

Museum on Main Street 2009 National Planning Conferences Sharing Best Practices

Reading & Discussion Activity for Orientation Workshop

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MoMS Tour(s) That You've Coordinated (exhibition and year): Key Ingredients 2003/2005; Between Fences 2005/2008; New Harmonies 2007; Journey Stories 2009

How did extra effort(s) in this area come about? Needs identified in the state; among the local hosts, etc.

- During the course of several orientation workshops, it became clear that alternate models of “public humanities programs” ought to be more readily available to host sites – many of whom rarely produced programming outside of lectures and/or social activities;
- We also wanted to take advantage of those sites – like public libraries – that might have decided literary interests in each exhibition;
- Moreover, engaging the project directors in substantive discussion about a piece relevant to the exhibit seemed to deepen ideas, broaden themes, and open conversations that could further their understanding of the exhibit’s main points. We wanted them to stretch their notion of history and the humanities.

What council resources/expertise were you able to utilize? What partner resources/expertise?

We are fortunate to have had developed a number of reading-discussion series with IHC affiliate, Adam Davis, who manages and develops content for “The Meaning of Service” and “Velosophie.”

What were the steps involved in implementation?

- Utilizing the exhibit script or outline, consider the exhibit’s big idea/s;
- Search out short, provocative pieces of literature/poetry that allow for depth and breadth of exploration on the exhibit themes;
- As example, for “Between Fences,” we utilized **Robert Frost’s, “Mending Wall”** (itself a part of the exhibition content) paired with **Franz Kafka’s, “Fellowship”**;
- For “Journey Stories,” we utilized two poems – **Philip Larkin’s, “Poetry of Departures”** and **Edward Field’s, “The Journey”** – that allowed us to talk about how one might come to decide to leave and how one might be changed during the course of a journey;
- We hold the discussion session early in the morning, on the day when we talk about content and brainstorm ideas for companion exhibits and public programs;
- Set aside at least 90 minutes for reading and then facilitate the conversation.

What were the results?

Only anecdotal information has been collected so far:

“I really appreciated the opportunity to experience the exercise from a humanities viewpoint, as you were able to so eloquently distill to: “the humanities ask the why question,” the discussion that followed the readings were doing just that. Having poetry as a starting point was a bit intimidating. It is not a format that most people are comfortable with, I think in large part, because it is billed as an elitist exercise. I appreciated the opportunity to confront that uncomfortable feeling and try to respond to what I was feeling. I appreciated listening to the

responses of others, without judgment, but with a shared sense of experiencing a moment together. I actually quite enjoyed it."

"Looking back on the poetry session at the MoMS workshop I really think about how it took everyone out of their comfort level. We are all passionate about history, but sometimes we get a little too focused. The poetry session made me think about Journeys with a different perspective."

"Reading and discussing the selections truly emphasizes the importance of associating our physical fences with the humanities through literature. The discussion also facilitated "out of the box" brainstorming that was imperative for the development of quality companion exhibits and programs."

What adjustments (if any) did you make along the way?

It's helpful to explain what your intentions are by adding an activity component like this. For us, telling them we want them to think about alternate formats/models for programs and considering whom else they might invite as program participants – local libraries, English teachers, etc. – gets them thinking more broadly about the humanities and how culture informs history. We also now say that we want them to consider the conversations as they consider the narratives they're telling with their companion exhibitions.

What's been the short and long term benefit to the local hosts?

- Short term: not there yet
- Long term: not there yet

What's been the short and long term benefit to the state council?

Difficult to determine right now, but I think we're able to consider how else to utilize our resources/expertise in a way that might convince local hosts to talk to us earlier in the conception of their programmatic/exhibition ideas.

What advice would you have for other state tour coordinators trying to make a similar impact in this area?

- Utilize short, dense provocative readings that are relevant;
- Utilize a good facilitator and avoid any proscribed content delivery;
- Inform the hosts that you intend for them to deal with this early on;
- Explain why it is you're doing what you're doing.

Do you have any files, forms, documents or digital images illustrating this component of your MoMS tour(s) that we could post on-line to share with others?

*Between Fences: Robert Frost, "Mending Wall" and Franz Kafka, "Fellowship
Journey Stories: Philip Larkin, "Poetry of Departures" and Edward Field, "The Journey"
(upcoming) New Harmonies: Langston Hughes, "Theme for English B"*

Would you be willing to serve as a mentor to other state coordinators, advising them on this topic? If so, please indicate the best way for them to contact you.

Please feel free to contact Ryan Lewis at 312.422.5585 x231 or rml@prairie.org