

Inquiry on Tours

Inquiry Method

Inquiry-based learning is more than asking a student what he or she wants to know. It's about triggering curiosity. And activating a student's curiosity is, I would argue, a far more important and complex goal than mere information delivery.¹

Inquiry teaching, or instruction through questions, encourages museum visitors to really look at and engage with artworks. Questions invite visitors to discover more about artworks, analyze artists' intentions, examine their own responses and attitudes, and share with others. Questions spark curiosity and engagement. It is not enough to simply hear information; people remember best when they have helped to construct the meaning.

Being able to answer questions and talk about art empowers both children and adults. As a guide, you play the role of facilitator, and facilitation is a dynamic process. By asking questions and leading discussions on your tours, you involve visitors in the learning process. By encouraging visitors to generate their own ideas and construct meaning on their own, you help them develop skills they can use to become independent learners in the museum.

There are other good reasons to use inquiry on your tours. If you begin your tour with thoughtful open-ended questions, you learn a lot about your group — attitudinally, intellectually, visually and verbally. The use of inquiry creates an atmosphere of trust because it demonstrates that you are genuinely interested in what the group thinks.

Open-ended Questions

Open-ended questions accommodate the divergent perspectives of your tour group. To encourage learners to make observations or to generate ideas, open-ended questions must have several appropriate answers, such as “How would you describe this person?” If you ask a question that has a brief and predictable answer, the question is close-ended, such as “Who is this person?” Closed-ended questions often ask visitors to recall factual information; they do not stimulate reflective thinking. Open-ended questions encourage multiple answers, involving more of your group, and lead to greater engagement during the tour.

Paraphrasing

An important part of inquiry-based learning is actively demonstrating you heard and understood responses to questions. Paraphrase responses you receive. Paraphrasing allows all in the group to hear the response and is a dynamic expression of your engagement with the group. It also lets you make connections between observations from the visitors.

¹ Heather Wolpert-Gawron, *What the Heck Is Inquiry-Based Learning? Teachers use inquiry-based learning to boost student engagement*, Edutopia, August 11, 2016. (<https://www.edutopia.org/blog/what-heck-inquiry-based-learning-heather-wolpert-gawron>)

For example, “So you feel that the man is sad, too, but you believe that he is sad because of the dark colors the artist used.”

Nonverbal Responses to Inquiry

At the start and through the tour, work in some simple questions that allow for quick nonverbal responses, especially if a group is hesitant or shy in answering questions. For example, ask visitors to make a shape with their hands that they see in an artwork or ask an opinion question that can be answered through raising hands. Nonverbal participation offers a way for all to contribute on a tour and can be used to lead to open-ended questions.

Scaffolding Questions

Inquiry will be most successful if you scaffold your questions. Begin with basic observation (description) questions or exercises that encourage visitors to look closely (e.g., “Describe what you see.” or “What’s going on in this picture?”). Take multiple answers, then follow up responses with a question that asks them to back up their responses with evidence from the artwork itself (e.g., “What about his expression makes you say he is sad?” or “What do you see that makes you say that?”). This can often be further followed up with a question that asks them to think about their explanations (e.g., “Why might the artist have painted it this way?”). By scaffolding questions, you encourage tour participants to look, explain, and generate ideas.

Balance Information and Inquiry

Ultimately, it is up to each guide to determine the balance between information and inquiry on a tour. A well-balanced tour offers information that supports visitors’ comments and encourages further observations and questions—the visitors’ observations should inform the facts given during the tour.

Most often, information is best given after visitors have been allowed time to observe and discuss the work of art. You will be surprised at how much visitors will be able to tell *you* about objects and cultures by what they observe. They are more likely to remember what they learn if they have invested their own time, energy, and thoughts in the discussion. However, if an object is open to cultural misinterpretation, introduce some relevant information at the beginning of the discussion. For example, to avoid misinterpretation you might begin a discussion of the Congolese Power Figure with, “This nail figure is valued for the good power it brings to the community. What about this figure looks powerful to you?”

By balancing inquiry and information based on the group’s interest and observations, you continually challenge deeper looking and meaning.

Types of Open-Ended Questions

An inquiry strategy outlined in *The Great Books Foundation* training manual has been adapted for discussing works of art using three basic categories of questions: description, interpretation, and association.

The following is a summary of the question types and some examples of each.

1. Description Questions

Descriptive questions can be answered by looking at the work of art. They often involve the subject matter or the visual elements, such as color, line, or shape.

These questions and appropriate follow-up questions encourage tour participants to make observations and support their observations with visual evidence. Some descriptive questions encourage viewers to describe the subject or action of an artwork, while others ask the viewers to analyze or describe how the elements are organized within the artwork.

Examples

- What's going on in this picture/sculpture? What do you see that makes you say that? (from *Visual Thinking Strategies*)
- How would you describe the figures in this work? What kinds of animals do you see?
- If you could touch this sculpture, how might it feel? What about the texture makes you say that?
- What do you think the climate/weather is like in this scene? What in the picture makes you think so?

2. Interpretation Questions

Interpretive questions help tour participants explore the meanings of works of art. They require viewers to offer opinions that can be upheld by observable evidence. These questions offer the possibility for divergent opinions and you should remain open to all responses.

Examples

- How do you think the artist felt about this woman? What do you see that makes you say that? Why do you think the artist chose to place her in the back of this scene?
- Why do you think the artist left so many open spaces in the sculpture? Why might the artist have chosen wood instead of stone or metal?
- How do you think the artist feels about her home, New York City, by this painting? What do you see that makes you say noisy and fast? Consider the colors she has used to depict the city; what do they say about how she felt?

3. Association Questions

Associative questions ask viewers to consider to what extent an artist's viewpoint or a work of art has application to their own opinions, lives, and/or times. Associative questions can be fun and provocative and help people relate artworks to everyday life. However, avoid overusing this type of question since they can get group members (especially young visitors) far away from the artwork itself. Typically, you ask these after the artwork has been thoroughly explored and various interpretations have been

discussed. However, sometimes an associative question at the start of discussion can help spark a discussion (e.g., “What about this Chinese Reception Hall is similar to your living room at home? What is different?”).

Examples

- If you could take this sculpture home with you, where would you display it? Why?
- What do you like most about this painting? Least? Why?
- If you lived in this house, what kinds of activities would you do in this room?
- What kind of animal would you choose to represent you?

Comparison and contrast

And last but not least, consider incorporating opportunities for your group to compare and contrast during the tour, either with objects on the tour (e.g., “How does the color here compare to the last painting we saw?”) or with objects close by the selected object (e.g., “What are some similarities in all these ceramic figures? What are some differences?”). This type of question allows visitors to make some connections that could illuminate information you may then share about the artist or culture.

Tips for Successful Inquiry on Tours

1. Ask open-ended questions that encourage multiple responses.
2. Ask follow-up questions that encourage even closer looking and invite individuals to support their observations with evidence.
3. Ask questions that are appropriate for the group (consider age, experience with looking at art, language skills, cultural background, etc.).
4. Avoid run-on questions.
5. Avoid asking “yes or no” questions. These types of questions stop a discussion as soon as the responses are given.
6. Avoid asking questions that begin with “Can you. . .” or “Who can. . .”
These types of questions automatically set participants up to fail if they “can not”.
7. Embrace moments of silence. Allow people time to observe, process and respond.
8. Listen to responses and treat all serious responses as equal even if you think some are not the “right” answers.
9. Paraphrase when appropriate.
10. Be flexible enough to let participants’ responses determine how the discussion of an artwork will unfold.