Timothy G. Young

The young visitors

Introducing children to the research library through exhibition tours

Humanities research libraries need to constantly assess their user populations. The classic model from decades ago of a writer armed with an exclusive contract to access an unexplored archive has been changed over the years by major repositories seeking to foster a user base of researchers with a range of interests and goals. While the rede nition of the patrons of humanities and archives repositories has expanded to be more inclusive of the adult population, it hasn t changed much vertically that is, younger readers and children are not included in most target audiences.

The obvious response to this observation is that research libraries are not meant for children. The nature of collections and the conduct of research are not intended to include them. In the matter of reading room use, this is undeniably correct, but there is at least one goal that research libraries should consider, one borne out of a secondary, but rather crucial mission: exhibitions.

Over the past four years, the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library of Yale University has presented a number of exhibitions that were intended to attract and educate young visitors. Observations from the preparation and execution of three of these exhibitions can provide lessons in how younger visitors can be introduced to the research library.

Why children should visit

Why is this important? The Beinecke Library has, as part of its mission, the goal to allow free and open access to its public exhibition spaces and events. Situated in the city of New Haven, with its history of variably successful town-gown relations, Yale University tries to make its programs accessible to foster community building. There is, on a daily basis, a wide range of events open to all visitors to the campus.

But to be more direct, what good does it do for a child to visit a research library, especially when museums and other kid-friendly places may be hard sells? Besides the usual platitudes of libraries being good for the soul, the value of a visit to a research library can rest on several more mundane returns: 1) a visit to a research library demysti es the institution by placing it in context of what libraries, in general, do; 2) contrary to fears about a paperless society, a tour of a research library can serve as a brief introduction to the crucially important subject of printing history, which is likely not included in many curricula; 3) a visit to an exhibition allows a research library to be considered on a par with more visible institutions (such as museums and art galleries); and 4) a tour can introduce students to the often invisible work of academic researchers and writers, the people who write the essays and books that help inform our understanding of history, literature and popular culture.

Langston Hughes exhibit

The rst of our kid-friendly exhibitions, on Langston Hughes in 2002, was the culmination of a long planning process organized

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jointly by two curators and a student assistant. The lead curator arranged a series of events around the exhibition, including lectures and dramatic readings. The Web site version of the exhibition, available at beinecke.library.yale.edu/langstonhughes highlighted items from the show and added an audiovisual component with movie clips and recordings of Hughes reading his poems. The intent of the Web site was dual: to serve as a parallel component of the exhibition while on view and to continue as an educational resource after the physical components had been returned to their archival boxes.

Planning for student visits began months before the show was mounted. With the help of a school liaison on the Yale staff, proposals were made to local schools to arrange visits for classes, and arrangements were made to have teachers visit the library in advance for a tour. This allowed the teachers to focus on certain objects and themes around which they could build teaching units and permitted preliminary discussion of how best to address problematic and troubling issues such as lynching, a topic that Hughes addressed in his writing. The results of this preparation, observed when students came into the Beinecke Library building, were wonderful, especially when several children noted items they had studied: We read that poem in class!

Observations

This approach of preparing in advance for class visits was followed for a 2005 exhibition on J. M. Barrie. While Peter Pan may have relevance to some of today s children, Barrie s varied and interesting career was new ground to most visitors, young and old.

By the time of this second venture into hosting a younger audience, a number of realizations had crystallized. The rst was the preferred age of a target student group. Taking into account the vagaries of maturity and attention span, it became clear that fth graders paid attention and got the most out of guided tours to the library. Younger classes often had a hard time concentrating on the materials, and older groups often lapsed into boredom before entering the building. Another eye-opener this time around was the reality of school budgets. Though teachers might be quite willing to bring a group of students, limitations on the number of bus excursions allowed per year per teacher meant that precious travel time would likely be allotted to high visibility eld trips, such as to a natural history museum.

Class trips, however, were only one component of the targeted youth audience. Family groups were encouraged to visit the exhibition. Large ads were placed on buses traveling throughout New Haven County (as had been done for the Hughes exhibition). The most effective part of the design package for the show, however, was a guide prepared especially for children. A full exhibition catalog was for sale, but any visitor (young or old) was offered a free booklet: J. M. Barrie and Peter Pan: A children s guide. This colorful 16-page item included a simpli ed narrative (aimed at a fourth-grade reading level) and interactive portions, such as a page for writing an adventure story and a maze. The only items that surpassed the booklet in popularity were the free lapel buttons depicting Peter Pan and J. M. Barrie. It was an honor when the children s booklet was chosen for a 2005 Leab Exhibition Award.

The most recent exhibition intended to attract a juvenile audience was Breaking the Binding: Printing and the Third Dimension, a show that seemed an easy sell for families. Drawn largely from the library s collection of children s books, the exhibition showed off many delightful pop-ups, mechanical books, and other formats that exhibited dimensionality in an essentially at medium.

The principal challenge of such an exhibition (besides the vexing problems in displaying books with multiple aps) was how to make it literally accessible for the viewers, since the attraction of the books on view is their ability to be manipulated. The books were locked in cases under thick glass alluring but inert. The solution was to prepare a table of modern, inexpensive

facsimiles to allow all visitors the chance to work versions of books on display and to allow harried parents the chance to have a leisurely look at the cases while the kids played contentedly.

Lessons learned

Here, then, are some lessons learned from the experience of planning exhibition tours for younger audiences:

Plan ahead. If the exhibition is going to have an educational component for young viewers, make that part of the planning for the show. Include development time, appropriate budgeting, and a schedule for previews and tours in your plan.

Work with campus liaisons, if available. Many museums have curators of education; most libraries don t.

Advertise early and in different venues. In addition to advertising and placing notices for an exhibition in the likely places, think about reaching out to local public libraries, community centers, area transportation routes, and local newspapers.

Host previews for teachers. School teachers love the opportunity to develop a novel teaching unit. This focused activity often generates the greatest interest from school children who arrive having learned in advance about a writer or a subject.

Think about sightlines and obstructions for younger viewers. Because exhibition cases are built for adults, consider how well younger visitors might be able to see materials.

Develop an alternate storyline when preparing for a tour. Think about dif cult, non-age-appropriate sections or themes of the show and decide how to address them. An alternate tour narrative might also focus on only a few key pieces, instead of trying to cover the entire history of a subject.

Keep group sizes manageable. Even the best-planned tour for children can fall apart if there are too many bodies in too small a space. One way to limit group size is to ask about special classes. Often, an honors class or the staff of a school literary journal would be the perfect t for a tour, rather than the entire fth-grade class.

Have something to give to your visitors. The greatest value for the money, when it comes to children and tours, is a small give-away: buttons, yers, postcards, bookmarks. These cost only pennies when ordered in bulk, but they work wonders with kids, who love to have something to take home to show off.

And here are tips on giving tours for groups of children and school groups:

Allow plenty of time/leeway for a tour moving a mass of children on and off a school bus and into a building is not an exact science.

Introduce yourself by name and identify the teachers and minders in the group.

Start not with the exhibition itself, but with an introduction to the library, the building, its mission and function. This is crucial for establishing a context for children. Make connections between what a research library does and what a public library does.

During the introduction, make clear the library s policy on noise. Does everyone need to be silent or can the children speak freely?

Allow for two question periods: after the introduction to the building and after the exhibition tour itself. Holding a question for an entire hour can be dif cult.

During the tour, be prepared for any number of tangential questions: Why is there a thermometer in there? How many pounds of books are in your library? When is a book old ? How old are you? All questions are fair. Sometimes it is suf cient to provide a brief response or to admit that you don t really know the answer.

Have in mind certain interactive moments, such as asking children to locate a speci c item or phrase in a case or having them guess to age of a book. Literature on guiding children through art museums can provide a range of activities that can be adapted to the research library.

Pay attention to the mood and focus of the children. Even if you are at an important

moment that requires a long discussion, if eyes are drooping and feet are shuf ing, pare down your comments and advance to another case. Keep them moving.

If possible, have a nonrare example or facsimile of an item on display that children can hold and touch. This added attraction is very popular and even the shyest child will want to participate.

At the end of the tour, allow some time for questions, then pose a few of them yourself. Ask about an important item or the oldest object they saw. Ask older students to formulate themes about the show.

A tour of a research library s treasures for children, appropriately planned and well-rehearsed, can be a particularly rewarding kind of outreach. How many of us remember our earliest identi cation of things called rare books and manuscripts? Maybe a friendly introduction at a young age can put what we do in understandable context and plant the seeds of possibility for future careers and future support.

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reference questions asked, and an increase in collection use. The WSSU marketing plan demonstrates that it is possible to create a plan that has a tangible and measurable impact.

I am extremely excited and delighted that the O K dream team is being nationally recognized for their work, said Mae L. Rodney, director of library services at the C. G. O Kelly Library. It is a true joy to have such talented and personable individuals on the O Kelly Library staff. We have tried to create an environment where creativity is nurtured and celebrated. This national recognition will encourage other small environments, like Winston-Salem State University, to shoot for the stars.

April 2003 marked the of cial launch of ACRL s Academic and Research Library Campaign, part of ALA s Campaign for America s Libraries, to create awareness and understanding of the value of academic and research libraries and librarians in the 21st century.