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MUSEUMS AND MORE

Stephen Tchudi

It's a recurring nightmare for museum directors: A yellow school bus pulls up in front, and 250 gum-snapping children disembark. They press against the museum doors like shoppers waiting for a Highland Appliance midnight madness sale. A brave curator opens those doors and the children swoop in, supervised by an eighty-two year old teacher and a volunteer parent who's on valium. Armed with dull pencils and dittoed worksheets, the children visit all the museum exhibits in eight minutes flat, then spend another four minutes filling in the worksheet blanks by guesswork and answer-trading. With an hour and forty-eight minutes remaining before the bus returns, the students then busy themselves stuffing paper towels in the toilets, eating lunch prematurely, riding the service elevator, and trying to figure out whether the plaster dinosaur has privates. Their shouts and laughter echo off the high ceilings at ear-pinging volume; the museum guides hide out at the loading dock. Seeing a solitary girl in tears before an exhibit of butterflies, the hopeful museum director asks, "What did you learn that moved you so much?" The child replies, "I just found out that Richard thinks I'm ugly."

Veteran teachers have similar bad dreams about museum trips run amok, and sometimes kids have bad dreams as well, generally on the order of being forced to write a 50,000 word post-museum report on the culture of some island where people wear peculiar clothing or no clothing at all (the latter, at least, being food for a couple of jokes and the first fifty words).

It's too bad that museum field trips don't have a better educational reputation, because museums have enormous potential for helping teachers and students expand their learning beyond textbook bindings and school-yard boundaries. For their part, many museum directors are changing their approach to ways of exhibiting materials and engaging visitors—especially school-age visitors. And new directions in museum education mesh nicely

with some of the most exciting developments in English language arts education. Like English teachers, contemporary museum directors want to find ways of involving kids in active discovery and holistic, "real world" learning that goes beyond the rote and routine of recitations, reports, and worksheets. Museums do it through artifacts; we do it through language. The *word* provides a point of convergence.

For several years I have been exploring the potential of museums as an educational resource. My quest began far from home in London, where, in the summer of 1985, Michigan State University's Marilyn Wilson and I sent our students to the museums of London to discover the culture they had previously known only through college literature texts. As our students explored the British Museum and the National Gallery, as they went to toy and transportation and military museums, as they studied artifacts of British science, technology, art, craft, and history in places like Greenwich and Hampton and Kew, their reading of British literature came alive for them.

Of course, London has world class museums and a literature to match. In subsequent years I have explored this approach to learning closer to home, drawing on smaller museums with less dramatic artifacts and literature which, while engaging, might not be on the scale of the British masterpieces. I've taught a course in "Reading and Writing About Michigan" based on the premise that one can create a full and engaging language arts curriculum using Michigan literature and community resources. At the Traverse Bay Writing Workshop, I led a group of elementary and secondary school teachers on a museum tour of Leelanau County, with correlated readings from David Anderson's *Michigan: A State Anthology* (Detroit: Gale Research, 1984). At Henry Ford Museum & Greenfield Village, I worked with another group of teachers exploring American literature and culture. In each of these courses I experienced results similar to what Marilyn Wilson and I had seen in London: both reading and writing were brought to life when people could connect the written word with museum exhibits.

The heart of museum learning – of museums generally – is the *artifact:* an object created some time in the past which has been valuable, useful, or lucky enough to have been preserved. (A museum artifact is analogous to a literary text in this respect.) Artifacts (like texts) have stories to tell, stories which reveal something of the artifact maker (or storyteller). The trouble with both artifacts and texts has been that they have often been

preserved in museums and textbooks as mummies rather than as a form of living evidence.

The traditional museum exhibit placed rows of artifacts in glass cases, with dates and informative labels attached. (One Henry Ford curator calls this "1001 Toasters Under Glass.") Newer museum exhibits are designed to be "interactive," helping viewers understand the story (to *respond* to it) and to see its connections with people, places, and times. Michiganders who have been to the Henry Ford Museum recently know that it has replaced its traditional exhibit of old cars ("The Used Car Lot," our curator called it) with an interactive exhibit that surrounds the cars with other artifacts from the period: road signs, motels, a diner, a McDonalds arch, some antique gas pumps. One leaves the exhibit with a sense of the automotive era, not just knowledge of stages in the development of technology. The visitor can see *why* cars have become what they are in America, rather than simply looking under the hood of aging machines.

However, my students and I have observed that even the best "interactive" exhibits need help if they are to lead to more than rote responses or fill-in-the-blank summaries by students. And here's where writing has a crucial role to play, one that is not widely understood even by progressive museum educators.

Through the "write to learn" movement, English language arts teachers now realize that writing is more than simply encoding of ideas, facts, and concepts. When students write, they come to *understand*. They even make new knowledge ("new" for them, at least, if not original in a scholarly sense). By writing about what they see at a museum, youngsters can get *inside* the glass cases (even if those cases contain 1001 toasters). They can use their imaginations to fill in the missing link in museum exhibits: the human element. By bringing their own humanness to bear on an exhibit, through writing, youngsters not only enlarge their understanding of history, but expand their understanding of themselves and their links to humankind.

The students in my courses seem to respond in writing to museum exhibits in three main ways (generally, but not always, in this order):

1) "Gee Whiz" pieces where they simply marvel about what they have seen or hadn't known before.

2) Writing in role, where they take on the perspective of an historical person who created or used the object, or where they actually write from the perspective of the artifact itself (the "be the thing" writing activity familiar to elementary school teachers).

3) Writing about their own lives in the context of the museum itself, reflecting how things have changed or how the past has shaped the present which they know and are coming to understand.

(This last form is especially exciting to me, since it demonstrates the connection between student and artifact that I hope to promote in my teaching.)

To make all this more concrete, here's a list of writing topics that I use in museum work. (These are "generic" assignments for any museum. You can make them specific for any museum you happen to be visiting and adapt them to the particular group of students you are working with.) You'll note that I encourage my students to write in many forms and genres: poems, stories, scripts, nonfiction. I find that when students choose imaginative forms to write in, they stretch their imaginations and artifactual interpretations.

- Be the artifact. Write about life from its point of view in time and place.
- Do an anthropological analysis of an object: where was it made? Who might have made it? What was its purpose? What does it tell you about the needs of the people who made it?
- Be Sherlock Holmes and deduce all you can about the user of this object based on wear and tear, its function, and any other clues you can sleuth out.
- Describe how things have changed between then and now (e.g., how do today's toasters and vacuum cleaners differ from yesterday's?).
- Make a collection of "gee whizzes"—facts, ideas, and concepts you didn't know before.

- Write a character sketch of the person who made this object.
- How would you make one today, using modern materials?
- Write a poem that describes your artifact or the person who made it or the feelings that it creates in you.
- Write a letter to a museum director who is pressed for exhibit space, arguing that this object should be either saved or tossed out.
- Write a letter from the former owner of this object to his or her child explaining why it's important to save it.
- Keep a journal or "split column" log of your museum visit, writing down your reactions to what you have seen.
- Write some postcards from the museum to friends, telling them what you have seen. (Instead of buying postcards, you might write a word picture of an exhibit on one side of a card and the message to your friend on the reverse.)
- Go back in time to the era of an artifact and write a description of life for a person your age at that time.
- Create a tall tale about the creation of this object or about a person who owned it.
- Write about how objects like this one are likely to change in the future.
- Write a script for a documentary radio show about this object.
- Interview one of the museum guides about what he or she thinks is important about the exhibit.
- Watch people watching exhibits and write about what they seem to be learning.

- Create a short story in which this artifact plays an important role.

- Write about an artifact in one of the following discourse forms: speech, editorial, letter to the editor, imaginary diary, joke, riddle, song lyric, telegram, newspaper article, advertisement, bumper sticker, satire, fantasy, science fiction, a set of directions.

Another area where English language arts teachers can enrich museum learning is through the natural connection with reading. To begin with, libraries are museums, preserving the written artifacts which somebody thinks are worth hanging onto. Too often kids see libraries as dusty, old-style museums, but if youngsters are off on learning quests of their own, libraries are genuinely exciting places to be. Libraries increasingly include non-print (but still verbal) materials which can be employed in connection with any museum visit. Below are some ideas to pursue.

- Prior to your museum visit, ask your school librarian to create a book cart or reserve collection on the broad topic of your visit. Provide some reading days or times for students to explore this collection and to come up with questions they think they might want to answer at the museum. (If the librarian won't cooperate, of course, you may have to do this yourself. One enterprising teacher I know sent her thirty seventh-graders to the library and simply had them check out "everything on magnetism" in preparation for a museum visit.)

- Don't forget to include nonfiction books for children and young adults in your search for reading materials.

- Collect magazine and newspaper articles connected with the museum and its collections. (In a Michigan State University class on "Interdisciplinary Learning," I had my students each find ten easy-reading articles related to an exhibit at the MSU museum. These materials found a welcome home at the museum's education center.)

- Scan the TV guide for related documentaries on the Discovery Channel, Public Broadcasting, Arts & Entertainment, or commercial networks, and check the school or district media center (and/or your local video store) for documentaries and other videos which can help your students prepare for the visit.

Of course, reading is a natural activity *after* the museum visit as well. In exploring this approach with junior high students, I found that kids were often self-directed in seeking out new reading to answer questions which their museum visit had piqued or failed to answer.

I've learned, however, that simply coming up with engaging writing and/or reading activities is only a partial improvement over conventional museum worksheets. Visits need to be linked to ongoing units of study, not simply plugged into the curriculum as a one-day respite from the usual academic fare. In a cooperative project with the MSU Museum and Hannah Middle School in East Lansing, my undergraduate students prepared and presented pre-and post-museum work based on a unifying theme: "People and Their Environment." Working on such subtopics as Tools, Climate, Culture and Values, Health, and Folktales, my students engaged small groups of middle schoolers in hands-on inspection of artifacts (supplied by the museum) prior to the visit. Webbing and brainstorming were used to help middle schoolers identify issues, problems, and questions which they wanted to answer at the museum. In that way my students were able to use the museum exhibits selectively, for *learning*, not just for passive viewing. We also built in follow-up sessions to answer questions, synthesize our learning through writing, and discuss additional reading and project work. Thus the museum trip was simply a part—albeit a major part—of a much larger interdisciplinary unit.

All this is not without challenges. When I enthuse about museum learning, for example, teachers sometimes remind me that budgets are tight, that one can't always arrange for field trips. Who will pay the admission fees, which can be steep at the big museums? Actually, a trip to Detroit, Chicago, Flint, Ann Arbor, Lansing, or Grand Rapids isn't required for successful use of museum learning in a language arts class. You can find community and county historical museums to visit close by, and I've honestly come to enjoy some of these "Mom and Pop" places more than the larger museums. A

pamphlet available from the Michigan Historical Society lists over three hundred museums in Michigan, and that *doesn't* include the Tuba Museum which is a proud part of an ice cream store in Okemos. Kids can often get to local museums on their own or with parents, thus relieving the teacher of School Bus Horrors.

In fact, I have also come to understand that, ironically, a *museum* visit isn't always vital to what I have come to call "museum style" or "artifactual" learning. Even if the yellow school bus isn't available because of cutbacks, or if you simply can't stand the thought of listening to kids sing "a hundred bottles of you-know-what on the wall," you can still engage students in learning in new and interesting ways.

Your community is a living museum. Whether we're talking of a large metropolitan area or a rural crossroads, every community is full of *stuff*: buildings , tools, streets, the school building itself. This *stuff* has stories to tell about history, society, culture, and day-to-day living. Students can turn to the community storytellers as well: their parents and neighbors, the mayor, other kids, senior citizens. A Henry Ford Museum has a great deal to tell about American history and technology, but so do the living museums of Bad Axe, Caro, or Battle Creek, Michigan

We should also recognize that kids themselves are museum curators. Their closets are filled with stuff that they have preserved as important. Organizing, writing about, and sharing collections can be a significant language arts activity. Beyond that, students can become curators of their family history: writing genealogies, labeling photographs, collecting stories. Nor should we forget that the writing students produce day in and day out for publication uses language to preserve ideas for present and future contemplation.

At worst, then, museums can lead to nightmares for everybody, but at best, they become a metaphor for a bright new way of learning through language.

Recently I pulled up my Michigan roots and moved to the University of Nevada in Reno. Already I have found myself looking for new museums to explore, on my own and with my family and students. There's a Nevada Historical Society Museum on campus, a planetarium nearby, Harrah's Old Car Museum in Sparks, a silver mining museum in Virginia City, the old

mint and state archives in Carson City, and even a slot machine museum in one of Reno's downtown casinos.

Wherever one goes, it seems, there are museums, and more.

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