

galleries that they can become inured to the effect of the physical and psychological space on audiences. Galleries can feel cold and distancing, rather than warm and inviting. They are safe environments for objects, but not necessarily conducive for conversations. Yet a palpable sense of safety is needed for conversations of care to take place (Passe, 1984; Sandra & Spayde, 2001; Vella, 2002; Zander, 2004).

Not only do visitors need to feel safe both emotionally and physically in order to be receptive to conversation, they must feel comfortable. The museum teacher who is warm, responsive, empathetic, and open can counter the physical chill of formal spaces and cool temperatures as well as the icy elitism of these institutions of high culture. Moreover, seeking opportunities to enable our conversationalists to sit for awhile, or at least not stand in the same spot until backs ache and feet numb, demonstrates care for the body as well as the mind. Safe, comfortable environments are essential to nurturing caring, communicative relationships.

The Museum Teacher

The prowess to engage visitors in conversations that are intriguing and personal, but not overtly didactic, makes many demands on character and spirit. Ego must be under control. Humility is vital, especially in conversation with adult visitors (Vella, 2002). Conversation must be selfless, focused on the visitor, not on displaying how much the museum teacher knows. One of the most effective means of communicating these values is

Zhenya Gershman

The J. Paul Getty Museum

On the Tension Between the Role of the Museum Educator as Teacher and as Facilitator of Experience

Every teacher asks himself or herself a question: "What do I want my audience to walk away with?" You've spent weeks reading on a subject, and now you want to share that bulk of knowledge. But when it comes to dealing with a work of art, you want something else to take place, something we call an "experience." This demands something impossible—a teacher not teaching. A successful gallery talk, then, will have a synchronic relationship or a fluctuation between the teacher becoming the audience and the audience becoming the active leader. While being eager to impart knowledge, one must always keep in mind the amount of information that is appropriate for that particular audience before launching into an ocean of historic facts with the listeners left behind. At the same time, forcing interaction on the museum viewer could also be painful. Here are a few things to keep in mind. As teachers we often find ourselves in a situation where we want to elicit a response from our audience based on their observations. It is not always the case, however, that the audience is ready or willing to provide that response. In an attempt to bridge that gap, we say, "What do you see?" That seemingly risk-free question is loaded with baggage. For one, it tells your audience, "I know what's there, but you need to get it yourself." On the other hand, it is too simplified and makes one feel condescended to—a person might think, "Why should I say what's there when everyone can see it?" It is in the way we introduce the concept or choose our words that can make our audiences feel at ease or encourage them to participate. Consider rephrasing the original question after creating a shared viewing space: "Let's take a moment to look at this object together. There are many ways to talk about it. Depending upon where we start might lead us to different paths of understanding. Therefore, I'd like you to think about what attracted you to this object or where you were compelled to look first. Let's start there."

Another gallery teacher dilemma is eliciting a follow-up response from the audience that backs up their original observation. A common tool is to ask, "What makes you say that?" This friendly question can become annoying as the teacher relies on it over and over again. While desiring to be an invisible guide to an experience, this question reveals an insistent urge of the teacher to get a response from the viewer. It can also make viewers uncomfortable to share ideas, as they know that they will have to account for what they say. In my experience, I find it more productive to alleviate this pressure from the individual and to throw the question to the group as a whole. While a person might share an initial gut reaction, others might have the extra time to think about the meaning and be ready to follow up with an observation. Simply rephrasing the question—"Does anyone feel the same way?" or "Would anyone like to respond to this comment?"—can spark exactly what the teacher might be looking for, a teacher-facilitated experience. It is the delicate balancing act between the presence of the teacher who is ready to share knowledge of the work of art and the discrete absence of a teacher who steps back to let the viewer take charge of their experience that we call the art of gallery teaching.