

# K-12 Curators: What Kids Learn by Designing Exhibitions

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Now, more than ever, students need active, experiential learning opportunities both in and outside of the school setting. With increased pressure to meet academic standards and to do well on accountability measures, schools are tempted to sacrifice meaningful learning experiences in favor of a narrow focus on test preparation. Museum educators are feeling the pressure as well, and are increasingly aligning their programs to the state and district academic standards. But must this current age of educational reform represent a narrowing of learning opportunities for students? Or is this the time for both museum and school educators to explore innovative ways to involve students in meaningful learning experiences that are both rigorous and relevant? Programs that involve students in designing and creating community exhibitions are such experiences.

Exhibit development is a comprehensive process that involves students in research, writing, and design, as well as problem-solving, communication, and teamwork, and is therefore a powerful vehicle for engaged student learning. In our 2006 AAM session, we explored the use of exhibit development as an instructional strategy in the school and in the museum and discussed how both approaches offer innovative alternatives to traditional learning.

## **Kid Curators** by Linda D'Acquisto

It is opening night at Bayside Middle School. The school is filled with energy as teachers and students put the finishing touches on their Revolutionary War Museum before opening the doors to the public. Student docents are dressed

as colonial Americans, eager to guide visitors through the fifteen exhibits. They have practiced their tour scripts for a week and guided other middle school students through the museum. Now they are ready to teach their parents and community about the American Revolution.

Community members and parents begin to arrive; their excitement is obvious. They enter the first exhibit, *Colonial Life*, a walk-in cutaway of a colonial home complete with a kitchen table, fireplace, and rope bed. In this immersion exhibit, furnishings and accessories on loan from a local museum are exhibited alongside artifacts created by students. Near artifacts such as a butter churn, quill pen, spinning wheel, and musket, students have placed detailed text cards that explain differences in the communication, schooling, family roles, and daily lives of colonial and modern Americans. The exhibit addresses the focus question "How did colonial life differ from modern life in America?"

Other displays dot the exhibition. *The Forgotten Faces of the War* exhibit answers the question "What role did women play in the Revolution?" In a dramatic video presentation, 5th grade actors tell the stories of Mercy Otis Warren, Molly Pitcher, Betsy Ross, Abigail Adams, and Deborah Sampson. In the *Can You Believe Everything You Read?* exhibit, the well-known Henry Wadsworth Longfellow poem *Paul Revere's Ride* is displayed alongside contrasting information from books and pamphlets about Revere's famous midnight ride. Other exhibits answer questions such as "In what way was communication crucial to the Revolution?" and "How does one event influence future events?" and "How did the technology of the times affect the outcomes of the war?" At each exhibit, student docents interact with visitors.<sup>1</sup>

Students in a high school Spanish film and literature class create a bilingual exhibition based on the book, **The Motorcycle Diaries**. (Shorewood High School, Shorewood, WI)



Visualize elementary, middle school, and high school classrooms transformed into research workshops, exhibit design studios, and finally into museums. When students create exhibitions as part of the classroom curriculum, school has an entirely different look and feel. I have had the opportunity to work with teachers and principals who have transformed their school curriculum into interesting museum design projects. In the process, they have brought the curriculum to life and motivated student learning.

When I have the opportunity to visit professional museums, I look for exhibitions and exhibits that encourage visitors to interact with content (and with each other) in fresh and meaningful ways. I find myself imagining the challenging work that must precede such an installation—the research, development, design, and construction. It occurs to me that developing successful exhibitions—those that encourage visitors to “make meaning” of the topic—must present a powerful “meaning-making” experience for the developers as well. At these moments I am fully convinced that the exhibit development process presents a powerful catalyst for student learning.

School museums can be about anything as long as they are well-linked to the academic standards for which teachers are responsible. The simplest way to insure this is to transform an existing instructional unit into a school museum project. School museums can be small-scale projects developed by a single classroom of students or they can be larger-scale projects that involve an entire grade level, multiple grade levels, or the entire school. Regardless of the scale of the project, creating a school museum is not a culminating activity for an instructional

unit. Rather, it provides an organizing framework for the curriculum.

Before students engage in school museum process their teachers engage in a planning process that begins with a key question: “*What will students learn as a result of being involved in this project?*” To answer this question, teachers develop a “big idea” for the exhibition using the format suggested by Beverly Serrell<sup>2</sup>—a single statement with a “subject, action and consequence” that represents what students should remember about the topic long after the exhibition is over. For example, one school’s environment museum had the following big idea: “The decisions of businesses, government, families, and individuals can hurt or help the environment both nearby and far away”. The teacher who wrote this statement reviewed her local academic standards and science text book before developing the single organizing idea that she felt would have a lasting effect on student’s understanding of the topic.

A big idea enhances the power of a curriculum unit for the same reason it enhances the power of an exhibition—it organizes ideas around an important concept. Learning research suggests that superficial coverage of isolated facts is a poor way to help students organize knowledge. (Bransford, et. al)<sup>3</sup>. Information is more meaningful and useful to learners when it is presented in a context that they have time to explore and understand. The often criticized

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“inch deep and mile wide” curriculum practices common in some schools leave little time for students to develop important, organizing ideas. For this reason many K-12 educators are beginning to organize their curriculum around “enduring understandings,” utilizing backwards design frameworks such as “Understanding by Design”. In this curriculum design model, teachers determine the content that is most essential for students to understand and plan assessments and activities to support those understandings.<sup>4</sup>

Similarly, in a school museum project the big idea and supporting focus questions represent important understandings that are used to develop assessments and to organize student work. For example, an instructional unit about local immigration might be transformed into a school museum project where the big idea for the exhibition is, “Immigrants built a new life in an unfamiliar land, enriching the local culture”. Supporting focus questions, such as the following, may eventually become exhibit areas in the student-created museum: *What brought people here from other countries? How has life changed and stayed the same for cultural groups that have immigrated? What are the challenges of immigrating to another country? How have different cultural groups experienced stereotyping or discrimination? How has each cultural group enriched the local culture where they settled?*

Before students can create an effective exhibition they must know something about their topic; therefore student work begins with research. In small teams of three to five members, students explore the answers to research questions about their focus area. Students use a variety of information sources to find answers to these questions, including print material—library books, reference materials,

the textbook, magazines, and so on—as well as the internet. The school museum project provides a great opportunity to go beyond these typical sources of information. Students may interview people in the community who have firsthand experience with the museum topic. When this happens, people can become a valuable source of information for student research. A student exhibit team studying land and sea battles of World War II, saw an article in the newspaper about a local WWII prisoner of war. They invited him to visit their school, drafted interview questions, recorded his interview, and later studied the transcript for information that became part of their exhibition.

Students include objects, images, and artifacts in their final displays, but these items can also be viewed as resources in research phase of the school museum project. For example, elementary students creating a “History of Our School” museum, found mathematics texts from 1909 in their school storehouse and were able to study these texts, comparing them to their current textbooks.

When a sufficient amount of research has been conducted, student teams teach each other about their findings. This allows students to pull information together and to develop a better understanding of the big idea of the full exhibition. It is at this point—when students know enough about their topic—that they are ready to brainstorm display ideas that will engage their visitors.

When possible, a focused museum visit is incorporated into the process. Where better to learn about good display techniques than at a professional museum? Students examine exhibits and try to define what makes them effective or ineffective. As they explain ways

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in which exhibits effectively engage, inform, or arouse curiosity among visitors, they begin to develop a better understanding of the characteristics of a high-quality exhibition—information they can use in their own designs. With good models of professional exhibitions and their own criteria in mind, students ask themselves.....

- What ideas are most *important* for our visitors to know, feel, or act upon?
- What is the *story* we want our exhibition to tell?
- How can this story be told *visually*, using objects, images, experiences?

Students brainstorm ways their visitors might “make meaning” of the content for themselves. This is a real challenge, and one way in which school museum process results in much more than a series of written reports affixed to a wall. Students develop exhibit designs, write label copy for their exhibits, and finally construct their displays.

It is my belief that the development, design, and interpretation of an exhibition provides a “complete” learning experience for students. Often school work requires students to *acquire* new knowledge but does not provide opportunities to *use* that knowledge in a meaningful context. In contrast, the school museum project asks students to put their knowledge to use by creating a product—a visual and written representation of what they have learned. Finally, the opening event presents additional opportunities for student learning. As students interact with their visitors by posing and answering questions, leading discussions, guiding tours, or presenting activities to further interpret their exhibition, they *communicate* their knowledge to a real audience. This “complete” learning experience makes the work of students and teachers more engaging

in the classroom because it infuses the learning process with purpose from the very beginning—students must create an interesting exhibition that will educate their community.

## **Teen Chicago** **by Marie Scatena**

**Teen Chicago** was envisioned as a national model whose strategies for attracting and increasing youth audiences, and inspiring collection and interpretation strategies about the history of adolescence could be adapted by urban museums. Original oral history research carried out by teens hired and trained to do this work was a critical component of **Teen Chicago**. These stories provided the foundation for an exhibition, website, and publications about growing up in Chicago over the twentieth century. The fifteen teenagers who comprised the Teen Council worked as paid staff at the museum for two years, collecting one hundred oral histories, advising on all aspects of the exhibition, from label writing to curating, advising on content and design, developing a website, and developing and implementing programs. This fundamental involvement was essential from the start in order to achieve the goal of building a new audience. It also raised questions about the challenges of working with teenagers on museum exhibition projects. How did the selection of teens and training relate to and inform the exhibition development process? Why was it important for teens to tell, collect, interpret, and display stories about growing up?

**Teen Chicago** offered unique opportunities to establish a teen community within the museum. Forming a Teen Council who would represent as many perspectives as possible, was critical to the project’s success. Selection of the Teen Council entailed a process which considered

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To see photo stories of school museum projects visit [www.kidcurators.com](http://www.kidcurators.com). For more information about the school museum planning and instructional processes see: D’Acquisto, L. (2006) *Learning on Display: Student-Created Museums that Build Understanding*, Alexandria, VA, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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criteria such as race, ethnicity, socio-economic, and academic achievement levels and geographic backgrounds, skills, talents, interests, and individual personalities. In creating a diverse Teen Council, the exhibition team had a ready-made array of teen ideas, opinions, and perspectives to draw upon. For the teens, this created many opportunities for expressing their individuality. The Teen Council's diversity both reflected the demographics of the city, and in turn the pool of interviewees. Another opportunity critical to the Teen Council's and audience building success was to give teens adequate time and space to meet, socialize, and work together. Working in two adjacent classrooms turned office spaces, Teen Council members were able to re-imagine themselves as museum professionals and historians, researching and interpreting the past for public audiences. The opportunity to learn new skills such as interviewing, preservation, and interpretation of objects, and apply these skills, and along with opportunities to work side by side with adults, was cited by most Teen Council members as the most important benefits of working on the project.

The Teen Council was trained in Chicago history, oral history, and programming, in an eight week course designed as a museum studies and outward and inward bound history course. The course curriculum included time spent learning about the city, both out in it and in the museum, studying with a cast of experts, and learning historical practice, with an emphasis on oral history. Daily journal writing gave the Teen Council time to process and reflect on what they had learned. From their first day at the museum, the teens were aware, the oral histories they were collecting would be important for the museum and for the field.

Teenage history is relatively undocumented and the *Teen Chicago* oral history collection would fill a gap in the historical records at the Chicago History Museum, and provide the basis for a ground-breaking exhibition. Throughout the project, our lead scholar, historian of adolescence Harvey Graff, supported privileging a teen voice in the exhibition by setting the conceptual framework and guiding the oral history survey and exhibition which looked at the main spheres influencing teen life: home, school, work, and play. He vetted their oral history survey, seconded their object and design choices, reviewed all curatorial work, and even attended programs.

The issue of how to make the exhibition appealing to both youth and a general public audience was one we grappled with throughout the process. Teen Council's lively debating arose from the diversity of perspectives from which the CHS exhibition team could draw upon for advice and coaching. Even with extensive Teen Council involvement, we knew that teen history would not appeal to youth if told in an 'adult' voice. The Teen Council members and their ideas challenged exhibition curator Joy Bivins, "The Teen Council did not develop the interpretation, but they played a role in helping to shape it. It was sometimes difficult for me to swallow what the Teen Council said. They challenged the ways I looked at content and they also forced me to put myself in their shoes, in terms of what subjects seemed stereotypical or stale to them". Considering teen perspectives and coming to consensus was time consuming, but ultimately rewarding for Joy Bivins and designers Dan Oliver and Julie Nauman. Two decisions made jointly by the Teen Council, designers, and curatorial team was that the physical space of the exhibition

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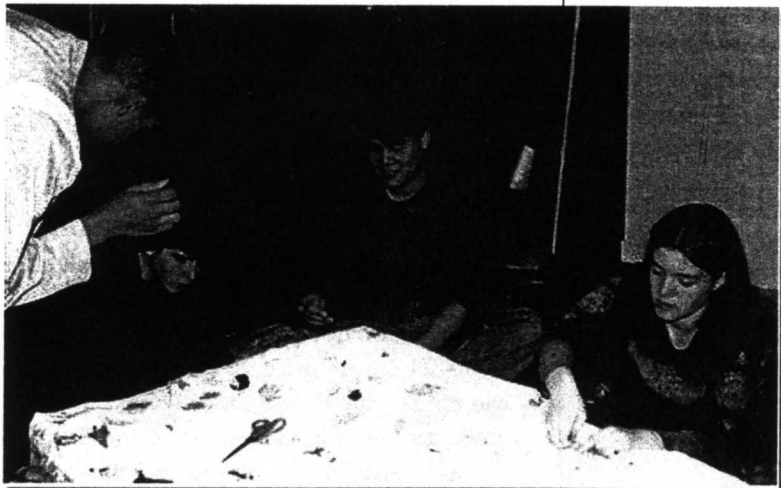
should not contain any 90 degree angles. This resulted in curved and sweeping shapes, which created an overall ‘cool’ effect. Another Teen Council suggestion was to not always look for the similarities between generations. Joy Bivins remembered, “During one brainstorming session, teen council members came up with the idea that they (meaning teens) are different and we should concentrate on that. This ran counter to what the adults came up with. So, exploring how different generations of teens lived in the city became a critical objective.” These compromises were negotiated along with the idea of including Teen Point of View labels, complete with Teen Council member photographs and curved shapes. These labels were written by the teens themselves, contrasting and corresponding to labels of quotes taken from the oral history interviews, both sprinkled throughout the exhibition, mimicking the feel of the intergenerational dialog which occurred during interviews.

The most popular exhibition element was the teen bed that dominated the home/private space section of the exhibition, and begged questions about the public’s on-going fascination with teen bedrooms. A summative evaluation cited that over 50% of visitors stopped to view the bed. Accompanied by an interactive touch screen game matching photographs, Teen Council members, and their bedrooms (what else!), the bed also became the floor of the hang-out section, an interactive piece. People added candy wrappers, pens and pencils, a folder, a condom, and a cigarette (later ingeniously removed from between a small opening in the acrylic covering. The floor in the hang-out section was sponsored by Director of Exhibitions, Tamara Biggs, in a successful pairing of programming and exhibition. At the

opening, visitors were invited to draw slang on the floor with markers (closely supervised by museum staff). Over the course of the year the exhibition was on display at the museum, the floor filled up with slang from visitors—on the floor and nowhere else.

The *Teen Chicago* exhibition drew upon the content and spirit of the oral histories, and was embedded in a larger plan to involve teenagers in museums as visitors and as staff.

Through the process of becoming oral historians, Teen Council members created an interrelatedness of personal and public history as well as the importance of historical trends, events, and memory in shaping teen lives in Chicago across time. As Teen Council members analyzed and interpreted the data, they observed how people characterized their own teen years across time. Interview questions such as “When did you become a teen?” and “What event or experience defined your transition to adulthood?” highlighted the differences and



*Teen Council Coordinator, Ray Yang and Teen Council members, Claire Elderkin and Bakir Bicakcic secure personal objects such as lipstick cases, teen magazines and CD's to a Simpson's inspired bedsheet donated by Teen Councilor Landon Jones.*



The Teen Bed featured prominently in the award-winning **Teen Chicago** exhibition was designed by Dan Oliver, along with curator Joy Bivins and fifteen Teen Council members.

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similarities among teens growing up in different times and circumstances and challenged interviewees to reflect on how their identity as teens was constituted. Ultimately, the teen-developed oral history questionnaire helped to shape much of the exhibition's content and oral history video clips were an appealing and significant feature of the exhibition. Curator Joy Bivins considered that, "... the oral testimony gave many of the objects more weight. It can be difficult to make the artifacts of youth "sing" because many of them can be commonplace, meaning many of our visitors either have seen similar materials or have or had them in their possession. The oral histories helped to give them context and a quality of significance they may not have had otherwise". Likewise, these powerful stories influenced programming. Programming and the exhibition were married in a play, based on the oral histories, which was written, staged, directed, choreographed, and performed by students at two opening events. This represented the most thoroughly realized example of how the exhibition and programs related to each other. During the life of the exhibition at the museum, programs with strong music and dance components evolved into themed events. A voter registration drive highlighted student activism described in the

exhibition, and brought over 400 teens to the museum in late summer when most teenagers were relishing the last days of summer before school started.

Teen presence in the form of the Teen Council, as museum visitors and in the exhibition brought subtle and obvious changes to the museum's culture. Teen Council member Hai Minh Nguyen defined their undeniable vitality as, "bringing a lot more energy than the old fogeys" to the museum. As staff, the Teen Council's agenda sought to make the experience as different from high school as possible. Appropriate language, dress and behavior were big issues which required negotiation with staff from many museum departments in order to establish reasonable and happy compromises. In some cases, a war of attrition was waged and won by the Teen Council. They pushed policy boundaries by bringing issues forward about shoes or no shoes in the museum, sitting on the floor, exposed midriffs, noise levels, running, dancing, and going in and out of the building. In some sense, **Teen Chicago** was an experiment in both ownership and storytelling, and in a nine month run at the Harold Washington Library, visitors responded to the exhibition in an enthusiastic, but quieter way.

Mentoring and inter-generational learning were also hallmarks of the project, as well as a remarkably successful outcome of interviewing. In general, teens were awestruck with some of the older interviewees. The immediate relevance to teens hearing about dating in the 1920's, driving cars in the 1940's, and being drafted in the 1960's was apparent in their feedback summaries written after each interview. The teens also had no preconceived notions about the person who was to become the group's

most influential mentor. A diary entry from July, 2002 read, "Today Studs Terkel will be talking to us he is apparently a really famous guy but I had never heard of him before today". Studs Terkel was one of many of **Teen Chicago's** champions. Lonnie Bunch's initiation and direction gave **Teen Chicago** its size and scope, and his support was indispensable to the project's success. The teens themselves garnered the respect of the staff who worked with them and amazed visitors. Project sponsor Phyllis Rabineau observed at a Friday night teen event, "They (visitors) were surprised too see young people not in uniform, not in checkered uniforms, to see young people

looking and acting a little crazy... but they got it that young people were here as a new presence at the museum." **Teen Chicago** created a safe and welcoming environment that facilitated historical debate, discussion and creativity across generations, ethnicities, classes and backgrounds. **Teen Chicago** has been a part of a movement in Chicago to foster respect for youth. It provided the public with fresh ways to consider how, if given opportunities, teenagers might participate in Chicago's cultural, intellectual and artistic life. We hope this project inspires more than replication, but inspires new ways to advocate for, work with, and take delight in youth in museums. 

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**References Cited:**

<sup>1</sup> D'Acquisto, L. (2006) *Learning on Display: Student-Created Museums that Build Understanding*, Alexandria, VA, Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. (pages 3 - 4)

<sup>2</sup> Serrell, B. (1996), *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, Walnut Creek, CA, AltaMira Press

<sup>3</sup> Bransford, Brown, Cocking, (1999), *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*, National Academy Press, page 30.

<sup>4</sup> Wiggins, G. & McTighe, J., (1998) *Understanding by Design*, Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

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**Christi Atkinson, Associate Director of Education and Community Programs, from the Walker Art Museum, was also part of this panel presentation. Information about the Walker Art Center Teen Arts Council (WACTAC), an innovative teen-directed program designed to connect young adults to contemporary art and artists, is available at <http://teens.walkerart.org>.**

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