful field identification, including how to differentiate edible from poisonous species.

- **Vegetarian Cooking** is more than nuts and berries. Participants are led in the creation of nutritionally balanced multi-course vegetarian meals.

- **Cooking with Grains** examines ancient and uncommon grains such as amaranth, spelt, kamut, and teff and explores preparation methods for quinoa, millet, kasha, and others.

- **Quick Vegetarian Gourmet** teaches students to create fine meatless dishes with flair and flavor in approximately thirty minutes.

- **Wild Food Recipes** introduces students to methods of incorporating wild vegetation, such as chicory, dandelions, day lilies, fiddleheads, and nuts, into everyday recipes.

- **The Portable Garden: Growing Herbs in Containers** offers methods of designing and planting portable gardens and teaches how to grow herbs successfully indoors or on a city terrace or country patio.

- **The French Kitchen Garden in America** addresses such issues as whether or not to use raised beds or organic gardening methods, and how to design and plant gardens.

For further information or to request a catalog of courses call The New York Botanical Garden at (718) 817-8747.

Do You Thrill or Chill the Audience?

In her book *Knockout Presentations: How to Deliver Your Presentation with Power, Punch, and Pizzazz* author Diane DiResta provides tips on creating successful presentations. Here is DiResta's list of the ten most common mistakes that speakers make:

1. **Lack of preparation or focus.** If you're unprepared as a speaker, it shows. Take the time to know your topic and rehearse your presentation out loud. Be prepared for questions.

2. **Speaking too long.** Starting and ending your presentation late shows a lack of respect for the audience. Allow time for people to settle down and know how to cut and summarize a presentation if you sense you're running out of time.

3. **Not knowing the audience.** One of the biggest mistakes is not meeting the needs of your audience. Do not give the same presentation to different groups; tailor it for each audience.

4. **Projecting the wrong image.** Dress appropriately. Do not distract from your presentation.

5. **Using visual aids ineffectively.** Check all of your equipment before you speak, and have a backup plan in case something fails.

6. **Including too much material.** People can't digest information if you give them too much to chew on, so give them the condensed version. Make your points memorable.

7. **Using inappropriate humor.** The best bet is to poke fun at yourself, never at others. Better yet, if joke telling is not your forte, avoid jokes altogether.

8. **Speaking in monotone.** Too many speakers fail to realize the importance that tone of voice plays in the success of their presentation.

9. **Not connecting with your audience.** Begin your presentation from the listener's point of view and continue to address what's important to them.

10. **Offering weak evidence.** Don't expect the audience to take things on faith. If your presentation is sketchy or lacks substance, flesh it out and fill in the details.
AAM and the Sin of Omission

The editors of The Docent Educator find it curious that the 2000 National Program Committee for the American Association of Museums' Annual Meeting in Baltimore, MD, does not include one person currently holding an education position. Of the 27 members, the vast majority are directors, several are presidents, and a few are curators or exhibition designers. What has become of "Excellence and Equity," the AAM’s reinforced commitment to education?

Docents at the Opera!

The Canadian Opera Company (COC), in Toronto, offers educational programming that introduces students to an art form that "is powerful, emotional, immediate, and larger than life, and that deals with timeless mythology and the eternal struggles and joys of human nature."

Middle and secondary school students can attend dress rehearsals of opera performances for a very reduced price, just $12 (Canadian). In addition, students at the dress rehearsals begin with a 45 minute docent-led discussion of the story and background of the opera.

The Living Opera Program allows participants to attend a Student Dress Rehearsal, preceded by a day at the COC on location, taking a behind-the-scenes look at the creation of an opera. First, students are introduced to "the challenges faced by composers of opera. They also consider some of the innovative ways in which composers tackle those challenges." In addition, students investigate the dynamic designs for stage production from the COC’s technical department.

Other docent-led tours include a walking tour of the COC’s building (including visits to rehearsal studios, wig and make-up departments, music library, wardrobe, prop shop, coaching rooms, as well as the Imperial Oil Theatre) and Opera Storytime (an introduction to the stories and music of an opera as told by a dynamic storyteller).

To learn more about the Canadian Opera Company's educational offerings, contact their Education coordinator at (416) 363-6671, extension 307, or e-mail them at: education@coc.ca.
Adding Flare to Guided Tours

Imagine — a visitor stares blankly at a guide, alternately tuning in and out of attention. A group follows a guide around the site from stop to stop, never talking, only listening. These behaviors are not signs of an attentive audience having a positive experience. And yet, we have all had experiences similar to these.

In truth, it isn’t far removed from the one-dimensional tours visitors receive at many facilities around the country.

Now, imagine the opposite set of experiences. As visitors arrive they discover a hustle of activity. They see a figure and ask themselves, “Is that a real Civil War uniform he’s wearing?” Right away they realize that this will not be an average tour. Periods of listening to the guide present information are broken by interactions with living history demonstrators. The demonstrations allow visitors to encounter, first-hand, much of the subject matter the guide relates. Before visitors realize it, the tour is over, sending many of them back to the park in order to interact with demonstrators at their own speed.

So, just how do you go about creating interesting interactive tours? Permit me to share the techniques adopted at Arsenal Park. They may help you achieve this goal.

The story of the arsenal began in 1836 when the federal government commissioned the Fayetteville Arsenal for the construction and storage of arms in an attempt to expand national defenses. The second scenario is not imaginary. It represents a typical Sunday tour at Arsenal Park, which is part of the Museum of the Cape Fear Historical Complex in Fayetteville, N.C. Here, our LIVE! At the Arsenal program incorporates a series of demonstrations into the tour context.

During the Civil War, North Carolina troops took control of the facility and began manufacturing the Fayetteville Pistol-Carbine and the Fayetteville Rifle. In March of 1865 the arsenal was destroyed by Union troops. Today, Arsenal Park is located adjacent to the Museum of the Cape Fear. The park includes foundations of the arsenal’s machine shops, a steel representation of the northwest tower, and interpretive signage for a self-guided tour.

The Museum of the Cape Fear began LIVE! At the Arsenal in an attempt to expand and add vitality to its programming. Originally, tour groups were led around the site by guides wearing period clothing.

Docent Glinda Biggerstaff demonstrates 19th century quilting techniques at one of the demonstration stations at Arsenal Park, which is part of the Museum of the Cape Fear Historical Complex.

Photo: Courtesy of the Museum of the Cape Fear

by Rachel Yahn

The Docent Educator Summer 2000
Guides emphasized the political events and significant individuals associated with the arsenal's history. Last year, the Arsenal Park education coordinator experimented by adding two different interpretive stations. At each point, a tour group stopped and interacted with a reenactor. Each month featured one civilian and one military presentation to appeal to a broad range of visitor interests. This new format seemed to work well. It kept people interested throughout the tour and allowed supplementary information not directly tied to the tour content to be presented. Unfortunately, the demonstrations lacked continuity, simply offering random snippets of nineteenth century life.

So, this year, the museum staff further expanded the program format. On the first Sunday of each month, the living history demonstrations that accompany the guided tours would focus on specific themes. Some of the monthly themes presented include: textiles, weapons, foodways, Civil War infantry, the homefront during the Civil War, military camplife, a mail call for soldiers in camp, and medical practices. Among the specific demonstrations are dying, spinning, carding, bullet-making, gun cleaning, infantry drilling and firing, open-fire cooking, food preservation, basket making, quilting, and hospital activities.

Among the many benefits of integrating demonstrations into tours are increases in visitor comfort levels, site reputation, and visitation. Demonstrations put the public at ease. By adding an interactive dimension, the tour loses its formality and becomes more of an exchange of information. The visitors also seem more receptive to the information and concepts presented.

Interpretive stations that provide demonstrations allow people to learn in various ways, and through a combination of their senses. The taste of blackberry cobbler cooked in a Dutch oven, the smell of black powder fired from a rifle, and the monotony of rolling cartridges creates a more vivid picture of the past. While it is impossible to completely recreate the past, living history provides greater understanding.

Engaging visitors through demonstrations increases the visitors' attention spans — fidgeting stops and misbehavior by children decreases. In an era when historical sites and museums compete directly with other forms of leisure time entertainment, strong visitation becomes necessary for our survival. At the Museum of the Cape Fear, our galleries seldom rotate. By integrating different presentations and demonstrations, along with new activities, we have been able to encourage repeat visitation among the local public and hope to attract more tourists.

Also, by successfully marketing the new tour format, you will increase your site's visibility within the community. This year, museum staff at Arsenal Park will be issuing monthly press releases to announce the featured theme and the character of the tour. Such visibility not only attracts visitors, it attracts and rekindles the spirit of volunteers.

Once you have done your research to ensure credibility and accuracy, you will have to acquire a reliable volunteer corps. For this purpose, it is useful to identify organizations and specialists in your area that can assist. Gain the support of local artisans. Networking is the key. The Museum of the Cape Fear works closely with several reenactment groups around North Carolina.

The next step is to make certain you have the appropriate props. If you are a small site with a limited budget, do not despair. (Reproduction props are costly, and providing a wide array of demonstrations will require a greater number of supplies.) You will find that many reenactors possess their own equipment and are willing to bring their gear with them. Too, when reenactors decide to retire, they often sell their equipment for a reduced price. Neighboring institutions may also be willing to lend props on a short term basis.

Continued on the next page.
And, check the want ads in reenactor newsletters such as The Camp Chase Gazette and other living history publications.

Another tip to assist in the establishment of a demonstration program is to emphasize the importance of organization. Demonstrations relate to the tour theme so visitors are aware of the overriding message you wish to present. Also, it is critical to provide visitors with the proper orientation. A brief introductory statement describing the tour’s format will reduce any element of surprise and encourage a positive exchange among visitors and presenters. Thorough docent training is a must and should complete your preparation. Compose and distribute schedules, send out confirmation letters, and make docents aware of your goals for the season. Don’t forget that the docents’ expertise, interest, and abilities are important. In many instances, our volunteers have served in the capacity of teachers for our museum staff. In short, such programming should be a cooperative effort.

Volunteers should be allowed to evaluate the program. Listen to what the docents have to say. They are the people representing your site and have the most contact with visitors. Integrating demonstrations and presentations is a process of trial and error. Completing a survey halfway through a season allows time to make adjustments. A more extensive, final survey should be conducted at the end of the season. These responses will help you set next year’s goals and determine any changes that should be incorporated into your demonstrations.

Although the introduction of demonstrations into tour content requires thorough preparation, it is a sure way to add spice to existing programs and to create interesting, interactive tours. By taking into account some of these tips, you should find your site reaping the benefits of return visitation and increased publicity.

Rachel Yahn is the Arsenal Park education coordinator. Prior to spending the last year with the education department at the Museum of the Cape Fear Historical Complex in Fayetteville, N.C., Ms. Yahn worked in the curatorial department at the North Carolina Museum of History in Raleigh. In addition, Ms. Yahn completed internships at Historic Brattonsville in Rock Hill, S.C., and the Minnesota History Center in St. Paul, MN.
Storytelling Ignites Experience

by Bev Twillmann

Storytelling is a powerful tool. It is not just entertainment, but an instrument of great value. It is the oldest form of communication. It has no geographic boundaries. It is a way we understand and a natural way to motivate learning.

Story can be the basis of good interpretation. While people rarely remember facts, they often remember story! Story lets visitors experience other times, places, people, and events, and is an effective and fun method for communicating facts and relating information.

To begin your storytelling training, tap into the inner passion you feel — a passion that should be shared and experienced by the visitors you contact. Do not be afraid to share fervor, for it is contagious in the best sense of the word. Remember, interpretation without passion is only half a presentation.

Listening to a story is not just an audio experience, but an imaginative one as well. Storytellers count on an audience's involvement and reaction to make telling successful. Watch a group of people, whatever their age, listen to an exciting ghost story and you will see fear and anticipation. Likewise, laughter, tears, and nodding of heads reveal participation as well as listening.

Storytelling is sometimes defined as "helping listeners make pictures in their minds," which is another way of saying "visualizing." Visualization in interpretive programs helps visitors make images in their minds. And, as any effective storyteller knows, without visualization, the story does not come to life.

A key to successful storytelling is being creative and using your creativity to help an audience change their perspective. Remember that questions beginning with the word "what" usually evoke factual answers, but questions beginning with the word "why" evoke more subjective and passionate answers. Effective storytellers always think about their story in the "why" manner and allow their creativity to take a path of no limits.

Many people believe they are not creative, when in reality we are all born with this gift. Unfortunately, as we grow up, many forces (society and school among them) tend to squash our creativity. No wonder that, as adults, we find it difficult to spew forth creative ideas on a moment's notice. Learn how to recapture your creativity; find that time of day when your thoughts seem to flow and write down your ideas. Yes, do write your thoughts down! Like remembering dreams, we tend to forget fleeting thoughts, but by writing down an impression, an idea, or a notion you will fix and validate your own creative thinking.

Think about your presentation in different ways. Shift the context and discover new methods or ideas for sharing. Just as there is often more than one right answer to a question, there's also more than one way to tell something. A good example is found in the storytelling world using the very popular tale Cinderella. There are over one hundred thirty versions of this story, each with value, but each created in its own unique fashion.

When you tell stories, remember that people learn in different ways and at different speeds. Plan your program accordingly with thought given to the visual, auditory, and kinetic learners. Watch other storytellers during their performances and you will witness lots of gesturing, body language, eye contact, voice differentiation, movement, etc. This engages all three types of learners. Too often, we witness presentations directed to the auditory learner, but that won't keep the interest long for those who use other methods of learning.

It is interesting to acknowledge that the words we speak are only seven percent of the message. The tone of voice accounts for thirty-eight percent and the remaining fifty-five percent is nonverbal. (This is based on a Kodak study.) Work on your body language, inflection, and expressiveness.

Let your sense of "play" further open your creativity. Play is the basis of learning and motivation. Each time a new story begging to be told comes into a storyteller's life, he or she will play with that story many, many times before feeling that it can be successfully shared with others. Change is a constant to good programming, and play encourages change.

Bev Twillmann is a storyteller/story educator/keynote speaker who works all over the country giving workshops, performances, and training sessions. Ms. Twillmann contributed an article previously to The Docent Educator entitled "Storytelling: A Hands-on-the-Mind Teaching Technique," which appeared in the Winter 1998-99 issue (Vol. 8, No.2). Ms. Twillmann can be contacted at 9508 George Williams Road, Knoxville, TN 37922, or by e-mail at: bevstory@aol.com.
Thinking Outside the Box

by Roca L. Harding

We are all creatures of habit, and change does not come easily for many of us. Like their colleagues at so many institutions, docents at the Freer and Sackler Gallery are primarily responsible for giving tours of our art collections to the public. But, often, museums want volunteers to give innovative demonstrations or presentations beyond the standard one-hour tour. How do we get volunteers to think “outside the box?” How do we elicit their support and enthusiasm?

It has been said, especially in the rapidly growing innovative information technology sector, that success is built on the back of past failures. This is also true in the museum world. Several years ago, in conjunction with an exhibition of Hindu religious objects, the Freer and Sackler education department wanted its docents to offer visitors a cart presentation, rather than a tour. This would consist of showing replica objects of Hindu gods and goddesses and explaining how these and other objects were used in Hindu worship. Our docents objected strongly to this idea. The education department, not wanting to force the issue, dropped the idea of a cart demonstration and resumed scheduling exhibition tours.

What did we learn from that failure to get docents to perform “outside the box?” The lessons were threefold: 1) the idea has to be well thought out beforehand (either by staff alone or together with a few docents) before presenting it to the corps; 2) implementation has to be organized and orderly; and 3) lines of staff authority have to be clear (someone has to be in charge).

With these lessons in mind, I faced the challenge of persuading docents to participate in a new initiative called Art Night on the Mall. During the summer of 1996, the Smithsonian Institution funded evening hours at five Smithsonian museums on Thursdays until 8:00 p.m. From Memorial Day to Labor Day, the Freer and Sackler Gallery participated in this new program. Since the Gallery did not have much money to hire staff or fund programs, I was asked to provide docents who could work Thursday evening hours. In addition, since the regular information desk volunteers do not work evening hours, I was also asked if our docents would sit at the information desk during Art Night on the Mall evenings.

How could I get our docents to “think and perform outside the box?” How could I get them to work evening hours? How could I convince docents to drive during the Washington DC rush hour to the National Mall? How could I persuade docents to give several short 10-minute gallery talks to evening visitors rather than the standard one-hour tour? And finally, how could I get them to stand at the entrance doors and greet visitors, give directions to the various exhibits, and answer questions?

I heard the following kinds of comments: “I don’t work evenings.” “I hate driving downtown and fighting the rush hour traffic congestion.” “I give one hour tours, not 10 minute talks. It’s not worth my time.” “I refuse to be a hostess at the door.”

Year 1

To overcome objections that first summer, I implemented the following steps:

1. EXPLAIN RATIONALE.
Docents were given the rationale for the short 10-minute gallery talk format, followed by a 15-minute period for answering visitor questions. Visitors, whether locals or tourists, are hot and tired at night and generally not receptive to lengthy tours.

2. DEFINE DUTIES. Each docent was asked to staff for a 2-hour period, from 5:30 p.m. to 7:30 p.m. and was asked to give four 10-minute gallery talks, followed by a 15-minute period for visitors to ask questions. I would provide docents with ideas for gallery talk topics or advice on how to structure a short presentation.

3. MAKE IT VOLUNTARY. This was strictly voluntary (very few docents volunteered that first summer). No docents would be forced to give gallery talks during Art Night on the Mall.

4. GIVE THEM CHOICES. For those who volunteered, I gave them the choice of galleries they wished to work in (Sackler or Freer) and what talks they would like to give (the Arts of Japan, Whistler’s Peacock Room, etc.).

5. PROVIDE AN ATTRACTIVE "GALLERY EXPLAINER” PIN. I asked our design department to create an attractive Gallery Explainer pin for docents to wear during Art Night on the Mall. This enabled the visitors to easily recognize museum personnel and helped Gallery Explainers take pride in their participation in this new program.

6. MANAGE EFFECTIVELY. I called the docents that volunteered
as a Gallery Explainer to talk through their duties and answer their questions. In addition, docents received a detailed memorandum in their mailbox about their assignments and other Gallery public programs that evening.

7. **SHOW STAFF SUPPORT.** My assistant and I alternated working every single Thursday night so that we could provide help to our Gallery Explainers, if needed. The Gallery Explainers appreciated seeing staff working alongside them. When there were no visitors, we chatted with our voluntary Gallery Explainers. It was important for the staff to see how this new program was working and to make adjustments, as needed.

8. **SHOW APPRECIATION.** At the end of the summer, I sent handwritten thank-you notes to each Gallery Explainer.

9. **TALK IT UP.** We reported the public’s positive response to the Gallery Explainer program to the docent corps at the fall general docent meeting. Attendance for these short gallery talks was high—higher than the daytime tours. The few docents that did volunteer that summer derived a great deal of satisfaction from giving these well-attended gallery talks and follow-up conversations with visitors. Word spread to their colleagues.

10. **DON’T GIVE UP.** I was only able to recruit one docent, an emeritus docent, to greet visitors at the entrance doors and answer questions. I set an example by wearing a Gallery Explainer pin and greeting visitors at the doors.

**Year 2**

The following summer, the Smithsonian Institution continued funding for the *Art Night on the Mall*. I continued the steps outlined in Year 1 and added a few more.

11. **TAKE A RISK.** This year, I assigned the voluntary Gallery Explainers to staff the entrance doors for an hour! They spent the second hour giving two or three ten-minute introductions to different aspects of the collections. This experiment of “staffing and presenting” was an immediate success. A total of twenty-three docents volunteered their time and expertise over a period of fourteen *Art on the Mall* evenings. Eleven docents volunteered more than once, with three docents volunteering four times.

12. **PROVIDE A SOFT TOUCH TO WIN LOYALTY.** In Washington D.C., summers are hot and humid. When a docent asked for a cup of water in the evenings, I immediately realized that I needed to provide free bottled water (and pretzels) for my Gallery Explainers who worked in the evenings.

13. **EXPRESS FORMAL RECOGNITION.** In addition to receiving personal handwritten notes, I submitted an article about the new Gallery Explainer program

---

*At the Sackler and Freer Galleries, the challenge was to persuade docents to give several short 10-minute gallery presentations to evening visitors rather than the standard one-hour tour during the day.*

*photo: courtesy of Roca Harding*
During the summer, when Art Nights on the Mall is an ongoing program, docents serve in several additional capacities. They greet entering visitors and answer questions about the exhibitions.

photo: courtesy of Roca Harding

during summer Art Nights on the Mall. The article recognized each docent that volunteered as a Gallery Explainer. I also asked the Director to send a thank-you letter to each Gallery Explainer saying “I am extremely grateful for your fine work. Your desire to serve the public and our galleries is extraordinarily generous.”

Years 3 and 4
By its 3rd and 4th years, the Gallery Explainer program complemented the regular tours program. Docents were enthusiastic supporters of the concept of working as Gallery Explainers — greeting and answering visitor questions and giving brief 10 or 15-minute talks about the collections. All the summer slots were oversubscribed and I had to limit sign-up by docents to no more than two evenings per summer.

14. SHARE ENTHUSIASM. I asked Gallery Explainers to share their experiences. Then, these testimonials were shared among the volunteers.

“I enjoyed the format because it allowed for a less formal, more personal interaction, geared to the interests of visitors plus my own enthusiasms.”

— docent Lilian Sokol.

“Exhausted, but exhilarated, is how I felt after my Thursday evening Art Night on the Mall experience. At the Freer, my first short gallery talk was Japanese screens. The crowd grew and grew until I must have been surrounded by about 30 people, all affable, interested, lingering on, asking additional questions after the talk ... I thought my hour on duty at the door would be a let down. Not at all.”

— docent Marlyse Kennedy.

Our visitors also weighed in.

“It’s wonderful that you are providing short Gallery Talks on Thursday evenings! Thank you for being so friendly and enthusiastic greeting visitors at the entrance doors. We appreciate your efforts!”

Expanding the Program
Once our docents were comfortable with the Gallery Explainers format, we expanded this presentation in a number of ways. During the summer months, we offered out-of-town and local visitors the option of short gallery talks in addition to regular tours. For special events (receptions, dinners, etc.), Gallery Explainers are stationed in popular galleries to give brief introductions or to answer guests’ questions. For very popular special exhibitions when we are unable to give guided tours, our docents provide a 20-
minute introductory gallery talk and are available to answer questions.

A large majority of our Freer and Sackler Gallery docents are now comfortable “thinking and performing outside the box.” Some of the docents are urging me to consider presentations offsite, such as outreach programs to senior citizens. So now they are challenging me to continue thinking outside the box, too.

Roca L. Harding has been Docent Coordinator for the Freer Gallery of Art and the Arthur M. Sackler Gallery of the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, DC since 1992.


---

**minds in motion workshops**

Participatory workshops for docents and staff held at your institution and incorporating your collection or site!

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

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

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

- **Get Real! Using Objects to Teach Across the Curriculum** - a co-operative in-service event for your area’s classroom teachers. Jackie Littleton, leader.

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

For further information write The Docent Educator, or call us at: (808) 885-7728.
Finding and Using “Clear Proofs

One of the definitions of demonstration is “clear proof,” as in “clear proof of ability.” For docents seeking to improve their teaching technique, clear proofs of ability abound. Some are intentional — demonstrations offered by institutions to help staff and volunteers provide better tours and educational programs for the public. Other demonstrations are unintentional — opportunities that lie outside the formal training milieu but, nevertheless, are fertile ground for docents wishing to pick up useful tips that can make their teaching better and more effective.

The most common intentional demonstrations docents are exposed to are called modeling. Usually, modeling comes in the form of sample tours provided by experienced docents or staff educators. Unfortunately, educational neophytes are sometimes tempted to “parrot” these sample tours. There are a number of dangers inherent in this practice, not the least of which is the “copy machine syndrome.”

Back in the days of carbon paper and mimeograph machines (before modern copy processes), a copy was never as good as the original. It lost some degree of clarity and focus. Parroted tours do the same. Unless a tour “belongs” to the docent giving it, it is only a poor copy. Docents can take possession of a good tour they feel inclined to copy by adding their own personalities, their own language and phrasing, anecdotes from their own experiences, and their own choices from the collection to the frame of a tour they admire.

In another, perhaps better, way of modeling, docent instructors teach by employing the same techniques docents are expected to use when giving tours. For instance, an education program that asks docents to use inquiry or hands-on experiences while touring does more than just provide sample tours using these techniques. Instructors actually model these techniques during training sessions.

Docents trained in this manner explore and question the collection as they acquire the knowledge base they need. Instead of simply listening to lectures, they participate. The instructor asks questions that challenge docents to observe, analyze, and evaluate the collection throughout their training. In turn, docents learn how to apply such creative questioning techniques by learning from questions that encouraged them to think creatively, to explore multiple answers, to suspend disbelief, and to consider from several points of view.

Demonstrations also surround docents who take notice of their peers. Other staff and volunteer educators may use crowd control or discipline techniques, and introductions, transitions, or closings that work well. Again, rather than merely copying, a docent might analyze them. Why is this technique successful? Would I be comfortable doing or saying something similar? How can I modify this technique to suit my personality and tour goals? While imitation may be the sincerest form of flattery, it is wise to ask before “borrowing” from another’s tour repertoire.

Sometimes other docents will drop fascinating bits of information into their tours that you might never have heard before. Charming little stories about the collection or the people associated with it may be interesting additions to a tour.

Unfortunately, however, many fascinating bits of information and charming little stories are not true (or are told incorrectly) and may damage the integrity of the institution or its collection. Before borrowing any of these “tour brighteners,” be sure to check the facts. Start by asking the docent using them to share her source. If you cannot verify the story or fact, don’t use it. Your refusal to use a fact you can’t verify is another demonstration, a “clear proof” of your commitment to accuracy and honesty in your tours.

Masterful docents in other institutions also provide demonstrations of exemplary teaching. In addition to observing good teaching in museums like your own, try touring and analyzing educational programs in institutions with very different collections. As you observe a fascinating tour in a historic home, for example, try to determine what makes it so interesting. Is it the stories the docent tells? Has she drawn you into the home’s time period by asking you to role play? Does she make the artifacts relevant by asking you to imagine what we now use in their place? In what ways can you use her techniques in your institution?

An art museum docent, intrigued by a science center guide’s use of a magnifying glass, might employ such an aid in his tour of miniature portraits or Chinese snuff bottles. A zoo docent, who was captivated by the storytelling she encountered in a history museum, could incorporate African or Asian folk tales in her tours of animals from these continents. A botanical garden tour that encouraged visitors to sniff and touch in a kitchen garden might inspire docents at a
of Ability

The most common intentional demonstrations docents are exposed to are called modeling. Usually, modeling comes in the form of sample tours provided by experienced docents or staff educators. Unfortunately, educational neophytes are sometimes tempted to “parrot” these sample tours.

photo: The Art Museum of Western Australia

Most docents continue to add to their knowledge base throughout their careers by attending lectures, taking college courses, and reading and studying on their own. But, it’s equally important to continue to sharpen teaching skills. By seeking and learning from demonstrations of “clear proof of ability” wherever they are found, your ability to engage visitors’ interest, stimulate their curiosity, increase their retention, and foster their self-confidence will become more effective and rewarding.

Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor

historic site to develop a similar garden appropriate to the era they are interpreting.

Museums, zoos, historic sites, gardens, and science centers don’t have a monopoly on good teaching, of course. Teaching of note also takes place in more traditional settings, and docents should take advantage of such demonstrations of quality. If you teach children, the most obvious place to find excellent examples to study is in public or private school classrooms. Youth programs, such as scouting or camps, offer educational programs where good teaching takes place. Religious classes, organized sports, and after-school programs are also places to find dedicated teachers who might have some things to teach you. And, if you should encounter teaching that doesn’t seem to be working, learn from that as well. Why doesn’t the teacher seem to have control of the group? How could the instructions have been clearer? What would you do to make this topic more interesting to a group of third graders?

If you work with adults, you might want to explore the classes offered by a local college or university, Elderhostel, or financial institutions. If you find the class interesting and well-taught, examine what made it so. How does the teacher make allowances for differences in background and experience in his audience? In what ways are class members encouraged to share their knowledge? Are the teacher’s questions designed to elicit facts or do they encourage open discussion and accommodate a variety of perspectives?

Television is yet another resource for teaching demonstrations. If you are challenged by the need to work within a constrictive timeframe in your institution, look no farther than a 30-minute TV cooking program for ideas. While the personality of the on-air chef goes a long way toward making these programs successful, they also employ a number of useful teaching techniques that anyone can use. One of my favorite chefs answers phone-in questions during her preparation, never allowing the interruptions to get her “off track” but, instead, serving to keep her audience interested while she sautes or stirs. In addition to the visual treat of the food preparation, she uses printed menus and recipes to help her audience learn what she’s teaching. Museum docents that explain complicated processes, or who must use arcane language to interpret their site, could borrow this tip, using written visuals to make the process or language clearer to their visitors.
Weaving Artifacts into Stories

The Early American Museum is a historical museum in East Central Illinois that focuses on life in the 19th century. Our education program is largely centered around central Illinois' farm life in the 1800's and currently serves about 5,000 children throughout the year, encompassing public, private, and home schools.

The Early American Museum has a strong history focus in its educational programming. In order to broaden curricular opportunities, we developed a program with the dual focus of history and creative writing. "Gnagey Days" was named for Larry Gnagey, a local storyteller and author, who has written children's stories for years, including several series for the Early American Museum.

During the first 45 minutes of this 90-minute program, Larry entertains the children and explains how to write a story based on fact, but fictionalized, using artifacts other than those the students use in their assignment. In the second part, students view three artifacts, learn about their past use, and talk about how to weave these artifacts into a story.

The artifacts selected for the pilot semester (Fall 1998) included a pair of ice saws used on Lake Michigan near Chicago, an 1860's Wheeler and Wilson sewing machine, and a steer horn chair owned by a local cattle rancher. Not your everyday story stuff!

Ice harvesting was a massive industry in the 19th century, employing over 60 kinds of tools to complete the process. The absence of refrigeration in the 1880's is known to most grade schoolers, but the concept of ice being a luxury is difficult for them to understand. Consequently, the ice saws have proven to be the hardest artifact for the children to write about.

In 1860, Godey's Lady's Book called the sewing machine the "Queen of Inventions." This invention had a tremendous impact on life in the late 1800's. The Wheeler and Wilson machine is reported to be one of the first in our area.

During the mid-to-late 1800's, interior decorating with mementos of the wilderness was a popular fad. Benjamin Harris owned a vast cattle ranch near Mahomet, IL, and on a trip to Texas in the 1880's, he purchased a steer horn chair. It is a Victorian, upholstered chair, incorporating four Longhorn steer horns — two as arm supports and two curving along the top of the back, with hooves serving as feet.

Children were provided with paper, pencil, writing board, and "story starters." The story starters included facts about the artifacts arranged in "people," "places," and "times" categories. Students could use any of the information they found relevant in developing their stories.

Although specific pre-visit preparation is not required, classes that incorporated this program into an in-depth, language arts unit produced the most exciting stories. Teachers are responsible for ensuring that the students' stories are completed, and for sending the museum the three they consider best. All participating students receive Gnagey Day pencils. All submitted stories are returned with ribbons and stickers, and those judged the best from each class earn their authors a one-day family pass to the museum. A random selection of stories is displayed on our bulletin board.

One advantage to the Gnagey Days concept is its adaptability to varying audiences. The program can be easily targeted to school children of nearly all grades. Stories can be created orally or written at length and the artifacts can be selected with ages and interests in mind. Junior high school students tended to place familiar, modern day products, occurrences, and language in their stories (such as Nike shoes and the prom). Their stories were openly expressive and often of a personal nature. High School juniors came up with stories that demonstrated their considerable grammar and vocabulary skills through character development and plot. Their stories even evoked reader reaction and involvement.

We extended Gnagey Days to the next level, presenting the program to an art class of elementary education majors at the University of Illinois. The combination of history, art, and writing made this a terrific college experience. Their pre-Gnagey Day preparation included a study of 1800's architecture in Champaign, with special attention to the Sholem Building, which originally housed the shoe collection that their stories centered upon. An added requirement for this audience was to sketch the shoes they chose for their story.

Of course, the most stringent test for an educational program like this is your peers. In September 1999, at the Illinois Association of Museums conference, a group of museum professionals were engaged in a shortened version of the program.
The feedback was very positive, and many were excited to begin integrating their own version of Gnagy Days into their institutional programming.

So far, students from 2nd grade through college, and adult audiences on two occasions, have experienced this program. Integrating writing activities with your museum’s area of specialization works. It’s fairly easy to accomplish, takes little in the way of material resources, and allows you to make the museum visit an active learning experience.

The most challenging part of recreating this program may be finding a storyteller who will work with you. We are extremely fortunate to have Larry Gnagy volunteering his talents and time. Try contacting your local libraries and bookstores or even small publishing companies for leads to storytellers. Once found, your new program is well on its way. I wish you success and fun!

Sandy Osborne is the educator at the Early American Museum in Mahomet, Illinois. She attended Clarion State University in Pennsylvania, earning a B.S. in Elementary Education and an M.S. in Science Education. For ten years prior to taking the educator’s position at the museum, Ms. Osborne worked in several central Illinois public school districts as a substitute teacher.

Previous Issues of The Docent Educator are Available!

To receive a complete list of issue titles, articles, and authors from our ten years of publishing, simply send us a self-addressed stamped envelope, or e-mail us at: arg-de@aloha.net
Docents Design Investigation Stations

In 1992 the Desert Botanical Garden received a grant to develop educational elements along the trails to teach about desert plants and ecology. One of those elements was docent-staffed “investigation stations.” The stations, to be located at selected sites along the Garden trails, would have docents available to answer visitors’ questions and engage them in learning activities with hands-on items and nearby plants related to the theme for that station. The landscape designer had suggested a few ideas for built-in demonstration tables along the trails, but somehow they just didn’t seem quite right. Since docents had been doing demonstrations on portable “kitchen carts” on the trails for several years, and had the biggest stake in any new design, they were invited to participate in a task force to help develop the new “investigation stations.”

The task force met in the summer of 1992 to discuss docents’ ideas and suggestions for improving demonstrations along the Garden trails. Docents were given the following guidelines before beginning their discussion.

The demonstration stations would:

- be in trailside pull-off areas that would eliminate the problem of blocking the flow of traffic on the trail.
- be aesthetically pleasing when not in use for demonstrations. In other words, it should not look as if visitors were missing something if no demonstrations were taking place.
- be in a shaded area for docents and visitors (after all, we are in a desert).
- have storage space so items for the demonstration would not have to be carried out from the building each time (a fair distance away).
- have a surface area large enough to display a variety of hands-on items.

**Docs assist in the Design of Demonstration Structures**

During the brainstorming session, which was carefully structured to produce creative ideas, the pros and cons of the current storage and movable carts were discussed. Every idea was written down and considered. Some ideas generated further ideas, and the excitement and synergy grew. Finally, we came up with a design that seemed to satisfy most of the requirements and concerns. The result was a multi-level bench that doubles as a display area with built-in storage. The bench provides three levels for displaying items so docents can choose how to highlight certain items. The middle level is actually the top of the concealed storage area, accessible from the rear of the station. Since the storage area is at ground level, (and no one wants to get on their knees to access the items that get pushed into the back) a wire frame and light weight slide out basket system, purchased from a hardware store, was the ideal storage solution.

These plans were submitted to the landscape architect to work her magic and make the stations compatible with the rest of the Garden. The final result was multi-functional “shade islands” with stone-faced combination demonstration area and bench located under shady trees, that serve as lovely seating areas when not in use by docents. No one would ever guess, if they had not seen a demonstration there, that it was used for anything else.

**Docs Help Design Demonstrations**

In a desert garden where most plants are prickly or spiny, visitors are asked not to touch the plants for the well being of both the plants and the visitors. The demonstrations at the “investigation stations” give visitors opportunities for hands-on activities and sensory experiences with these amazing plants, using viewing aids and other interpretive techniques that illustrate educational messages about how desert plants live in harsh desert conditions.

To help the docents tell stories about desert plants, each investigation station focuses around a theme that has clearly articulated messages (but not a canned speech) and specific hands-on activities. The docent task force was asked for help in choosing the hands-on items that would best support the stories relating to the themes. Again, all ideas were written down for everyone to see, and some ideas generated other brand new exciting ideas. Ideas were then prioritized, and the best items were selected for each station.

These hands-on demonstrations use as many sensory experiences as possible to help visitors experience and understand the concept of the themes. For example the *What is a Cactus?* station has a cross-section of a cactus and opportunities to touch the spongy inside and see the woody support system. There is also a real cactus fruit, and a tiny cradle with “baby” saguaro cacti planted in it (only as big as your thumb) all available for visitors to touch and ask questions of the docent doing the demonstration. The station is surrounded by a variety of cacti for docents to help visitors compare and contrast and relate to the hands-on items.

The *Prickly Pear Cactus* station, on the other hand, shows the edible value of that particular cactus. Docents serve samples of candy or jelly made from the cactus fruit to taste, and samples of the vegetable,
called nopalitos, made from the stem. They share additional interesting information about prickly pear cacti, such as the nutritional value, recipes, and how the foods have been used by native desert dwellers. They also relate the fact that not all cacti are edible.

The education staff then asked docents to evaluate the demonstrations they were doing. If there was a general consensus that something needed to be improved, then steps were taken to make necessary changes and to get the word out to all docents. Changes are not undertaken lightly nor accepted easily by everyone, so they must be evaluated carefully. Appropriate training is always provided to ensure that the information shared with visitors is accurate and consistent.

The End is just the Beginning

The biggest advantage to having docents help design their presentations is that they are familiar with the types of questions they receive from visitors. The education staff know which concepts the museum wants to share with the visitors, so the teamwork enhances the quality of the presentations. Using volunteers to help design interpretation has been very successful at the Desert Botanical Garden. As new trails and exhibits are developed we continue to gather input from our diverse and dedicated volunteers.

Nancy Cutler is the interpretive coordinator at the Desert Botanical Garden. She began working at the Garden as a volunteer in 1989 and was hired in 1992. Ms. Cutler co-authored a previous article for The Docent Educator entitled, “Desert Detective” (Vol. 7, No. 1).
At the Hudson River Museum, the three worlds of art, history, and science are tied inexorably together. The museum houses two floors of art exhibits, a planetarium, and Glenview Mansion, an example of life among well-to-do New Yorkers in the late nineteenth century.

Are docents able to put this all together and relate it to tours for schoolchildren? You bet! For instance, the museum recently hosted a presentation by the quilter and folk artist Denise Allen, who talked with third graders about her art. She spoke of materials, techniques, design, and the stories her quilts tell.

Following their conversation with Ms. Allen, the students participated in a quilt-making workshop. There, it became clear that the students had carefully internalized the ideas they had discussed.

None of the children said the typical, "I don't know what to make." Instead, they immediately and energetically got to work using scissors and glue, rather than needles and thread. At the completion of this workshop, the parent chaperones from the school were put to work tying the "quilt pieces" together, while the children talked again with Denise Allen and about their quilted stories.

While the docents of the Hudson River Museum don't have the luxury of seeing a real live artist in the galleries every day, the experience taught us a fresh way of approaching art. And, while these young visitors did not get to see all the exhibits at our museum, they expressed the desire to come back. As one boy said on his way to the school bus, "This was cool."

---

Louise Waller, docent
Hudson River Museum
Yonkers, New York
Digitization of *The Docent Educator* was generously sponsored by museum educators from around the globe through their support of Museum-Ed’s 2014 Kickstarter campaign:

**Full Series Supporters:**
- J. Marshall Adams
- Marianna Adams
- Christina Alderman
- Anonymous
- Autry National Center Education Department
- Bayou Bend Docent Organization
- Birmingham Museum of Art
- Mary Ann Bloom
- Brooklyn Museum
- Berclee Cameron
- Carnegie Museum of Art
- Jennifer Chowning
- Susan Chun
- Edith Copenhaver
- The Corning Museum of Glass, Rakow Research Library
- Karen L. Daly
- Herminia Din
- Robin Dowden
- Julia Forbes
- Robin Gabriel
- Courtney Gerber
- Golden History Museums, Golden, CO
- Kimberly Hanson
- Phyllis Hecht
- Anne Henderson
- Victoria Hughes
- Kathleen F. G. Hutton
- Indianapolis Museum of Art Docents

Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum
- Johns Hopkins University Museum Studies
- Carole Krucoff
- Judith Landau
- Jean Linsner
- Beth Maloney
- Laura Mann
- Melinda Mayer
- Museum Education Roundtable
- Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago
- Museum of Contemporary Art Cleveland
- Museum Partners Consulting, LLC
- Diana Musslewhite
- Elisabeth Nevins, seed/ed consulting
- Ayumu Ota
- Lauren Patton
- Sandbox Studios
- Roger Sayre
- Susie Severson
- SFMOMA Research Library
- Arthur Smith
- Ellen Soares, Peabody Essex Museum
- The Softalk Apple Project and
- FactMiners.org Developers Community
- Marcos Stafne
- Nicole Stutzman Forbes
- University of Michigan Library
- Katherine Yount

**Volume Nine Supporters:**
- Katherine Moloney
- Monterey Museum of Art

**Volume Nine, No. 4 Supporter:**
- Leonard Steinbach