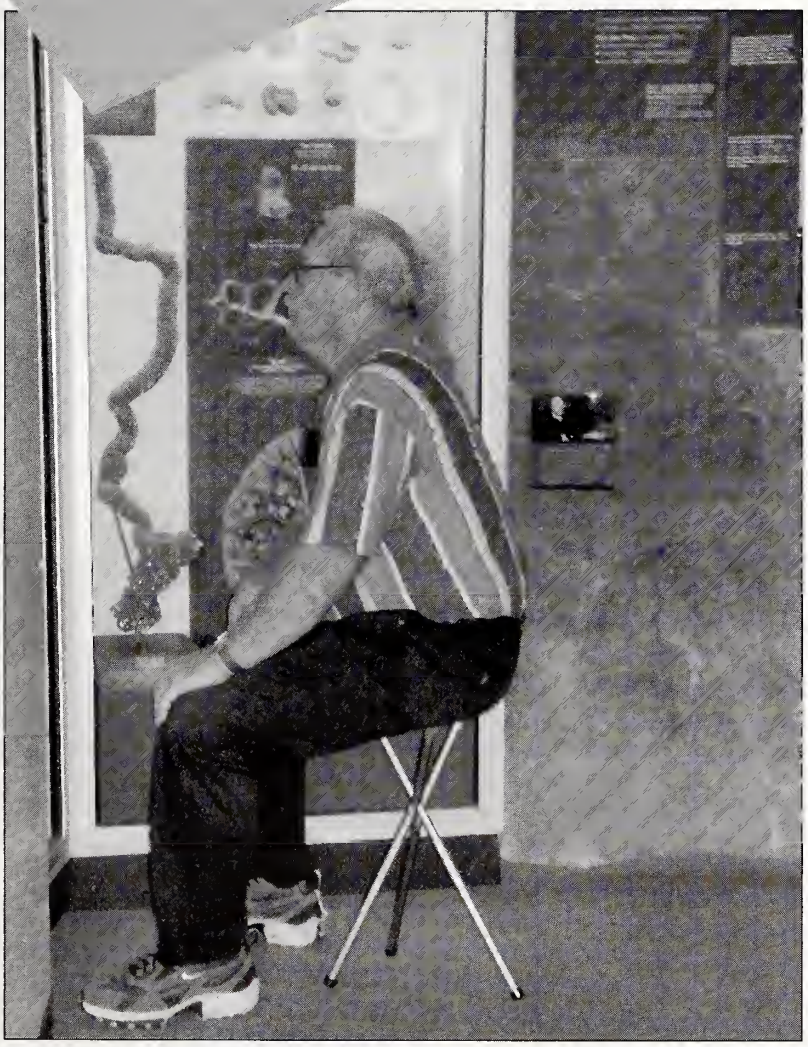
Minds in Motion

Vol. 12, No. 3 Spring 2003

THE DOCENT EDUCATOR

THE QUARTERLY JOURNAL FOR DEDICATED EDUCATORS

Programming for Seniors and the Elderly



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Different, Yet the Same

As a freshman in college, and all of 18 years old, I shared a Spanish class with a woman who was in her 70's. One day, while chatting before the teacher arrived, I asked the woman why she was bothering to learn a new language at her age. "I don't know," she answered graciously and patiently, "I was thinking someday I might travel to South America and would want to know the language."
I was taken aback. It hadn't occurred to me that a person who was in her 70's might be eager to continue exploring and learning. I thought that by the age of 70, a person was at the end of life's experiences. Little did I know.

Learning is truly a life-long pursuit. And, today, people are living longer, better, more healthily, and with greater resources than ever before. As a rule, people who are considered "seniors" are far more vital than younger people might expect and, even when they do have infirmities or impairments, remain eager to continue learning and growing. In spite of this happy reality, no audience (with the possible exception of teenagers) can intimidate docents more. The reasons for this are a mystery, for few audiences seem better prepared for learning, more attentive, or more grateful for the experience. Perhaps, when we meet people who are older, we get a glimpse of our own mortality and that puts us off balance. Whatever the reasons, we should remember that the desire to satisfy one's curiosity and quench the thirst to know does not necessarily diminish with age.

Cover:
A visitor takes advantage of a portable stool, so that he can spend more time exploring exhibitions in-depth while touring the National Museum of Natural History, a museum that is part of the Smithsonian Institution complex in Washington, DC.

Assessing the Group

Hopefully, when *any group* contacts your institution about reserving a docent-led visit, the museum representative will ask questions designed to make the visit more meaningful and appropriate. Just as one might inquire about a school group when a teacher calls, any group leader contacting your institution on behalf of seniors or people who are elderly should be asked such questions as:

✓ How many people will be in the group?
✓ Is your group hoping to see a specific exhibition or do they want a more general overview of our collection?
✓ Does the group have a specific purpose or reason for this visit?
✓ Do any members of your group require the use of wheelchairs; or, do they have other special needs, such as mobility, vision, and/or hearing impairments?

These questions go beyond courtesy. They allow docents to strategize an appropriate focus for their tours, plan the physical routes they will take, and reflect upon any stylistic changes that might be helpful. Such related issues as scheduling additional time to move from one place to the next or taking greater advantage of transitions to maintain tour cohesiveness can also be considered and factored into the lesson plan.

Accommodating Needs

Docents should heed the scouting motto, "be prepared." Docents ought to know how to ensure that all visitors, regardless of age, attributes, or infirmities, will have a pleasant and productive touring experience. I t can be both irritating and embarrassing for a visitor to discover that he or she cannot join the rest of the group because a path is not appropriate for adaptive equipment or because the distances traveled will be too great for a person who walks slowly. Equally frustrating for visitors of any age is finding that they cannot hear the docent or see the collection.

It is appropriate and polite to ask if anyone might have a problem hearing your voice or seeing the exhibit. If one or two people raise their hands, bring them closer to you (rather than shout at them). If more than a few people can't see, perhaps you have chosen the wrong object or artifact to focus upon. Whenever possible, have people rotate their positions so that everyone has a chance to inspect closely. Also, provide the group with a verbal description if an object or living creature might be difficult to see.

Before entering a dimly lit gallery, tell your visitors of the lighting change and give them time to adjust to the low lighting before charging ahead. (The older we get, the more time we need to adjust to a sudden change in lighting.) Perhaps, while waiting, the docent could provide an orientation or relate an anecdote that will enhance the experience and keep the "down time" productive.

Like all visitors, seniors tire when standing for long periods of time. (In truth, I've hear people of all ages complain of "museum-itis,"

which usually refers to lower back pain and stiffness from standing too long.) Compounding this problem is the lack of comfortable seating in many museums' galleries. It might be a good idea, therefore, to make portable seats available. Many museums, zoos, gardens, aquariums, and galleries have lightweight stools that are used, primarily, during docent training sessions. These stools could be made available to seniors who, should they choose to take them, can rest at each stop along the tour and be more comfortable while investigating an object or specimen in-depth.

Encouraging Participation

Yes, like all other visitors, seniors and people who are elderly will gain more from a docent-led visit if that encounter is conducted in a participatory manner. Just listening to someone else talk will fatigue anyone after a while. And, as is true of all other groups, participatory activities will increase a senior's willingness to investigate an object or specimen longer, while improving what is learned and retained from the encounter.

Since all adults tend to be more reticent to respond to questions than school-aged visitors are, I suggest employing "rhetorical questions" to get the ball rolling. Rhetorical questions are those questions asked without expectation of a verbal response from your audience. For instance, when approaching a non-representational work of art, a docent might say, "You might be asking yourself, 'What would be an appropriate title for this sculpture?'" While such a question will lead your visitors to request the artist's title, it also challenges them to think of a title of their own. Frequently, one or two people among the group will blurt out their response to your question, if you pause after asking it, which will open the conversation up for full group discussion.

Similarly, in a science museum or nature center, a rhetorical question might be, "What is it about minerals and gems that have made them coveted by people throughout time and across the globe?" An enlongated pause after positing such a question often elicits responses from the audience. Additional questions about uses, appearance, or properties should follow these responses and lead to productive observation and comparison activities.

Rhetorical questions are constructed the same way other open-ended questions are developed. Such questions should request that visitors participate by observing, comparing, classifying, summarizing, interpreting, hypothesizing, imagining, or deciding. The only real difference is that rhetorical questions are asked in such a way that if no one responds verbally, the lesson can still continue. The point is that all open-ended questions, including rhetorical ones, will stimulate active thinking and encourage personal involvement even if visitors do not offer their answers out loud.

Building Upon Knowledge

Two truisms can be knitted together to improve your teaching. The first truism is that the older

Continued on the next page.

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Continued from the previous page.

It can be disappointing, disenfranchising, and worse for a visitor to discover that she cannot join the rest of her group simply because she is mobility impaired. To avoid such humiliating circumstances, groups reserving tours of institutions should be asked about any special needs before they arrive. Then, docents should plan their tour routes and activities accordingly.

we get the more we tend to indulge ourselves in remembering "the old days." The second truism is that people learn best when building upon knowledge or experiences they already possess. This is why, when touring seniors, you might consider introducing lessons or creating transitions by requesting reminiscences.

"Do you remember when everyone used manual typewriters and fountain pens? In what ways was writing and corresponding different then from the way it is today?" After accumulating responses and anecdotes, you might continue by saying, "Well, far greater shifts took place throughout society when books changed from being precious individual works, such as these illuminated manuscripts, to being press-produced copies such as these printed texts over here."

Requesting reminiscences of seniors is a wonderfully effective way to garner participation and connect new information to known facts or experiences. "What games or toys did you play with when you were a child? How are they different from those young children play with today?" are questions I might ask seniors before taking them to look at toys in the children's bedroom of an historic house museum. Or, "In what ways was life more formal when you were young than it is today?" might be used to introduce and further the contrast when examining antique clothing, personal calling cards, sitting rooms, food service pieces, or other items found in many history collections.

And, such questions as, "What did your generation do that shocked your parents?" might serve as a useful introduction when looking at works of art that explore unconventional or contemporary issues, lifestyles, fashions, or themes.

Avoiding Stereotypes

While I have presented ideas and approaches that I apply to the category of people called "seniors" or "elderly" it is important to remember that the people grouped within

While differences certainly must be taken into account when we tour visitors or plan educational activities for them, we should remember that curiosity and the excitement that comes from learning are a part of our essential human nature and do not, necessarily, diminish with age.

such categories are not homogenous. Personally, I find it useful to remind myself not to stereotype people using sweeping generalizations or labels. It is too easy, and usually inaccurate, to suggest that people can be formulaically grouped into categories like "Hispanic," or "yuppie," or "disabled" or "gay," or "old." Within such categories are individuals who are different from one another, and my teaching should honor those differences.

It may sound like an exercise in "political correctness," but I find it useful not to say "Hispanic people" or "gay people" or "disabled people" or "old people" but to say "people who are Hispanic," or "people who are gay," or "people who have disabilities," or "people who are older." It reminds me that we are all people and not the labels used to modify us.

While seniors and people who are elderly may be naturally grouped by their age, most of their commonalties end there. If you are open and aware, you will discover as many differences within this category as there are people in it. And so, while you consider how to teach this group, keep in mind that one size will not fit all.

▲

Alan Gartenhaus
Publishing Editor

Lifelong Learning

AARP has been after me for years, but the U.S. government has finally made it official. I'm a senior citizen, and I have a card to prove it. I've reached that stage in life that owes me some privileges. At last, I can tell everyone exactly what I want and why I want it. Museum docents and staff educators, listen up!

Now that I don't have to stand in long registration lines, take tests, and buy expensive books that will be obsolete next semester, I've discovered that I really like to learn. I'd appreciate it if you would continue to provide tours, classes, and trips that help me expand my knowledge of fields I never had time to pursue when I was busy raising a family and earning a living.

Tours

I enjoy those seniors-only tours you offer from time to time. I appreciate that you schedule them for late afternoon. I like kids, in small doses, but, let's face it, my hearing isn't everything it used to be and the acoustics in your facility are less than perfect. When school groups, even well-behaved ones, are in the galleries, it is very hard for me to hear what you and other members of the tour group are saying. Besides, I sometimes take a short nap after lunch. Afternoon tours are just perfect. If I must come in the morning, I'm grateful for the carpeting you convinced the museum to put down on your beautiful marble floors to absorb some of the echoes.

Thank you, too, for providing a place for me to sit as we move from gallery to gallery. I walk two miles every day, but I have a little arthritis in one hip, and standing on those hard marble floors, even the ones that are carpeted, is very uncomfortable. I appreciate the sturdy folding stools you've purchased for adult tours. I know these tall wooden ones are more expensive, but I'm not so afraid of having one fold up with me on it. I like the sturdy sidepieces, too; it's much easier to stand when I have something to push off from.

It's nice, too, that you've made it easy for my older friends who are in wheelchairs to negotiate the in's and out's of your institution. You've done more than meet the letter of the law; your museum is "user friendly" and the wheelchair-bound don't have to go to the back door or up some obscure back elevator to stay with the group.

I like the topics you've selected for your senior tours. Even though I'm a regular visitor to your museum, you find different ways to present your permanent collection as well as the new exhibits. I've seen some of your paintings so often they are like old friends; you constantly help me learn new things about them, just as I do with human friends. Sometimes you let me learn a new skill or uncover a talent I didn't know I had, all within the context of your collection. And, occasionally, you ask me to share a skill or talent that has stood me in good stead for the last half century or so.

Day Trips

Now that driving long distances is a little problematic, I appreciate the day trips you organize for seniors every now and then. I can't afford to go on all of them, but I do enjoy the ones I select. I like the fact that a docent from your museum, someone I already know, goes along on the bus to give me a little background before we get to the museum we're visiting. She not only tells me something about the exhibit we're about to see, but she tells me where the bathrooms are, when and where to eat lunch, and exactly what time I have to be back on the bus. When we get to the museum, she leaves me alone to discover the exhibit by myself, using the information she's given me ahead of time. She's always available to answer questions, but I can visit the exhibit on my own time, not hers. Not only that, but she makes the rounds of the museum about 15 minutes before we are to leave to "round us up." Nice lady, that!

Classes

I've learned a lot from the classes you offer, too. It's been fun to try my hand at everything from bookbinding to calligraphy to object analysis. Even though it's great to meet and work with other students of all ages, I especially like the classes that are just for seniors. I was especially grateful that the geology field trip was for seniors only—I didn't want to think I was holding someone back because I walk a little more slowly these days.

Thanks, too, for asking me to teach some classes for docents and others who take advantage of your museum's outreach program. I enjoyed my years as a classroom teacher, but teaching in your institution is even better. There aren't any papers to grade, parent conferences, or after-school meetings to attend. I think it's very perceptive of you to realize that, even though I taught elementary classes, most of my teaching skills are useful in classes for all ages and all disciplines.

Teaming Up with Elderhostel and the Local University

I also think you are pretty smart to team with the local university, community college, and Elderhostel to present your collection as part of a class for a larger audience. Using your collection as a springboard in a creative writing class at the Junior College brought in a whole new generation of students, and it was enlightening to compare their interpretations of images and events with those of my generation. The Elderhostel class that explored your collection as an introduction to our community got a quick overview of the events, people, and values that make us what we are. And, it was great to be able to interact with other seniors from across the United States.

Volunteer Opportunities

Your classes and trips are very important to me, but I'm also grateful that you've given me a chance to remain useful by providing volunteer opportunities for seniors in your institution. As is always true with teaching, developing my docent tours allowed me to learn much more than I ever taught. Interacting with visitors of all ages has helped me stay young in spirit if not in body. And, I know that when you and I decide that my effectiveness as a docent has begun to wane, you will find another way for me to continue in the museum family as long as I'm able.

For many years, my job and my family were the centers of my little universe. Now that the job is gone and most of my family are far away, I appreciate all the ways you've helped me create another little universe where I can continue to be a part of something important.

▲

Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor

Publish Your Teaching Ideas and Techniques!

Submit an article for possible publication.
Develop a text addressing the theme of an upcoming issue.

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F.Y.C.

For Your Consideration

Hearing Challenges

According to *Consumer Reports On Health,* a publication of Consumers Union, almost every older person experiences some hearing loss. "Much of it is caused by a lifetime of exposure to loud noise. When communicating with an older person is difficult, the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association suggests reducing background noises, beginning conversations with casual topics, keeping sentences and questions short, allowing extra time for a response, listening actively, and looking for hints from eyes and hands."

In many museums, reducing background noise is among the greatest challenges while touring, especially when gallery surfaces are hard and sounds reverberate. In such cases it may be best to give visitors things to look for, or consider, prior to entering the area and then holding discussions after exiting.

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Excitement on the Gulf Coast

The Ohr-O'Keefe Museum of Art is dedicated to the pottery of George Ohr, who was born and raised in Biloxi, Mississippi. George Ohr was a potter who astonished the art world with his contradictions of the rigid standards and expectations applied to art during his time. Today, he is considered among the first modern artists in the United States and has been designated one of "America's Treasures" by the United States Department of the Interior.

Frank O. Gehry, an architect who also has astonished many with his unconventional designs, is creating a new museum to house Ohr's works, as well as works by regional artists and classrooms for art-making. The anticipated opening for this new museum campus is early 2005.

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An Allegorical Tale

A 92-year-old, petite, poised, and proud lady, who is fully dressed each morning by eight o'clock, with her hair fashionably coifed and makeup perfectly applied (even though she is legally blind) moved to a nursing home today. Her husband of nearly 70 years recently passed away, making the move necessary.

After many hours of waiting patiently in the lobby of the nursing home, she smiled sweetly when told her room was ready. As she maneuvered her walker to the elevator, I provided a visual description of her tiny room, including the eyelet curtains that had been hung on her window. "I love it," she stated with the enthusiasm of an eight-year-old having just been presented with a new puppy.

"Mrs. Jones, you haven't seen the room ... just wait."

"That doesn't have anything to do with it," she replied. "Happiness is something you decide on ahead of time. Whether I like my room or not doesn't depend on how the furniture is arranged, it's how I arrange my mind.

"I already decided to love it. It's a decision I make every morning when I wake up. I have a choice. I can spend the day in bed recounting the difficulty I have with the parts of my body that no longer work, or get out of bed being thankful for the ones that do. Each day is a gift, and as long as my eyes open, I'll focus on the new day and all the happy memories I've stored away just for this time in my life.

"You see," she continued, "old age is like a bank account. You withdraw from it what you've put in. So, my advice to you would be to deposit a lot of happiness in the bank account of memories. Thank you for your part in filling my memory bank. I am still depositing."

Author Unknown

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Exploring the Museums of Mexico City

Mexico City is among the busiest and most exciting cities in the world. Filled with cutural institutions, most Mexico City museums are open daily except Monday, from 10 a.m. to 5 or 6 p.m. A nominal admission fee is charged (usually between $1.50 and $4 US). Perhaps the best way to visit museums and other sights in this crowded and bustling city is to hire a private guide.

You can usually do so at your hotel or by contacting "Grupo Cultur" (tel. 52.55.5564.0652 or 5574.6353), which will furnish you with an English-speaking driver. Expect to pay roughly US $50 for the day (plus gratuity).

La Palacio de Bellas Artes
(The Palace of Fine Arts)
1 Centro Historico
tel. 5709.3111

Museo Frida Kahlo
Calle Londres 247, Coyoacan
tel. 5554.5999

Museo Leon Trotsky
Calle Viena 45, Coyoacan
tel. 5554.0687

Museo de Arte Moderno
Paseo de la Reforma y Gandhi,
Chapultepec Park
tel. 5553.6233
www.arts-history.mx/museos/mam.

Palacio Nacional
on the Zocalo, Centro Historico
(no phone)

Museo Estudio Diego Rivera y Frida Kahlo
Calle Diego Rivera 2, San Angel
tel. 5550.1518

Museo Mural Diego Rivera
Colon 7, Centro Historico
tel. 5612.0354
www.arts-history.mx/museomural.

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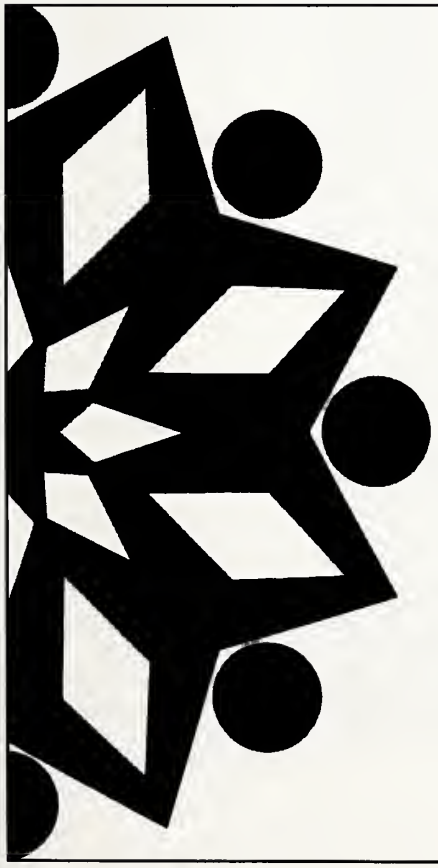

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Emphasizing the Noun, Not the Adjective

Touring with

by Betsy Gough-DiJulio and Raymond M. Leinbach

Successful tours for older adults, as with any group, are largely a matter of understanding the audience and reshaping one's perceptions and techniques accordingly. The media, which strongly influences many of our commonly held perceptions, abounds with negative stereotypes of older people. Consider the advertisement for an emergency response system featuring poor Mrs. Fletcher who has "fallen and can't get up." Examining stereotypical representations of people, whether in the media or elsewhere, is a useful starting place when attempting to better understand an audience.

A common stereotype related to education is that the capacity to learn diminishes with age. Thus, the adage "You can't teach an old dog new tricks."

While most experts agree that the *capacity* to learn is maintained throughout the adult life cycle, the *reasons* for learning can change. For instance, children in school often regard learning as the accumulation of information, ideas, skills, and literacies to be used later on. Adults, on the other hand, often regard education as something to be applied to an occupation or a family role.

We should, therefore, expect the goals of learning to be different for older adults than their younger counterparts, partially because of changed social roles brought about by retirement, grandparenting, death of a spouse, or other life changes. Perhaps their goals become more general, such as to develop a more inclusive sense of how they relate to the world around them.

While knowledge of what motivates learning can help docents provide a better learning environment, knowing something about theories and styles of learning allows docents to discredit erroneous stereotypes and provide older adults with more meaningful tours. In an article in the *Journal of Museum Education* (Winter 1991), Lynn Dierking identified 10 generalizations that are key to human learning. Docents should have an understanding of all of them, but for purposes of this article's emphasis, we will focus on three.

1- The learning process is strongly influenced by prior knowledge, beliefs, and experiences.

Heterogeneity may be the most obvious characteristic among groups of older adults. The range of individual differences increases with age and life experiences. In addition, all the other factors that differentiate people from one another (educational background; social, economic, marital, and health status; social, religious, and political attitudes/beliefs) will determine the behavior, personality, and learning process of older adults.

It becomes necessary, therefore, to establish a context in which visitors feel comfortable sharing highly diverse observations, ideas, and experiences. This can be accomplished, in part, by asking older adults questions that work to establish an informal, accepting environment while revealing more about each visitor's aptitudes, interests, and perspectives.

Though the benefits of inquiry teaching are well established, decades may have passed since adults on tour were engaged in this manner. Students, on the other hand, are exposed to this method in their classrooms. Therefore, docents should "ease" these older visitors into this mode of interaction.

Many docents find "life review" an effective way to structure interaction with older adults. History is meaningful to older adults in ways that it cannot be for younger people. Life review encourages individuals to reflect on their diverse personal histories and relate them to exhibited objects.

The docent's questions and comments should direct the discussion to help visitors forge connections for themselves.

2- Perception is central to the learning process.

Information is acquired through the five senses (seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, tasting). Making tours more multi-sensory is advantageous because it engages additional ways to perceive, while it acknowledges and accommodates differences in the variety of favored modes of perception.

The majority of older adults do not experience significant vision or hearing impairments. For those who do, however, tours that depend largely on the spoken or written word, or even upon viewing objects, may deprive them of a prerequisite for learning — perception.

Older Adults

This article first appeared
in the Autumn 1992 edition
of *The Docent Educator.*
We believe the excellent counsel
this text offers
is worth repeating
and is particularly germaine
to the topic of this issue.

3- Memory is central to the learning process.

Dierking defines learning as "a measurable change in behavior that persists over time, presumably because it becomes a part of our memory." While most older adults do not experience significant difficulty with short-term memory loss, those who do may be more apt to forget earlier parts of a discussion. Therefore, they may seem unable to link new information with prior knowledge, since what has been forgotten cannot be integrated.

To avoid creating problems for those who experience memory loss, docents should design questions that are not dependent upon visitors' ability to recall information introduced earlier in the tour, while still building on previous concepts. For example, in an art museum, replace a question like this: "Think about our discussion of Picasso's treatment of space in the last painting we looked at. How is de Chirico's different in this work?" with this: "We just talked about how Picasso flattened space and presented different sides of an object simultaneously. How is de Chirico's space different from Picasso's flattened space?"

The latter question does not require visitors to retrieve earlier dialogue from their short-term memory.

Current philosophies of museum education recommend a slower pace for ALL visitors to allow time for them to realize new insights and contemplate more fully the object(s) being discussed.

Though most do not, some older adults do experience a significant slowing in the assimilation and processing of information, as well

Continued on page #20.

Mining the Memories

Oral history projects, senior citizens, and history museums, historical societies, historic sites, and history centers have a long symbiotic association. Seniors have the memories that these institutions treasure, and oral history projects put the two together. Sometimes the impetus is a centennial or other anniversary of a community, museum, or collection. Often a university history department makes the first move as part of an undergraduate or graduate course. Occasionally, a museum will uncover an artifact or photograph that needs the first-hand explanation locked in someone's memory. Oral history is also an overlooked, but brilliant, addition to science centers, art museums and galleries, zoos, and gardens.

Oral History

Oral history has been defined most succinctly as "spoken memories." It consists of an oral "document" regardless of the technique used to capture it — written record, audio or video tape, or participant observation where the historian participates in the action he records. Oral history is important as a supplement or complement to written documents and is particularly useful in societies or aspects of society that have little or no written history or where telling the "story" might be restricted in some way. Although there are important histories written from the oral reminiscences of famous people, many of the best oral histories are from "ordinary" people whose stories are usually not recorded in written documents but whose memories tell the "why" and the "how" of events.

One of the principal advantages of oral history over written documents is the participation of the interviewer in creating the oral document. A good interviewer can ask the questions and provide the impetus that uncovers memories of specific events. There is also a danger, of course, in oral history if the interviewer does not take care to avoid introducing his or her own biases during the interview process.

The process

Numerous books and courses exist to help novices begin oral history projects. The American Association of State and Local History, for example, has published several books and technical leaflets that explore various aspects of oral history. Two books in particular are helpful: *From Memory to History* by Barbara Allen and Lynwood Montell and *Transcribing and Editing Oral History* by Willa Baum. Three technical leaflets available from the AASLH bookstore online (www.aaslh.org) deal with this subject:
#210- A Guide to Oral History Interviews;
#191- Using Oral History in Museums; and
#123- Using Oral History for a Family History Project.
This discussion will only highlight certain aspects of the process, and you are encouraged to do additional research on the topic before beginning your first project.

Merely recording the memories of a senior member of your docent staff is not oral history. Without context, such recordings are merely interesting, not historically valuable. Therefore, the first step in undertaking an oral history project is selecting a topic and researching the historical context within which that topic exists. For example, interviews with local citizens about an event of significance in your community should be preceded by careful examination of existing newspaper articles, previously published materials, letters or journals, and other written accounts. Such early research will lead you to the types of questions that you want to have answered — the facts that are omitted, the contradictions that are evident, the emotions that are missing.

After preliminary research is completed and questions compiled, it is time to select interviewees who have first-hand knowledge of the event. At the very least, keep in mind that interviewing a 65-year-old about Pearl Harbor will uncover the memories of a three-year-old! This is another place where senior docents can be of immense help. They may have the local contacts that will help uncover the best people to interview about a particular topic or event. They can offer introductions that smooth the path for interviewers who are not local or not of the same age as the person being interviewed. In most cases, however, they may not be the best people to do the actual interviews. It is frequently more likely that an oral history

subject will talk more freely to a knowledgeable stranger than to a friend or acquaintance who might disagree with or be "hurt" by certain revelations.

During the interview itself, care should be taken to put the interviewee at ease. The presence of audio or video equipment can be off-putting initially, but a good interviewer can soon make a subject forget about equipment in the course of what should be an interesting dialogue. Taking notes should also accompany a recorded interview, but the interviewee should give permission for both. Another necessity, if the recorded history is ever to be published, is a simple statement of release signed before the interview. Such a release does not, however, absolve the interviewer of ethical considerations concomitant with a person's memories.

Connections

Although oral history is most often used with history museums and historic sites, other institutions can develop oral history projects to supplement and complement their own collections. Art museums and galleries, for example, might interview area artists and their models, family and friends, for additional insight into the creative process. Museums with photography collections would find interviews with early photographers, even non-professionals, could illuminate the challenges of pre-digital photography. The same museum might also wish to record the difficulties attendant on decisions to collect photography or some other genre. The memories of long-time docents and/or board members regarding the creation of the collection or some aspect of it, as well as their personal reactions to "new" art, could be a valuable asset to the museum's archives.

"Seniors are often used in oral history projects because they are the sole keepers of first-hand memories of certain events in the past. There is no where else to find such memories."

In science museums, recollections about inventions such as electricity, television, or even something as mundane as a ballpoint pen, could create an interesting layer for an exhibit about inventions. Interviews with local inventors, engineers, and mathematicians might illuminate a variety of aspects of scientific collections. Teachers' memories about the changes in the teaching of science throughout their careers would create an interesting document.

The memories of docents in gardens and nature centers are rich depositories of the folklore of herbs and other plants. The processing of cotton, flax, and other plant fibers and/or the development of a local plant "industry" such as growing roses or grapes also can be recorded by oral history projects in such institutions.

Although the board minutes of a zoo will offer a discussion of development of a breeding program or introduction of a new species to the zoo's collection, oral interviews are the only way to discover the human interplay that led to these changes. Older zoos, too, have a wealth of information regarding changes in animal presentation and education policies locked away in the memories of long-time volunteers and staff.

The Importance of Seniors

Of course, seniors are not the only repositories of memories. A project recalling local reaction to the 9/11 attacks, for example, might record interviews with people of all ages in order to determine the effect on people at different stages of their lives. Seniors are often used in oral history projects because they are the sole keepers of first-hand memories of certain events in the past. There is no where else to find such memories. Another timely reason is exemplified in an African proverb: When an elder dies, a library dies with him. Tomorrow may be too late to capture and record some of our memories.

▲

Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor

Museum to Memory

by Doris Larson

Objects elicit stories. The kindergartner holding a turtle shell can hardly hold still as she tells you about the turtle she and her brother found while on a camping trip. "It was sitting on a log and then we poked it with a stick and it put its head in and then we picked it up and then we carried it to the picnic table and then we waited and then ... and then ... ." The elderly gentleman, who is gazing at a Model T Ford, talks about the first time his father brought home a car. "My brothers and I were just hanging off the car and grandma kept saying 'Mercy, I've never seen the like. I'm not going near that machinery! Why, the Lord never intended for me to be seen in such a contraption. My horse and buggy will do just fine, thank you.'"

Since museums are filled with objects, it is inevitable that stories are a part of any museum visit. Each object is capable of evoking memories for visitors. Therefore, the stories they relate can be numerous and varied. The richness of experiences that a museum offers, and the opportunity for storytelling, were two of the motivating factors that contributed to "Museums to Memory," a program developed and offered by the Public Museum of Grand Rapids.

Our community has many senior and retirement facilities. While working on program development for our new museum facility, we realized that there was a large population of folks who might be unable to make a visit to the museum. So, we decided to take the museum to them.

The Public Museum of Grand Rapids, Van Andel Museum Center, opened a new facility on the Grand River in 1994. The museum has four large permanent exhibits housed on three floors. They include temporary exhibits, and a smaller exhibit, from "A to Z," which bring more of its holdings into public view. How could we begin to convey the depth of these exhibits to people who could not physically visit them? How could we give an overview of the wealth of information available in this large and attractive new space?

Do you remember the good old slide projector? They aren't used as much in this era of Power Point presentations and digital cameras. However, we decided such a system suited our purposes. We assembled slides giving a quick tour of our facility. Quick is the operative word. Watching slides, no matter how beautifully or cleverly described, can be deadly. Our determination was the slide show would be a maximum of 15 minutes.

A primary goal was to give the viewers an exciting overview of the facility. Pictures allowed us to present this facility, define the mission of the museum, and briefly describe the architecture of the building, which was intentionally designed to reflect the cultural heritage of our city. The museum's treasures were our next emphasis. Many older residents of the community remember the Blue Whale, the Spillman Carousel, and the Wurlizer organ. It was important to include these treasures so we could share the memories they brought forth.

Next, we highlighted new exhibits being installed. Pictures of the exhibits in our "A to Z" program allowed us to explain that many of the items in the museum's holdings were finally being put on display.

Finally, we gave viewers a brief tour of each of the four permanent exhibits: "Habitats," which explores the way that humans participate in the natural world historically; "Anishinabek," which presents the story of the tribes of Western Michigan from pre-contact times to the present and which is told by the Anishinabek themselves; "Furniture City," which tells the story of the development of the furniture industry that flourished in Grand Rapids and shows how this industry adapted and changed over time.

The final exhibit highlighted in the slides is "Streets of Old Grand Rapids." This exhibit portrays Grand Rapids in the 1890's. Facades of the buildings are based on actual buildings; shops are based on actual businesses from the 1890's. Though we knew that none of our viewers would have been alive in that decade, we knew that many of them would remember particular stores, and we hoped that the pictures would call forth memories.

As the slide show ends, the lights come up and the real fun begins. Having introduced the museum facility, exhibits, and artifacts, we now hope to entice the group into the object-storytelling part of the experience. With assistance of curators and education staff members, we filled a suitcase (on wheels!) with objects from the 1890's — objects we thought might

bring memories to mind. The items included: old postcards depicting Grand Rapids during that era; laminated drawings of clothing items; small washboard; shaving cup; boot jack; tooth extractor; collar box; flypaper strip; soap saver; hair receiver; iron; flutter; potato masher; and items of clothing, including a hat or two.

The items in our suitcase have changed during the course of these presentations. Some items are more successful in eliciting stories than others were. Participants mention items in the course of their stories that we have been able to add to our collection. Only the size of the suitcase has limited the number and types of items we use. (Volunteers, many of whom are seniors themselves, give these programs. Carrying a slide projector and pulling a suitcase is about the limit for our volunteers!)

Since stories differ with each individual, the "Museum to Memory" program differs with each presentation. When training volunteers to present the program, we tell them the program takes an hour (not including travel and set-up). However, sometimes the program lasts much longer. Some folks have many stories to tell. Time spent is usually determined by the response of the group and the docent's schedule.

Target groups for "Museum to Memory" are retirement homes and senior groups. Happily, some of the retirement homes we visit arrange trips to the museum for those who are physically able to go and view our facility. However, many who participate in this program are unable to come to the Van Andel Museum Center, so we are most pleased to know that we have been able to share a bit of our wonderful institution with them.

▲

Doris Larson is a docent serving at the Public Museum of Grand Rapids in Grand Rapids, Michigan.

Our community has many senior and retirement facilities. While working on program development for our new museum facility, we realized that there was a large population of folks who might be unable to make a visit to the museum. So, we decided to take the museum to them.

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Knowing When to Go

My decision to resign my docent position at the Camp Tyler nature trail was dictated by the development of chronic allergies. Simply put, the woods and I no longer enjoyed each other's company. Not all decisions to leave a cherished and rewarding place within the museum community are as clear-cut, however. With every new tour year, senior docents must face the choice of staying or going. No one wants to outstay his welcome or continue in a position where he is less than effective. The following questions may help in knowing when that time has come.

✓ *1. Am I still physically able to do the job?*

In my case, of course, the answer was "no" and the decision, while painful, was unequivocal. Allergy medicines made me too drowsy to be an effective guide, especially since the woods can be a dangerous place and a guide needs to be constantly alert. Without the medicines, I was a red-eyed, red-nosed, sneezing machine. Not exactly the ideal docent!

As we age, of course, other physical limitations may interfere with our effectiveness. If you find yourself constantly having to ask visitors to repeat their questions, or if their puzzled looks indicate that you've answered a question they didn't ask, perhaps a hearing loss is creating problems with your tours. If your after-the-tour regimen includes a day in bed, perhaps arthritis is turning pleasure into pain.

However, before you decide that you are physically unable to continue as a docent, take the time to do two very important things. First, make an appointment with your doctor for a complete physical check-up. Perhaps your "ailment" isn't an age-related guarantee, and some modification of diet, exercise, medication, or assistance can keep you in the docent pool for a few more years. Next, ask your docent supervisor if she will observe one of your tours and give you an honest assessment of your physical abilities to do the job. If there are problems, perhaps the museum can make some adjustments in your schedule or your tour route. Perhaps seating can be provided in the galleries, not just for you, but also for others who may wish to observe the collection from a more comfortable position. If none of these options help, ask your supervisor to find a non-touring position where the physical challenges aren't so great.

✓ *2. Do I look forward to every tour as an interesting challenge?*

One of the great things about a volunteer "job" is the fact that you are volunteering to do it! That means that you can "un-volunteer" when the job is no longer rewarding. Your ability to pay the bills or hold your head up in the community does not depend on your docent position. You took on this role because it was fun, because it offered you opportunities for personal growth and learning, and/or because it was a challenge. When any of these elements are missing, it may be time to move on. When the little inside jokes about the visitors or the staff become less funny than mean, you might want to think about finding something else to do with your free time.

Before you decide that your docent job is more "job" than it could be, you should take a good look at your tour routine. Are you giving the same lecture that you gave when you first entered the docent corps? If the staff needs to find you during one of your tours, do they know exactly which painting you will be standing in front of at 9:45 a.m. each Tuesday? You may find that you can re-energize your interest in your docent assignment by simply re-vamping your tour. Have you tried some of the new techniques the education director keeps introducing at each docent meeting, or do you customarily slough them off because you've "never done it that way." If you've "always" given tours for elementary children, why not observe and then try a tour for a different age group. If the weekly trip through the galleries has become a weekly "grind", why not ask to be assigned as a substitute or for special events only. But, if you're tired of the institution where you volunteer, if none of these "pick-me-ups" actually pick you up, you probably need to resign before your tour visitors notice your stagnation.

✓ *3. Have I gone from being "Docent of the Year" to doing nothing right?*

From the very beginning, you received praise from the staff and other docents for your tours, your work ethic, and your willingness to mentor new docents. Letters from school children and grateful teachers often mentioned your name. You were frequently asked to "model" your questioning techniques, the transition elements of your tour, or the way you were able to maintain

discipline with only your aura of authority. Lately, however, there have been a few criticisms, or, worse, silence from those who used to compliment your work. If your institution is one of the fortunate ones that have implemented peer or staff evaluations processes, you may be imagining things. If your techniques were really slipping, the evaluations would have caught them in time for you to make the necessary corrections. If no such evaluation exists, you will need to ask for help — help in discerning whether or not your less-than-stellar performance is real or simply a figment of your imagination.

If, indeed, you determine that your tours are not as good as they used to be—if you have "lost your edge"—you must decide whether or not you can and will improve. A valued docent such as yourself deserves the help of the education staff and other docents in locating and correcting errors of technique or content so you can get back to the top of your game. If no help is available, or if you simply don't want to make the effort, it may be time to develop a new interest outside of the museum. Why wait to go out on a sour note? The old show business adage is still true: It's always best to leave the audience wanting more.

✓ 4. Am I staying for all the wrong reasons?

While it's true that we began volunteer work in a particular institution because it was fun, because it offered opportunities for personal growth and learning, and/or because it was challenge, we may find that we are staying for entirely different reasons. Maybe that weekly trip to the museum is just a habit...and maybe we have no difficulty at all in "calling in sick" when a better offer comes along. Maybe we're lonely and we walk through our tours each week just to have the opportunity to interact with another human being, even if the interaction isn't as interesting as it used to be. Maybe, after all these years, we'd hate to give up the "perks" — the training sessions that are still fascinating, the field trips and parties, the good friends we've made, the discount in the gift shop.

One of the great things about a volunteer "job" is the fact that you are volunteering to do it! That means that you can "un-volunteer" when the job is no longer rewarding. Your ability to pay the bills or hold your head up in the community does not depend on your docent position.

Fortunately, many museums have programs for docents who want to retire from touring but don't want to give up their connection to the museum community. "Emeritus Docent" programs, or status, offer long-time docents the option of continuing their affiliation with the docent program to which they've given countless volunteer hours without actually touring. Emeritus docents are still available for research projects, for teaching, for consultation if they desire, but they no longer give tours. They've earned the right to retire, with the dignity their long commitment deserves. They are still invited to the parties. They're still welcome to join the field trips and the gallery talks. They're still on the mailing list.

If your answers to these questions were:

1. Yes
2. Yes
3. No
4. No

you have nothing to worry about. Whatever your age, you're still providing a valuable service for your institution and its visitors. If, however, your answers were reversed, it may be time to discuss moving into the Emeritus Docent program. And, if your museum doesn't have one...well, your last good deed as an active docent will be to start one!

▲

Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor

All Things Must End

An Announcement of Importance to our Subscribers

For nearly thirteen years, Jackie Littleton and I have had the honor of producing *The Docent Educator*. What began as a late-night revelation — that no publication for professional development existed solely for staff and volunteers teaching in museums, historic sites, aquariums, zoos, gardens, and libraries — has grown into a quarterly publication that enjoys an international following. From Bonn to Berkeley, Hong Kong to Houston, Montreal to Miami, and Perth to Pittsburgh, docents and other educators have subscribed, submitted articles, and sent us their thoughts and suggestions.

In the over 50 issues we have published, *The Docent Educator* has explored topics related to teaching techniques, programmatic challenges, and various audiences. We have attempted to do this in a manner that presented practical ideas and solutions rather than philosophic discussions, and that communicated in a consistent and clear manner, without reliance upon educational jargon.

Recently, Jackie and I have been hard pressed to think of topics left unexamined in previous issues. That led us to the difficult conclusion that it was time to retire the publication. Therefore, we have decided that the Winter 2003-04 issue of *The Docent Educator* will be our last.

Renewing subscriptions from now on will differ from doing so in previous years. Those of you who are renewing your subscription with this, the Spring 2003 issue, will be purchasing the next three issues. Those of you whose subscriptions are scheduled to end with the Summer 2003 must purchase the next two and those whose subscriptions end with the Autumn of 2003 can purchase the one additional copy available before we cease publication. (To learn when your subscription ends, please see your mailing label on page #20.) By using the subscription form on the facing page, you can pay for the individual copies remaining and get every last article and idea offered by your colleagues and friends throughout the docent/museum teaching profession.

I wish to express a special thanks to the many authors who submitted articles and shared their wisdom and advice. Your contributions have been greatly appreciated. (Please note that there are still several issues left in which to publish your teaching ideas and techniques.) And, to all of you who gave your support to this publication by subscribing, thank you for your encouragement and participation. Sharing thoughts, teaching philosophies, and ideas with you has been a great privilege!

Alan Gartenhaus
Publishing Editor

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Touring with Older Adults

Continued from page #11.

as in response time. Speaking at a moderate pace will help. Also, repeating or rephrasing aspects of the dialogue slows the pace of exchange, making it easier to follow while teaching or clarifying vocabulary and concepts.

Slowing the pace of discussions will also aid visitors having hearing impairments. It is estimated that approximately 15 percent of people over 65 experience significant hearing loss. A person who appears not to understand what is being discussed or asked may simply not have heard. Presbycusis, the most common hearing impairment among older adults, is associated with difficulty hearing higher tones. Lowering the pitch of your voice, enunciating words, and looking directly at visitors is much more effective than shouting. Background noise, such as music or conversation, should be minimized. Similarly, conversations between people in a group are often difficult to follow for people with hearing impairments, unless care is taken to repeat or rephrase what was said.

Some physical changes that occur with aging may require that docents make adaptations for older adults. Slowing the walking pace accommodates those with decreased mobility. While walking more slowly, try asking questions or pointing out objects for visitors to observe.Rest and restroom stops may need to be incorporated into the tour. During a rest stop, pass an object around to shift attention away from the wait. If some of the visitors want to move more quickly, or don't want to rest, direct them to your next stop and suggest a focus. You might say, "If you walk straight ahead and enter the next gallery on your left you will see an exhibition of landscape. Try figuring out which country each scene depicts."

By understanding this audience and making a few adjustments to your teaching and touring techniques, you will find that when providing tours for older adults, you can emphasize the "adult" and not the "older."

Betsy Gough-DiJulio earned her M.A. in art history from Vanderbilt University and is the partnership coordinator in the Office of Community Relations for Virginia Beach City Public Schools. Formerly, Ms. Gough-DiJulio was the education director at the Contemporary Art Center of Virginia in Virginia Beach, VA, a position she held for over eleven years. She has been a frequent contributor of articles to The Docent Educator *over the past 12 years.*

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