



Themes are Substance, Not Style

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If you've listened to a conversation without understanding what was being said, or seen a movie and not been able to figure out the plot, then you know how it feels to take a tour that lacks a theme.

It's confusing!

A theme is the glue that holds a tour together. It establishes the tour's *raison d'être*, or purpose. A theme defines what is being explored and gives both observation and conversation a context and meaning.

It's not cleverness that distinguishes the better theme, but an ability to effectively summarize the topic or concept being examined on a tour. A theme should offer tour participants a clear point-of-departure for contemplating and establishing a realm for understanding. It should provide a reference marker that tells visitors why they are discussing what they are discussing.

The theme defines a tour's intent and content. Without a theme, a tour can become pointless, dissolving into a "show and tell" performance ... a loose presentation about assorted things that have no relationship to one another.

Themes are useful tools, beneficial to both docents and visitors. They serve no less than four important functions for touring and teaching.

1) *A theme establishes the focus of a tour and, therefore, provides docents with gauge for making choices about a tour's structure and content.* If you know what you are teaching, decisions about your

tour planning and strategies are more straightforward. Your theme becomes the criterion for decision-making — it enables you to make intelligent choices and to develop relevant questions, as your choice of objects and the questions you ask about them should relate to the topic being examined.

2) *A theme provides visitors with a context for organizing information and constructing meaning.* People learn better if they know *what* is being taught, and they learn best if they also know *why* they are learning it. A theme tells visitors *what* is being taught. And, when a tour is appropriately reflective of its theme, answers to the *why* emerge.

By establishing the overriding idea or concept to be learned, a theme allows visitors to make connections to what they already know and to determine applications for new information. In this way, a theme provides visitors with an anchor for facts and discoveries that otherwise float away into a sea of confusion.

3) *A theme offers both the docent and visitor a way to stay on track and to evaluate the relevance of what is taking place.* A docent can use the theme as a way to stay cohesive. Following a tangential

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discussion, a theme offers the docent a route back to the topic-at-hand.

If confused or sidetracked, the docent or visitor can ask herself, "What does this have to do with the topic being explored?" When that question cannot be adequately answered, clarification can be sought or a "bridge" can be requested that helps make the relationship more relevant.

4) A theme serves as the "big idea" through which memories are recalled and impressions are organized. On a long term basis, most people will retain little more than an impression of their institutional visit. The theme of their tour becomes the sieve through which their impressions are sifted and retrieved. Recalling the theme may even jog memories of facts and experiences that might otherwise be discarded.

To be truly effective, a theme must be broad enough to allow docents some latitude in their choice of objects and approaches, but narrow enough to provide visitors with clear and useful parameters for learning. To accomplish this, a theme should describe what is being taught, *not* what is being shown. Declaring "the permanent collection" as the theme of a tour doesn't work unless the tour is focused on how the institution gathers and displays its collection. Otherwise, such a topic is too amorphous, and does not describe *what* is being taught.

A theme is different from a goal. While hoping that visitors "gain an appreciation" for art, or history, or nature is a noble and appropriate goal when teaching, it is not an effective theme because it, too, does not establish *what should be learned*. However, such themes as "identifying emotional content in art," or "insights into the pioneering life," or "how ecosystems function," do.

Themes can be borrowed or built. Among the best and most available resources for borrowing themes are the units (or curricular components) schools create for every subject area. They serve

the same function for schools as they can for museums, historic homes, zoological parks, and botanical gardens ... to organize the construction of lessons and the presentation of information consistent with the age and sophistication of the audience. For instance, a typical second grade social studies topic, such as "food, clothing, and shelter" or "transportation and communication," could be developed into a tour theme for use with almost any institutional collection.

Sometimes, a theme is presented by an exhibition's title. "The Tropical Rain Forest" not only describes an exhibition, but offers a cohesive tour theme for examining such things as physical characteristics and inhabitants, geographic locations, importance, and threats. Similarly, "19th Century Landscapes of the American West" can function as a tour's theme, as well as an exhibition's title. As a theme, one might explore the confluence of styles, artistic and political concerns, and societal influences of works that share both a time period and subject in common.

Perhaps the simplest way to build a theme from scratch is to create an "attributes list." Making an attributes list uses inductive reasoning by going from specifics to generalities. The process is fun and can produce many useful themes.

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Let's develop one using some of the plants cultivated in a botanical garden ... for instance — oak trees, bamboo, roses, ferns, lavender, hostas, tulips, and daffodils.

To make an attributes list using these plants, we begin by asking ourselves what are some of the general characteristics (activities, characteristics, functions, uses, needs, and so forth) that these specific plants share. Our list might include: propagation and reproduction, growth and life span, proper soil and atmospheric conditions, limited geographic ranges, dormancy during winter, susceptibility to diseases and pests, functional and decorative uses, varieties and hybrids, photosynthesis, flowers and leaves, and aesthetic considerations such as shapes and colors. Each of these attributes could be used as theme and developed into a tour that would "knit" these various plants into a cohesive lesson.

If, to continue our example, a docent chose the theme of "propagation and reproduction," he or she would plan a lesson that allows visitors to survey, identify, examine, and compare the different methods used to propagate these plants. Such a tour would expose visitors to the seeds, rhizomes, spores, bulbs, and cuttings that nature and gardeners use to produce more of these plants.

Thematic teaching isn't comfortably embraced by everyone. Educators who teach in a "stream-of-consciousness" style find it too disciplined and confining. Consistently effective teaching, however, requires both an aim and a plan.

There are other educators who believe that focusing on one aspect or facet of an institution's collection is too limiting. They feel an obligation to show and discuss as many things and subjects as possible during the limited time visitors have at their facility. Their concern is misplaced, however. The pre-eminent concern should be for the quality of a visitor's educational experience, rather than for the quantity of superficial exposure.

It just isn't possible to have people see and consider the significance of everything an institution collects in one visit. Visitors should be encouraged to make return trips or to explore further following a docent's lesson. If, for some reason, they cannot return or spend more time, then at least the tour theme ensured that they had an in-depth, memorable, and coherent visit during the limited time available.

Teaching with a theme is not style, it's substance! It functions much like a book's title. It announces the agenda and establishes the content. A theme is an essential part of cohesive teaching and facilitated learning.

