Questioning Strategies

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Asking Questions

Ask interesting, thought-provoking questions and you know what happens? People try to answer them! Whether they respond orally, or simply contemplate in reflective silence, visitors will actively participate when asked appropriate questions.

No matter whether you teach with art, history, or science collections, you can encourage active thinking and participatory learning by asking questions. Let the objects or specimens in your collection serve as the focus of your tours, but employ questions as catalysts, provoking investigation and reflection by requesting participants to consider and do something.

Not all questions will engage reflective thinking and active learning, however. In fact, some can do quite the opposite. Closed-ended questions, which test a person’s recall of factual information or challenge their perceptual abilities, are counterproductive. These questions, while useful when testing material previously learned in a classroom situation, may impede participation by visitors who are examining an unfamiliar object or site.

Closed-ended questions test a person’s recall of specific information. Questions such as “Do you know which year the settlers first arrived at Jamestown?” or “How many trees do you see in this landscape?” request specific and correct responses.

Such questions restrict participation to those who know the answers, and lead to judgments of accuracy rather than to involvement and discussion.

Open-ended questions, on the other hand, are questions that do not have presupposed or predetermined answers. They embrace a wide variety of responses, and call upon our individual perceptions, thoughts, and creativity to formulate a range of possibilities. They invite everyone to offer their ideas and join in the discussion.

For instance, the question “What is the distance in miles between Jacksonville, Florida, and Los Angeles, California, if driving on Interstate 10?” is closed-ended. It is not subject to interpretation. There is a specific, correct answer. However, the question “How many different ways might you measure the distance between Jacksonville, Florida, and Los Angeles, California?” is open-ended. This question has many possible responses, including:
- by miles or kilometers;
- by the time it takes to drive at different speeds;
- by the calories it burns to walk;
- by the time it takes to fly on different types of aircraft;
- by fuel consumption using different modes of transportation;
- by the geo-political units (states or counties) you would pass through;
- by time zones;
- by how far away the cities “feel” when a loved one is in the other location; and so on.

**How do open-ended questions work?**

Just as there are two types of questions — closed-ended and open-ended — there are two types of thinking — convergent and divergent. Closed-ended questions request convergent thinking, challenging the mind to narrow its focus to a specific answer, or specific set of correct answers. Open-ended questions call for the production of ideas, thoughts, and imaginings. They invite the mind to think divergently, acting as a pry to open thinking up in order to generate new, different, or more possibilities. Open-ended questions call for the “creation” of possibilities. Creating possibilities within a particular discipline is what artists do when they make choices about how to convey ideas, what historians do when trying to reconstruct the past, and what scientists do when beginning to formulate hypotheses. In other words, open-ended questions prompt the many, varied, unique, and detailed ways of thinking one needs to produce in order to fully understand and appreciate art, history, or science.

Questions or tasks designed to provoke a greater quantity of responses often incorporate phrases like, “How many … can you think of?” or “Develop a list of as many … as you possibly can.” Such interrogatives request fluent thinking.

Questions or tasks that serve to provoke a greater variety of responses often begin with phrases such as, “How else might you consider …?” or “What other kind of answer can you think of …?” These interrogatives invite flexible thinking.

Questions or tasks that provoke highly personalized responses should specifically request this form of thinking from participants. Phrases such as, “What would you do …?” or “Come up with your very own …” can prompt original thinking by challenging participants to develop individualized ideas.

Questions or tasks that provoke highly detailed responses might begin with such phrases as “Tell us more about …” or “What else do you know about …?” Such interrogatives extract detailed or additional information from participants through elaborative thinking.
What kinds of responses are offered to open-ended questions?

"Ask an open-ended question, get a multitude of responses." Because they are designed to encourage the production of options more than solutions, open-ended questions will elicit responses ranging from the predictable to the hardly credible. Some will seem clever; others may seem "off-the-wall." Keep in mind, however, that the reason for asking these questions is to have visitors spend time examining your collection and reflecting upon its significance, and NOT to have them retrieve correct answers to questions about things they are not well acquainted with.

Remember that the responses you receive will reflect differences in individual points-of-view. Each participant will see, think about, and decide different things when inspecting museum objects because each person will selectively focus and respond in their own, personalized way.

How should a docent react to the range of responses received?

Active thinking can be encouraged or discouraged simply by the manner in which the group leader reacts. Participation and the communication of ideas are based on trust that one's thoughts will be valued and that one's attempts will be positively recognized. If anyone has an inclination that his or her thoughts are not respected, that person may quit participating, withdraw, and even shut down thought altogether.

Your responsibility when leading tours and activities is to facilitate and encourage reflection and active participation, NOT to sit in judgment. Be open to new, wild, humorous, or idiosyncratic thoughts. If you, or others in the group, are puzzled by a response, request elaboration. Without seeming to challenge the respondent, ask for more information or to understand how the person decided upon a particular idea. Then, accept the reasoning offered and move on. Sometimes, participants will offer answers that they, themselves, will choose to re-evaluate after more ideas are put forth or with additional time for reflection. That's fine. After all, we learn by trial and error.

As the facilitator, you should encourage idea production and not focus on idea evaluation. The purpose of your questions is to slow visitors down, encourage their investigation, and to provoke their thoughtful consideration. Remember that you are teaching people how to think about art, history, or science objects or specimens. That responsibility is challenging enough without taking on the further burden of testing their knowledge base.

Though it is difficult, avoid excessive use of positive feedback to reward or encourage responses that you like. Visitors will quickly learn the difference between being told, "good answer" and being told "okay." The lack of a positive reaction is the equivalent of a negative reaction to most people. Remain consistent in both the type and the tone of your reactions.

Remember that everyone seeks validation from a group leader. Try to avoid having participants work for your approval, rather than for the internal satisfaction of thinking and investigating your intriguing collection. Offer such non-judgmental statements as "thank you" when acknowledging responses from participants.

And, finally, remember to be patient. Do not expect responses to your open-ended questions immediately after asking them. Give participants time to think, reflect, and reconsider something they may have never seen before, or thought about in that particular way.

Alan Gartenhaus
Publishing Editor
Questions that Go Beyond the Facts

Every beginning reporter knows that asking the "5 W's and an H" is the way to gather the facts. Who, what, where, when, why, and how are basic. With careful embellishment, however, docents can adapt these questions to go beyond mere facts, encouraging their audiences to observe, analyze, and evaluate.

"Who painted this picture?" "Who used this tool?" These questions are designed to elicit a factual response: "Picasso." "A shoemaker." In most tours of museums, gardens, zoos, science centers, and historic sites, such dead-end questions allow someone in the group (usually the docent) to show off his or her knowledge or force at least some of the group to admit (if only to themselves) that they don't know the answer. Even phrasing the question so that it appears to ask for a variety of answers, ("Who do you think used this tool?") is merely a poorly-disguised quest for facts. Another way to use the Who question allows visitors to examine the painting, artifact, or zoo specimen to arrive at more useful answers.

"If I gave you this painting to take home, who in your family would like it best?" This more imaginative Who question opens opportunities for visitors to think about the painting on a different, non-factual level. Answers to this question might lead to a discussion of gender and/or age preferences, to ideas of monetary or aesthetic value, or considerations of an artist's intended audience. As part of the discussion, a docent could "slip in" facts about the artist and the art, if she thought they were pertinent. The visitors, on the other hand, are freed from the demands of facts — they can imagine, explore, opine without a glimmer of pressure to "know the answer."

"What period in history does this furniture represent?" Docents who work in a historic house might be tempted to ask their visitors a what question such as this to determine how much the group already knows. Perhaps some of the visitors will venture a guess, but most wouldn't know the specific, factual answer the docents wants. "Although this house was built in the 1850's, the furniture is a local product created during the Reconstruction Period to encourage the use of local woods." Who knew?

A more creative what question would allow the docent to share local lore while freeing all her audience to participate. "If you were a pioneer farmer who'd finally made it financially, what would you do to your home to show your neighbors how well off you were?" Architecture, decorative arts, furniture design, even those pudding drapes, could enter the discussion as visitors explore their ideas of "making it," and the docent might add information specific to the era of the historic site being toured. Few facts are necessary, unless the docent has some to share, and visitors are encouraged to bring their own experiences to an imaginary situation.

"When does a baby elephant or chimpanzee reach maturity?" I've never actually heard a zoo docent ask this question, but I've had several tell me an animal's gestation period, as well as the length of time the animal is cared for by its mother. If the docent wants me to think about the comparative time that humans and animals care for their young, which usually is the point of such facts, a more interesting when question might be a lot more fun.

Bringing the question into the visitors' own experience is relatively simple. "When did you think your kids were ready to leave home? Or, if you're working with students, "When will you be ready to leave home and live on your own?" Such a question is certain to generate some laughter and, maybe, a little controversy — an excellent lead-in to a discussion of human versus animal "child care." Facts about the specific animal being viewed can easily be inserted in such a discussion without pressuring visitors to produce the "correct" answer.

"Where do these small plants seem to grow best, in the sun or the shade?" a docent in a botanical garden or nature might ask. It's not a hard question to answer; they are clearly doing well in the deep shade of the oak trees. It's a question designed to let the visitor observe and draw a conclusion. It's also the kind of question teenagers call a "no-brainer."

A different kind of where question encourages visitors to use their brains in a more creative manner. "As you can see, these plants seem to grow best in the shade. If you didn't have to take such things as sun and shade into consideration, where in your yard would you put all the different plants you see here?" Answers to this question, based on each individual visitor's vision of his or her own space, could allow the docent and visitors to explore other landscaping considerations — size, color, shape, and function of plants as well as their sun/shade requirements.

"Why did you spill your milk?"

"Why haven't you done your homework?"

Young visitors have had lots of experience with why questions, and not all of their experiences have been positive! For this reason, why
questions can be fraught with danger. If they are used in a museum setting to force the visitor to justify an answer or explain a choice, they can elicit the same defensiveness — even in adults — as "why were you late this morning?" On the other hand, asking a question that tries to explain why someone used a particular pigment or started a collection of butterflies is simply another thinly-disguised search for facts. And, unless the artist or artisan in question left a journal, explanations of why are often highly speculative.

However, why questions that allow the visitor to suspend disbelief, to step into another situation or another person's life, can be real eye-openers. "Let's pretend for a few minutes that you have lived in another country all your life," a docent at a reconstructed historic community might begin. "Why would you ever want to leave home and move to an entirely different country?" By asking her audience to place themselves into an imaginary scenario, the docent enables them to become more personally involved with the real people who once lived in the community. As they discuss reasons they might have for moving, the docent can guide them to explore the "whys" of the community's historic inhabitants.

A how question asked in a museum exhibit hall can be closed ("How does the blood flow from the heart through the body?") or open-ended ("How could you explain the life cycle of a butterfly to a child younger than you?"). However, how questions are also perfect vehicles for hands-on experiences as they encourage visitors to solve problems.

"The exhibits in our history museum are arranged chronologically. How might you rearrange them if you were the curator? Use shoe boxes and cut-outs of the artifacts to show how you would redesign the museum's collection. Remember that the galleries usually have some sort of title in the museum brochure, so also think of a title to go with each of your new galleries."

"We're not very pleased with this exhibit about the nervous system. I know you've been studying the body's systems at school. If you were trying to explain the nervous system to a visitor to our science museum, how would you do it? When you and your partner have decided how you would solve this problem, use this poster board to draw a picture of your new exhibit."

"We've been talking today about ways that an artist uses color to emphasize certain parts of his canvas. How would you use color to make me look at a particular part of your painting first? Remember, you can only use color to make one part of your painting seem more important than others. No fair drawing a big arrow! After you've finished your painting, I'm going to try and guess which part you wanted me to look at first."

We all work in fact-filled environments, and part of our job as docents is to convey important facts about the collections with which we work. However, allowing our visitors to go beyond the facts gives them ownership of the museum experience. When a docent's "5 W's and an H" are phrased to encourage imagination and creativity, a visitor can relax and participate, knowing he's not expected to produce "just the facts, ma'am."

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Jackie Littleton
Associate Editor

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A Framework for Organizing

You have researched your newest exhibition for months, amassing extensive material on each work of art. The opening is quickly approaching and you, as a docent or gallery teacher, need to be prepared to tour the exhibition. This tour will not be a lecture in which you regurgitate the volumes of information you have acquired to a passive audience. Instead, it will focus on the exchange of information, the give-and-take of questioning and answering, the discoveries made through discussion. How do you translate hundreds of pages of information into a succinct, sixty-minute, interactive tour? This is a question we all have faced.

This article suggests one solution to this problem by summarizing a tool called the Tour Framework Worksheet. You can use this Worksheet to organize an enormous amount of information into a flexible, theme-based tour that identifies the artwork in the exhibition, supplies important points about these works, and connects these main points back to the overall theme of the tour, while promoting questioning and leaving room for transitions between artworks. This tool functions in a very simple, straightforward way, and like any other effective tool, it is a flexible one that is open to modification according to your particular institution, collections, or exhibitions.

The Tour Framework Worksheet consists of eleven pages that can assist you in organizing your tour. On the cover sheet, the first directions indicate a space to write the theme of the tour and then list ten works of art that articulate this theme.

Following the theme sheet is a page titled "Artwork 1," which is divided into five sections. The first section asks for the artist, title, medium, and date of the work. The second section focuses on the main points to relay about this artwork or have your audience self-discover during conversation around the object. In the third section, attention shifts to how these main points relate back to the overall theme, listed on the cover sheet. The fourth section designates space to list important questions to ask about this work of art. Finally, the fifth section provides an opportunity to detail the transition from this artwork to the next included in the tour. This segment works as a vehicle to move you the next page, titled "Artwork 2" which is identical to the former page. There is one of these pages for each of the ten works of art included in the tour. Taking the time to fill in the worksheet from what you have learned through research and training ensures a theme-based tour that identifies the artwork, articulates the important pieces of information about the works, connects these ideas back to the theme, and builds in questioning techniques and transition from one artwork to the next. By using this tool, you establish the basic information and format of your tour before you even step into the galleries to start touring.

The Theme: The Root of All Inquiries

Once you have decided on a theme for your tour, it is important to summarize the theme in a few succinct sentences. Recording the theme as the first piece of information on the worksheet keeps it at the forefront of the tour from which all else proceeds. Also, having a specific place to write the theme of the tour requires a well thought-out and developed focus.

As an example, let us use the UCLA Armand Hammer Museum of Art and Cultural Center's permanent collection, which consists mainly of paintings by European artists spanning the sixteenth century to the early twentieth century. We will use the theme of how lighting and color affect mood in an artwork. After determining the theme, you can select a number of works to communicate this idea by listing the artist and title of those objects under the theme. Whether you support the concept of touring eight to ten works of art in an hour-long tour or only cover three in that same time, this practice requires narrowing down all the work in the exhibition to a few representative objects by taking into account how strongly each artwork supports the theme, probably one of the most difficult components of the worksheets.

Once you have decided on the artwork you will discuss, you can establish the order in which you will examine these objects, considering placement of the works of art and movement through the galleries. By laying out the ten works of art on the tour, you can see if the selection of artworks lends itself to smooth transitions and an even representation of the exhibition or collection. For example, if all the chosen works are by male artists and half of the works in the exhibition are by women artists, listing the artworks makes it clear that it might be appropriate to include a more balanced portrayal in order to depict the exhibition in a
Theme-Based, Inquiry Tours

more thorough and accurate manner. With the theme sheet completed, you can move on to the bulk of the worksheet, which focuses on the identified artworks you will explore on the tour.

The Basics: One Artwork at a Time

The first part of the individual "Artwork" sheets asks for the "vitals" of the object: artist, title, medium, and date. In examining the UCLA Hammer Museum's collection, we will discuss Rembrandt van Rijn's Juno, an oil painting from 1662-1665. The second section requests the "main points" to relay about the artwork, followed by a few numbered lines. One important piece of information about the work is recorded on each line (three or four in total). For Rembrandt's Juno, the information on the first line clarifies who Juno is (the goddess of such things as marriage, the state, and wealth). The second line explains how your audience can identify Juno by examining the "attributes" that are portrayed and how to read them in this painting. On the third line, the story behind the artwork is expressed; it was commissioned by a rich banker, which is connect to the subject matter of Juno as the goddess of wealth. On the fourth line, an introduction and definition of Rembrandt's use of "chiaroscuro" (the use of light and dark areas to create and imply contour and form) is described through observing the limited palette and sharp contrasts between light and shadow.

Establishing these main points entails narrowing down an enormous amount of information to a few significant pieces of knowledge that will be at the core of the inquiry around this artwork. By breaking the object down into a small number of comprehensive facts, the essentials of the artwork become easy to remember for both the docent and the public. With this approach, even in a conversation that digresses, the main points remain at the forefront of the questioning strategies.

The third section asks for this artwork's connection to the overall basis of the tour — how do those main points about this specific artwork tie into the tour's theme? For Juno, the issue of Rembrandt's dark palette and use of chiaroscuro directly refer to the theme's investigation of light and color. By focusing on this link, you can better create a solid, cohesive tour that flows from the theme and applies to each work.

This section guides you toward making a logical, conscious correlation among all the objects you explore and their relevance to each other as well as the overarching theme.

Continued on page 8.
Creating Questions and Moving On

At this point, you have laid out all the basic information about the artwork that you want to include on the tour. Now, you can move to the fourth section by considering important questions to ask about this piece. The questions here are not general questions that could be included in a discussion around any work of art, but are inquiries specific to this one object. In reviewing the most pertinent points of information listed above, you can create questions around those ideas to assist the group in reaching these bits of knowledge or to push the group beyond these basic pieces of information. For instance, when looking at Juno, certain questions might assist your audience in discovering the technique of chiaroscuro. "Where on the canvas is your eye drawn? How does Rembrandt draw your attention to these areas?" Laying out a few specific questions in advance helps you plan how to approach each artwork and draw information out of your audience.

Section five of the worksheet asks for a transition idea or statement to move the group from this artwork to the next work on the tour. Transitions can be quite simple; they certainly do not have to be deep, profound connections. For moving from Rembrandt’s Juno to Jean-Antoine Watteau’s Festivities in Honor of Pan, 1710-1711, the next painting on our tour in the museum’s collection, we can examine the comparison between the two artists’ use of light and shadow or the contrast of Watteau’s more colorful palette versus Rembrandt’s darker color scheme. These simple links help your audience change mindsets from one object to the next, while creating a smooth, cohesive movement through the galleries, tying the whole tour together.

Conclusion

In summary, the Tour Framework Worksheet is a simple tool that you can use to organize your thoughts and information into a well-thought-out, unified tour. By starting with the theme of the tour, moving through the specific works to be included on the tour, and then focusing on each of these objects individually, you can clearly establish all the information and questioning strategies to incorporate on an interactive tour.

There are many applications for the Worksheet beyond art museum galleries. It can be used in a variety of other institutions — historic houses, science museums, and even zoos and gardens. The format of the Worksheet itself is also extremely flexible. It would be easy to expand or add sections to the existing form. Overall, the Tour Framework Worksheet can serve as a rubric to create a succinct, stimulating, interactive tour with the theme at the center, moving you from a sea of books and information to a well thought-through journey.

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It Works for Me ...

Sharing successful techniques, thoughts, and ideas.

I read the article “Pedagogical Techniques for Being a More Effective Teacher,” which appeared in the previous issue of *The Docent Educator*, (Autumn 1999) the night before I had my first fall children’s tour with third and fourth graders. The teachers wanted a highlights tour of the museum so I had assumed it would be the easiest type of tour and that I'd cover my favorite subjects — in other words, “no sweat.” But, after reading your excellent article, I realized that I was taking my first assignment too lackadaisically and that the kids deserved better.

While you didn't reveal new techniques for me, you reminded me of all the great ideas of teaching that I carelessly let fade to the obscure periphery as I settled into a routine job. Thanks for the jolt! You reminded me of the affection I hold for the subject matter and my job. You also reminded me to communication wonder, while delighting in and showing respect for our visitors.

I planned the lesson as if it were my first time and expended the perspiration this first tour demanded. Since these young visitors were probably coming to a museum for the first time, I chose as my objective “to provide tools to make their art museum visit fun and exciting.” I would divide the tour into three groups of five each and allot the tools for each. One group would have colored construction paper to match with the colors in the objects. Where colors didn’t match, we would open a conversation about the emotional response to color. The second group would be given a pencil and folded index paper (stiff enough to draw on) to find and draw shapes they saw in the works. The third group would bring their own tools: their senses. These youngsters would tell me their five senses, and then how they could imagine using them at each object.

Even the five adult escorts and the teacher would get into the act. I would have the taller of them find and read things too high for the rest of us. At other times they would find things (when I requested them to do so) that the kids couldn't distinguish.

I went down to Birmingham Museum of Art an hour before the tour to be sure all of my museum objects were on display and changed a few choices for balance. I wanted contrasts between contemporary and classical painting and sculpture. I changed more en route because of time restraints and because the children wanted to include one object they found.

Well, I had a great problem. There was so much excitement that it was difficult at times to control the chaos, but the adults were a great help — they didn't interfere but kept the noise level under a roar. Thank heavens there were no nearby tours.

Then, I evaluated. The results of my evaluation were:
1. Next time, I will have the entire tour group work with the same tools at the same time.
2. Fifteen kids and five or six adults in a tour is too large a group to have the amount of participation that I like. Ten kids is better.
3. I accomplished my objective: To provide tools to make each art museum visit fun and exciting. I knew I had achieved the objective because in this tour the students demonstrated their fun and excitement. By “tools” in the objective, I'm not speaking of pencils and paper, but the sharpened senses — to see how colors and shapes are used in the works and how the senses can be activated. I realize learning requires reinforcement and I hope the teacher provides it. To that end, I sent a follow-up note to the teacher.

Thanks for reminding me of a better way to have one of my very best tours.

*Bud Johnson*, docent
Birmingham Museum of Art
Birmingham, Alabama
Helping Visitors Ask Better Questions

As part of the weekly comedy television show Whose Line is it Anyway? comedians are given a variety of improvisational challenges designed to entertain. In one game, the comedians must carry on a conversation using only questions. While at first the “Question Game” sounds relatively easy, after five or six exchanges even these experienced performers struggle to keep going, finding it difficult to come up with yet another question.

A thirty-minute comedy television program may seem worlds away from the education that takes place at your institution, yet it can offer docents a few practical strategies. The “Question Game” gets us thinking about questions for their own sake — not questions in search of answers. Asking good questions is becoming an increasingly valuable skill. I believe that docents can do a great service for visitors if, in addition to asking a few questions, docents encourage visitors to strengthen their own questioning skills.

What strategies can you develop to assist your visitors in asking better questions? You can use some of the same ideas put forth in the television game, namely, encouraging your students to: (1) rise to the challenge, (2) improvise, and (3) stretch for “yet another” question.

The first strategy, rising to the challenge, suggests that it can be difficult to engage in extended questioning. This is part of why the “Questioning Game” on Whose Line is so funny. Focusing on questioning rather than answering takes us outside of our normal realm. Watching performers on stage forced to converse in this way is unexpected, and in turn, humorous. It is as if listeners are hanging on the edge, waiting for what years of experience have taught them to expect — an answer.

Today’s society is very answer-oriented. There is great attention put on uncovering the right answer, without giving much importance to the question itself. Eric Booth, in his book The Everyday Work of Art addresses this habit, saying, “The value of questioning is grossly overlooked in the high-demand quick-fix nature of our lives and our nation. We are answer-oriented everywhere, having been trained to this through schooling that is almost entirely right-answer driven.”

He goes on to point out that the root of the word question is quest. A quest is a search and a challenge, but not without rewards.

So, how can you set the stage for the participants on your tour to ask questions? One suggestion is beginning your tour by letting the group know that you value what each individual is bringing to the experience. Make it clear up front that you will not be lecturing and that instead you hope to engage in dialogue about the things that are of interest to them. As a group you will share ideas, stories, and questions.

Dr. David Carr, Professor of Information and Library Science at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, has often pointed out the value of attending to thoughtful questions. In his keynote presentation at the 1996 Wisconsin Docent Symposium, he suggested, “You may want to say explicitly [to your visitors] that there are no keys or secrets here and that the purpose of what you do here is not to find answers but to ask questions. You might say, ‘Not everyone sees the same things in this object. How many different questions come to mind when you look at it? No one has any better answers than anyone else, but some questions help us to go farther than others.’”

The second lesson taught by the “Questioning Game” is the value of developing improvisational skills. The dictionary defines improvise as the ability “to fabricate out of what is conveniently on hand.” This seems a fairly accurate description of what a docent does when creating an atmosphere of learning. A good docent is a facilitator who is able to take the resources readily available, (e.g., the objects on view, the students’ minds, the docent’s experience) and weave or fabricate a meaningful experience. You can teach your students to do the same. By encouraging them to use their own minds as one of their resources, you will enhance the quality of their learning.

Jerome Bruner, author of several books on education, wrote, “Acquired knowledge is most to a learner, moreover, when it is ‘discovered’ through the learner’s own cognitive efforts, for it is then related to and used in reference to what one has known before.” If you challenge students to improvise by using their own minds, their peers’ ideas, and the objects you are exploring, you will help them construct their own meaning.

How can improvising help you on a tour? Well, lets say your initial plan for a tour was to focus on a selected work or object in a gallery, but upon entering the area you notice...
that the visitors on your tour are intrigued by something else and it is generating conversation. You could try to re-direct their attention to the piece you had pre-selected, or you could improvise. With the object of interest, and conversation that has already begun, you can fabricate a quality learning experience. Encourage visitors to direct their energy into designing questions about the object that stirred their interest. What do they want to know about it? See if they can vocalize their interest in the form of questions. In this way you help them explore both the object and what they themselves are thinking about it.

The third thing we can learn from the comedians is the value of stretching for "yet another question." On Whose Line, the farther the actors get into the "Questioning Game," the funnier the lines become. It is by stretching the limits of questioning that the most interesting scenarios and connections are made. The more you move beyond the surface level, and peel back the layers, the more intriguing and meaningful the dialogue. Yet is can be difficult enough to motivate students to ask questions. Moving them beyond their initial inquiries may take extra effort and creativity on your part.

To assist you in this approach, here is an activity you can try at any institution with any object. It doesn't matter if the object is a rare tree, a historic rocking chair, a zebra, a Roman vase, or an abstract painting. Give each visitor a sheet of paper and pencil. Have them individually list five to ten questions about the object you are discussing. Almost certainly they will write down their first and second question easily. However, as visitors get farther in their list they may pause more before writing. They will have to take a closer and longer look at the object. Some may insist that they can only come up with three or four questions. But encourage them. Challenge them. When finished, ask everybody to share the last question on their list. You will accomplish a few things with this activity. First, you will have given each person time alone to reflect on his/her unique questions about the object rather than putting everyone on the spot up front. Secondly, you will be emphasizing the value of extended viewing and thinking. Finally, the activity will result in more interesting and varied questions to initiate your group discussion, demonstrating that pushing for the more involved questions was rewarding.

For younger students who might not be capable of much writing, you could make a game out of this "yet another question" approach. First, focus the students' interest on an object. Then invite them to see how many questions they can come up with. Stress that the point of the game is not to have you, as the docent, answering the questions, but rather it is to see how many questions the group can come up with. Ask the students to raise their hands whenever they have a question ready, having them ask just one question at a time. Young students will find it particularly humorous and engaging if, as the questioning goes on, you pretend to look a bit fatigued trying to keep up with all of their questions. Their initial reward is the fun of "wearing you out." The extended reward is the discussion you can have following the game, based on the questions they created.

Now that we've explored rising to the challenge, improvising, and Continued on page 12.
Helping Visitors Ask Better Questions

Continued from page 11.

stretching for more questions, let’s go farther with the idea of having visitors ask questions. It is important to realize that not all questions are created equal. Eric Booth explores this, saying, “Good questions themselves are creative accomplishments. Of course, there is more to a good question than just its invitation to produce a lot of right answers.” Consider the example he gives related to questioning students about trees. He compares the questions “What are some kinds of trees?” to “What are various solutions that trees could offer to that empty part of the backyard?” He explains, “Each of the two questions in this paragraph evokes images of trees in the answering process; however, the first invites a recall-and-drop mental game while the second uses images of trees as part of a process you have a personal stake in.”

Educators can be most effective when they model for their students what they are expecting. If you are trying to help your students ask deeper questions, show them what you mean. For example, ask them to decide which of two questions you pose is more effective in generating discussion. For instance, you might ask (1) “What are the colors in this artwork?” and (2) “How does the artist’s choice of colors impact the mood created by this artwork?” Ask them to discuss why one question takes the group further than the other. The first question certainly has value in leading to the more involved question, but comparing the two will help illustrate for the students what you are looking for.

To assist your visitors in designing their own great questions, here is another activity you can try. Break your tour group into small teams of two or three and have them choose an object to discuss. Ask each team to generate as many questions as they can about their chosen object.

Challenge the teams to design questions that will promote thinking and dialogue. After giving them some time, bring the larger group together and travel to each object selected by a team. Have the team members share the two or three top questions about their object that they think will get everyone most involved in a discussion.

Putting so much effort into having visitors do more questioning raises the issue of docents providing answers. Sometimes docents feel pressure to provide answers to all questions. Encouraging multiple questions from all participants would seem to create multiple opportunities for a docent to be “wrong.” You may have lots of factual information about your collection that you could use in answering, but a string of factual answers thrown at an audience does not always set the stage for the best educational experience.

There are times on a tour when you should provide information. But, you could not — and should not — be able to answer every question that is posed. First, this would make it seem as if you are the keeper of all information and the group must rely on you to receive it. Secondly, it is a wonderful gift to visitors to model how to handle not knowing the answer to a question, and that there is value in the questions themselves. You may want to let your audience know early in your tour that some questions will not be answered in the museum. In addition, some good questions are never fully answered — but the questions themselves still have value.

I am not suggesting that you design a strategy that avoids all answers, but you may want to consider the manner in which you...
provide information. When you share facts with visitors, it is helpful if you contribute the information as a member of the group, participating in the discussion rather than leading it. For example, if discussing an artwork you might say something like, “I find it interesting that so many of you have asked questions related to the dark colors in this painting. Through reading, I discovered that this artist had recently experienced the death of a loved one, and he said that the experience influenced his mood and in turn his color scheme.” By sharing in this way, you are demonstrating that you are listening to and honoring their questions, and you now know they are ready to actively receive information. Imagine if you had walked up to that painting and started right in saying, “This artist had recently suffered the death of a loved one and as a result his color scheme is primarily dark…” Students would never have had a chance to ask their own questions, formulate their own opinions, or develop a connection with the painting.

By encouraging better questioning skills, you are helping visitors develop strengths that will enhance their personal and professional lives. Eric Booth stressed “[if] we develop the habit and skill of pursuing personal interests with good inquiry, our possibilities for growth become infinite.” And Renate and Geoffrey Caine, in their book Education on the Edge of Possibility, describe business leaders looking for potential employees “… who are innovative and creative in their thinking, and who can focus on possibilities rather than ‘right’ answers or doing what they are told.” By designing a strategy that gets your visitors asking questions, you’ve helped them think about what they already know, and what they’d like to know more about, rather than just having your group wait for you to give the “right” answers.

Eric Booth echoes the lessons taught by the Whose Line comedians when he says, “I wish I could give you a handy kitbag of reliable questions to try, but there can be no prescribable set of sure-fire questions. The whole game is one giant improvisation; it is unplannable. Also, the questions themselves are far less important that the habit of questioning.

Having a tour group ask more thoughtful questions rewards the docent as well as the visitors. After listening to the questions your visitors create, you will almost certainly be able to say to yourself and others, “I’ve seen that object so many times but I never thought about it in quite that way…” That, perhaps, is one of the most enjoyable rewards of being a docent and working with such a variety of people, with such a wide range of questions.

Michael Nelson has been a museum educator for ten years. Previously, she worked at the Snite Museum of Art at the University of Notre Dame and then the Leigh Yawkey Woodson Art Museum in Wausau, Wisconsin. She currently resides in Austin, Texas, and is working as an independent museum education advisor, specializing in docent training.

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A Guided Research Program Asks the Right Questions

by Kristin Gallas

After years of conducting tours for high school students, the docents and education staff at the Montana Historical Society realized that something was missing. Secondary students responded well to the inquiry method we used, but their need to explore on their own wasn’t being met. A docent and staff brainstorming session produced what has become the Guided Research Program.

The Guided Research Program is a carefully crafted set of questions that provides students in grades seven through twelve with an opportunity to take an in-depth look at Montana’s history through the artifacts in our Montana Homeland exhibit. Under the theme of people and environment, Montana Homeland examines what life was like in Montana’s past. The exhibit focuses on how people lived, worked, played, raised families, and built communities, and how they adapted — to each other and to the world around them — in this place we know today as Montana. The Guided Research Program tour of Montana Homeland promotes individual exploration and group work, as students teach and learn from each other.

A key component of the Guided Research Program is the pre-visit lesson. This lesson allows students to develop the skills — museum literacy and visual analysis — they will use while working in the museum. The museum literacy reading and discussion section of the lesson attempts to familiarize students with the concept of museums and how people learn in them. Visual analysis is, of course, a valuable skill to possess when visiting any museum as it helps students closely examine an object and formulate questions to give meaning to the object.

The classroom teacher models the visual analysis process with her students using common objects, such as a Coke can or computer disk, with which the class is familiar. Then the students work in small groups to analyze a different object. After describing the object’s physical aspect, students explore other questions. What emotions, moods, or ideas does the object seem to convey? How has the creator of the object manipulated the elements of art (color, line, form, light, balance, etc.) to convey these emotions, moods, or ideas? What social, cultural, and historical factors might have influenced the creator’s choices? What personal significance do you find in the object?

The core of the Guided Research Program is the questions the students answer during their on-site visit to the Montana Historical Society Museum collection. The questions, five groups of four corresponding to designated sections of the exhibit, allow students to become “experts” on a topic. The students use five research “tools” — the exhibit text panels, the object identification labels, the objects themselves, people (classmates, chaperones, teachers, and docents), and their own prior knowledge. Each group’s questions about a particular part of the exhibit build upon information from the other groups, so, as the class proceeds through the exhibit, they acquire the same amount of information through their own research that would have been provided by a docent using the lecture and inquiry methods of a traditional tour.

A post-visit discussion back in the classroom helps students retain the information they learned during their visit. In addition, we have included a grading component. Teachers are given a grading rubric, which measures the students’ ability to work in a group, their oral presentation skills, their ability to work within an established time frame, and the thoroughness of their research and answers. The grading rubric allows teachers to formally evaluate their students’ performance during the Guided Research Program. It also provides a way to have teachers and chaperones actively engaged in the tour as they assist the groups in locating and discussing answers.

As the Guided Research Program tours began, we learned...
from both students and teachers and made changes to our original design. At the suggestion of the Montana Historical Society Teacher Advisory Panel, we added ‘hooks’ before each section of the tour. We started with four ‘pre-fab’ hooks — an excerpt from Meriwether Lewis’ journal, an excerpt from the Saco Divide Irrigation Committee’s 1937 report, iron pyrite (fool’s gold), and a piece of coal. Docents were encouraged to use the ‘pre-fab’ hooks or to select their own objects or readings that allowed them to introduce each section of the exhibit and to make connections between Montana’s past and present.

We first tested the tour with a group called Junior Leadership Helena, juniors from Helena’s two high schools. We attempted to focus their attention by having them sit on the floor in a large group at the end of each section of the exhibit as their classmates shared what they had learned. When we asked for feedback at the end of the tour, the students told us it was hard for them to understand which objects each group was talking about if they could not see them. Now, instead of sitting down as a large group to share answers, each group stands to the side of their portion of the exhibit so their classmates can look and listen at the same time.

A few weeks after the docents began leading the Guided Research Program, a group of juniors and seniors from Drummond, a small town in western Montana, took the tour. They were very disappointed that they did not get to see all of the objects in the exhibit. We had developed the program to offer an alternative tour for local high school students, most of whom had visited the museum many time throughout their primary and middle school years. We had not fully considered those who may not have visited us before. Now when we book the tour, we ask the teacher if a majority of the students have visited the museum before, and we emphasize the fact that the students will not see the entire exhibit in this program. They are encouraged to spend more time exploring the exhibit on their own after the tour.

The education staff decided to train a pilot group of docents to conduct the tours before we trained the entire staff. This enabled us to slowly introduce the new tour to our docents, as well as allowing us time to rework the tour according to the feedback we were receiving from students, teachers, and docents. We considered all the comments that we received during the 98-99 school year and made final revisions before training our entire docent corps for the 1999-2000 year. We are promoting the tour to middle and secondary teachers, and our tour calendar is quickly filling with Guided Research Programs. The experiment turned into a smashing success, and we are currently looking for ways to adapt the ‘guided research’ concept to our other exhibit galleries.

Kristin Gallas is the education officer at the Montana Historical Society. She received her B.S. in secondary history education from the University of Vermont and her M.A.T. in museum education from The George Washington University. The Montana Historical Society, located in Helena, Montana, was established in 1865 by the Territorial Legislature and is the oldest historical society west of the Mississippi River.
Putting the Question Mark

by Laura Silver

The question mark evolved from the first and last letters of the Latin word quæstio. Sometime in the Middle Ages, the “q” was placed above the “o” to form the now familiar symbol of inquiry. *Io*, the Latin equivalent of “wow,” lent its stacked letters to create the exclamation mark. In fact, the exclamation mark is a question mark unfurled, proof that questions are necessary to elicit a sense of wonderment.

Central Park Conservancy’s *Welcome to the Park* tours were created with the question mark in mind. The original draft of the recruitment flyer for the inaugural class of guides invited prospective guides to “Take the question mark out of Central Park!” The final draft boasts a huge question mark and reads, “Central Park: Want to know all the answers?” As the program developed, volunteers and staff maintained that knowing the right questions is at least as important as knowing all the answers.

**Program Design**

The *Welcome to the Park* program is designed to address some of visitors’ most frequently asked questions: “What can I see in a half-hour?” “Is the Park safe?” Central Park is 843 acres large. It covers the equivalent of 153 city blocks. A half-hour foray in the Park could not serve as much more than an introduction, punctuated perhaps by a ride on the carousel. Our goal: to transform visitors’ inquietude and inquiry into wonderment.

**Training**

Two dozen New Yorkers aged 22-72 participated in the inaugural guide training for the Conservancy’s *Welcome to the Park* program. After the new recruits had a bit to eat and heard about the basics of our program, we asked them to form small groups and find out 5 things that all group members had in common. Enter the power of the question. Groups’ responses give a clue to the introductory questions people asked each other.

**Sample of things Group Members Had in Common**

- All live in New York City.
- All speak English.
- All like bicycles.
- All like tourists.
- All love nature.
- All were born in the second half of the year.
- All like red wine (not a prerequisite for becoming a guide)

At the end of the full-day orientation, we distributed notecards and asked guides to list the hows and wows of their initial experiences in the Park. Hows were questions that were generated or left unanswered after the day. Wows invited people to share something that drew them into the Park and impressed them.

**Hows**

Volunteer guides asked questions about every aspect of their new roles. Program logistics, factual information, and personal queries all surfaced on colored sticky notes.

**How long is the running track around the reservoir?**
1.58 miles

**How do we schedule our volunteer times?**

Sign up on a sheet on the table or call Laura.

**Where is Strawberry Fields?**
Just inside the Park at West 72nd St. and Central Park West.

**How many bodies of water are in the Park?**
Seven: The Harlem Meer, the Pool, the Reservoir, Turtle Pond, The Lake, Conservatory Water, and the Pond.

**What is the Ramble?**
A 37-acre man-made woodland haven for birds and wildlife in the middle of the Park.

**How can I be a successful tour guide?**
Read on.

**Wows**

A wide cross-section of responses heightened the group’s enthusiasm about leading tours and made us all aware of the range of things that appeal to visitors.

- A carousel ride is $1.
- The colors! Spring, Fall, Summer, and Winter.
- The number of joggers.
- Central Park is man-made.
- That this busy city has not developed this land.
- The number of people who want to volunteer for Central Park!

Before guides began their official tours of duty, they shared many more questions and insights. We asked them a fair amount of questions as well. Each guide was required to fill out an evaluation and a certification quiz before donning an official Central Park Conservancy blue tee shirt. The evaluation asked:

- What was the best part of the training?
- What might you change?
- Would you recommend this to your friends?
in Central Park

How would you rate various aspects of the training (which were listed)?

The certification quiz asked guides to scavenge for practical information and to think on their feet:

- How did the Dairy get its name?
- Who is the manager of the Dairy?
- Who is Balto? Where can he be found?
- You are at the Dairy. An impatient visitor asks for directions to the nearest restroom. What do you say? (Look for the answers at www.centralparknyc.org.)

Welcome Tours

Half-hour weekend tours depart at 10:30, 11:30, and 12:30 on Saturdays and Sundays and can leave at other times in between, depending on the availability of guides and tour goers. The tours don't purport to inform visitors about every detail of the Park, rather they offer a friendly, free, (and often impromptu) overview with an enthusiastic New Yorker. Guides accompany tourists on a half-hour walk through a corner of the living work of public art created by Frederick Olmsted and Calvert Vaux over a century ago.

Advertised in local and regional newspapers as well as weekly guides to city events, "Welcome to the Park" tours are designed for out-of-towners as well as natives. Because it is impossible to predict who will show up for a tour on any weekend morning, guides' first questions are important ice-breakers that help them gear their pace and vocabulary to the needs of tour goers at hand.

A typical tour begins with smiles and information-gathering questions:

- Where are you from?
- Why did you come to the Park today?
- How did you hear about these tours?
- How long have you been in the City?
- What else do you plan to do here?

Before the tour sets off, guides hand visitors a "Tour the Park" badge. The badge identifies tour participants and is a souvenir conduit for answers to visitors' future questions. The back of the badge lists the Central Park Conservancy's URL, membership, volunteer and tour phone along with an environmentally-minded suggestion, "Please re-use this tag as a bookmark."

Once tour goers are identified with blue badges, they are ready to set off on an off-the-beaten path exploration with a Conservancy guide. Tours leave from a kiosk at Grand Army Plaza, in the southeastern corner of Central Park where Fifth Avenue explodes into an international shopping esplanade. Welcome to the Park tours invite visitors to escape the din of midtown Manhattan on a stroll through meandering pathways and framed landscapes. This return to the Omstedian vision of passive recreation offers a chance for conversation, discovery, and, of course, questions.

Guides present the southeastern corner of Central Park as a microcosm of the entire 843 acres. Alongside the Pond, guides discuss the unique man-made aspects of this slice of nature and its upcoming renovation. This setting also provides an opportunity to mention the Park's six other waterbodies. Guides allude to the successful 1993 reconstruction of the Harlem Meer, and encourage visitors to head to the northern part of the Park for catch and release fishing, free concerts, and family workshops.

The tour crosses Gapstow Bridge and examines the changing role of recreation in an urban setting. Tour goers walk past a nature sanctuary and learn how original design elements have been adapted and preserved. The tour concludes at the Dairy, Central Park's southernmost visitor center, so named by Olmsted and Vaux for the unfulfilled idea that cows would graze on a nearby lawn. From here, visitors must decide whether to explore exhibits inside the Dairy, join a longer guided tour, continue through the Park on their own or return to the concrete jungle. Guides are on hand for information, suggestions, and directions to the restrooms.

Onward

Guides continue to ask visitors questions. Visitors continue to ask questions of their guides. Conservancy staff asks both visitors and guides to report on their experiences. Response often take the form of questions.

Can we have training on the basic forms of plant and animal life in the Park?

Why do some water fountains have such low water pressure?

How can we make the tour longer to incorporate more information?

What does the current public art installation mean?

Questions can taunt, sting, entertain, and remind us of serious

Continued

on page 20.
Have you been frustrated when members of an adult tour wander off as you speak? When a group of junior high students fold their arms and challenge you to entertain them? When members of your elementary group sit lethargic and yawning? What can you do to enliven your tours, keep the people in your group attentive, challenge those tough kids, and stifle those yawns? It’s simply! Don’t tell anything you can ask.

Well-thought-out questions can guide your audience to discover a lot of the information we, as docents, tend to tell. Plan open-ended questions — questions whose answers are subject to interpretation and require more than a simple “yes” or “no” response. If, by mistake, you ask a “yes” or “no” type question, recover by following up with “why”, “what,” “where,” “when,” “who,” or “how.”

You’d be amazed at what tour groups can discover when guided by well-thought-out questions. Decide what you want the group to learn and gear your questions to that focus.

Playing games, writing stories or poetry, and using the five senses can draw audiences into works of art. The following are some activities that involve audiences and teach them how to enjoy and learn when visiting museums on their own or with friends.

**Play a Looking Game**

Position your group before a painting of your choice and tell them to begin identifying all they see. Explain the one rule that applies for this activity — they cannot name anything that has been named before. Therefore, they must listen carefully and choose a back-up for their first selection. Begin on one side of the group and call on each person. Remind them to consider colors, shapes, and lines, as well as things. Once everyone has had a turn, ask if anyone sees something still not mentioned. Repeat the process until nothing new can be found.

To further prompt your visitors, ask such questions as: What lines (real or imaginary) draw your eye to the subject? Are all the areas you called “green” the same color and intensity? Do the figures in the composition form a triangle? Where? How?

**Look and Recall**

Stand behind your group and have them look at a painting for two minutes. Keep time, as it can seem like ten minutes. Then, ask them to face you. Can they name what they saw without peeking? After the discussion ends have the group look again. Have the group discover how little they actually observed in two (long) minutes.

**Use Similes**

Ask your group to list adjectives that describe an art work (i.e., colorful, busy, dark, happy, and so on.) Then, ask the group to combine those words with “as” or “like” and a noun or phrase. Give some examples, such as “Colorful as a rainbow.” “Busy as rush hour traffic.” “Dark as night.” “Happy as a party.” Soon, without even trying, they will have written poetry.

**Find a Treasure**

Choose a gallery and have a treasure hunt. Pick a work of art and give three clues about it. Have your group guess which one it is by asking questions that can only be answered by responding “yes” or “no.” Or, walk through a gallery slowly without talking, just looking. At the end of looking ask the group which “treasures” drew their attention.
Consider This …

"You have the rigor of questions in 2nd grade and in Ph.D. programs. The problems are with all the stuff in-between."

Theodore Sizer  
co-author of  
The Students are Watching

stated on August 25, 1999 during an interview with David Gergen on the Nightly News with Jim Lehrer


Did everyone see the same things? Why or why not? Go back to view the treasures mentioned in greater depth.

As you employ these interpretive tools remember, it's not how many art objects they look at or how much information you give — it is what they see and discover on their own that counts.
Putting the Question Mark Back into Central Park

Continued from page 17.

oversights. They can shed light on important issues and reinforce our points of focus. Questions form the basis of program design, evaluation, interpretation, and basic human interaction. Asking questions spurs further learning and invites multiple perspectives.

The journey from question mark to exclamation point dictates an interpreter’s posture: how we need to ingratiate ourselves, bow our heads to make eye contact, convert ourselves into one giant ear in anticipation of varied responses. Entertainers, teachers, expedition leaders, we remain slightly stooped, balanced on our round bodies of knowledge, hoping that our questions will provoke and inspire the spire of involvement symbolized by a tall exclamation mark. Questions are the currency of our profession. Where would we be without them?

Laura Silver is Tour Program Manager at the Central Park Conservancy. She invites you to contact her with answers to, or questions for, the Guide Certification Quiz at Lsilver@centralparknyc.org. Ms. Silver contributed an article previously to The Docent Educator entitled “Screaming and Whispering,” which appeared in the Autumn 1999 issue (Vol. 9, No. 1).

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