

An Investigation of Student and Adult Docents During Guided School Tours

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Abstract

In most museums and cultural institutions, adult docents lead school tours through exhibits. A large cultural library in Los Angeles employed traditional adult docents to provide school tours, but they also offered local high school students the opportunity to provide tours as part of a service learning project. Students served as junior docents and led elementary school tours for an exhibit, *George Washington and the American Republic*. The library education staff employed by the museum trained junior docents for five weeks during the summer so that they would feel confident to guide elementary students during the fall and spring. The purpose of this paper is to compare the traditional adult-led tours to the junior docent "Dove-tail" tours and to report the cognitive and affective outcomes of the Dovetails as a result of their participation in the docent program.

Introduction

Theoretical Framework

An examination of the current literature related to service learning, museum field trips, and docent-led tours provided a foundation for this inquiry. Service learning projects in elementary schools, secondary schools, and universities are

increasing, as these projects benefit both students and the community (Erickson & Anderson, 1997; Wade, 1997). Students who participate in service learning experiences demonstrated improved education, civic engagement, and knowledge about their community (Donahue, 1999). Teachers who advocate service learning in their classroom “provide learning experiences that capture the interests and talents of their students. Students work longer and try harder to accomplish tasks and develop skills when there are real-life purposes and consequences connected to learning” (Erickson & Anderson, 1997, p. 27). High school students in this study participated in service learning by taking roles as junior docents and leading tours through a historical exhibit.

School field trips to museums and cultural institutions are widely regarded as teaching tools that enhance learning (Falk & Dierking, 1992; Ramey-Gassert, Walberg, & Walberg, 1994). Falk and Dierking (1997) found that field trips also promote long-term recall. Their study revealed that 80% of children and adults could recall three or more specific areas linked to a field trip; many of these responses related specifically to content. Therefore, it is imperative for researchers to continue investigations related the educational potential of museums to improve the quality of learning for those who visit.

Studies over time (Falk & Balling, 1982; Gennaro, 1981; Rennie & McLafferty; 1995) found that students who have studied an applicable topic at school before visiting a museum and who have prepared for the visit learn more from their experience. Without proper orientation and preparation for the trip, students will not concentrate on tasks relevant to the learning intended (Falk & Balling, 1982). The library education staff spent a great deal of time and money making sure that teachers were properly educated to prepare their students for this exhibit.

Few studies have examined the effects of different museum tour programs and docent-led tour programs. Stronck (1983) found that greater cognitive learning occurred during a structured docent-led tour, but greater positive attitudes resulted from a less structured teacher-led tour. Nevertheless, we know little about different types of docents and their impact on student learning. We know even less about the impact of student docents such as the Dovetails, their impact on school groups who visit an exhibit, and how leading tours enhances their own knowledge and personal development. This study offers insight into these areas.

Methodology

As the researchers, we examined the differences and similarities between the traditional adult-led tours and the junior docent tours. We were also interested in looking beyond what we observed during tours to inquire about how participation

as a junior docent impacted high school students' academic and personal development. Interested students from a local high school in the San Gabriel Valley of southern California were asked to submit an application to become a junior docent. Students were also asked to participate in an interview with the library education staff employed by the museum and to write an essay about why they wanted to participate in the junior docent program. About 16 eleventh and twelfth grade students were selected from a group of 30 to pursue the role of docents for the traveling exhibit, *The Great Experiment: George Washington and the American Republic*. They participated in summer training related to exhibit content and tour structure, then were asked to provide tours for elementary students for two hours per week for five months. The high school made arrangements for students to ride to the museum together on a bus. Students were required to make up any assignments missed while leading junior docent tours.

We engaged in naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by observing 10 school groups and adult docents or junior docents. School groups were selected using purposive sampling to cover a range of grade levels and student ethnicities. Data were collected by two researchers who observed different groups of students and one adult or student docent during a one-hour tour. Data collection instruments included:

- *Observation Guides* - One open-ended guide was used during observations. This instrument focused on the interaction patterns between docents and students: lecture, questions, student connections.
- *Docent Interviews* - Brief interviews took place with a random sample of junior docents. Questions included their main focus of the tour, why they chose to give tours, and the perceived value of being a docent.
- *Teacher Interviews* - A brief interview with the teacher. At the beginning of the tour, the questions focused on the teacher's preparation for the trip. At the end of the visit, the interview was resumed and focused on the perceived value of the visit.
- *Student Interviews* - At the end of the tour, four students from each class participating were randomly selected for a brief interview. The focus was on what the student liked or did not like about the tour and what he or she learned during the tour.
- *Student Docent Reports* - Each junior docent was asked to write a report about their experiences learning about exhibit content and leading tours for elementary students.

Following data collection, several strategies were used to identify trends and patterns in the findings. The two data collectors examined research notes for each visit and identified themes across visits using the constant comparison method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Data from each school group was analyzed against the themes

to establish the extent to which each theme was reflected or not reflected in each visit. The content of the junior docent reports was analyzed using the constant comparison method to determine cognitive and affective learning outcomes. Content within the reports was compared with observation and interview data.

Findings

First, we found that the high school docents related to the students in ways that were different from the adult docents. These findings will be reported by comparing adult and student docents in relation to their interactions with school children, strategies for presenting exhibit content, and historical perspectives. The impact of the junior docent program will be gauged by reporting how participation enhanced the participants' knowledge, including cognitive and affective domains.

Comparison of Adult and Junior Docents

Interactions with School Groups

Junior docents consistently related ideas from the exhibit back to the students and their everyday life. Adult docents rarely relayed information from history that would be significant in the everyday life of the student. One junior docent asked, "If you have posters on your walls, who do you have them of?" One of the students responded, "The BackStreet Boys," while another responded "InSync." The junior docent then stated, "This is how people felt about Washington. If they had posters that they could buy (featuring George Washington) they would have placed them in their homes." While discussing jewelry being worn by Martha Washington, the junior docent asked, "How many times a year do you receive jewelry?" Many of the students looked at one another and did not say a word. Without going on with the exhibit, the junior docent then reiterated the question in another way, "If you were to receive jewelry, or give jewelry, how many times would you like to receive/give jewelry within a year?" One female student stated, "I have a necklace my mother gave to me a year ago," while a young man stated, "I have never given anyone jewelry." The junior docent then went on to explain how George Washington gave his wife, Martha, jewelry every year that they were married. The students began to ask more questions regarding the giving of gifts and jewelry "back in George's day." What this shows is the ability of the junior docent to relate events from the past into the everyday lives of the students.

The adult docents were able to interact with the students, but rarely in the observations did the adult docents make the artifacts from the exhibit personal for the students. One adult docent did explain that George Washington gave his

wife Martha jewelry every year of their marriage. As she stated this, students were observed to look at one another with smiles, and began to whisper about the “type of person” they thought George Washington was. Although through the observation it appeared the adult docent heard the comments, she (adult docent) did not follow-up with the students.

Junior docents were also more animated with facial expressions and gestures, as well as creating role-playing opportunities, whereas the adult docents generally were less animated and did not involve the students through creative avenues. While examining a poster from the Boston Massacre, the junior docent divided the group of students into two groups. One group was named “Sharks” and the other group the “Jets” (obviously the student had seen *West Side Story*). The junior docent then explained a simple plot that included the dislike between these two groups. The Jets held a particular neighborhood, and wanted things to remain the same, whereas the Sharks were new and wanted to change things, for they represented a majority of the city. The docent then told the Sharks to pretend they threw rocks at the Jets while the Jets were playing basketball by themselves. The students did this, and the “Jets” responded by acting like they were throwing rocks back. Two male students from opposite “gangs” then pretended to throw punches. The junior docent then stepped in, and told the students, “this is how the Boston Massacre started. The patriots started to throw rocks at the British, and the British responded.” A history teacher who shadowed the group of students stated, “I like the way the (junior) docents get the students involved by acting out the Boston Massacre!”

The adult docents exhibited fewer facial expressions or actions. However, the adult docents presented the exhibit in a professional, factual manner. While stories were being told to the students, adult docents remained calm. Often, their voice remained constant, and did not fluctuate while describing events from the past. The simulations or role-plays were not present when the adult docents escorted the students throughout the exhibit. Often the communication between the adult docents and the students was superficial at best and void of cognitive discourse. The junior docents employed more active listening skills (repeating what the sender would say, to tell the sender that they actually heard and understood the statement) and asked more open-ended questions to guide students through critical thinking skills.

Strategies for Presenting Exhibit Content

Junior docents elicited more feedback from the students, making sure the students understood the material by asking follow-up questions, whereas the adult docents were more apt to lead students into desired answers, and did not give much time for true interaction and discussion. A junior docent questioned one student,

“What is this document? . . . Yes, it is the Declaration of Independence! . . . Now what does this document mean to you?” By using this technique of questioning, the junior docent was able to have students respond to documents that they may have known (to insure they would get the question correct), then ask a more probing question to elicit higher order thinking skills. This form of questioning was observed throughout all junior docent tours. One junior docent in particular made this comment on the level of questioning when approached by a researcher: “Since I want to become a teacher, I have found that questioning leads to more questions and more thinking about the topic. I don’t know what subject I would like to teach, but I am thinking about history after this experience.” This junior docent felt she was able to convey a message to the students that history could be fun, not boring, if the students became more involved in the subject.

An historical “revisionist” perspective was noted more frequently by the junior docents than by the adult docents. One junior docent asked, “How would you react if you were seated at lunch with some friends, and a group of people started to throw rocks at you? . . . Why do you think that we are not taught this about the beginning of the Boston Massacre?” This question was given to the students who participated in the mock simulation mentioned above. The junior docent wanted to relay to the students that the traditional picture of the British in a row shooting the Patriots may have been sensationalism created to stir the masses into retaliating against the British. When probed further, the junior docent asked to the students to see if they knew who drew the picture of the Boston Massacre. “The photo was created by a Patriot . . . whose side were they on?”

Additional non-revisionist questions centered on “what if” types of questions. When speaking about George Washington’s induction into the military, one junior docent asked, “What would have happened if George Washington had been accepted as an officer in the British Army, which he desired?” These comments, coupled with revisionist questions, stimulated conversations among the students, teachers, and parents that were following the junior docents.

When adult docents tried to develop more conversations within the student groups, they were often met with silence. As mentioned previously, even when it seemed students became excited about a particular exhibit, the adult docents rarely tried to foster any further dialogue on the exhibit being discussed by the students. It appeared as if the junior docents were “sharing” information, while the adult docents were “delivering” information. The junior docents desired to foster discussion, whereas the adult docents wanted to give information.

Cognitive and Affective Outcomes as Perceived by Junior Docents

Junior docents overwhelmingly indicated that leading tours not only gave

them first-hand opportunity to learn about George Washington and the American Republic, but enhanced their personal development as well. One junior docent commented, “Participation in the program has provided me with the experience I need to succeed in life.” Another student noted, “Learning history through Dove-tails was a leap ahead from reading everything from a textbook. I got to see many primary documents and other related pieces. History became the present as I got to see documents from two hundred years ago.”

Teacher and Student Satisfaction with Junior Docents

Students and teachers who participated in adult docent-led tours were generally satisfied with the tour. However, students and teachers who toured with junior docents were more satisfied with the interactions and personal connections made throughout the tour. One teacher noted, “Some enjoyed telling humorous anecdotes, others made analogies to modern day life.” Other teachers commented that they “enjoyed the simulation of the Boston Massacre,” and “The tour was excellent! My students interacted well with the (junior) docent.” One teacher liked the “GW trivia” that the junior docents were playing with their students, while another teacher commented that the junior docents went “more in depth than the regular curriculum.” An AP teacher who was covering U.S. History during the time that her students went on the tour commented that the experience, “Totally fits in with our curriculum. The Dovetails (junior docents) demonstrated causes of the American Revolution, and showed George Washington as an interesting figure.” This was particularly important for the teacher, for she loved the subject, and was trying to relay this sense of excitement to her students. She felt the junior docents were able to convey the missing element of passion toward history that she tried to relay.

The students also enjoyed how the junior docents “relayed the information to make sense” and “related to us.” One student commented that, “George Washington was a mystery, a miracle; today I learned about the man . . . I like the way the guide showed me that George was an everyday person.”

The junior docents provided an opportunity to learn while they discussed the exhibit with the students. The information that was provided was appreciated not only by the students but also by the teachers. One teacher made the comment, “Maybe I need to brush up on U.S. history after this experience.”

Discussion

Learning in museums involves developing an understanding of concepts and looking for relationships, links, connections, and patterns related to previous expe-

riences (Lucas, 1993). The results of this study indicate that Dovetails were much more successful in identifying with school children, creating relationships, and addressing personal connections during the tour. Even more interesting was the fact that junior docents connected with students and adults without formal training in educational methods. They received training related to the content of the exhibit and typical structure of the tour, but they added their own comments and analogies to engage students. As one student noted, "My job as a docent was to give the children information about George Washington's life that they would not be exposed to through textbooks. I had to make absorbing the information fun and inspiring to them." When researchers spoke with adult docents they had a similar purpose for conducting the tour, but their main focus was on transmitting historically accurate information to students during a one-hour period. In addition, teachers and students who toured with the junior docents were overwhelmingly pleased with the manner in which the junior docents presented the content within the exhibit. One student who was a beneficiary of the service provided in this study commented, "Past history has affected our present country. Decisions made by George Washington have made this country what it is today. I think I got more out of this one hour than a semester of sitting in class."

Service learning, like the example described in this study, provides authentic learning experiences for the students who participate, while they, in turn, provide valuable service to their community. Student docents appear to be an untapped resource for museums and other cultural institutions. Although logistical problems exist (i.e., time away from class, transportation to and from the museum), the positive learning experiences these high school students gained by participating as a junior docent seem to warrant a more in-depth look at the possibilities. Museums offer a wealth of resources that should be accessed more fully than just a half-day field trip each year. We would like to challenge educational researchers to reexamine potential partnerships between schools and local museums and to redefine the roles of students as docents to improve the quality of learning for all students. Such partnerships would be a "win-win" situation for the schools and the museum. The museums would gain docents with enthusiasm, knowledge, and eagerness to make connections to the everyday life of the citizen. Also, museums would gain access to the community through the students. Schools would gain by having a connection to the museums and by having students who learn content in an authentic environment. Creating a partnership with a museum would provide valuable resources for the students and faculty at schools with limited resources.

Cultural institutions and other community organizations can develop and sustain service learning projects such as the one described in this study by following a series of steps: (a) Contact potential community organizations to determine the types of service project available, (b) Connect content standards for each grade

level with service learning projects, (c) Provide opportunities for students who participate in service learning to reflect on their experiences, (d) Assess each service learning project by obtaining feedback from students, parents, faculty, and the community organization. As the use of service learning in K-12 schools continues, we suggest that educational researchers pursue more research in all content areas and at all grade levels.

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