

Hey, What's the Big Idea?

Creating a Lesson Plan

by Alan Gartenhaus

The Docent Educator

vol. 5 no. 1 1995

Struggling to prepare the appropriate introduction for your tour — one that establishes both the topic and purpose of the lesson? *Where* do you begin? *How* do you begin?

To be effective, an introduction should tell visitors what they are about to learn in a manner that prepares them to receive the information and that helps them integrate the experience. This implies that the docent knows precisely *what* learners are expected to learn, and *how* they will be learning it.

A common error when developing a tour or lesson is for docents to prepare it chronologically — in the same sequence as it is presented to an audience. An introduction should only be developed after the full lesson plan is conceived and constructed.

Another common miscalculation is trying to construct a lesson plan based upon what the teacher or docent intends to do. Some statements do little to help plan an introduction, or the rest of the tour for that matter.

– I plan to teach the group how to better appreciate works of art.

– I will acquaint visitors with the customs and traditions of the indigenous island people.

– I'll introduce students to various kinds mammals and their common characteristics.

Statements such as these offer no guidance as to *what* a lesson should include, nor do they reveal any information about *how* learning will actually take place.

It is best to begin with what is expected of visitors and work from there. What should visitors have learned by the end of your encounter together? What should *they* be able to do?

– By the end of this lesson, learners will be able to articulate several responses to works of art beyond

personal preference.

– By the end of this lesson, learners will be able to identify and discuss at least three attributes of the people who first inhabited these islands.

– By the end of this lesson, learners will be able to distinguish between mammals and non-mammals.

Statements like these are known as *instructional objectives*. Instructional objectives state unambiguously, and in an active voice (using action verbs), exactly what the learner should be able to do by the conclusion of the lesson. Notice that the instructional objectives are phrased in a very specific manner, beginning with “By the end of this lesson, learners will be able to ...”

To be useful, instructional objectives must be clear and defined. To simply state that “learners will appreciate works of art,” or that “learners will know about an indigenous people,” or that “learners will understand what makes an animal a mammal” does not ensure that learning will actually occur. You can't see appreciation, knowledge, or understanding. They must be demonstrated. Instructional objectives should describe what observable behaviors will take place that will indicate that learning has happened.

Learners must be given opportunities to practice what they are supposed to learn and to demonstrate that they have learned it. Working from your instructional objective, decide what activities will prompt visitors to practice, learn, and demonstrate mastery of your instructional objective.

– In a gallery of many works, visitors will select a work of art that they feel has powerful emotional content, and will analyze how the artist conveys these emotions. Then, visitors will ...

– Visitors will examine tools used for fishing and for agriculture, and will make hypotheses as to what these implements

reveal about the people who used them. Next, visitors will ...

– Visitors will decide if humans are mammals after considering their physical characteristics. Following this, visitors will ...

The various activities that you use to promote learning constitute your *instructional plan*. Your instructional plan answers the question, “How?” How will learners practice, learn, and demonstrate mastery of the instructional objective?

Once you have developed an instructional objective, and you have mapped out the instructional plan that leads to achieving that objective, you are ready to create the tour’s structure. Each aspect of the tour’s structure — its introduction, content, transitions, and conclusion — should advance visitors toward the instructional objective.

The primary function of an introduction, for example, is to provide visitors with a sense of purpose and to set the tone of instruction. *What* is the central theme or idea of the lesson? *How* will it be taught? Answers to such questions are the ingredients — the content and character — of your introduction. They answer the question, “What’s the big idea?” before it is ever asked.

– *Have you ever seen a movie that you didn’t like, but that had a powerful effect on you, nonetheless? Which movie? What was your response?*

Well, today we will look at a variety of art works; some you will like and others you may not. We won’t be focusing on likes and dislikes, however. We will be thinking about other attributes and reactions we might have to them.

– *The everyday things people use tell stories about them. For instance, what might one of our coins tell other people about our society? How many things could other people learn or decide about us just by inspecting one?*

We will be going through the gallery examining the tools, artifacts, and art work of the native island people. As we



Docent Gary Outlaw, who volunteers at the Denver Zoo, gives an introduction to the herpetology exhibits using a living participant. His introduction will establish a construct for learning about reptiles and amphibians.

do, I will be asking you to consider what these objects might tell us about their lives and society.

– *Every living creature has some kind of covering on its body. Fish have scales; people have skin and hair. What other kinds of body coverings have you seen?*

You will be looking at lots of living things, here. Most of them will be mammals. Many different types of animals are mammal, but all of them share some important things in common. One is having hair or fur on their skin. Soon, you will be able to tell if an animal is a mammal simply by considering its appearance and activities.

Knowing what *visitors* are expected to learn tells a teacher exactly what he or she will need to teach. It makes constructing introductions, and all other aspects of the tour, far easier and less cryptic.

The rule to remember is that learning should always lead teaching, not the other way around. When learning leads, creating a lesson is not a mysterious process of hit-or-miss, but a deliberate route for directing visitors toward a better understanding of “the big idea.”