

SEEKING Real-World Connections With Museums and Cultural Institutions

Maximize the Value of Field Trips

Written by James Wells and Sue Snyder

Collaborations between schools and cultural institutions provide long-lasting benefits, especially when the plans encompass more than single-visit field trip excursions. Whether collaborating with a museum, historical site, science center, zoo, theater, or other cultural attraction, establishing a long-term relationship begins with aligning each organization's needs and determining what learning experiences fit the institution's artifact collection and the school's learning objectives.

Immerse Faculty in Learning

The field trip image that comes to mind is students pouring out of a school bus and bouncing their way into an off-campus learning environment. Shift the paradigm by envisioning a teachers' field trip that immerses them in a cultural site and helps them shape student learning experiences.

Imagine teachers beginning their first preparation day of the new school year. The speaker announces, "Teachers, we have a special treat

today. Please exit the building and take a seat on the bus. Join me on a field trip!" This happened at Hokulani Elementary School in Honolulu, Hawaii. Curious teachers proceeded to the bus with the same bounce in their step as eager students. Principal Laurie Luczak kicked off the school year with an engaging professional development experience at the Hawaii State Art Museum. To plan such an innovative first day, Luczak leaned on her experience as a former arts-integration

specialist. She secured a grant targeting visual literacy from the Hawai'i State Foundation on Culture and the Arts. She established a schoolwide collaboration between the museum's education staff and her faculty.

Luczak reports, "The professional development day was *so* valuable! Many teachers had not been to the museum before. At the end of the day, they said they were 'no longer intimidated by art or the museum.' They were eager to integrate art observation, visualization, and expression



exercises into their teaching. In order to design unit plans that support these learning methods, we had to effectively train our educators.” Luczak’s advice to other principals is to “immerse teachers in visual literacy experiences, so they can cascade the robust learning for students. With firsthand experiences, teachers understand how to plan art integration and choose new ways for students to demonstrate learning.”

Visual Literacy Builds Essential Skills

Visual literacy involves the essential skills of observing, citing evidence, explaining inferences, and using inquiry to deepen critical thinking. Exploring art museums, historical sites, and science centers provides perfect opportunities to immerse teachers and students in visual literacy bandwidth-stretching experiences. Whether studying sea life at an aquarium or making connections between historical context and the art displayed at a museum, visual literacy is the ability to make meaning of the ideas conveyed through visual artifacts and observations.

The beauty of perusing a community’s shared space is unlocking the stories behind their collections and performances. Stories unfold through living artifacts such as animals in zoos or aquariums and as human performers dance, sing, and dramatize history on the stage. The lines between science, math, language arts, and visual art blur in these settings where learning is authentic and relevant.





New Ways to SEEK™ Meaning

Given the broad range of artifacts available in many community cultural institutions, how can teachers and students frame a consistent approach or set of questions to organize their thoughts and formulate points of view? How can visitors to museums increase their comfort and confidence as they explore new collections? How can increasing visual literacy inform and deepen cross-curricular learning? The SEEK protocol, introduced early in Crayola creatED professional development, addresses these needs. By definition, the word *seek* means to search and to discover. When exploring artifacts, viewers seek to understand or interpret by asking questions that guide them through an insight-rich discovery process.

The SEEK questions move the learner from observer to responder and inquirer. Students and teachers transition from being inactive viewers to active meaning-makers and researchers. The SEEK protocol is applicable to all curricular areas and any artifact, making visual literacy accessible. Librarians use SEEK to help students read illustrations in picture books. Science educators use SEEK to unpack the mysteries found in planetariums and paleontology collections. Art educators use SEEK to reveal the layers of meaning artists' work conveys, including student artists. Historians use SEEK to consider what an envelope on display at the National Postal Museum reveals. How can this series of questions

enrich a zoo field trip or help parents facilitate conversations during art museum visits? SEEK's four sections are easy to remember: *See*, *Evidence*, *Explain*, and *Know*. These address the foundational education pillars: *observation*, *evidence citation*, *explanation*, and *inquiry*.

SEEK Museum Practices Within a School

In Livingston, New Jersey, the creative leadership team at Hillside Elementary School learned SEEK during their creatED professional development courses. To ensure schoolwide adoption of this multifaceted protocol, they created an interactive bulletin board on which they rotated student artwork and professional artists' print reproductions monthly. Similar to museum docents and curators, Hillside students prepare introductions for each month's collection. Students use SEEK to discuss the art during their Student Council assemblies and invite students to write reflective thoughts on sticky notes as they respond to the monthly displays.

Principal Carlos Gramata states, "This interactive bulletin board creates an opportunity for students to build upon their observations and respond to comments made by peers. It is amazing to see how this process develops their vocabulary and for us to see how mindful and deeply students are thinking about their responses."

Maximizing the Value of Field Trips

Best practice for deriving the most value from a field trip involves pre- and post-visit experiences that tie directly to learning objectives. Cultural institutions' personnel can share resources that help teachers scaffold the pre- and post-lessons. They could offer suggestions for which artifacts are developmentally appropriate and how vocabulary and context can be woven into units of study.

The National Art Education Association (NAEA) and the

Association of Art Museum Directors (AAMD) investigated the impact of single museum visits (*The Effects of Facilitated Single-Visit Art Museum Programs on Students Grades 4-6, NAEA/AAMD Impact Study, 2019*). They found that even a single visit to a museum setting with authentic artifacts affects students in the following multidimensional areas:

Questioning: Students ask more complex questions about works of art.

Multiple Interpretations: Students are more accepting of multiple interpretations of art.

Physicality of Art: Students are more likely to think about art in terms of its properties.

Emotive Recall: Students experience greater emotive recall of the art.



Johnsburg Central School in rural North Creek, New York, leverages community resources as part of its daily routine with individual volunteers and regional museums. Principal Heather Flanagan states, "We see many learning opportunities beyond the school walls. We take our students out into the community, and we invite the community in." The *Adirondack Experience*, an interactive museum

about 40 minutes away from the school, has made a deep, ongoing commitment to bring their education staff and environmental science lessons to Johnsburg Central School four to five times each year. When classes take field trips to the museum, students are well prepared to maximize the value of the trip.

Researchers Jay Greene, University of Arkansas College of Education, and Brian Kisida, University of Missouri, explored the value of field trips. The opening of Crystal Bridges in Arkansas provided the opportunity to collect data on the impact of field trips. They found significant benefits for students. “Students who attended school tours possessed more knowledge, demonstrated stronger critical-thinking skills, exhibited increased historical empathy, displayed higher levels of tolerance, and developed a taste for consuming culture in the future,” reports Greene. “We also found that these benefits were much larger, in general, for students from rural areas or high-poverty schools, as well as minority students,” (Greene, J., EdNext Podcast, Episode 59: *Why Do Field Trips Matter?* Nov. 2, 2016).

Collaborations with cultural institutions range in depth and breadth from long-term, multi-event experiences to single field trip excursions. While the former type has most significant impact on the school’s learning community, the latter has well-documented value. Authentic artifacts inspire learners to SEEK connections between what they know and want to know and build visual literacy skills. Finding new ways to teach in sites that extend beyond school buildings increases the authenticity of content and broadens interactions with the community. 🌧️

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Planning Successful Collaborations

The best field trips are long-term interactions sustained by mutually beneficial relationships between schools and community institutions. To plan and sustain these interactions, think about the pillars of a symbiotic relationship:

1. Identify a variety of potential organizations, but focus on a few that can best support your objectives.
2. Determine how both institutions could help each other achieve specific goals or address challenges.
3. Understand each other’s mission, vision, and needs. Ask questions such as “What goals are you concerned about achieving?” and “Where do our mission statements align?”
4. Look for opportunities that are authentic to what each institution can bring to the table. Ask, for example, “If the museum is assessed by the number of visitors, would holding your school’s family engagement event at the museum help them reach their metric while enriching the experience for families?”
5. Map out a plan with multiple opportunities for teachers and students to interact with museum educators. Would co-hosting a community-wide professional development experience give your teachers an opportunity to demonstrate their arts-integration strengths while showcasing the museum’s collection?
6. Wear the other organization’s hat while planning. Ask yourself, “How would this help them, as well as us?”