



Using Museums: A Guide's Guide

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ABSTRACT

Though most educators understand that museums can be a useful resource, many seem unsure how to incorporate a visit into their teaching practice. The author uses his years of experience to explain how museums are creating educational activities in order to attract class trips. Examples from two history museums in Montreal are cited to show the variety of pedagogic activities available. The author concludes with advice for teachers who want their visit to succeed.

think most educators implicitly understand the *idea* that museums can be a useful resource. And certainly some teachers love and use museums frequently. But I also know that quite a few do not. I suspect this is because some teachers simply do not know how to incorporate a visit into their daily teaching practice. It is a rather sad state of affairs, because in principle, I would contend that we are teammates doing much of the same work.

As a museum guide, I would like to try to resolve this accessibility problem in my own *vulgar* way. I use the word vulgarization in the positive sense: my job entails making information understandable to the public, to bridge the knowledge gap between experts and the uninitiated. Off the bat, I will state that I am not in a position to expand on the serious scholarship already written on learning in the museum setting.¹ However, I think that my personal reflections, after more than a decade working in Montreal's history museums, can help these institutions seem a bit more approachable in the eyes of teachers.

To be fair, the gulf between using museums in theory and in practice is partly our fault. Museums, like other cultural institutions, will often project an image they hope will afford it a certain cachet that attracts aficionados and donors. But the danger with such branding is that those who are not regular visitors may regard museums either like the good china, only to be used on special occasions, or worse, as elitist and uptight—not the sort of place that would welcome a class of children among its exhibits.

The truth is, though, that almost every museum I know is keen to come across as more inclusive and to bring in more visitors (Griffin, 2004). And when teachers abstain from using museums it is a particular shame: On one side, my teacher friends tell me they are constantly looking for resources, for ways of spicing up the classroom routine. On the other, we museums love welcoming school groups.

Why? Museums want to ensure they stay relevant. The best way for history museums, in particular, to make an impact on society is not simply to entertain tourists for an afternoon. It is to attract regular visits by local residents: those that stand to gain the most from learning about local or regional history, and are more likely to support the museum in the future. Students are keen to learn, they have the most to learn, and developing a good long-term relationship between a particular school and a museum is great evidence that the latter has become a valuable asset to the community.

In order to cater to the particular needs of teachers and students, most museums and historical sites boast an education department. At its head is someone usually with an education background and who is intimately familiar with local pedagogy. The interpretive guides, who are charged with giving tours and workshops, are often students studying teaching or a relevant subject matter, although quite a few full-time employees like me have more than one degree. Together, the department members develop pedagogic activities that shape the museum's subject matter—as explored in its exhibits and through its artefacts—into easily digestible forms, using the themes and concepts appearing in a school's curriculum.

As an example of how straightforward some museums will make this, here in Quebec, Grade 3 students need to examine the Iroquoian First Nations culture around 1500 C.E. (before European contact). When I worked at the Stewart Museum, a fellow guide developed a workshop for school groups called "Iroquoian Society Around 1500." It was a great activity and teachers knew exactly what to expect and how to fit it in into their teaching schedule.

Montreal has more than a dozen history museums and historical interpretation sites, and competition to attract schools results in a huge list of educational activities available to educators. You might think they all resemble each other, but since each museum has its own character, the pedagogical possibilities vary accordingly. To a large degree, standards are such that all these activities “work”: a teacher’s personal taste and teaching style are usually the deciding factors in choosing an activity and museum. But such choice can be overwhelming, so I would like to give some more concrete examples of the types of activities I’ve conducted and helped to put together.

For ten years I worked at the Stewart Museum on Saint Helen’s Island, Montreal. It is located in a 19th century British military depot in what is now a large park. It features an amazing collection of artefacts: maps and globes, books and scientific tools, domestic objects, and weapons. The primary objective of the museum is to showcase both this collection and the heritage of the island (Stewart Museum, n.d.).



Fig. 1: Located in an old British military depot, the Stewart Museum houses an impressive collection of artefacts

Given the artefacts on display there, it’s not surprising that the activities offered at the Stewart Museum are often object-centred. In the Iroquoian workshop mentioned above, for example, classes would be introduced to many accurate

reproductions of native material culture. Once I had explained each object I would then pass it around. The students could touch a beaver pelt, shake a rattle made of a turtle shell, and could smell tanned moose hide and dried tobacco.

Already with this one example I'm reminded of some of the intrinsic advantages museums have in helping students learn concepts. Teachers can describe an object or show a picture, perhaps even a video demonstrating its use. But to see an object in real life—and ideally to handle, smell, and in some cases, use it—seems to bring about a much more automatic and deeper understanding. I cannot count the number of times I would reveal a model canoe, for example and be met by a chorus of “Awws”—not simply out of enthusiasm or wonder, but because a connection was made in the audience's minds: “So *that's* what the book was talking about...”

Another successful activity on offer was the Recruiting Sergeant. For primary students learning about the history of New France, we'd have two costumed guides each recruit a class into either the French or British army. These “soldiers” would be given uniforms and wooden muskets. They would be trained on how to march as a unit, load their firearms, and fire volleys. The two armies would face off on a bluff near the museum, and some students would be assigned to act as casualties and fall during the battle.

Left at that, it would all be quite fun but lacking in academic weight. Throughout the training process, though, the guide would explain what life would have been like for soldiers hundreds of years ago and why the European powers would have been fighting over Montreal. At the end of the skirmish, all the children would be gathered together, partly to defuse any remaining animosity (some students really committed to their roles) but mostly to uncover what the students had noticed and learned. Because the students had gotten a chance to re-enact a slice of history, instead of just reading about it, their observations could be quite astute. Often the post-battle discussions would explore how terrifying such a battle would have been in real life and we would also reflect upon the outcome of such colonial wars in North America. Moreover, I have been told the activity is being reworked to cover an even broader swath of the province's curriculum requirements.



Fig. 2: The Centre d'histoire de Montréal is a city-run museum with a focus on socio-cultural and oral histories

For an alternate educational approach, I can draw upon my two years at the Centre d'histoire de Montréal. Museologically speaking, this city-run institution is not quite a museum, but rather an interpretation centre; we have very few objects on display or in our collection, and our focus is much more on telling the story of how the city of Montreal has changed over time. There is great emphasis on sharing the stories of the city's residents, often through unconventional or informal means, such as oral histories (Centre d'histoire de Montréal, n.d.).

With regard to our educational approach, we do not have access to many reproductions or the sprawling building complex available to the Stewart Museum. Instead we make use of a dense and flexible permanent exhibit that can be visited in a variety of ways depending on grade level and theme. There is also more emphasis in making our visits mesh with the work going on in the classroom. As a result, most visits include pre- and post-visit activities that teachers are encouraged to conduct

at school. And while the students are visiting the museum, they are asked to fill out short worksheets that we provide. I have noticed that giving them this task helps focus their energy and make sense of what the guide is sharing more effectively. The answers also provide information that the teacher can then use as the basis of post-visit activities, creating articles for a class newspaper, for example.

Perhaps the most ambitious of these projects, and therefore among my favourites, is “Young Citizens,” which explores municipal democracy. Before visiting the museum, students are divided into five groups and tasked with mounting an election campaign of sorts. Each group researches a former mayor of Montreal with help from information posted on our website.² They must put together posters and organize a press conference to convince their fellow students that their candidate did the most for the city. Only then do they visit the CHM, where we explore our main exhibit with an emphasis on the evolution of municipal democracy over time. We also review the accomplishments of the five mayors they studied in class, making sure all the while that they fill in answer sheets that will help them keep track of who-did-what.

By the time we finally get to the vote, the students are primed and eager to fill in their ballot. The vote mimics a real municipal election, with voting booth and ballot box and all. The count takes place at school and once the teachers send us the results we post them online so everyone involved can see trends in voting among all the classes we receive. Each of the former mayors of Montreal has been selected by at least once class, and it is always fascinating to hear the students’ arguments supporting their favourite candidates.

But the project does not end there. It includes a subsequent visit to City Hall. There, students can visit the city archives, where documents related to the mayors are kept, and get to meet with the President of the Municipal Council, who invites the students to sit in the Council Chambers and fields their questions on the mayoralty. And finally, one of our guides visits the class at its school to conduct a workshop on the municipal Charter of Rights and Responsibilities. To top it off, a governmental program allows some schools from disadvantaged neighbourhoods to participate in the project for free, with bussing included.

I mention all this because I want to make clear how much this contrasts with how some educators still seem to view museums: a place you visit at the end of term, where students can play around and hopefully learn something. Now, there is nothing wrong with using a museum for more limited or recreational means, especially for groups incapable of or uninterested in tackling more challenging activities. Quizzes,

crafts or, more spectacularly, lacrosse games, are less demanding academically but still have an educational core.

However, museums are increasingly trying to make available projects that require a lot of work—from our staff, from teachers, and from students themselves—but result in a more comprehensive, cohesive, and memorable learning experience, all while strengthening bonds between schools and cultural institutions. Personally, it delights me to see how much effort some classes have put into the Young Citizens program (some children have even gotten dressed up like their candidates). And with such a project, one does not feel as though one is simply checking off topics on a curriculum checklist. Sappy though it might be, I've actually been moved to tears when watching a motivated group applaud its own corruption-free campaign and realizing that to some degree, students are ending the process with a better understanding of their role as future voters and, as a result, have become better citizens. The dividends are well worth the extra effort.

For brevity's sake I will skip detailing how there are also an array of activities suitable for secondary students, for second-language and special needs classes, for adult education groups, and for nearly any conceivable hybrid. A little Internet searching will make clear what one's options are nearby. But I will conclude with some advice for educators who plan on making use of museums.

As a guide, I do not have the formal educator's pleasure of getting to know a group of children over the course of a year. I do, however, get to see thousands of students from different cities, neighbourhoods, schools, and classes. From my vantage point I can observe the difference that good, experienced teachers make. They tend to ask questions before booking a visit and they make clear their educational expectations and logistical requirements. They show up on time and make sure any preparatory work included in the activity design was carried through. During the visit they neither take over from the guide nor rest on their laurels. Instead they help keep things running calmly and on time and occasionally supplement the information provided by the guide. And once back at school, the best teachers take what was learned in the museum and build on it.

As for good museums, they tend to be able and willing to adapt their activities to particular needs. Their staff is well informed, welcoming, courteous, and calm. Their activities are both educational and entertaining and they are conducted on schedule. These museums seek out criticism and update their programs over time. Overall, they make it easy to incorporate a visit into one's teaching routine.

I feel there is much potential to strengthen the link between learning in and outside of the classroom. I hope that my thoughts have helped make this notion more tangible.

Notes

1. For example, please see:

Anderson, D., Kisiel, J., & Storksdieck, M. (January 01, 2006). Understanding teachers' perspectives on field trips: Discovering common ground in three countries. *Curator*, 49, 3, 365–386.

Falk, J. H., & Dierking, L. D. (2000). *Learning from museums: Visitor experiences and the making of meaning*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

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Hein, G. E. (1998). *Learning in the museum*. London: Routledge.

Leinhardt, G., Crowley, K., & Knutson, K. (2002). *Learning conversations in museums*. Mahwah, N.J: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Talboys, G. K. (2010). *Using museums as an educational resource: An introductory handbook for students and teachers*. Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate.

2. Many museum websites feature free virtual exhibits and even stand-alone pedagogical activities that the teacher can conduct in class.

References

Centre d'histoire de Montréal. (n.d.). *Lost Neighbourhoods, as seen by Jean-François Leclerc, Director of the Centre d'histoire de Montréal*. Retrieved January 22, 2012, from http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/portal/page?_pageid=2759,85239572&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL

Griffin, J. (July 01, 2004). Research on students and museums: Looking more closely at the students in school groups. *Science Education*, 88, 1, 59–70.

Stewart Museum. (n.d.). *Mission and vision*. Retrieved January 19, 2012, from <http://www.stewart-museum.org/en/mission-and-vision-56.html>



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LINK TO:

http://ville.montreal.qc.ca/portal/page?_pageid=8757,97305573&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL

<http://www.stewart-museum.org/en/home-page-45.html>