

## **Schools and Cultural Institutions: What Teachers Want!**

Sally Gissing from the Wagga Wagga museum recently posted a blog on the maNexus website titled 'Mutualism in the Cultural Realm'. Essentially the blog was about the mutual benefits of schools and museums working together. As a teacher and as someone who has worked as an Education Officer in a museum, I would like to elaborate on Sally's blog by giving you the teacher's perspective. I will attempt to answer the following question. What do teachers want when visiting cultural institutions such as museums and galleries?

While Sally's blog is written from the museum perspective the same issues can be applied to all cultural institutions. Sally begins her blog by extolling the mutual benefits such a relationship fosters. I concur on all points. The idea that museums should support teachers is an important one. In this day of high petrol prices, complicated risk assessments, crowded curriculums and expanding technology, it is increasingly difficult to attract teachers to museums and galleries. Please be assured that teachers are not blind to the benefits cultural institutions offer but their desire to organise a visit is easily crowded by the variables listed above. So how do cultural institutions overcome this?

*Step one – Offer teachers activities that are relevant to their school programmes.* While curriculum is uniform across all schools, individual school programmes often differ. Think of curriculum as the end of the journey - a goal all schools must achieve. How each school reaches their journey's end differs. Methods, topics and themes all vary between schools.

It is important therefore to make contact with local schools and find out what they are studying and where your institution best fits in. On the surface hosting a teacher information session appears a useful technique to make contact with teachers but from my observations it is difficult, especially for museums, to attract teachers to them. Galleries do appear to have a bit more success in this area. The course of action I would strongly recommend is to go to schools. Student free days can be a good time to organise a visit. If teachers are only available during lunch times or non-contact periods, be well prepared as your time will be limited. Perhaps send through some background information or the list of questions you would like to discuss the week before so teachers are well briefed before your meeting. Once you have found out what schools are studying it is time to move on to step two.

*Step two – Develop activities that support school programmes.* As Sally highlighted, provide activities that differ from the students everyday learning experience. Worksheets and activity books will always have their place but try not to make these the only experiences available.

Provide experiences that are age and developmentally appropriate and varied to cater for the different learning styles that inevitably exist. Make the visit an active learning experience. The younger the audience the more active the experience should be.

Provide strong, clear links between your tours, activities and the curriculum and remember that curriculum not only covers content but skills designed to equip students to be life-long learners. Generally your programme will fit largely into one key learning area (KLA). For example activities offered at a history museum would fit into the key learning area SOSE (Studies of Society and the Environment). Whereas an art gallery would obviously draw from The Arts KLA. When linking your

programme try not to limit yourself to this one main area. It is usually possible to draw links between several key learning areas thus maximising the educational benefits of the programmes on offer and making your programme more appealing to teachers. Have this information easily accessible for teachers: put it on the web. This information is not only useful for planning and assessment purposes but can be used to justify the visit to interested stakeholders.

Develop objectives for each activity and have them clearly displayed for teachers and guides. The importance of this should not be underestimated. Teachers can review the objectives and decide which activity best suits their requirements. Stating objectives clearly also assists in overcoming the problem of competing agendas. This occurs when teachers and guides are not working towards the same goals. Valuable learning time can be lost if this occurs. Asking teachers for any assessment pieces they develop that directly relate to the activities you offer is also helpful in avoiding the issue of different agendas. Perhaps not for their first visit, but if the school returns, the previous year's assessment piece will provide you with a clear indication of the educational skills and knowledge that teachers want their students to gain from their visit. I have found assessment pieces to be particularly useful tools in the past.

Where possible provide pre and post-visit activities. If used in isolation a visit to a cultural institution imposes time limits on the learning experience. Pre-visit activities should equip students with the knowledge required to make the most out of their visit. They should be used to introduce concepts and vocabulary students will experience during their visit. Post-visit activities should reinforce the concepts learnt and extend on them further. Pre and post-visit activities allow teachers to re-visit the key concepts in a variety of ways and to extend the learning time available. They act as a learning bridge between what happens during the visit and what happens at school. If teachers can see educational benefits that extend past the visit alone they will be more interested in coming. Once you've got your activities in place move on to step three.

*Step 3 – Make it easy for schools to visit.* To do this provide teachers with the following organisational information. A timetable of activities, a map of the venue, a map that shows where to park. Provide them with clear answers to the following questions. Is there room for the student's bags and lunches? How many toilets are there and where are they? Is a water fountain easily accessible? Does the museum/gallery have a first aid kit? Is there a safe area for the students to have lunch? Is it shaded? Will staff perform a meet and greet? Do students need to be in groups? How many groups? Do students need to cross a road? Can students bring a camera? Can teachers bring cameras?

Also provide teachers with as much information about the venue and the requirements of the students, parent helpers and teachers during the visit. Will guides need assistance with certain activities? Can food be consumed in the venue? What are the rules of the venue? Is there a gift shop and can students access it? Providing schools with a risk assessment of the venue is also particularly helpful.

Armed with this information teachers can then prepare all parties before the visit. Forewarned is forearmed for both teachers and students. For teachers a visit runs smoothly and learning experiences are maximised if there are no surprises. For students, knowing what to expect helps alleviate any anxieties and curiosities they may have. Children settle into the routine of the day

much quicker when they have been 'prepped'. This also helps limit the amount of time wasted on the day.

Charging for visits can be a contentious issue. I personally believe cultural institutions should be free. If you do need to charge keep prices at a minimum. At my last place of employment we were required to charge each student \$4.00. On average each student paid \$15.00 for the excursion: \$11.00 went into bus fees.

Where possible use trained guides. Don't rely on teachers or parents to deliver the content. They are coming to you because you are the experts, not them! Teachers who have to take the time to become familiar with each display or exhibition simply won't bother.

Be flexible, not every school operates the same way and offer a variety of tours that can be mixed and matched to suit the diverse nature of your audience. For high school audiences in particular, offer as much 'bang for their buck' as possible. Often high school teachers will need to take their students out of other subjects in order to visit you. With a crowded curriculum, they will need to provide solid justification to their colleagues for doing so. One idea is to join forces with other cultural institutions in your region to offer a full day programme. I have seen this course of action work well in the past.

Finally, provide as much information about your tours and upcoming exhibitions as possible on the web. Think of this information as your bait. To catch the fish, make it easy to find and make it appealing.

Attracting teachers to cultural institutions is a competitive exercise. Cultural institutions are competing against each other, a crowded curriculum and many other variables. In planning for school visits it is important to remember that teachers are time poor and that teaching constantly ranks as one of the top five most stressful professions. This indicates that you need to support teachers by designing visits that are educationally relevant, that provide opportunities outside the scope of normal school activities and are easy to organise. In my experience children who have a positive experience during a school visit will often return with their families. This outcome alone highlights the importance of hosting a strong, school education programme. If we lived in an ideal world, we would easily be able to implement all of the above suggestions, but we don't. However if you can implement at least a few of them, then you will go a long way towards providing teachers with what they want, making your chance of attracting schools to your venue that much greater.

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