

Realia: It's Not Just about Field Trips Anymore

Kyle McKoy

Museums and schools have long shared a mission to educate students. The primary interaction between the two institutions, school tours, has long been established. But this volatile economy has strained the relationship between museums and schools. Many school districts have been forced to limit, or even eliminate, field trips to museums due to transportation, insurance, and admissions costs. Districts struggle with performance rankings and are forced to eliminate museum visits in order to spend more time on classroom instruction. The economy has, likewise, affected museums. Museums have lost staff and have been forced to restrict public hours. Some institutions have closed their doors altogether. It is becoming increasingly difficult for schools to bring students to museums, and so museum educators understand that it's not just about school field trips any more.



Two students enjoy the zoetrope from the Arizona Historical Society's Victorian Toy Trunk.

What is it about museums that makes so many teachers want to include them in their plans year after year? Bottom line: It's "the stuff"—the three-dimensional objects, the primary resources unique to each institution. To see, touch, hear, and smell the objects (whether real or a replica) adds a whole new layer of learning that textbooks simply cannot provide.

Artifacts anchor students in their own learning process, making them active investigators for, instead of passive receivers of, information. Simply watch students interact with objects and see their inquisitive minds take over: What is it made of? Who used this? What is its purpose?

Museums can make certain that "the stuff" still reaches students. Each pack-

age may be labeled differently—traveling trunks, artifact packs, resource kits, object boxes—but whatever they are named, they are comprised of hands-on objects with which students can interact. Some include clothing to try on, instruments with which to play music, or tools that actually work. Some are organized according to theme, like *Victorian Toys*, and others chronologically, such as *Battlefields of the Civil War*. However arranged, the kits are vehicles that keep the museum objects accessible to students.

Artifact kits are not a new idea, but they are becoming increasingly important as a part of museum outreach programs. Whether the kits travel to your classroom accompanied by an interpreter, or are checked out by the teacher to accompany a unit, placing objects in the hands of students is a unique way to keep them engaged in their own learning process.

With the decline in school tours, museum educators have had to re-evaluate their missions. In the past, they simply tried to attract as many people through the doors of the museum. Success was measured by attendance numbers onsite. With vanishing budgets and new directions in technology, museums are switching gears and looking to alternative ways to reach students. It's not just about fieldtrips anymore. Websites and social media are the newest tools but artifact kits remain a mainstay in museum outreach programs. Museum educators are eager to share their resources with teachers and students. Contact your local museum and discover what they have to offer. 🌐

KYLE MCKOY is director of the Education and Outreach Division of the Arizona Historical Society. She can be reached at kmckoy@azhs.gov.