

Preparing Discussion Materials: Art & Mental Health



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Learning Outcomes

Learning objectives are standard tools college teachers and museum educators use. For museum tours, guides, and educational materials, these learning objectives should be considered flexible and evolve based on experience and visitor feedback from the tours and activities. The learning objectives also help the educator (“educator” encompassing teachers, guides, or anyone facilitating discussion) to determine what to research for background information about the artworks.

An example of a learning objective is “**CRITICAL THINKING:** visitors will practice critical thinking skills through observation questions, and making connections between art content and mental health topics.” Think about what you’d like to accomplish with the tour or presentation. Remember that things can change and evolve. Keep the old outcomes, as this shows your journey as things develop.

Questions

This starts with the primary critical thinking technique, questions. Because of my teaching experience in critical thinking, I value using questions. Why are questions good for activities like a museum tour?

- Questions help for those who are new to attending museums (such as college students) and people engaging in new ways of using materials. People often need a framework, a means to jumpstart the process. For students, as example, a museum can be a daunting experience. A task helps in dispelling that fear, and questions can provide that task.
- Questions initiate involvement and active participation
- Questioning focuses attention, while making for an appropriate mix of listening and doing.

An educator can craft questions to integrate the background research on mental health topics and information on the artists and works. Philip Yenawine's *Visual Thinking Strategies* encourages educators to use questions in a tour to move from observation to facilitation. Once the educator shows an object, explains background information about the

work or artist, and gives a group time to observe and reflect, the educator can then ask questions tailored to the object. Yenawine suggests asking an open-ended question that encourages participants to think beyond description, such as, “What’s going on in this work?” For disability/mental health-related topics, change the question to a variation of “What’s going on that speaks to mental health in this work?”¹

Alternatives to this question might be, “What is in this work that might symbolize emotions or feelings,” and “How do the lines, shapes, and colors speak to emotions and feelings?”

A follow-up question to the responses might be, “What do you see that connects to these topics?” (a question meant to get the observer to use reasoning) and later, “What more can we find similar to what you saw before?” (meant to add to the process of finding meaning, and to share observations among the group). The educator can point to an aspect of the object as an observer comments on it and then paraphrase what the observer shares to recognize the observer is heard and understood. The educator might then link the

¹ Yenawine, Philip. *Visual Thinking Strategies: Using Art to Deepen Learning across School Disciplines*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Press, 2013. pp. 24-25.

answers that agree or disagree to help the group make connections. Their position throughout this process, however, is to maintain a neutral stance.

An educator might also facilitate dialogue within a tour. Museum visitors, like students, vary as to how they are most effectively learn and engage with the material. Some visitors prefer to have questions as conversation prompts. Others are ready to jump in with their observations and debate points on a topic. Museum educators Elliot Kai-Kee and Rita Burnham advise in their 2011 book on gallery teaching that an educator should first research the objects for the tour, then create prompts for dialogue and conversation. Their suggested prompt for discussion is more facilitation than questioning: “I invite you to share your thoughts on...” They encourage the educator to be flexible in the subsequent flow of dialogue.

While educators are automatically imbued with authority, Kai-Kee and Burnham feel they can earn their expertise by using it judiciously and not inhibiting the visitors’ exchange of views and interpretations. Rather than impart information, they say that the educator’s goal is to contribute knowledge and insight to a conversation driven by visitors. Here, the questions I have above might be adjusted to be a variation of “I invite you to share your thoughts on what the artwork expressing about mental health,” “...share your thoughts on what

emotions you feel are expressed in the work,” or “...share your thoughts on how the work represents disability here.”

Kai-Kee and Burnham do not encourage using questions solely as a technique. In part, I agree with their complaints about only using questions and finding this approach insufficient, but I also find using questions for intellectual stimulation too necessary to abandon. Some people are reluctant to share thoughts freely and work better with question prompts. Persons with anxiety may be especially unwilling to share. Likewise, enthusiastic observers may also dominate conversations and frustrate others not as willing to share. Questions are useful for drawing out reluctant sharers, so long as used with a facilitative rather than interrogative attitude. ²

Questions need not be a Socratic exercise—one may combine open-ended questions with invitations to share feelings and observations. Through reflection, metacognition, and feedback, the educator should model a mode of sharing and responding that does not focus on getting a “right” answer but encourages conversation. Some may not have experience engaging in

² Kai-Kee, Elliot and Rita Burnham. *Teaching in the Art Museum: Interpretation as Experience*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2011. 87-91.

dialogue or active listening and may be afraid of speaking up and appearing unintelligent. Also, some may not have experience of openly discussing mental health. Questions help inexperienced observers move beyond these challenges and allow them to contribute.

Slow Looking/Observation

The next technique is slow-looking/observation, also a critical thinking tool. Amy Herman writes in *The Art of Perception* that analyzing works of art helps strengthen observation and thinking skills in a variety of professions. David Perkins also describes the benefits of slow-looking in his seminal 1994 work, *The Intelligent Eye*. Giving viewers time to reflect upon and study a work allows them to discover new things. As Perkins explains, the first minute of observation allows for initial discovery. The next minute will enable questions to arise. Generally, a visitor's examination of a work in a museum does not last longer than a minute or two. However, if the observer can extend this period to five, six, or seven minutes, more questions and perceptions come to mind. The observer might discover interesting features of the work.

Consider that in any tour in a museum, whether alone or with others, we tend to spend seconds or at the most a minute or so looking or snapping a photo. We often feel uncomfortable standing around, especially in a popular museum or exhibit. But a longer time observing is an important change--the more

time one spends taking in the work and reflecting, the more one discovers.

Perkins recommends looking away for a short time and then returning to the work. I find this true, and much like an approach to writing or creating works one's self. Not only step away or look away for a period of time, but also change where you are when you observe. It's like a refresh button to help your powers of observation. The longer you are there, and the more perspectives you have to observe the work, the more you see appreciate.

Perkins notes that even five minutes is long enough to make a work a completely engaging experience. least five minutes to encourage this kind of focus.

Let what you know inform your looking-what you know in general, about art in particular. If this is a major exhibit, read some of the wall labels and then return to the work, or look it up on your phone (check out online magazines like *Mental Floss* or *Atlas Obscura* on artists). Offer information or read information on mental health or how the artist or art connects, if possible. If you have a journal, bring it along and tell yourself when you notice interesting features as listed here.

Language

Let's talk about language. In addition to framing, educators need to be aware of the language used in tours, lesson plans, labels, presentations, and so on. Descriptions and narratives should reflect the most up-to-date and non-discriminatory, non-ableist nomenclature. The American Psychiatric Association has several good recommendations for language use, such as focusing on the person rather than the illness. ³

The primary point is using person-first language. So often newspapers and magazines don't do this because of space issues perhaps, but person-first gives a person dignity, which is part of human rights support, and acknowledges a person is more than a psychological disability. That applies to most kinds of identities, when possible. As example, "Person with disabilities," not disabled person.

Educators should also research terms they plan to use. In an article that appeared in *The Week* in 2016, the editor and linguist James Harbeck explains ten often-abused psychological terms and what these terms

³ American Psychiatric Association, "Words Matter: Reporting on Mental Health Conditions," <https://www.psychiatry.org/newsroom/reporting-on-mental-health-conditions>

really mean. For example, “OCD” doesn’t merely mean having a strong desire to be tidy. It is the term for a condition involving intrusive and unwanted compulsions to reduce anxiety or distress and are excessive and unrealistic. Similarly, ADHD is more than not paying attention. It is a clinical condition involving inattentiveness, hyperactivity, and impulsivity—symptoms that negatively impact social, academic, and occupational activities. These resources help educators ensure their materials are up to date, reflect best practices and knowledge, and construct their materials without bias. ⁴

Another aspect of language is to avoid, when presenting, terms that are insensitive (“crazy,” “insane,” “psycho,” “nuts,” “deranged” Don’t say “brain-damaged” or “demented.” Say “has a brain injury” or “has dementia.” It’s better to be specific when possible.

Don’t use terms that suggest pity, like “suffering from,” “victim of,” or “afflicted with,” when referring to a particular person’s illness or disability. Instead say, “has a history of,” “is being treated for,” or “lives with.” Think about and investigate words and what they mean. This is using the critical thinking tools of

⁴ Harbeck, James, 10 commonly abused psychology words — and what they really mean, *The Week*, February 22, 2016, <https://theweek.com/articles/603303/10-commonly-abused-psychology-words--what-really-mean>

metacognition, research, and open-mindedness.

Mental disorders have many aspects, are common in all of the population, and exist on a continuum. Educators should include information on symptoms, causes, outcomes, and prevalence, note that disorders can be temporary, overcome, and treated, and that persons with psychological or emotional disorders are often functional. The story does include the negative—it is part of the story. Yet so is the resilience of those with disabilities.

Risk Assessment

An educator needs to consider risk assessment when designing gallery talks and discussions. If conducting a tour in a museum, particularly with students, keep in mind some may not be used to a museum or feel comfortable within one. Risk assessment uses critical thinking to evaluate the tour, if taking place in a museum, from the perspective of observers who may not have previously visited museums.

Museum educators advise considering physical hazards in or around the museum, such as transport, crowds, stairs, and lighting. In addition, consider individual persons who may have mobility issues or find difficulty accessing a smaller area. Educators should help the unfamiliar visitors (this primarily applies to one's students) prepare by informing them beforehand about transport, cost, how to act, what to bring or not bring, what behavior and etiquette are expected of visitors in a particular museum, where restrooms are, and when to eat.

To this, I would add issues considering disability in particular. Students need to be warned of potential problems, such as lack of elevators, which are often absent in old houses and landmark buildings, what services are

offered for accessibility, and what areas may be problematic for those neuroatypical or anxiety-prone because they contain flashing lights, small spaces, etc. ⁵

⁵ Delematre, Jackie, "Questioning the use of Questions." *Art Museum Teaching*, January 23, 2015, <https://artmuseumteaching.com/2015/01/23/questioning-the-questioning-of-questions/>
Talboys, Graeme, *Using Museums as an Educational Resource: An Introductory Handbook for Students and Teachers*, London, UK: Routledge, 2010.

The Artist

Another essential practice to utilize before a tour is researching background information on artists and their works. The research helps the educator decide what to say about the artist and the art, i.e., if the artist identifies as having a disability. Many contemporary artists are open about having physical and psychological disabilities. However, others choose not to identify as having a disability because they do not want the disability to be their primary identity. They may specifically say they are not disabled and request that any promotional materials, labels, or articles do not reference disability.

Therefore, the educator should investigate how a contemporary artist prefers to identify. For artists who have passed away, the situation is more complicated. Suppose an artist is known to have had some sort of emotional or psychological issue. In that case, the educator should research what the artist expressed about the condition themselves and distinguish between what is historically accurate and what might simply be gossip or misinterpretation. For instance, Jackson Pollock is often portrayed as a “mad” genius and alcoholic “bad boy.” In fact, his most expressive work was during a two-year period of sobriety and therapy, and his drinking was more due to the pressure of his fame and

demand on his productivity. For artists working in time periods during which psychology was challenging to determine (i.e., Renaissance, Baroque, and Medieval), the educator might instead focus on the work and what it reflects about psychological issues or feelings.

Even if the artist identifies as having a disability, or whose works reflect disability themes, integrate aspects of a balanced presentation--avoid what's sometimes called "inspiration porn." Rather offer a story that has realistic acknowledgement of challenges but also showing nuances of that person's life and a full depiction of that person--like with Van Gogh.

In terms of choosing works for a tour, works by persons with disabilities or with disability themes help illustrate mental health learning and help visitors connect with those issues. These works might be what I call cathartic, in the sense of symbolizing or expressing a particular mental condition like anxiety or depression. Such works might also be what I call restorative, having positive mental and emotional aesthetics (i.e., the vivid and spiritual manner Van Gogh painted landscapes). However, tours and discussions do not have to be limited to artists with disabilities or works with specific disability themes. There may be too few such works or artists available to include in a tour. (A

presentation in a class or workshop obviously will have more choices).

Educators may use other artists with different disabilities as a jumping-off point. Educators may also use art without any specific disability connotation but instead use the art interpretation to discuss mental health themes. For example, a person with disabilities might find catharsis in critiquing a work that offers persons with disabilities as objects of pity, as happened in a U.K. program.⁶ The idea is to create an overall experience for people to learn about disabilities. The goal does not have to be ensuring the visitor leaves with facts, dates, and names, but with an enriching experience, feeling better, and wanting to return and repeat the experience.

Educators researching and preparing materials should be careful to avoid framing a discussion of disabilities in an overly sentimental or “inspirational” manner. This type of framing is a danger also known as “inspiration porn.” The late disability activist Stella Young coined the term, meaning media depictions of disability that encourage viewers to focus on the person overcoming the disability. This type of focus detracts from the

⁶ “Talking about...Disability and Art,” a partnership between the Birmingham Museum of Art and the Research Centre for Museums and Galleries [University of Leicester] in 2008
<https://www.culture24.org.uk/art/art54883>

artist's merits and the meaning of the works of art. It is similar to the “magical minority” trope seen in stories, movies, and T.V. shows (a marginalized minority character who gives wisdom and encouragement to the privileged main character). ⁷

⁷ See, as example, TV Tropes:
[https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/Magical
MinorityPerson](https://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/Main/MagicalMinorityPerson)

Final Thoughts

Thank you for reading and using this guide. Every person has a chance to make a difference in changing the world. As I found in my work teaching, we never know who we may influence and whose life we may change. In fact, we may never know that—but it's good to proceed as if that potential exists every day. Mental health issues are severely stigmatized, even when a growing concern in post-COVID times. Opening discussions helps lessen that stigma and encourages people to think differently and seek out resources. You are part of that discussion.

--Alex Fiano