



The Way You Do The Things You Do

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

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

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

This shift from insular to popular institution led museums toward a greater dependence upon their education departments. Before this time,

many institutions had no education departments, and those that did considered the department peripheral to their institution's operation. However, to increase and sustain higher attendance (and, ultimately gain additional funding), these institutions needed to make previously unaware or disinterested audiences aware and interested. It was at this critical juncture that education departments, public programming, and the use of docents began to take on a new level of importance within the museum structure.

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

From that time, and forward, the burden of expanding and enfranchising audiences fell squarely on museum education departments. Museum docents, who had been "explainers," essentially parroting back information about the

collection told to them by others, were being asked to become "educators," who could teach these new visitors the skills needed to become interested and comfortable in this setting.

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

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

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

A highly flexible approach, adaptable to a wide range of people and situations, became essential. No longer were docents speaking with people who shared a similar interest and who possessed a skill base that allowed them to absorb and validate (or invalidate) the information presented. Instead of imparting information that was refined and defined for the interested by the

interested, docents needed a method for teaching novice visitors the skills of careful observation, discrimination, and organization — a way to harness the museum experience and to put new information into a useful and relevant context. The role of "educator" within museums had grown enormously, and was changing from that of transmitter to mentor.

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

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

Inquiry, or the asking of questions that prompt visitors to participate in the learning process, is an art and not a science. Employing it requires practice. The method is not a particularly easy one either, especially because it departs from the more familiar expositional models, such as lecturing or reading from scripts.

The reason for reviewing how the role of educator has changed — from tour guide to

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"teacher," and how participatory teaching became the primary, accepted mode of instruction — is that we must know *why* we teach as we do in order to improve how we teach.

Concurrently, it is essential that we know *what* we are teaching.

What we hope to impart has changed from pre-determined facts about our collections to skills — ways of thinking within a discipline, methods of gleaning information from primary sources, and ways of placing what is learned into a larger, more meaningful context. Perhaps it is useful to think of our collections as a means to an end, rather than the end itself. We are not simply teaching about the collection, but about learning from objects or living

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things, and using our collections of objects or living things as significant and important examples.

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

