Don’t believe what your eyes are telling you, All they show is limitation...look with your understanding
find out what you already know, and you’ll see the way to fly.

Richard Bach,
Jonathan Livingston Seagull
Large Group Projects and Their Challenges

Every project that Please Touch Museum’s youth program creates begins with a basic Learning Plan. This Learning Plan is a very basic outline that maps out your “givens” and the basic mission of the project.

Our learning plans include:

- A brief description of the project
- The primary questions that students will try to answer.
- What students are going to have to do to complete it. This includes Research Activities, Writing Activities, Use of Technology, Reflection and Self-Evaluation, and any other specific activities the students are planning.
- A section describing the role of program educators. I discuss what it means to be a facilitator and collaborator.
- A section describing the role of the student. What is expected from each of them for the duration of our project.
- How the groups will be organized for the project and how we will monitor independent work.
- When we will work on the project.
- What the products and check points will be for this project.
- What school district standards we will meet.

This Learning Plan becomes the backbone of our project. It is a working document that expands and changes throughout a project as students assess their progress. The Learning Plan and project time-line become essential to our process. The project time-line is another working document created by students and staff together to organize our deadlines, event dates and work plan.
Every large group project that the students undertake at Please Touch Museum stems from a collective interest. The students work hard to isolate a project that they all care about. Although students can work on any type of project available, in our experience at Please Touch Museum, they consistently decide to address a social issue. Our projects largely become Service Learning initiatives. We will walk through one particular youth-driven project to give you a description on the type of projects the students have designed here. Remember that although I am describing projects, the most important part to us was the process. During the Spring and Summer of 2005, after lots of group discussion, preliminary research and personal essays the students decided to address the issue of youth violence in their local community. Our discussion of this issue began with one student's powerful experience in Sierra Leone. ACES student Francis Mans-Khanu talks very candidly about living through the recent civil war in Sierra Leone. Many other students connected with him on this issue because of the violence that they witness in their communities. Francis created this statement to describe the students' purpose in their project and his personal investment in it.

"Violence is a terrible issue that makes us miss our loved ones. It's an issue that makes us feel hopeless and worthless in this fearful world. Violence exists everywhere and we sometimes fall victim to it. This issue is making our friends and family members disabled, crippled, blind and at worst dead, so advocating to stop violence is very important for every human being.

Every day thousands of people are killed around the world because of violence. People are migrating from one place to another because their towns, cities, or countries are no longer safe for them to stay or live in. For instance, I once lived in a war zone in Sierra Leone. During the civil war there I learned how terrible and dangerous violence can get. Personally, I saw rebels killing, amputating hands and burning innocent civilians.

Violence can destroy one's life! We need to make positive changes in our communities and schools by not in any way supporting violence. The ACES are totally against violence. We know and realize that it is a terrible thing and it destroys our communities and lives. We want everybody to feel safe and protected around the world."

Francis Mans Khanu
Now that we had a premise, "students working to fight youth violence," we needed to figure out how to act on such a huge, intimidating topic. Together we researched rates of violence in Philadelphia and examined the media's portrayal of the students' neighborhoods. We discussed whether it was possible to make change in the community and whether it was worth attempting to fight something so much bigger than them.

This became a huge piece of our work, one that we all came back to over and over again throughout our work. It was hard for all of us to imagine that something that we could do might make a difference to someone. After many meetings, lots of investigation and some family interviews, the students decided that they wanted to make change by working to prevent violence. They felt that the best way to stay away from violence was to engage in other activities. The students wanted to help children and other teens find things to get involved in and to provide alternative activities for that day. Activities that would allow youth to speak out and that would educate younger children about the importance of avoiding violence.

As a part of our work to fight youth violence, the students attempted to get funding for their project by writing a grant, they created their own "Safe Night" event and organized a non-violent basketball tournament for seven to eleven year olds called, "Play 4 Peace."

The students decided that they wanted to support projects within Philadelphia that were already happening to help prevent youth violence. They learned about a school district-wide initiative called "Safe Night." "Safe Night" was a collaborative event involving more than 300 organizations across the city. All of these organizations open their doors to students for one night. This seemed like a perfect opportunity for the students to join a project which already had the city behind it. At Please Touch Museum we designed a large emcee battle and non-violent rap contest for teens. The students wanted high school students to find a place to speak out against that feeling of powerlessness that we were all feeling in the face of such a large issue. For "Safe Night" the students attended city-wide planning meetings and conferences, they worked to advertise

the program, ordered food, got in-kind support from area businesses and organized museum security. The students created a "statement of solidarity" that all of the participants could sign to show that they were against youth violence and wanted to see change in their neighborhood. The students invited the school district superintendent and were excited when he actually attended. Each student who attended the event also received a CD that the students created. It was a mix of popular songs that the students picked because they spoke out against youth violence. Students worked to choose the mix of music and oversaw the creation of the CDs.

Left to right: Jesus Lopez, David Tran, Antonio Owens, Tiara Hudson, Dion Robinson, and Brandon Jones sort and count pennies as a part of the Penny Harvest project. Students attempted to collect and display one million pennies.

The students had a wonderful event at the museum. It was well supported by staff and the students who attended had a great time. However, as with all projects there were many roadblocks that we had to work together to overcome. The students wrote a wonderful grant proposal for support for both the "Safe Night" initiative and the "Play 4 Peace" tournament. Unfortunately, the grantor did not fund our project because it
and invented fun ways to encourage children to stay away from violence. We had perfect weather, lots of watermelon, Philly soft pretzels and some very excited kids.

Throughout our projects, staff and students constantly need to re-evaluate, re-assess, re-group and start over. Unexpected things always happen within youth programs. Staff must create an atmosphere of trust. We must foster the idea that we can work through around and over obstacles. This atmosphere of perseverance, the idea that:

“Problems are only opportunities with thorns on them.”

Hugh Miller

is central to Please Touch Museum’s program philosophy.

was a part of a larger school district collaboration. After that disappointment the students had to go back to the drawing board to re-work the budget. We had to do both projects on much less money than we had originally hoped for. This process became a terrific opportunity to see how things often work within the world of a non-profit. Sometimes you need to figure out how to continue your project on less money than you expected. Another problem with “Safe Night,” was trying to get the word out about it. Students struggled to get advertisements out on time, and to recruit friends and family. As a result of our late promotion, and a very rainy night, we had low attendance. Again, this was an opportunity for us to reflect, re-group and try again. We improved many of these problems with our “Play-4-Peace” project later that summer.

Later in the summer, using the lessons learned from “Safe Night,” the students organized a basketball tournament near one of their high schools. “Play 4 Peace” was a non-violent day of basketball and games for seven to eleven year olds in the community. The students contacted a playground for our event, advertised in the community, ordered and collected the food,
At Please Touch Museum, our most exciting trip is our five-day overnight adventure trip. This trip is based on the MTV show, "Road Rules." This trip is planned entirely by staff and consists of a series of missions/challenges that the students must fulfill as we move from place to place. Each year, Road Rules is based around a particular theme, usually a social issue. Students receive missions throughout the day and must work together with teammates to complete various challenges. The Please Touch Museum Road Rules project has taken students many places including Chicago, IL; Providence, RI; Plimoth Plantation, MA; Gettysburg, PA; New York, NY; Baltimore, MD and Washington D.C. Our Road Rules missions have included activities such as horse back riding, hiking, high ropes courses, sleeping overnight in a Russian submarine, touring a “haunted” pizza shop and building a moving, sculptural self-portrait.

The destination is not the most important part of Road Rules, it is the journey. Road Rules is successful when the missions are well designed and stretch students outside of their comfort zone. For example, on each trip we have the students navigate. They are in charge of finding their way from one town to the next. Students are asked to get maps to our destination and to pay attention to the roads so that we can find our way. This is a place where chaperones need to take a leap of faith. Students must navigate and tell the adult driver where to turn. So, if we are supposed to make a left turn, but the student navigator isn’t paying attention—the adults must go straight. The students are in charge of getting us to the correct destination. This responsibility must be real for the students. If the students think that the adults are going to turn left
without them, there is no reason to pay attention to our route, or to seriously follow the directions. This has been a fun and exciting mission for the students in the past. They have all improved their map reading and orienting skills after a few wrong turns.

Another helpful hint for putting together your own adventure trip is to create a variety of different missions. At Please Touch Museum, our missions include physical challenges, challenges at other cultural institutions, survival missions (like grocery shopping for the group and some fun surprises).

If you are going to take your students to a cultural institution or art museum, find a way to help students access the material. Here is an example of one of my favorite Road Rules missions that got kids thinking about art and painting in a whole new way! First students were asked to enter the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, with their groups. Students were instructed to find and memorize one painting that they thought “represented the continuing struggle for the preservation of human rights.” (That year our Road Rules theme was human rights.) The students could memorize it any way they wanted, they could sketch it, talk about it, or just look at it. They also needed to be able to explain why they felt that the painting supported human rights. The next step in our Road Rules mission was for all the students to meet me at a predetermined location in Central Park. When they found me, I was surrounded by blank canvasses. The students were asked to re-create the painting that they had memorized with paint, brushes, and a canvas. This was an exciting mission. All of the students worked as a team to create creative and colorful paintings, similar to the originals. Then, we had to carry the paintings with us throughout the day. Imagine, all of us in the New York Subway, carrying large canvasses! As we were walking through the subway, a New Yorker stopped one of the students and asked the student if it was a painting of “The Last Moments of John Brown.” Shocked that their painting had been recognized the student said yes, and described our project. This teachable moment, the opportunity to discuss human rights with a local New York resident in the middle of the subway, was absolutely amazing and unforgettable.

Road Rules is an opportunity for students to engage new places, issues, and people in new ways. It is a time for students to challenge themselves emotionally, physically, and academically. At Please Touch Museum, Road Rules can become a transformative learning experience for our students.

While working at Please Touch Museum I have learned how to interact with children in a different environment. I have also been able to accomplish things I never did before. I got to meet many people and see how they feel about working in a different environment, because Please Touch Museum is a different type of organization. In this program I learned how to face my fears head on. For example in the summer there was a time when I went on a ropes course where I had to jump off of something high. When I reached the top of the course I froze, but there were staff members and ACES students there to cheer me on. I felt like I could do anything I put my mind to.

Besides getting to meet new people and getting the job done right, this program helps you out in school and on the streets. While working in ACES I have learned how to fill out applications and I learned that things aren’t as easy or as hard as they seem. I’ve found that there are twists and turns everywhere you go, you just have to work your way around them and be prepared to take on whatever is next.

Tydell Edwards