



Why Understand Audiences?

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Every audience is different. This simple axiom explains why teaching cannot be achieved by formula or script. To truly connect with the variety of individuals and groups they encounter, docents must be flexible and prepared with strategies that reach and respond to a full range of individual and collective differences.

Individual experiences are never identical. The particular place you are in (and the direction you choose to look) determine your experiences. Since no two people can be in exactly the same spot at the same time, all of our experiences are, to that extent, different. Add to this the many other variables among people, such as age, cultural background, education, interests, learning styles, special needs, etc., and you begin to understand why the same tour cannot serve all individuals, groups, and circumstances.

Attempting to deliver all learners on a tour to a single point of understanding or knowledge is impossible. In addition, it is counterproductive and contrary to the spirit and nature of learning within museums, zoos, botanical gardens, and other such facilities. The reason for understanding audiences is not to better deliver or transfer specific facts. It's to put docents in control of their teaching situations and to provide them with the tools to promote the full range of individual learning that should occur during any lesson.

Even for the most conscientious docent, contemplating the range of individual and collective differences among visitors can be intimidating. The more you learn, the more you must take into account. The more you take into account, the more complicated teaching seems. But this is only true in the beginning. Eventually, awareness of individual and group differences becomes almost instinctive. With increased sensitivity and awareness comes an increased aptitude for encouraging participation and facilitating learning. And, as teaching abilities are honed and refined, "job" satisfaction increases dramatically.

The first step on the path to understanding audiences is to recognize that within every tour group are individual differences only thinly veiled by such labels as "third graders," "people having visual impairments," or "senior citizens." Each person within a "category" acquires, absorbs, and responds to things in his or her own manner.

The second step on this path is to believe that thinking and perception need not follow a single point of view to be correct. Once that idea takes root, one can dispense with such subjective, and often erroneous, judgments as "slow" and "smart."

Learners do have an obligation to approach the learning situation with a willingness to try; however, the burden of sustaining that interest is the docent's. The commonly expressed notion of having had a "good group" or a "bad group" is often less accurate than having provided a group with a lesson that was "appropriately" or "inappropriately" geared to their interests, abilities, and needs. When tours don't work, "good" teachers ask themselves, "What could I have done to better engage and encourage?" *not*, "I just don't understand it? I gave the exact same tour yesterday and that group loved it!"

An effective teacher establishes reasons to learn at the very beginning of the lesson, creating a desire to learn. The satisfaction that comes from fulfilling that desire is much like scratching an itch. But, it takes understanding an audience to know what motivates them to learn, and to anticipate what will pique their interest and encourage their participation.

There's just no way around it, effective teaching *is* complicated. But it is also challenging and fun. And, while it may require additional effort, the rewards derived encompass many of the reasons people volunteer their time and energy to be docents.

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