

Surveying the Field:  
School-Museum Partnerships for Field Trip Curricula

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**Introduction**

The literature on schools and museums tends to be one-sided. Teachers are encouraged to take advantage of museum resources, and model for each other successful approaches to integrating museum visits with overall curriculum goals. Museum representatives, for their part, study how people learn in museums, and work to design programs and services that schools will find attractive and useful. Bringing both voices and both areas of expertise together appears to be the more difficult task, both in scholarship and in practice. This paper will make a brief survey of published materials on how museums and schools can collaborate to create field trip curriculum programs that best serve meaningful student learning both in and out of the classroom.

Defining terms remains the first duty, informed as always by the work of others. By field trips I mean classroom group visits to a museum, park or historic site. By field trip curriculum programs I mean the integration of museum visits into a set of instructional goals, where the field trip is just one component of a rich lesson plan that begins before the visit and continues after it. By meaningful student learning I mean personalized experiences of inquiry, discovery, and productive expression that involve acquisition and exercise of skills and knowledge within a framework that is designed to make sense to the student and to create

opportunities for new sense-making. Ideally, these experiences simultaneously enable the satisfaction of school requirements, and equip the student with the intellectual and motivational tools both for academic success and for a lifetime of learning.

Engaged in and by these field trip curriculum programs are school-aged children from kindergarten through the equivalent of U.S. grade twelve. School-museum partnerships for field trip curriculum development entail collaboration between school teachers and museum education staff, with the blessings of their respective administrations and community stakeholders. The partners work together to design activities and projects that take best advantage of each institution's resources. The partners' shared goals include facilitating the transformation of students' encounters with the real objects and places of museum sites into the meaningful learning described above.

This outline of museum-school collaboration goals derives in part from the principles of free-choice and inquiry-based learning (see Falk & Dierking, 2000); the Image Watching framework for developing critical thinking (Ott, 1993); the Institute of Museum Services' twelve Conditions for Success elaborated in its *True needs, true partners* report on school-museum partnerships (Frankel, 1996,

50-60); Uma Krishnaswami's ideals for field trips (2002); and Janette Griffin's analysis of research on students in school groups (2004).

### **Basic Principles**

Everyone appears to agree that field trips are desirable as educational tools. Yet field trips are more often than not treated as a "day out", or a "day off". Having surmounted all the logistical, administrative and financial hurdles to arrange a trip, on the day of the visit teachers often find themselves acting more as student wranglers than educators, particularly when (as so often happens) the trip involves a multi-class group and more than one destination. The mission is accomplished if the students have passed through the space on time and perhaps filled out a worksheet, whether or not anyone (including the teacher) has truly engaged with any of the resources at the site. The questions become, "Are all the students here? Are we keeping to our schedule?" rather than "What are we encountering here? What can we make of this?"

Partnerships between schools and museums offer one of the more obvious ways out of this predicament. The time and energy involved may seem daunting at first, but ultimately are less daunting than continuing the round of exhausting, largely empty "cattle-call" field trips. Partnerships can be as informal as a teacher

consulting closely with museum staff to help build a more effective visit into her planned curriculum (see Stephens, 2002), or as intensive as a school-system-wide collaboration to meet a specific curriculum goal, such as the eighth-grade interdisciplinary “New England and the Sea” program uniting the Society for the Preservation of New England Antiquities and the Triton Regional School in Massachusetts (Frankel, 1996, 42-3). Too often, however, teachers and museum educators design their field trip programs separately, or in association that does not extend much beyond superficial consultation. This approach fails to take best advantage of the strengths of either partner, and neither side comes to fully know the other. The consensus in the literature is that thoroughly conceived partnerships produce the most effective programs, featuring lively, creative projects that help students not only achieve curriculum goals but develop the skills of self-directed inquiry and insight that will power the pleasurable pursuit of learning for the rest of their lives (see Frankel, 1996; Hannon & Randolph, 1999; Krishnaswami, 2002; Griffin, 2004; Schneider, 2004).

Uma Krishnaswami’s field trip model (2002) offers sound principles culled both from the broader literature and her own experience. The curriculum should embrace a student-driven approach (What do they already know? What do we want them to know? What will this experience be like for them? How many

ways can this place engage their imagination and their skills?) that lets students ask their own questions and allows for at least some degree of student choice according to their interests. The teacher should be just as engaged in the project as the students, not only preparing beforehand but joining in the inquiry tasks with the students. The program should culminate in a tangible product (e.g., a poem, a sculpture, a model reproduction, a stage play, an experiment, an essay, a website) that lets students express their interests and their process of discovery; and that product should be presented to stakeholders such as parents or administrators, taking the outcomes back to the community. While school teachers rather than museum educators make up Krishnaswami's intended audience, her work is based on observations of a dynamic initiative by the U.S. National Parks Service ("Parks as Classrooms") that funds school-park education partnerships to develop rich field trip programs and other educational resources at many parks across the United States.

Krishnaswami's principles mesh well with the twelve Conditions for Success declared by the Institute of Museum Services (now the Institute of Museum and Library Services) in 1996, following two years of preliminary grant programs and a 1995 conference on "Museums and Schools: Partners for Education" (Frankel, 50). Those conditions include:

1. Obtain early commitment from appropriate school and museum administrators.
2. Establish early, direct involvement between museum staff and school staff.
3. Understand the school's needs in relation to curriculum and state and local education reform standards.
4. Create a shared vision for the partnership, and set clear expectations for what both partners hope to achieve.
5. Recognize and accommodate the different organizational cultures and structures of museums and schools.
6. Set realistic, concrete goals through a careful planning process. Integrate evaluation and ongoing planning into the partnership.
7. Allocate enough human and financial resources.
8. Define roles and responsibilities clearly.
9. Promote dialogue and open communication.
10. Provide real benefits that teachers can use.
11. Encourage flexibility, creativity, and experimentation.
12. Seek parent and community involvement.

The 1996 report includes profiles of fifteen grant recipients, and features illuminating comments and tips from participants, such as remembering to fund teacher time for participation (rather than making it a “free time” burden).

Janette Griffin’s analysis of research on students at museums reinforces many of Krishnaswami’s points, observing that children are treated differently in museums when they come as part of a school group than when they come with their families (2004). Griffin finds that school trips that are planned more like family trips (emphasizing the factors of purpose, choice, ownership of learning, and a social context of shared learning) are more successful both for the students’ satisfaction and for their learning levels than trying to impose classroom techniques on the experience (such as listening to a lecture or filling out a worksheet). She concludes that “making the links between school and museum learning explicit, genuine, and continuous affords real opportunities for school students to have enjoyable learning experiences in both settings. Studies to date indicate that providing opportunities for museum and school staff to learn from each other and to learn together has exciting potential.” (S67)

### **Historical overview**



In Britain in 1903, William E. Hoyle's booklet *The use of museums in teaching* made one of the earliest appeals for museum visits. Frank Collins Baker made a similar recommendation to American teachers in *The museum and the public school* at about the same time. In those same years John Dewey developed his ideas of educational reform. In the 1920's his model of learning by doing began to take hold in American schools, and led to increased museum usage. The Cleveland Museum of Art performed an experiment on the effectiveness of different types of museum instruction for fifth-grade students, and found that students who received pre-visit lessons retained more information from the museum visit (Bloomberg, 1929). In 1944 Lois Powell reported on a three-year project funded by the General Education Board of New York to explore the potential fruitfulness of art museum services to secondary schools. Once again the Cleveland Museum of Art was involved, along with the Chicago Art Institute, the Milwaukee Art Institute, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and the Albright Art Gallery in Buffalo. The grant was intended to allow a process of mutual discovery between the museums and the schools surrounding them. Although this project was primarily a museum initiative ("to" more than "with"), it did foster personal contact between museum staff and teachers. Comments from the school teachers and administrators were overwhelmingly positive, the primary complaints

stemming from the temporary nature of the grant and the inability to do everything desired within the three years allotted.

Over the next few decades, museums became more and more sophisticated in their educational offerings and their coordination with school educators. In 1972 the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Smithsonian Institution supported a survey by Ann Bay (1973) of museum programs for school children. Bay visited twenty-four museums across the United States, and profiled fourteen of them in depth. She selected the museums in part based on their success in working with schools to develop teaching materials. All of the profiled museums planned and taught formal programs with the school curriculum in mind; six of them offered programs designed in close cooperation with the schools to relate directly to specific classroom units or textbook chapters. Five years later, Lois Swan Jones (1977) sent a questionnaire to 110 art museums in the U.S., Canada and Europe, regarding their educational programs. Of the 73 respondents, 64 had school-visitation programs, which were more common in America (52 of 52!) than in Europe (12 of 21). Of the 64 with field trip programs, 41 of them could boast more than 10,000 student visitors per year. For most museums surveyed, however, coordination with the teachers who brought their students for a visit rarely extended beyond confirming the appointment and perhaps providing a

pamphlet on the tour with some suggested classroom activities. Twenty-two of the sixty-four museums offered pre-visit slide presentations; twenty-eight provided teacher-training sessions. While a few institutions like the St. Louis Art Museum worked more systematically with schools through such services as their Teachers' Resource Center, Jones found that most of the respondents were content with keeping up with demand for the more standard model of one-time field trips. Comparing Bay and Jones, it would appear that humanities and science museums were more likely than art museums to work closely with teachers on field trips.

The Essex (Ontario, Canada) Region Conservation Authority (ERCA) and the Windsor Board of Education launched a pilot project of cooperative curriculum design for 6<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students in 1979. This program was the first attempt by a local school board and the ERCA to collaborate in this fashion. Day-long visits to the Park Homestead, Iler Settlement Cemetery, and Fox Creek Conservation Area on the shores of Lake Erie invited comprehensive, sequential, interdisciplinary, inquiry-based learning on a variety of subjects. Students read topographical and historical maps (in the bus on the way to the site), observed conservation issues, explored details of pioneer lifestyles, made individualized deductions about what it was like to live (and die) on this site in the 1850's, and

thought about changes in family life over time. Feedback was sought from students and school staff, although the available report does not indicate the results of this evaluation (Carter & Hayes, 1981).

In an all-too-rare publication by a museum educator in a journal for teachers, Terry Zeller reported in 1981 on the Minneapolis Institute of the Arts' strategies for catering to schools with a popular touring exhibit on Vikings. The museum wrote development of curriculum materials into its NEH grant to host the exhibit, and consulted with its standing Educators Advisory Committee of area teachers (meeting monthly). The Advisory Committee requested pre-visit packages, including slides, for three grade levels; encouraged schools to organize "Viking Councils" of staff and parents who could coordinate logistics of school visits and related activities in the schools; and planned a series of Saturday teacher workshops about the exhibit and the museum's accompanying materials. During the three-month run of the show, 25,647 school children visited *The Vikings*, with classrooms carefully coordinated to provide optimum experiences (e.g., different groups entering the exhibit at different points, to avoid overcrowding). Two "readiness rooms" were built into the exhibit, to provide informative waiting areas and help control traffic flow. Docents reported that student visitors were well-prepared to experience the exhibit, thanks to the

developmentally appropriate curriculum materials teachers had received, and extensive training of teachers who had carefully prepared their classes for the visit. As Zeller notes:

“the key to any educationally valid museum experience for school children is to work closely with educators in planning the materials which teachers use for pre- and post- museum visit activities, and to inservice as many teachers as possible on those materials. The day is past when museum educators, sitting in their marble temples, can prepare object-centered rather than learner-centered materials” (27).

A teacher training course at the Smithsonian Institution in the mid-1980's led a social studies teacher and a librarian to design a ten-lesson curriculum aimed at developing critical thinking in 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade students through an introduction to American history through art, incorporating library and museum resources (Difulgo & Novik, 1987). The plan includes use of museum outreach materials, three museum staff class visits, and three museum field trips, embedded in a series of activities designed to develop student perceptions and thoughts about what they see. The authors intended the lesson plan as a model that could be adapted to other communities with different resources. Teacher-training courses often lead to useful documents regarding school-museum partnerships and the educational theory that can shape field trip curricula (see Copenhaver, 1994; Northern Illinois University, 1999).

In 1989, the National Art Education Association's publication *Museum Education: History, Theory, and Practice* included an essay by Ellie Bourdon Caston presenting "A Model for Teaching in a Museum Setting". Caston outlines the history of education in museums, and stresses the educational philosophies that should underlie an effective museum education program. She pays particular attention to the nature of school-museum partnerships, emphasizing the need to balance the roles of the partners so that the museum does not give up its unique capacities for exploratory learning in the name of serving curriculum.

The Institute of Museum Services 1996 *True needs, true partners* report has already been mentioned. Interestingly, when the re-christened Institute of Museum and Library Services repeated the survey in 2000-01 (Martin, 2002), the emphasis had shifted. Rather than focusing on transforming educational experiences for children through school-museum partnerships, the new report took a more museum-centric approach, looking primarily at what museums were doing to support K-12 education rather than at the potential work to be done with schools (a fine distinction, perhaps, but significant in attitude). The 2000-01 survey found that the median museum expenditure on K-12 education had astonishingly quadrupled since the previous report, to 12% of the median annual operating budget from 3% in the earlier survey. 71% of the 376 respondents coordinated

with school curriculum planners; 22% offered sequenced series of visits. In contrast with the 1996 publication, school representatives were not included in the survey or the report.

## Conclusions

The 2002 *True partners* report downplays the impact of educational reform and changing state educational standards, noting that its respondents in 2000-2001 were evenly divided as to whether such changes had affected their programs. Four years after the survey began, in the era of No Child Left Behind, it seems that standards and testing are all we can talk about (see Messenger, 2000; Henson, 2002; Bailey, 2003). Krishnaswami (2002) opens her first chapter by immediately addressing the problem of standards testing and its unfortunate tendency to quash the creatively designed, rich experiences that she champions in her book—with the intention of demonstrating what can still be accomplished. In the wake not only of No Child Left Behind but of economic downturn combined with slashed federal support of states and the ongoing struggles of local school districts to keep their budgets afloat, more and more of the literature today addresses the need for virtual field trips, rather than the more expensive and time-consuming on-site visits advocated in this paper. The Institute of Museum Services' 1996 eleventh Condition of flexibility, creativity and

experimentation for the success of museum-school partnerships is even harder to meet in the current climate. These swift shifts in the literature may, perhaps, represent a hopeful reminder that circumstances do change, and ten years from now we may be discussing a new range of issues.

Clearly, a paper of this scope can only begin to address trends in scholarship and professional reporting in the area of cooperative school field trip curriculum planning and implementation. Much more could and should be said about these issues, and certainly much scholarship has been omitted. If anything can be taken away from such a survey, it should be first a greater awareness and appreciation of the efforts that teachers and museums have made to better serve students; and second, the rich opportunities available to partners who embark on the journey together. An integrated, coordinated approach takes best advantage of each institution's abilities, and has the best potential to offer students rich experiences that will carry forward throughout a lifetime of learning. The partnership, after all, should not revolve around the teacher's need to meet curriculum requirements, or the museum's need to demonstrate its value to the community, but around the student's present developmental needs and lifelong capacity to make sense of the world. The key to motivating school-museum



partnerships and to making them a reality is to focus on the student as the ultimate educational goal.

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