Bringing Excitement to the Classroom

A Sabbatical at the Museum
By Debbie Tsarfati

"Why do we have to learn this?" and "How will I ever use this in my life?"

Each September new students question the relevance of studying ancient history in my sixth-grade class at Klinger Middle School. Trying to get them to understand that we can learn a lot about ourselves and our society today by examining ancient cultures is difficult, particularly if all you have is a textbook to help make the connection between their lives and those of past people and civilizations.

To crack their resistance and stimulate their interest, for years I have brought my sixth-graders to the Museum during the spring term, after they have some familiarity with the cultures they will encounter here. I always love seeing their reaction to the real artifacts on display: "Is this really thousands of years old? Are these real or fake?"

The looks on their faces—like nothing I have seen in the classroom—make it clear. They are mesmerized. The Museum and its artifacts make a connection for them, making the study of history meaningful and exciting—the past finally comes to life.

But for all these years I have always wondered: Could I capture this magic somehow and bring it into my classroom from the beginning of each year? Maybe, I thought, if I could only spend more time at the Museum, I would figure out how.

So in 2005 I approached Dori Panzer in the Museum’s Education Department and asked her what I might do at the Museum if I took a sabbatical from teaching for a semester. She suggested a number of possibilities that included training to be a docent (a person who guides tours through the Museum’s galleries) or working with the Museum’s Elderhostel program. To be honest, anything that would allow me to explore the Museum’s treasures, generate ideas about how to enliven the classroom, and allow me to refresh my teaching style seemed promising. I decided to join the Museum’s guide-training program.

In preparation for my sabbatical, which ran from February to August 2007, I began familiarizing myself with the Museum’s galleries during the Summer of 2006. Having lived in Israel for several years, I first chose to train in the Canaan and Ancient Israel galleries, where I successfully completed the requirements to guide tours under the mentorship of Helen Winston. But when the blockbuster exhibition, Tutankhamun and the Golden Age of the Pharaohs, arrived at The Franklin Institute in February 2007, it soon became apparent that the Penn Museum needed more tour leaders in the Egyptian galleries. Therefore, during my sabbatical, I switched my focus to the guide-training program

The Museum’s guide-training program involves a self-directed approach that recognizes that potential guides have different backgrounds and time constraints. The training includes observing experienced guides while they give tours—how they work with groups and how they use artifacts to teach—and studying one or more of our galleries. Each gallery has a senior volunteer guide who mentors guides-in-training. This typically begins with suggested readings—such as Museum publications, articles in Expedition, and copies of the text panels found in our galleries—to develop their knowledge about the particular cultures on display. When trainees feel ready to give tours, they write an outline of the proposed tour, meet with the senior guide to discuss it, and then give a trial tour on which they receive feedback. It takes an average of six months of training to become a Museum volunteer guide.

— Dori Panzer, the Museum’s Coordinator of Volunteer Guides
Ancient Egypt and spent many hours two or three days a week working with Steve Hecht, another volunteer guide, to prepare for my second guide certification under the supervision of Larry McClennan.

Finally able to lead tours, it was a pleasure to see the excitement on the faces of students as we moved through the dimly lit Lower Egyptian gallery. I loved the informal nature of the tours—questions and answers and the thrill of students on a school fieldtrip. When they saw a real mummy for the first time, I knew that a memory was in the making. They were connecting, and I was helping them to do so in a way that was much more effective than using a textbook.

Learning about the Museum's collections and giving tours was an eye-opening experience. I found that when you look at the artifacts closely they do come to life, telling a story about ancient peoples. Encountering each artifact and its unique story allowed one's imagination to soar. Clearly, what I needed to do in the classroom was similarly to tell stories using artifacts—but how?

I decided to take a cue from some of the scholarly presentations that I attended during my sabbatical. Using digital images assembled as a slideshow in PowerPoint presentations, I thought I might be able to capture the power of these artifacts to recreate the stories of people and teach my students about the past. So I spent many hours taking digital photographs in the galleries and also discovered that in the Museum shops I could buy artifact reproductions—Egyptian scarabs and statues and Mesopotamian clay tablets—to take back to my school. With these I could create a mini-museum in the classroom and allow my students to handle and inspect the replicas—one step closer to the real thing.

As I reflect on my sabbatical at the Museum, I am grateful for the time I had to immerse myself in its treasures and the opportunities it provided me to learn about so many cultures. I am especially pleased that I was able to meet so many tour guides and staff members who are dedicated to imparting their knowledge to the public in a meaningful way. I have been given a great gift and am infused with a new inspiration and enthusiasm for my subject and an excitement to share it with my students.

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