

SJMA Museum Experience & Education - Docent Council

"Discovery" Strategy

With this strategy, museum visitors are encouraged to do most of the talking, facilitated by specific questions posed to them by the docent. The questions are designed to help visitors investigate the work thoroughly and strategically, first by an analysis of the formal and factual elements, and then gradually make interpretive observations, and at last, form a value judgment or draw other conclusions about the meaning(s) of the work.

Visitors may come and go from the discussion as they please. ***From the onset, it is very important to tell your group that above all, this is a discussion.*** They will be analyzing this work of art together and ***the purpose of this program is to demonstrate and practice a method of looking at art that they can use on their own or with friends throughout SJMA or other museums and galleries.***

Start the discussion by telling your group carefully selected, basic facts about the work, such as: The title, the artist's name, the date, and/or the medium. When selecting which facts to start with, consider carefully how this information might be used by the viewer. For example, the title, or the medium, or a very famous artist may reveal more than you'd like them to know at the beginning, and may lead them to a hasty conclusion or judgment. ***Remember, the purpose of this method is for the visitor to experience the joy of looking and making discoveries from what they can SEE, not what they might already KNOW about the work.*** Then begin with the first question:

Q1. Take a look at this work here. What was the very first thing in this work that caught your eye?

As visitors respond, repeat or paraphrase their answers back to them, asking for clarification when needed. Also point out the area in the work so that the entire group is seeing together. Try to get a consensus answer to this question, but if there are differences of opinion, go with the majority answer first. (Try to remember some of the other responses. They may be useful when you move on to question #3.)

Q2. Why do you think you noticed this first? OR How did the artist make this element attract your attention?

These two questions are really asking the same things here. Depending on the person, the first version might elicit a short answer like, "It's red" or "It's bright." Another person with more experience might elaborate on this. The second version will probably elicit a longer answer and help visitors see relationships among the elements, like an awareness of color contrasts, for example. Experimenting with these questions will prove helpful in determining if you'd like to use them interchangeably or in tandem to develop the flow of ideas.

Q3. Where is your eye drawn next?

If there is a lull in the response, or some confusion on where to “go” next, this is where you pull out of your memory bank some of the secondary responses to question #1. (Don't be surprised however, if after a lengthy discussion about the first element, the group moves in a whole new direction.) Drawing on these earlier responses will impress upon your group, not only that you have a good memory, but much more importantly, that you are a good listener. Make sure to pick up on and address when you can, even the casual or side remark, often they are very insightful. This demonstrates that you value each person's input and encourages all the more participation.

Q4. How did the artist take you from here (the first element discussed) to there?

Now the emphasis has really turned to the **relationship of the elements** and becoming aware of the work's **composition**. Examples of techniques that draw the eye around are several concentrations of the same bright color--kind of a connect-the-dots approach--or an implied or actual line that connects certain elements. Again, as visitors tell you what they see, make sure to **actually point this out in the work so everyone in the group sees the connections**. This becomes increasingly important as you move through the work and the **structure of the composition is slowly revealed**.

Repeat 1 - 4 until a complete visual inventory of the work has been taken. This can take 10-12 minutes.

During the early discussion, keep your group's comments focused **on what they can see**. Have them reserve any interpretive remarks for the second half of the discussion, after you have looked at the entire work. Naturally, the more you, the docent, know about the work and the artist, the more enriching the discussion will be. However, it is very important to share your knowledge strategically. This ability comes with practice and self-confidence as a facilitator to stick to this line of questioning without “helping” the visitor. The above questions are designed to elicit information from your group. It is most important that they make their own discoveries. Adequate preparation on your part will enable you to guide your group to a clearer understanding of the work. If it's appropriate, you may also want to bring a work installed nearby into the discussion as a means to contrast and compare particular elements.

Q5. Now that we have looked at the way the artist has organized the work--the things emphasized through formal means--why do you think the artist made the decision to . . .?

Here the docent will have to select the specific “choices” or elements, identified by the group in the early discussion, that she/he believes best expresses the work's central points. For example, one conclusion to the above question could be . . . arrange half the painting in shadow and half in the light? Or another question could be, Why do think the artist made the decision to use these colors for the trees rather than their natural colors?

Continue this line of questioning until you have covered the most important “choices.” This can take another 10 - 12 minutes.

Q6. What are some of your responses to this work?

8 - 10 minutes

After asking this question following a 20-minute group discussion, do not be surprised to hear either a lot of the same response OR a lot of varied ones! As the facilitator though, you should remain as neutral as you can, giving equal consideration to all. Here it is most important to do three things: illustrate connections between the visitor's reaction and the visual stimulus, show connections among different visitors' responses, and point out that our responses occasionally have more to do with us than the visual stimulus. Recalling earlier remarks will be useful in building a "scaffold" of responses until you come to a group consensus.

Q7. What message (if any) do you think the artist is trying to convey?

5 minutes

This question should be held in reserve and applied only when the artist indeed has a "message." Question #6 addresses other kinds of motivations artists have for making a work of art that does not necessarily include delivering a message.

Another version to this question could be **What theme is the artist addressing in this work?**

Q8. Do you think this is a successful work of art? Why? or Why Not?

6 - 10 minutes

Notice that this question does not ask for a personal or subjective value judgment, but rather an objective one. Often this question gets answered in the natural course of discussing question #7. But if after concluding #7 or #8 and you think this question needs more exploration, it is important to articulate it. Also, because it is phrased in an objective way, it forces the visitors to step back from their own reactions and consider the entire discussion that just transpired. This serves nicely to help you "wrap things up" and summarize the group's major discussion points.

You may choose to add any other contextual information that did not come up earlier that may "validate"* or extend the group's observations. Be forthcoming on the sources of your information. For example, "At a lecture by the artist I learned that . . ." This sends an important message that information is readily available to anyone, not just the museum "experts." Suggest other sources for further study to those who seem interested. But with or without any further study The Discovery Tour has accomplished the following:

- a. The learners have been given some control over their own learning situation.
- b. They were able to participate to the extent that they wished, they discussed their ideas with whomever they chose, they asked questions and offered answers.
- b. The group learned actively instead of passively, made their own discoveries, which they will retain better, and had the opportunity to hear and respond to the discoveries of others in the group.
- c. By making these discoveries, they realized that this approach works and they will come to believe in the value of spending more time with a work of art, even one that may not attract them at first.
- d. They will be delighted to find that they are able to make critical,

objective observations about a particular work as well as a subjective response--it just takes the right questions posed to them. With practice, they will be able to form their own questions when visiting art museums in the future.

- This question of "validation" will pop up over and over. Often after these discussions, participants will want to know if they were "right." Many times, the group will reach a satisfying consensus, but occasionally, the group will be divided or some participants may still be unclear. This is O.K. and only demonstrates the need for further looking and interaction with the work, and that with art, there are seldom easy answers. As suggested earlier, remember to make suggestions for further study to help people find for themselves the answers they are seeking.

The "Discovery" strategy was introduced to the museum profession by Sharon Kokot of the Columbus Museum of Art in Columbus, Ohio in the late 1980s. Her method is based on a similar exercise, used by art historian William Kloss, prior to his conducting any art-historical research on a work. "The Discovery Tour" got its name from Joni Rehnborg, a former docent at the Laguna Art Museum, who was so delighted with the discoveries she made about a painting--that was already very familiar to her--using this method.