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Crafting a Tour

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This issue of *The Docent Educator* examines introductions, transitions, and conclusions — three of the most important structural elements of any lesson. Along with content, these structural elements determine and direct every guided learning experience. When poorly conceived or implemented, introductions, transitions, and conclusions can defeat the most well intentioned and deliberate tour. But, when fashioned in a manner that facilitates learning and achieves cohesiveness, they become the distinguishing hallmarks of a well-crafted lesson.

The Well-Crafted Tour

The structural elements of a lesson or tour consist of its introduction, content, transitions, and conclusion. Since content differs for every institution, we will focus on the functions and characteristics of the remaining three.

- The introduction. A tour's introduction serves as its starting point. The introduction should orient learners by providing them with a sense of purpose, a tone for interaction, and an awareness of the institution. It is also an opportunity to handle logistical considerations.

When constructed properly, introductions give tours "definition." Definition refers to the tour's focus and form. Do all participants have a clear understanding of the tour's subject, purpose, or theme? Do learners understand what is expected of them? Is the format to be active or passive, responsive or fixed?

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- Transitions. A tour's transitions are its moments of change. Transitions should help learners shift from one thing to the next by forging relationships between experiences or among ideas. ensuring that there is a continuity and focus throughout. Transitions can also provide an opportunity to embellish, emphasize, or clarify. When successful at establishing linkage between two objects or ideas, transitions give tours a sense of "unity." Unity refers to the tour's cohesiveness. Do all facets of the tour relate to one another? Does the central theme, message, or idea tie all parts of the experience together? Does learning carry over from one thing to the next?
- The conclusion. A tour's conclusion is its ending point. The conclusion should review with learners the lesson's purpose and content, integrating both into a larger scheme or body of thought. It is also an opportunity to evaluate the learning that has taken place and to invite visitors to return. When constructed properly, conclusions place what is learned into "context." Context refers to the circumstances surrounding or relating to information. How does this information fit into a greater field of study? What implications or applications does it have? In what other circumstances might this information be useful?

The Introduction: A Time to Define

Perhaps no single feature of a lesson is more crucial to its ultimate success than is its introduction. This is when visitors make inferences about the nature of the institution and the tour's intent, and appraise the character of the person leading the experience.

First impressions do count! Defining the appropriate tone is the immediate order of business. Are you friendly and accessible, or, are you formal and removed? One or the other is quickly communicated — through your body language, intonation, facial expression, and greeting.

Be welcoming. Convey enthusiasm for the subject matter. Remember that every learner deserves your best effort. Being tired or nonplused is contagious. Moods and interest are communicable. Often, it is your style of delivery that is the key to unlocking your audience's attention, interest, and enthusiasm.

Introduce yourself and your institution. "My name is Alan. I will be guiding you through the Metropolis Wildlife Conservancy, which most of you know as the Metro Zoo." If you volunteer your time to conduct tours, let your audience know. You need not say much, simply that you are a volunteer who tours the institution with visitors. This lets your audience know that your commitment is personal and that your interest is genuine.

If your tour will be interactive — in other words if you will be asking questions of your visitors rather than reciting a scripted presentation to them — ask them a question early on to get them talking and to let them know that you will want them to engage with you. Some typical questions are “Have any of you been here before?” or “Is there something in particular you were hoping to see on your tour today?”

Try using an ice-breaker to get things going. Ask questions that relate to the tour. “As you walked into this house, what was the first thing you noticed?” Or, “What things do you associate with a rainforest environment?” I do not recommend beginning an introduction with institutional rules filled with “please do not …” This starts things on a negative tone. Instead, present the rules in a positive fashion during your first transition.

Tell visitors the purpose of your tour. State the central theme or idea that will occur throughout the tour so that they can link the new information on to a concept that they understand. One should not assume that the reasons for learning are obvious or that they will be “discovered” by the lesson’s end. (School textbooks can provide good examples of how to introduce a topic by presenting the overall concept before delving into the details.)

For instance, you might begin the tour of a botanical garden by saying, “On this tour, we will learn how plants have adapted to specific climatic conditions by carefully observing their form and characteristics.” Or, when touring an historic house museum, you might tell visitors, “On this tour, you will see how this wealthy 1 8th century family lived by considering their home and by examining the objects they purchased and surrounded themselves with.”

If you are able to divide the group into smaller touring parties, now is the time. Have young visitors count off, and have all the “one’s” go with docent A, all the “two’s” go with docent B, and so forth. Teens and adults should be corralled and then asked, “Would the six of you please go with docent A,” and then ask about the same number go to with docent B.

Transitions: Ways to Unify

The first transition, which occurs as the group moves from its gathering place to the first stop, is an appropriate time to review institutional etiquette. Remember that it is nice to know the reasons for following a rule, rather than just to be told the rule. “Let’s keep our voices low so that we don’t startle the animals. People frighten them and they will hide from us if we are too noisy.”

Every transition thereafter should serve to unify the lesson by making experiences interconnect. Transitions are intentional ways to move productively from one thing or idea to another. Whether in the form of a question, statement, or activity, transitions should keep people on task while propelling them toward something else.

For instance, stating that "like these frogs, the birds we will see next also live in the rainforest, but they live at the top of the tree canopy" provides visitors with the connection between two different life forms, while supplying them with useful information about habitat. Asking visitors, "How do these hunting tools differ from those we looked at previously?" can heighten their awareness, while reviewing and reinforcing what they previously learned.

Activities are useful transitions when teaching youngsters. While investigating lines as an element of design in an art museum, have the children walk to the next art work in a single-file line, in parallel lines, in wiggly lines, and in broken lines. In similar fashion, you might have children count the number of birds they see while walking between stops during an ecology lesson in a park.

Use transitions to reinforce the overall theme or message of a lesson, while giving visitors something productive to contemplate. "Remember, our tour topic is adaptation. So, as you look at the plants in this next area of the garden, consider how they have adapted to climate and soil conditions."

Conclusions: Culmination and Context

The conclusion of a lesson is the time for summarizing. It is an opportunity to glance both backward and forward — backward to make certain that new information was understood and forward to ensure that new information will be placed into its proper context.

When concluding, ask visitors what they learned or remember best about the tour. This is a quick method to review and reinforce what was learned and to evaluate what you taught. (If everyone seems to remember something fairly peripheral, perhaps it was given too much emphasis.)

After visitors tell you what they have gleaned from the tour, remind them of how to use any newly acquired skills. "Remember, by comparing works of art to one another, you can gain greater awareness and understanding of artistic styles and subject matter." Or, "As you encounter new cultures, try asking yourself the same question we asked ourselves today — in what ways are these people similar to us?"

Finally, place the information and your institution into context. Context tells visitors that the educational experience they had at your institution is anchored in something larger than itself. It is learning that has usefulness, purpose, and applicability.

Without context, the meaning and significance of content are obscured. Consider the plight of the poor patient who overhears two medical professionals talking outside of the examining room where he has just received a check-up.

“You know,” one physician says to the other, “he really looks terrible.”

“It’s true,” the other responds somberly. “In fact, I don’t see how he can hold out for long like that.”

The patient, in near panic, scrambles out of the examining room only to see that the two doctors are watching a televised tennis match where the favored player is losing badly. Unless context is known and understood, things can be misconstrued and misinterpreted.

Give learners a context within which to place their new discoveries. For instance, tell them that “Your tour through this historic home has not been descriptive of most people’s lives during the time period. This house is a special place that shows us some of the most precious and exceptional things about life during the 18th century.” Or, that “Many of the same pressures threatening the rainforest ecosystem in Brazil threaten areas of our own country, too.”

Putting It All Together

Whether purposefully developed or haphazardly occurring, all tours have a beginning, middle, and end. At their worst, these elements can actually obscure lessons, making new information seem less accessible and increasing the level of confusion; but, at their best, these structural features work to support learning by reinforcing lessons and giving them symmetry.

It need not take lots of time to make introductions, transitions, and conclusions work on behalf of your teaching. A three-minute introduction, a sentence or two each time you move to a new location, and a brief conclusion can be sufficient. Almost immediately, these structural elements will become part of the flow of your tour, which is only fitting, as they are a part of your tour, whether deliberate or not!

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