Rationale for Why Docents Educating Docents Program is Worth Exploring: “What If I Told You?” One Work One Hour (OWOH) Program from the Columbus Museum of Art, Columbus, OH for the National Docent Symposium, Montreal, 2017

By: Carole Dale, Docent and Program Chair

In the disturbing 1953 book FAHRENHEIT 451 by Ray Bradbury books are burned so the knowledge books held would not challenge the ignorance of society. To preserve the enlightened world that learning embodies – individuals became the books they memorized and recited word for word so history would not be lost.

It is a harrowing metaphor for why we Docents must care about knowledge. In the art world and the museum community docents are the repository and the voice and face of art enlightenment.

What new skills and knowledge must 21st Century docents have to confront issues such as shorter attention spans and competition for time by technology? Brains are changing so how will we expand our abilities to grow with the times? How will we keep our purpose relevant and necessary for the future? How will we help people experience art?

The Columbus Museum of Art (CMA) faces this challenge head on and encourages docents who are already well educated to expand their knowledge base and touring skills in a program called One Work One Hour (OWOH). In this program docents educate docents. “What If I Told You?” is the phrase we use to invite curiosity and wonder about works of art and help people have an experience they remember.

As art historian, John Berger details in his book WAYS OF SEEING he shows Van Gogh’s landscape of a Wheat Field with Crows to
view. Later he adds the information “this is the last picture Van Gogh painted before he killed himself.” He states, “it is hard to define exactly how the words have changed this image, but undoubtedly they have.” Berger’s example shows how just a bit of extra information can entirely change the viewer’s response and in their memory of the experience.

*Wheat Field with Crows*
Vincent Van Gogh
Van Gogh Museum

The OWOH program has goals. The first goal is to define the difference between looking and seeing. I have created this distinction to illustrate what I mean.
You are meeting someone at the airport. People are everywhere, and you are looking, looking, scanning the faces BUT what happens when you SEE that person. Can you feel the difference in your brain! It is a cognitive shift in the brain. Get it? So that is the first step, to shift from the looking to the seeing which activates the brain, making it receptive to new information and what that means.

You are in a different state of mind – like the line from the song Amazing Grace, “I was blind but now I see.” The seeing is where the questions and the wondering initiate one to new ideas; curiosity begins to rise up and you are captured. It expands your mind making it receptive to deeper conversations, comparisons, readjusting your thoughts; it feels wonderful! Why? Because you have been wondering, thinking and this experience is what art should be - an experience you reflect on and remember.

The famous educator John Dewey said, “We are most alive when we are completely engaged.” The OWOH Program was created to help docents and therefore the public they tour to experience art completely engaged.

The OWOH program began in 2009 when our 1931 museum was closed for several years for renovation and we needed programs to keep the docents and the public engaged.

The museum actually allowed carefully guarded original works of art to travel to inner city neighborhoods and suburbs - to have an OWOH session. We will soon begin our 9th year.

For example, my first OWOH presentation was in Westerville on “The Wedding” by the artist Sandy Skogland, an installation piece commissioned by our museum in 1994. The Gallery floor was coated with dried orange marmalade and the walls with
strawberry jam. Skogland made 300 silver roses for this installation. Our CMA Director, Nannette Maciejunes, said the smell of the jam was overwhelming! As you know Skogland does installations in which the photograph is the art and archival memory.

*The Wedding*
Sandy Skoglund
Columbus Museum of Art

We had wonderful conversations about the societal pressures to marry, relationships, honest, innermost fears and being fearless to make such a commitment. How Skogland visually makes us feel tentative and why?
We always have questions to offer as part of the OWOH presentation that docents can use to trigger conversations on their tours, a very important product of the program.

A couple of questions I used were:
How differently would you react if this were a black and white photo?
How does this work of art grab you? Or if not, explain!

I served red velvet cake afterwards - we all had red dye No. 4 running down our chins, and the men with beards were a fabulous site!

In hindsight I wish I had begun the session with a black and white copy and ended with the luscious original in color. What would you have done?

I want docents to stay in love with their mission – to stay fresh and excited, to radiate their love and enthusiasm to everyone they tour. The OWOH program I believe feeds docent hunger for more information about art and artists to help us formulate new questions that challenge everyone. We cross-pollinate each other in this program and our docent community is stronger and more confident for it. We thrive together!

I did not see listed any other presentation at the International Docent Symposium that included a program created for and run exclusively by docents for docents. “What If I Told You?” OWOH is a very special program and I invite you to consider creating one at your institution.
My handout outlining the specificity of organizing and running an OWOH program is attached for your information.

The audience especially enjoyed the video I created to showcase our perspective and Jeff Sims did a fabulous job producing it. The music he selected is perfect! Great fun shooting it!

CMA-created video on “What If I Told You?”
https://youtu.be/W-WFfv_d7Jo
Is that Hollywood calling?

Docents want to be like the MADONNAS OF LENINGRAD, that inspiring book by Debra Dean about Russian docents during World War II who could tour the art in the Hermitage with all the passion possible when the gallery walls where in fact bare. It is to a standard to which we docents aspire!

We carry the torch for art and its experience: it is our calling, “Art itself is perhaps our most necessary nourishment,” wrote an art critic praising the book.

I believe our “What If I Told You?” One Work One Hour Program does just that. We docents nourish one another by sharing our knowledge and passion!

You are most welcome to contact me with questions.
Carry ON! Thank you.

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