Using Case Studies to Meet Challenges in Museums, Galleries, and other Sites

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Interpreters and docents often work in isolation and are rarely able to share practical experiences, beyond the exchange of "war stories" in the staff room. Such stories are important, but to identify problems and learn from their own experiences, interpreters and docents need skills that will help them to reflect on their practice, both independently and in small groups. At the same time, trainers need to acknowledge the role that interpreters and docents play in identifying and resolving the problems of teaching. None of us comes to the museum or gallery as a blank slate. The trainer's task becomes one of coaching the docents or interpreters to *transform* their existing understandings, rather than to form new ones. Docents and interpreters look for help in *integrating* their personal knowledge and experiences with what is being taught to them by the museum, gallery, or park. One solution to this dilemma is to use problems or case studies drawn from actual teaching practice in our own institutions.

How do we begin the process of identifying, reflecting upon, and sharing the critical incidents in our teaching lives? The following guidelines, based upon Selma Wasserman's *Getting Down to Cases: Learning to Teach with Case Studies* (New York: Teachers College Press, 1993), offer a useful place to start.

Framing the Problem

First, choose the "problem." Which problem has the greatest potential for self-discovery or increased understanding or professional growth? Does the problem still have "emotional power" for you? Did it present a dilemma that you were uncertain how to resolve? Did the problem require you to make a difficult choice? Did the problem require you to respond in a way that you feel unsatisfied with and are still thinking about? Did the problem have ethical or moral implications? The important thing is that you *want* to write it up.

Describing the context

Think about when the incident first caught your attention. What happened next? How did the chain of events begin? What was the context? What was your initial response? What were the physical factors? Set the scene.

Identifying the players in the problem

Every story is enriched by a group of characters who assume active roles contributing to the event. In writing up your problem, identify the key and the secondary players. Who were the key players? What were their relationships with one another and with you? Consider the feelings of each player. What were their motivations, goals, and expectations? Do not forget to include yourself in the list of players. Look at your own role. Examine the assumptions you made.

Reviewing the problem and your response to it

As the events unfolded, a crisis occurred in which the incident reached its climax. What happened? What choices were open to you as you considered what to do? What risks were involved in making those choices? How did you respond? What is there about the event that still troubles you? What is there about your response that still troubles you?

Examining the effects of your actions
Every action (or non-action) that an interpreter makes results in a series of reactions. What were some reactions to the response you made? What was the impact of your response on the group? On the climate in the room? On yourself? In what way did you feel better or worse about yourself? What remains unresolved for you about this incident?

Revisiting the problem
As you revisit this problem, how do you see events differently? What is different about how you see the players? your own role? the risks? the consequences? If you had this to do again, what would you have done differently? What now allows you to consider a different choice of response? What insights about yourself as a teacher came out of this process of self-examination?

These questions are meant to be guidelines only. The writer is the final arbiter of how the problem is to be constructed and what it should finally contain.

Reflection, Reconsideration, Rewriting
When you have completed the first draft of your problem, put it away for a couple of days to allow yourself some perspective. Then reread it and examine what you have written in light of these considerations:

- assumptions you may have made,
- where you may have attributed motives, causes, preferences, feelings, attitudes, authority, responsibility, and other human strengths and weaknesses to others,
- "extreme" statements you may have made (e.g., terms that permit no exception, like *all, none, always, exactly the same, no difference, never*), and
- value judgments.

Consider the extent to which you have been able to go beyond the surface of the event and look into the deeper, more complex issues. As you reflect on these questions, make notes. You are the one in charge of editing your problem.

Interpretation and analysis
Before you begin writing your interpretation and analysis, think about the following questions. You may want to make notes as you think.

- What do you see as the central teaching issues of the problem? List them and identify the most critical one.
- Who are the players? List them. What feelings do you think each one has? What motivates them?
- What did the incident teach you about yourself as a teacher?
- What questions about teaching did this case raise for you? How would you go about gathering more data to answer these questions?

"Workshopping" the Problem
Using this process to identify and write about a teaching problem can be therapeutic for an individual interpreter or docent. However, there is a danger that we may use such an exercise simply to affirm our teaching decisions, rather than to question and improve them. I have found it useful to identify and share teaching problems with other docents or interpreters in a workshop setting.

Well before the workshop date — sometimes as much as six months beforehand — I form a small group of interpreters or docents. Each member of the group is invited to identify, develop, and write up a problem, using Wasserman's guidelines. Usually the

problem is related to some commonly agreed-upon issue such as discipline on school tours. Then, as a team, we hone each written problem, both to clarify the main points the writer wants to make and to edit it to a workable length (about two paragraphs seems right). Throughout the process, the writer retains ownership of the problem and is consulted regarding any editing the group may recommend. However, the anonymity of the writer is preserved as much as possible by obscuring identifying details of time, place, participants, etc., so that when it is taken to the workshop the problem is not attached to one person. This preparatory stage concludes with a printout of four or five problems addressing different perspectives on the issue. Each of these problem statements contains a description, an interpretation by the writer, and the same four questions for the reader that were posed to the writer of the problem:

- What do you see as the central teaching issues of the problem? List them and identify the most critical one.
- Who are the players? List them. What feelings do you think each one has? What motivates them?
- What did the incident teach the interpreter or docent about himself or herself as a teacher?
- What questions about teaching did this case raise for you? How would you go about gathering more data to inform these questions?

These problem statements are then presented to the group as a whole in Part One of a two-session workshop. In four small groups, participants read and discuss one of the problems. Recorders summarize the discussions and report back to the group as a whole. Common themes are identified. We also talk about the relationship of these themes to key points in museum literature on the issue. Museum and gallery teachers want to reflect upon their own processes of inquiry so that they can compare and contrast them not only with those of their peers, but also with formal theories of education and museology. We bring theory and practice together through our own teaching experiences.

Each participant is then asked to identify and develop his or her own teaching problem. I schedule a week between the two parts of the workshop in order to allow sufficient time for writing and reflection. Since, as a consultant, I am not available on site, participants are invited to contact me by e-mail if they have questions or desire feedback on their work.

On the second day of the workshop I invite everyone to move into small groups, where each participant's problem statement is shared and discussed. This is an important step and one not to be omitted. The time allotted to reveal problems honors not only the time and effort required to write up a problem, but also acknowledges that each one of us can make mistakes. The trick is to learn from them. Once everyone has shared his or her problem, I invite the group to identify and list the central issues raised and then to brainstorm and develop one or two strategies to address each issue. Finally, I ask each group to choose what they feel is the most critical issue and to create a brief role-play that demonstrates both the issue and their strategy to address it. After each role-play has been performed, I invite the members of that group to explain why their issue is an important one and how and why the teaching strategy was chosen. Discussion is then opened to all. We begin with other teaching strategies that might work well in tackling this issue, discussing why, and end with strategies that would *not* work and why. All of this information is recorded. Ultimately, a "tip sheet" noting all of the recommendations is produced and distributed to the members of the group — an important contribution to the literature on the issue.

The challenge now is how to maintain this problem-solving approach once the interpreters and docents return to their separate teaching lives. Staff meetings offer one

opportunity for such interaction, but often they are too few and far between to establish a habit of identifying and reflecting together upon teaching problems. Two other tools that have proven successful in encouraging ongoing reflection and change are learning journals/diaries (both individual and shared) and learning partnerships, in which two or three docents or interpreters meet on a regular basis to discuss their problems, using Wasserman's guidelines.

Naming and acknowledging our teaching problems exposes our uncertainty, our value conflicts, and our vulnerability, but at the same time it brings us together as docents, interpreters, and educators in our never-ending search for solutions.

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