

**MERT Journal**

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Critiquing Tours and Public Programs - Guest Edited by [Christine Castle](#)

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**I. Introduction from the Guest Editor**

In this issue of MERT Journal I want to explore how we as museum educators and teachers can utilize our practical knowledge of the museum experience to establish a more meaningful review or critique of tours and public programs. In doing so I hope we can recognize and develop the ART of museum teaching and how we may use it to better respond to community needs.

If we don't develop our own "critique of practice" we run the very real risk of having standards imposed from elsewhere: from schools, from business, from marketing, etc.

Currently I am investigating with the Ontario Museum Association the possibility of a project to undertake the self-documentation of tours and public programs at Ontario museums, galleries, and nature/science centres with the goal of developing a shared "critique" of our teaching practice. If you are interested in more information, in participating, or have suggestions, please contact me as soon as possible.

M. Christine Castle, Ph.D.  
MCL Consulting (Museum Education & Interpretation)  
23 Arundel Avenue Toronto, Ontario M4K 3A1  
416-465-0569  
MCLConsulting@aol.com

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**II. What's Happening Now?**

I am talking about an "aesthetic" approach to museum teaching that has rarely been taken in the past. Art museum educators do employ this perspective as a way to approach the visual arts. For example, Vallance (1995) says that the task of the art museum educator is "to provide as many avenues to approaching the largely foreign language of art as we can, to guide them to make their own connections, and to form their own rewarding categories" (p. 7). Her goal is not only to help visitors "become their own critics" (p. 7) but also to develop "well-educated listeners and a well-educated citizenry, able to analyze arguments, see connections, make responsible interpretations and decisions about the world" (p. 13). However, nothing comparable has been done on the art or aesthetic of museum teaching, although its importance has been noted:

The key point we discovered is that a museum . . . is both a culture and the representation of a culture. In developing our programs, we needed to understand how a professional world like our own operates-what is its own range of skills, its aesthetics and politics, traditions and innovations . . . . Too often museums view themselves as mere technicians, as professional transmitters of other realities, rather than as artists, as actors, as prisms through which the past, or the exotic, or the mysterious, is illuminated in our own day.(Rabinowitz 1996)

Likewise, in the field of interpretation one of Tilden's (1967) tenets was "Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical or architectural" (p. 26). Lewis further suggested, "if interpretation is an art, perhaps it should be reviewed just as plays and paintings are" (Regnier et al. 1992, 91).

In 1989 Matelic and Heald proposed "Guidelines for Reviewing Public Programs in History Museums" (Matelic and Heald 1989) that considered purpose, content, method, museum staff, as well as museum visitors in order to distinguish the experience of public programs from the traditional exhibit. Their model is reminiscent of Schwab's "curricular commonplaces" (Schwab 1983) in education. Schwab argues that the translation of scholarly material into curriculum depends upon four main bodies of experience. The four bodies of experience that must be represented in the process of making curriculum are knowledge of subject matter, of the milieu, of the learner, of the teacher. Because they comprise the simplest model for looking at curricular problems, they are also useful analytical tools. Canadian researchers have successfully applied Schwab's model to studies of education in museum, galleries, and science/nature centres (Soren 1990; Livingstone 1999; Castle 2001; Lemelin 2001). Each of these perspectives needs to be explored if we are to develop our own critique of practice.

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### III. What Makes a Good Tour or Program?

My own work has focused on the perspective of the interpreter, docent, or educator. A tour or program has both educational and "fun" goals. While there is a growing body of literature on evaluating learning in museums (see Hein 1998; Falk and Dierking 2000), there is not much written on measures of enjoyment. When evaluating the success of performances (plays, vignettes) in the museum, Quinn (1981) considers the impact of the performance, its effectiveness in presenting emotional as opposed to factual information, and the numbers of visitors attracted and how long they stayed. In natural interpretation Randall (1996) argues for measures that depend on expressions of commendation, repeat visits, and willingness of visitors to undergo expense in terms of time, money, and effort (p. 7).

Docents, interpreters, and educators themselves identify markedly similar measures when considering the visitors' capacity for enjoyment. For them the chief indicator of success is whether or not the visitor returns. But interpreters also watch for signs of enthusiasm and involvement, "eye contact and the way they're grouped around you", the way learners group around exhibits, and whether or not visitors drift away or stay with the tour. As one docent remarks, on a successful tour "timing is nothing, [visitors] will stay with me . . ." On the other hand, failure can feel like hell: "You got to get them, get their mood, see where they're coming from, get how they feel about being there, and then get your venue going . . . because they're there for . . . an hour and either it's going to be a comfortable time or it's going to be . . . hell."

Implicit in the interpreter, docent, and educator's teaching is an approach not only to the subject matter of the lesson but also to the museum itself. The interpreter, docent, or educator is at once a learner/visitor and a teacher in the museum. It is presumed that he or she is museum literate in the sense of Stapp's (1984) definition, "mastery of the language of museum objects and familiarity with the museum as an institution" (p. 3). But are interpreters, docent, and educators aware of the qualities of the museum? What are the qualities of the museum to which interpreter, docent, and educators attend? Do these qualities shape their practice? If they are able to perceive these qualities, are they then able to assist the museum's visitors by illuminating, interpreting and appraising the museum itself?

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### IV. Reviewing Tours and Public Programs

A review or critique of a tour or program addresses the qualities of teaching that elude standardized observations and achievement studies. The form of a critique allows the critic to focus not only on the teacher's aims but also on the context of the teaching (p. 77). Thus the "trade-offs" that are a natural product of teaching are seen within the context in which they are made.

If teaching is indeed an art, then excellence is of many kinds. There may be "genres" of museum teaching just as there are genres of painting (p. 78). There may be genres of performance like the lecture, the small group discussion, or the experiment (p. 79). And this implies that each teacher has a "personal signature" or style (p. 79) that is a compendium of decisions made (Jarvis 1992, 240). Therefore the "task in coaching teachers is not to try to transform the pedagogical signature of a teacher into another form, but to help the teacher develop the strengths that 'come naturally'" (Eisner 1985, 79). Interpreters, docents, and educators are enabled to do their work well, rather than simply used by the institution to transmit information.

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### V. Documenting Tours and Public Programs

One way to start this review process is by assembling a "record" of these otherwise fleeting tours and public programs. Videotapes, audiotapes, and field notes of complete tours, along with interpreters' comments and discussion would be useful. Sites like the Musée des Beaux-Arts de Montréal videotape docent tours to assist with performance appraisal. A few researchers document tours and public programs (Griffin and Symington 1997; Cox-Petersen and Marsh 2000; Leinhardt, Tittle et al. 2000). Interpreters, docents, and educators have been asked for their perspective on museums, galleries, and parks (Duthie 1990; Abu-Shumays and Leinhardt 2000)

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## VI. A Sample

Here is a very brief excerpt from field notes taken during one school tour observation (Castle 2001):

<clip>

"I'll stop the video at this point," Gord says. "I want you to do some of the activities. Maybe you could ask your school librarian to get a copy for you. I'd like you to break into groups again."

"Same group!" the teacher calls out.

Gord directs the small groups to different spots in the room. He hands four of the groups a plastic bag of shards and the fifth group gets the red bin. Then he crouches down and tells the first group, "You guys are pretending you're archaeologists. You're doing detective work . . ."

Gord informs the teacher that there is not enough masking tape for every group to do the same exercise. This is the reason for the red bin. He says to me, "You have to be prepared. I didn't know when I brought the bin down whether or not we would use it. But when I discovered there wasn't enough masking tape, it seemed like a good idea."

Most of the students are sitting in their groups, talking and reassembling broken artefacts using masking tape.

"Anyone need any help?" Gord calls out. One group raises their hands. He walks over to talk with them. He comes back to tell the teacher, "You could do the other exercise in class. You just need to break up a pot." They discuss this briefly.

One student is wandering around looking at the displays on the wall. "Go and join the group at the end here," Ms. Peel tells him. She repeats this several times before he finally obeys her.

We could look at this tour in terms of subject matter, museum literacy, learner & learning, teachers & teaching or all four perspectives. A record like this allows us to stop time, look carefully at our practice, and ultimately establish performance indicators and standards of practice for tours and public programs that will help us to grow and change in meaningful response to the needs of our community. However we approach tours and public programs, we need to begin somewhere and we need to start now. I welcome your feedback.

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## VI. Resources

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On behalf of all MERT members, the Steering Committee would like to thank Christine for sharing her thoughts and experiences, and for her efforts to make this MERT JOURNAL happen. Thank you, Christine!

All MERT members can contribute to our group by volunteering to guest edit and edition of MERT JOURNAL. Please contact [Tracy Johnston](#) or [Heahter McDonald](#) for information on becoming a Guest Editor or contributing in other ways to future communications.

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The Museum Education Roundtable of Toronto, of which you are a member, is a grass-roots association of individuals who have come together to promote our mutual personal and professional development as museum/gallery educators. This year, this group of nine people has stepped forward to help make this happen. To find out how you can participate further or to share ideas/concerns, please contact one of us:

Doug Fyfe, Archives, <mailto:dfyfe@city.toronto.on.ca>  
Tracy Johnston, [tjohnston@city.markham.on.ca](mailto:tjohnston@city.markham.on.ca)  
Heather McDonald, [wpschin@zeuter.com](mailto:wpschin@zeuter.com)  
Cathy Masterson, Session Development, <mailto:cmasterson@cpia.ca>  
Jenny Rieger, Session Development, [jennifer\\_rieger@ago.net](mailto:jennifer_rieger@ago.net)  
Jane Ricketts, Session Development, [jane\\_ricketts@hotmail.com](mailto:jane_ricketts@hotmail.com)  
Milena Placentile, Finances, <mailto:milena.placentile@utoronto.ca>  
Josie Premzell, Membership, [premzellj@region.peel.on.ca](mailto:premzellj@region.peel.on.ca)

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