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Teens' Vision for Docent-Led Tours

By *Chelsea Emelie Kelly* / November 30, 2012 / *Field Notes, OpenThink*

Teen Talk at the Milwaukee Art Museum

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- **Respect the group; treat them like family.**

One of my favorite suggestions from the teens over the summer was for docents to think of the teens as their children or grandchildren. This gets to the heart of working with any visitor that comes into our space: respect them—their prior knowledge, their interests, their reasons for coming to museums in the first place. We can learn from visitors as much as (if not more than!) they can learn from us.

- **Take the time to get to know each other (even if the tour is only an hour).**

Begin the tour with introductions (name tags make it easy). Try a “check in” activity as a way for us to get to know each other. If you know your audience, you can tailor your tour to their interests from the start. The group will “gel” if you are friendly, enthusiastic, set a tone for curious exploration, not following a classroom model.

- **Museum tours can be intimidating.**

Teens know that YOU are knowledgeable (docents and educators) and it’s *scary* to offer your thoughts in front of a docent stranger as well as your peers. To support conversation, use clear, simple language (without being patronizing), and acknowledge student voices, even if they’re not the “right” answer, so teens know they’re being heard.

- **Be yourself.**

Share your passion, be your relaxed, friendly self. If you are excited about the art, chances are good that your enthusiasm will draw them in with positive responses.

- **Be aware of your group—and do what they want to do.**

Monitor the group’s body language and change the pace, the scenery, the tactic. If something’s not working, move on!

- **Technology is a tool, not a goal.**

When asked if museums should use more technology to engage teens, responses were mixed. Yes, technology is cool and lots of teens use it—but not all teens have access, and technology is not always successful *or necessary*. If the activity can be done equally as well or better in a discussion format, it’s probably not worth it to try to use a gadget. But if it’s something that can only be done well and quickly with technology—like Skyping with an artist or out-of-town group—then take the time to give it a try.

- **Remember that we all learn differently.**

To combat teen boredom, call on specific individuals to get them to pay attention, but or try a pair-share or solitary writing activity. Every educator should try to engage teens with voice (audio learner), visual (visual learner), movement (kinesthetic learner). Be intuitive, be a storyteller, a whisperer, a moving target to provide many different kinds of learning experiences for kids. Know when to support and when to challenge them.