

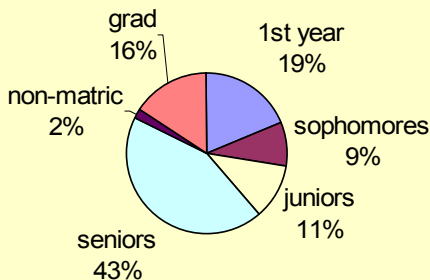
Introduction to the Program



A student helps visitors big and small learn about Native American art and culture.
Photo: Cassy Jarvis, Burke Museum.

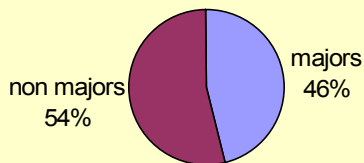
The Burke 101 Program at the Burke Museum is designed to give undergraduate students at the UW an opportunity to share their knowledge in a particular discipline and gain experience as informal educators in a museum setting. The program is organized around a course—General Studies 391—which is open to all students, regardless of their familiarity with the subject material. The subject focus of the course changes each quarter, but the emphasis of every course is on teaching. In each class, students work together to create hands-on, interactive activities for museum visitors using museum specimens. Students introduce these activities to museum visitors, assess the success of each activity, and make changes to the activities according to the nature of visitor response.

Who are the Students?



Paleontology students displaying a game they developed to help young visitors learn about the differences in herbivore and carnivore diets.
Photo: Larkin Hood, Burke Museum.

The majority of the students who enroll in Burke 101 courses are seniors, although the class is becoming increasingly popular among first-year students. The majority of students enrolled in the course are not majoring in the subject material they are teaching.



Characteristics of Informal Learning Environments



A student shows a young visitor animal bones from a local archaeological site.
Photo: Burke Museum Geology.

“People are completely different in what they find interesting.”
(junior, anthropology)

The term *Informal Learning Environment* (ILE) has been applied to a diverse group of settings where learning occurs outside of a classroom (Falk and Dierking 2002; Paris and Hapgood 2002). Museums are common examples of ILES. Regardless of the venue, successful ILES have several characteristics in common, including:

- learners have choice over what, when, where, and how they learn;
- learning occurs in a social context.

Research indicates that museum visitors have the most memorable learning experiences when they are able to engage in collaboration and conversation with others (Uzelmeier 2006). Best practices for museum educators and classroom teachers are similar in this respect. In order to go beyond downloading content to passive learners, teachers need to know who their students are in terms of knowledge, abilities and interests.

Students as Teachers: Undergraduates as Informal Educators in a Museum Setting

Larkin Hood, Diane Quinn, Julie Stein



Student Expectations of Teaching



Students use class time to plan a gallery activity.
Photo: Larkin Hood, Burke Museum.

Qualitative evidence indicates college students desire classroom experiences which enable them to be actively involved in their education. Thus students might be expected to be adept as teachers in a museum setting. Observations of student interactions with visitors as well as student oral and written reflections on gallery activities indicate some of the characteristics of informal learning environments (ILES) which make them so appealing to museum visitors make them challenging to students. Students may find ILES challenging because they are used to learning in large lecture courses where the emphasis is frequently on content delivery and auditory learning.



Students sit behind an activity station they created to help young visitors examine the differences in tooth structure between herbivores and carnivores.
Photo: Cassy Jarvis, Burke Museum.

“I was[n’t] exactly sure how I would deal with talking to lots of people, and trying to actually teach them something.”
(junior, Anthropology)

At the beginning of Burke 101 classes, most students do not see themselves as teachers. They report feeling uncertain about their ability to convey content to visitors.

“The real challenge for me was the...sessions on the weekends for a few reasons... I was not used to teaching anybody anything at all...”
(junior, anthropology).

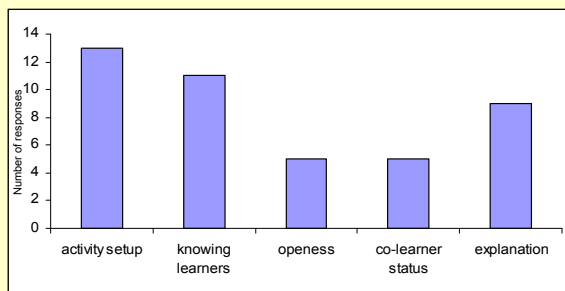


Curator of Invertebrate Paleontology Dr. Liz Nesbitt helps students select specimens for their gallery presentation.
Photo: Larkin Hood, Burke Museum.

In the preparation for their initial gallery session, students often create detailed outlines of the material, and express concern that visitors will ask complex questions. After their first two or three gallery sessions, students frequently comment that they are relieved to discover that visitors do not expect them to know “everything”. At the same time, students often express frustration that visitors want to talk about what they are experiencing in the museum more than they want to listen to additional information.

“...a lot of the time people enjoyed demonstrating their knowledge of the subject to us.”
(Stacie Johnson, sophomore, business administration)

Changes in How Students View Teaching



The majority (67%) of students who have participated in the Burke 101 Program stated they noticed a change in how they taught over the course of the quarter. Specifically, students reported a change in the way they set up an activity area. Students said they more frequently took into account their knowledge of museum visitors when providing explanations. Some students noted that they were more comfortable in helping visitors find an answer to a question.

“At the beginning of the quarter...my expectations were much different. I thought I would be... touring, and giving out much more information to people verbally. However after seeing how the Burke operates, I realize this wouldn’t have worked very well, as people meander through in small groups and don’t want to listen to lecturing much.”

(Justin Hanson, sophomore, pre engineering).

“...admit you don’t know...it allows you to join the person you’re speaking with on a mission to find the truth.”

(senior, finance)



A student listens to a visitor's explanation. Photo: Karen Flowers.

“I had to think what it was that I was doing that was contributing to a lack of interest from the visitors. When you find yourself in this situation, I found that it was best to simply change our approach...We changed our approach so that it was more spontaneous and creative.”

(non-matriculated student).

“Teaching...is much different than learning... You really have to know what you are talking about...Even if you’ve learned about something throughout your four years of college...it doesn’t always mean it’s easy to teach. I really had to think about what I was going to say in order to make it easy to understand.”

(senior, Anthropology).

Conclusions

By the end of the course, many students reported:

- increased confidence in assuming a role of facilitator, rather than content expert;
- being aware of the needs of informal learners to construct personal meaning, and exercise control over their own learning.

“I feel much more comfortable with my decision to pursue some form of teaching or librarian work and I am actually considering working in a museum now too.”

(freshman, undeclared)

“We...were teachers. We were able to bring real fossils and real information to the public. We made a difference.”

(Amy Tice, senior, Earth and Space Sciences)

References

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