



WABASH CENTER

For Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion



Teach More Can & Less Cannot

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Experienced teachers recognize the need to continually learn about the art and craft of teaching. With the aim of improving our own teaching, a group of Wabash Center colleagues and I set out to observe classrooms beyond typical higher education settings. Our first session was with a museum docent. The plan was for our small group of colleagues to meet the docent, then along with a group of first-graders, take the tour of featured exhibits. I was very excited about the museum tour and the first-graders.

A museum docent, volunteer or staff, is a person who leads tours of exhibits in museums. The docent has interest in art, might be an artist themselves, desires to interact with persons who come to the museum for an experience of the art, and desires to assist persons to discover their own interpretation the artwork. Docents are guides who help museum visitors better see the artwork. Our docent was named Ann Marie (not her real name). She had been a guide, teacher, trainer in this museum for more than fifteen years.

The colleagues and I arrived at the museum before the first-grade class. We were greeted in the lobby of the museum by Ann Marie. Ann Marie was a white woman, mid-to-late fifties, with a cheery disposition. She gave us a brief overview of the museum and talked about her responsibilities as a docent and docent trainer. She said she liked her job and that she had started as a volunteer, and now she was on staff. She said that during the quarantine the museum, like all others, had gone dormant, but now, with a mask requirement, they were open

for business and had a regular schedule of visitors.

The first-grade class arrived. My colleagues and I stood to the side as approximately 25 African American children, age 6 & 7, along with about 8 chaperones (likely parents and aids) quietly filled the museum lobby. The group entered the museum like people would a library or church – with a kind of quietness of spirit and anticipation. Ann Marie instructed the group to take a seat on the floor. I watched as the children, under the guidance of their chaperones, made three orderly rows. The children were talking quietly and waiting for the tour to begin.

As I watched the children interact, I had pangs of remembering field trips from my elementary school days. Those memories reminded me why I loved learning and why I have wanted to be a teacher since childhood.

The chaperones, standing, placed themselves at the edge of the group and kept a watchful eye. I noticed a young white woman sitting on the floor in the third row. She sat with the children, relaxed and talked calmly with the children seated around her. She was the only white person in the group of children and chaperones. As I observed, I thought this likely the first museum many of the children had visited. I was glad these children had the opportunity to leave the classroom for learning in the wider-world. I felt my heart open.

Ann Marie approached the seated children and began her presentation. Her welcoming and cheerful manner quickly devolved into what sounded like a canned speech, withering into a series of questions meant to prompt specific responses from the children. The children were instructed to raise their hands and wait to be called upon to answer the questions. With each question from Ann Marie, multiple children raised a hand to participate. Once Ann Marie finished with the question-and-answer portion of her presentation, she informed the children she had instructions for how the group should navigate the exhibits. Ann Marie said in a dry and disciplining tone to the children,

Please do not run.

Please do not touch any art work.

Please do not talk when I am talking.

Do not walk on the stairs without holding onto the handrail.

Do not leave the group.

Do not wonder.

Do not call out to speak.

Do not

With each “Do Not” command spoken by Ann Marie my heart sank. I cringed. The

experience of wonder, art, creativity and interpretation was becoming an exercise in compliance, obedience, right-doing, and rule following. At the end of the long list of rules, the children were still quite attentive, Ann Marie took a long, dramatic pause. I suspect she was trying to reinforce the point that these rules were important. During the pause, the white woman sitting on the floor in the third row raised her hand. When she got Ann Marie's attention she stood up. The young white woman stepped out from amongst the children so all could see and hear her. In this moment I realized she was the teacher.

Teacher said in a firm tone,

*Class, I want you to remember what we talked about while we prepared to come to the museum. Remember? We talked about all the kinds of things you **CAN DO**.*

Who remembers what we CAN DO?

Teacher paused for the children to think and respond. Several first graders raised their hands to signal they had answers. Taking turns as they responded, the children answered saying:

We can look with our eyes.

We can enjoy what we see.

We can ask questions.

We can appreciate the colors.

We can talk about what we see.

We can see the pictures.

We can say what we think about the pictures.

We can see what artists drew and painted.

We can say if we like it or if we do not like it ... or both.

We can look at all the different kinds of art.

Teacher responded,

Yes, to all of those. Very well done!

Teacher looked at Ann Marie and said,

We are as interested in what we can do as what we cannot do.

I was relieved that Teacher had spoken. I was grateful that Teacher advocated for her

students. Teacher had a clear vision of the kind of learning experience she wanted for her students and she spoke-up for that experience to happen.

Learners, children and adults, are formed by the theories, concepts, and lessons of the classroom. They are equally formed by the ecologies, experiences, relationships and rules which frame the learning. We learn as much from how we are treated by the people and by the institution as we do from the curriculum materials.

The brilliance of Teacher, in advocating for the learning of her students, was that her advocacy was not meant to provoke a confrontation. Teacher's advocacy did not hinge upon telling the docent that her methods were unwarranted or even biased. Teacher had prepared her students for an experience of curiosity, wonder, exploration and discovery. When the docent tried to diminish that experience to an experience of NO, CANNOT, MUST NOT, SHOULD NOT, DO NOT, Teacher intervened by making use of her authority and voice. Teacher had authority because she was the teacher. Teacher simply, elegantly, and forthrightly used her voice to reframe the rules and signal to the class that they were free to learn, expected to explore, and be free.

On behalf of your learners, Teacher, I thank you.

<https://wabash.center/2022/06/teach-more-can-less-cannot/>