DETOUR AHEAD:
A ROADMAP FOR CHANGE WITHIN A DOCENT PROGRAM

National Docent Symposium 2019
Washington, D.C.
Friday, October 25 @ 9:30 – 10:30 am
WHO ARE WE?

Barbara Schoell
Docent

Kathi Toombs
Docent

Marla Van Thournout
Educator, Volunteers
WHY ARE WE HERE TODAY?

• We’re going to talk about our process of change over the past eight years.

• **What happened?**
  • Our philosophy about tours and our style of engagement changed.
  • Went from linear and docent-centered to constructivist and audience-centered.
  • It was a bumpy ride!

• **Why did we do this?**
  • To remain relevant to our community and local schools.

• We recognize that you are probably all at different points in your own journeys. We are here to share our experience of change in the hopes that it will help you.
• We look forward to hearing from you and your experiences as well!
“EVERYTHING CHANGES, AND NOTHING STANDS STILL.”

--HERACLITUS
Over 40,000 Works of Art
Nelson-Atkins Museum
Some Numbers

- 106 Docents
- 33 Docents-in-Training
- 2,987 Guided Tours 2018-2019
  - 7,625 Adults
  - 22,565 Students
- 300 Museum staff
- 39 Education division staff
- 500 Total volunteers
WHY ARE YOU HERE TODAY?

(Ward Parkway in Kansas City, MO. April, 2019.
Credit: Chris Ochsner, Kansas City Star
(This has been repaved...thank goodness!)
WHY ARE YOU A DOCENT/STAFF MEMBER AT A MUSEUM?

• Love of history/art history/science, etc.
• Love teaching
• Love learning
• Love engaging with visitors
• Love children/adults
• Love building community with like-minded people
• Love giving back to the community
WHY ARE YOU A DOCENT/STAFF MEMBER AT A MUSEUM?

• Love of history/art history/science, etc.
• Love teaching
• Love learning
• Love engaging with visitors
• Love children/adults
• Love building community with like-minded people
• Love giving back to the community
TIMELINE OF CHANGE

2010 – 2012
Museum trustees hire new senior museum leadership

October 2012
Visual Thinking Strategies is introduced to docents

July – October 2013
Five new school tours are rolled out

New staff join the museum

September 2012
Docent Annual Meeting; first concept of change is introduced

May 2013 – New Docent Committee is elected

Fall 2013
Staff following tours in the galleries

July 2015 – Present
Continue practicing, tweaking, testing, and growing into these tours
# Mission Statements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1998 – 2013</th>
<th>2013 - Present</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Promoting visual cultures</td>
<td>1. Promoting visual cultures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Supporting our city’s educational and cultural life</td>
<td>2. Preeminent institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Preeminent institution</td>
<td>3. High professional standards</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. High professional standards</td>
<td>4. Supporting our community’s educational and cultural life</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Building an environment for people to gather and share</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Inspiring creativity &amp; building community through art</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LET’S HIT THE ROAD!

• We are going to take you through six key moments on our path to change.
• For each moment, we are going to give you a moment to stop and assess your gut reactions. How are you feeling?
• Hold up your stoplight color:
  • Red = STOP!
  • Yellow = hold on there, need more information…
  • Green = I’m good, let’s go!
• We’ll discuss how you’re feeling and share our docent’s feelings about each event.
OUR ROADMAP OF CHANGE: EVENT 1

- **September 2012**...Docent Annual Meeting takes place; a new staff member presents to docents the idea that change has to happen for the museum to grow and adapt to the modern world. One of the changes is that docents need to be more engaging.

- How are you feeling right now? Hold up your stoplight color:
  - Red = STOP!
  - Yellow = hold on there, need more information…
  - Green = I’m good, let’s go!

- Let’s talk…why did you choose the color you did?

George Caleb Bingham, *Canvassing for a Vote*, 1852
Purchase: William Rockhill Nelson Trust, 54-9
• **One Month Later …** A representative from Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) comes to the museum to introduce and demonstrate VTS. VTS is introduced to docents as a new questioning strategy that could be used on tours.

• How are you feeling right now? Hold up your stoplight color:
  • Red = STOP!
  • Yellow = hold on there, need more information…
  • Green = I’m good, let’s go!
• Let’s talk…why did you choose the color you did?
QUESTIONING STRATEGY COMPARISON

**VTS**

- What's going on in this work of art?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- What more can we find?
- Paraphrase each comment.
  - Participants drive the discussion – the docent facilitates by paraphrasing, framing, and linking the comments together.
  - No information is inserted.

**Traditional Questioning Strategy**

Have students form a line at a safe distance from the painting. Explain that this is a painting of a pond in Monet's garden with water lilies floating on the surface. Pretend it's real and that we are standing at the water's edge. Let's get our feet wet! (Have students take a small step forward.)

- Does water temperature change? *Cooler because deeper or warmer because away from shade along shoreline. Discuss sunlight and surface being warmer than water below.*
- Let's sniff the water lilies. *Explain that are very fragrant.* If you swam under water you would learn that they have a long root that tethers them to the mud on the bottom of the pond. Careful, you could get tangled in all these tendrils. Water lily petals fold up at night. Their root pulls the closed bud underwater until morning.
- How would it look different if a cloud covered the sun?
- How would it look different in moonlight?
  - Docent drives the conversation. Visitor follows along.
  - Information is inserted liberally throughout the stop.
• **One Month Later** … A representative from Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) comes to the museum to introduce and demonstrate VTS. VTS is introduced to docents as a new questioning strategy that could be used on tours.

• How are you feeling right now? Hold up your stoplight color:
  • Red = STOP!
  • Yellow = hold on there, need more information…
  • Green = I’m good, let’s go!

• Let’s talk…why did you choose the color you did?
## HOW DID OUR EDUCATIONAL PHILOSOPHY CHANGE?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Previous Mode</th>
<th>New Mode</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Linear</td>
<td>Constructivist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closed-ended questioning</td>
<td>Open-ended questioning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Docent-driven</td>
<td>Visitor-driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art history focus</td>
<td>Skill development focus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• **7 Months Later...** A new Docent Committee is elected by the docent body. Docent leadership feels that we are at a critical turning point and the Committee takes steps to help docents move ahead. A redefining of what it meant to be a volunteer docent occurs.

• How are you feeling right now? Hold up your stoplight color:
  - Red = STOP!
  - Yellow = hold on there, need more information…
  - Green = I'm good, let's go!

• Let's talk...why did you choose the color you did?
2 Months Later… Five new school tours are rolled out to docents by staff over a four-month period. The training format and tour structures are both completely new.

How are you feeling right now? Hold up your stoplight color:

- Red = STOP!
- Yellow = hold on there, need more information…
- Green = I’m good, let’s go!

Let’s talk…why did you choose the color you did?
## SCHOOL TOUR COMPARISON

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Old Format</th>
<th>New Format</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus is docent-driven</td>
<td>Focus is visitor-driven</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on 1-2 key works</td>
<td>Focus on whole gallery; many works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Activity is linear questioning</td>
<td>Variety of activities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Students are seated</td>
<td>Students are moving around the gallery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10 minute stop</td>
<td>15 minute stop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No materials needed</td>
<td>Needs materials</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information was shared liberally throughout each tour stop</td>
<td>Information was saved until the very end of each tour stop</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• **2 Months Later…** Five new school tours are rolled out to docents by staff over a four-month period. The training format and tour structures are both completely new.

• How are you feeling right now? Hold up your stoplight color:
  
  • Red = STOP!
  
  • Yellow = hold on there, need more information…
  
  • Green = I’m good, let’s go!

• Let’s talk…why did you choose the color you did?
• **Immediately** – Staff follows the new docent-led school tours in the galleries to observe student behavior and record observations on a clipboard. This is a new method of observing tours in the galleries. For some docents, the tour is being observed without advance notice.

• How are you feeling right now? Hold up your stoplight color:
  • Red = STOP!
  • Yellow = hold on there, need more information…
  • Green = I'm good, let's go!

• Let’s talk...why did you choose the color you did?
OUR ROADMAP OF CHANGE: EVENT 6

• **9 Months Later**... A change of museum leadership takes place. Some staff members who introduced the change leave and new staff join the museum. The new staff introduce small group brown bag lunches with docents to provide an open forum.

• How are you feeling right now? Hold up your stoplight color:
  • Red = STOP!
  • Yellow = hold on there, need more information…
  • Green = I’m good, let’s go!

• Let’s talk…why did you choose the color you did?
WHY ARE YOU A DOCENT/STAFF MEMBER AT A MUSEUM?

• Love of history/art history/science, etc.
• Love teaching
• Love learning
• Love engaging with visitors
• Love children/adults
• Love building community with like-minded people
• Love giving back to the community
WHAT ARE THE OUTCOMES FROM OUR CHANGE?

• **Docents and staff are more flexible and adaptable**
  • More comfortable with experimentation and testing new approaches
  • More open-minded
  • Better able to navigate difficult conversations

• **We see that students are more engaged and interactive on tours**
  • Discovering together and making meaning as a group
  • Collaborating with classmates
  • More learners are accommodated
  • Developing soft skills which are relevant to the 21st century and our community
WHAT ARE THE OUTCOMES FROM OUR CHANGE?

- **Museum attendance has benefitted from the community focus, too**
  - Overall museum attendance is up:
    - **2010** – 336,267
    - **2012** – 408,202
    - **2018** – 543,057

- **Docent tour attendance (school & adult combined)**
  - **2010** – 57,000
  - **2012** – 40,943
  - **2018** – 40,973
WHERE IS THE DOCENT PROGRAM TODAY?

• Everything is done collaboratively, from tour writing and prototyping to docent training.

• Tours have a variety of hands-on activities and questioning strategies.

• VTS became a wonderful tool to start a conversation and begin looking. We have adapted it for our needs by following up on that looking with directed questions.

• Information is shared more freely throughout the tour stops.

• Majority of school tours are done in the “new” format and docents have added some of the school tour approaches to their adult tours, with good response.
WHERE IS THE DOCENT PROGRAM TODAY?

• Things are better! But still not perfect.
  • Most people are comfortable with this tour approach, but some are still not quite comfortable with it.

• Introduced more flexibility with questioning variety and information sharing now, but still strongly visitor-centered.

• We’re looking at developing the next phase of our strategic plan…which means change will likely be coming again.

• We have also had a new change in staff leadership... which means change will likely be coming again.
• Trust
• Respect
• Openness
• Empathy
• Inclusiveness
• Transparency
OUR KEY TIPS FOR SUCCESS

• Do your research
• Include stake-holders  
  • Consider using a Charter for Change to help align all parties
• Don’t rush
• Transparent communication is key
• Remember: change is hard for everyone, even those who want it
• Pay attention to those Key Words
“EVERYTHING CHANGES, AND NOTHING STANDS STILL.”

--HERACLITUS
Q & A?
CONTACT

Marla Van Thournout
mallen@nelson-atkins.org

Kathi Toombs & Barbara Schoell
volunteer@nelson-atkins.org