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The front cover shows Gerald Jessop active at work at the Moose Jaw Art Museum. Feature story is on page 3.

Photo Credit: Randy Burton

The circle represents the strongest and most durable shape known to man. Surrounding the province it symbolizes the protection of the province's heritage by its museums.

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THE SOCRATIC DIRECTED QUESTIONING METHOD OF INTERPRETATION

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Beware all ye who abandon yourselves to questioning! After all, you must remember, Socrates himself was indicted and presented with his cup of hemlock for the very crime of 'corrupting' Athens' youth. Such is the power of the question. It seems as if some very serious results can arise from encouraging people to think!

According to much of the museological wisdom, past and present, the ideal educational role of the museum is one which is provocative rather than expository; discovery-oriented rather than didactic. Indicative of how much easier such an ideal is mouthed than carried out, however, is the distinct impression that the majority of museum interpretation efforts being carried out today rely on one-way expository communication from docent to visitor, with the museum object in the background.

The following will hopefully stimulate some further interest in the use of the question as an important interpretive alternative, or at least help to confirm the gut feeling of many of us that it is a method that is not only important, but which is also one that works!

First, a (mercifully) short digression into some foundational educational philosophy. As a broad generalization (hopefully without the destruction of all meaning), education can be described as inducing some sort of change within the learner. One way in which such change can be accomplished is by introducing into the mind of the learner what is referred to as 'dissonance.' Dissonance, very simply, is the result of confronting the learner with his/her own lack of knowledge. The attendant frustration, or dissatisfaction, felt by the learner becomes a very strong motivation (one which is intrinsic rather than laid on) to actively seek out information to solve, or at least ease, the internal dilemma.

Obviously, one effective way to establish dissonance is by raising a direct question. It is to the theory and practice of this process which we now turn.

Why use questions in the museum? Isn't it more educationally efficient just to tell the visitor significant facts? Why play the 'I-know-but-I'm-not-telling — you-have-to-guess' game at all? The answer here, of course, is not quite as simple as these questons might suggest.

Granted, the expository method is more "efficient," but (and this is important), only on an extremely limited basis. Facts, per se, often are more efficiently communicated by lecture. However, the stated objectives of modern museums go much beyond the transmission of purely factual information. Indeed, the very ability of the museum to maintain a basis in simple factual accuracy comes into question in light of the "knowledge explosion;" contrasted with the real shrinking of support (financial and otherwise) for the continuing documentation of change in the world.

Many museologists believe that museums must aim beyond facts alone toward such ambitions as the development of visual awarenesss, critical thought processes, and problem-solving skills.

In addition, given the right attention to atmosphere and the input of serious planning, the questioning technique is not at all an arrogant "Ha-Ha-I-know-something-you-don't" approach, but one which truly involves the visitor in significant mental activity based on examination of the museum object. The key here is that the mental activity engendered by the question can more easily be moved into the higher levels of the cognitive, hopefully to result in more meaningful learning.

How much difference is there between watching television and taking a typical guided tour through a museum?

The questioning technique also helps to "learner centre" museum activity to a greater degree. By avoiding the straight line interpretive model, which sees docent interposed between object and visitor, the "reformation" of museum interpretation requires that the docent step aside and allow the visitor to focus directly on the museum object in order that they might "know" it more fully. When questions are used in this triangular model, there is an inevitable decrease in the "distance" between the visitor and the museum. The sharing of thoughts through question, answer, and discussion helps to establish a warmth and rapport between learner and institution which is missing from traditional guided tour relations.

Another important value of the question is in its focussing potential. In this the age of celluloid and video, we have all seen the effects of the popular media. Children, who are now imbued with vast audio-visual experience, enter the museum and, if allowed some freedom, rush from exhibit to exhibit without really looking at the objects. They are obviously utilizing McLuhanistic impressionistic skills honed in front of a television set. Children are so accustomed to movement and the high ratio of "jolts per minute" that they seem compelled to create their own movement since most museum objects don't move. Indeed, even for adults, how much difference is there between watching television and

taking a typical guided tour through a museum? The only major difference seems to be that it is the audience, rather than the image, which moves!

In order to counteract this tendency, the museum must create visual and mental "hooks" which will hold the visitor long enough so that he/she is actually motivated to *study,* not just look at, the museum object. Again, one worthwhile way of accomplishing this is by establishing a question in the visitor's mind. It is the question which focuses attention on the object; and it is the museum setting which allows for real observation and reflection not possible in front of a television screen.

Given acceptance of the above rationale, the next question, of course, becomes just how does one go about developing and using questions in the museum setting? The method described below is neither strictly a Socratic nor enquiry approach, but one which is an eclectic combination. It is perhaps best described as focussing, not on testing a specific hypothesis (as in the Socratic method), but on clarifying thought. On the other hand, this method is more directed than a true discovery-enquiry approach, as it requires more intervention by the questioner.

The use of questions in museum interpretation also helps to restore a more natural order to learning. Adults undertake personal learning projects because they need some particular information or skill in order to solve a problem confronting them. Schools and teachers, however, often tend to reverse this logical order by saying in effect . . . "This is what you should know . . . Be ready for the question tomorrow (on a test)."

By first raising a question, and then by providing the means through which answers might be approached, museums can contribute a great deal to the fundmental understanding of just how to go about learning in a natural, non-contrived manner.

By employing the questioning technique museums also help visitors to assume responsibility for their own learning, thereby freeing him/her from dependence on the docent, and enabling the development of an attendant self-confident, autonomous and empirical, rather than prejudice-dependent, approach to learning.

Of course, the fundamental reason for using the question is not to confuse or humble the visitor but, as Socrates had originally intended, to clarify thinking. Again, the question forces the learner to confront dissonance and to become active in reducing this internal discomfort by using the museum object as a resource.

How then does one actually go about designing an effective questioning strategy? The process obviously demands more than a liberal sprinkling of Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How? throughout a tour.

The key to the whole process is found in detailed and thoughtful pre-planning. The would-be Socrates must know exactly why questions are being asked. This implies an awareness of museum and specific programme themes, goals and objectives.

The task then becomes one of designing questions which will help the visitor to focus on the established themes. This is done by examining the artifacts on exhibit and considering how each relates to museum and programme goals. Questions are then designed so that they can be answered by observation of the artifacts.

Because most museum interpretive programmes are limited in both time and scope, it becomes necessary to establish in one's own mind what is important and which questions will tend to focus on these aspects. The interested docent should engage anyone who is willing to help sort out these considerations; and perhaps the most effective way this can be done is on paper.

Once the basic concepts are established, the formulation of the actual questions becomes relatively academic. Of course, questions should be clear and concise. They should be formulated on the basis of: the course and dynamics of the particular programme; consideration of visitor needs, abilities, and desires: and most importantly, they should incorporate various levels of cognitive skills.

There are various ways of classifying types of questions according to the level of cognitive activity that is required to answer. Most, however, are based on Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive tasks which range from the lowest level of memory recall through translation of information, interpretation of relationships, application to problem solving, logical analysis, synthesis of previous learning for creative solutions, and finally, evaluation. Questions can also be structured on the basis of whether they demand convergent (focussing toward a single answer) or divergent (encouraging varieties of answers) thinking.

Once the types of question levels are understood, it is important that various levels be used in a logical sequence. Questions such as "What is this?" will stimulate only so far.

If we were to diagram the use of questions, many questioners would be represented by a straight horizontal line. Some questioners never go beyond factual recall or observational questions. Many others could be diagrammed with a zigzag line, since they may use a variety of question types, but in no logical sequence.

The ideal is a regularly-stepped profile, where questions are first asked at the factual/observational level and then progress through information processing (comparing and contrasting, etc.) into application (problem solving) questions. We might suspect, however, that such an ideal is an unobtainable goal for the structuring of a complete tour in a museum. More realistic perhaps, would be an attempt to use the stepped model at each exhibit stop in the tour.

It is only common sense that questions posed at the end of tours should ask for summations of themes and a synthesis of learning.

In the end analysis, however, the important idea

is to rise beyond the exclusive use of lowest-level memory and observation questions. We should not worry unduely about a lack of emphasis on facts, since the higher levels involve application of all the types of cognitive tasks below them, including factual recall.

The *atmosphere* under which questions are posed is another critical factor in their success or failure. Many questions in the classroom setting tend toward the relatively threatening type such as "I-taught-this-yesterday-and-you-should-know-it."

Questions in museums, on the other hand, should be used in as relaxed, cheerful, reassuring, non-threatening manner as possible. Wording should be informal and conversational. After all, we also want a museum tour to be an enjoyable experience.!

Another important factor in achieving such an atmosphere seems to be pace. All too often, the questioner simply moves along too fast to receive thoughtful, detailed answers (if any at all). The questioner's anxiety about not being able to "cover everything" (questions do take time to answer) should be set aside in favour of an equally strong desire to deal with a few ideas in sufficient depth which are meaningful to the learner. Many museologists believe that the opportunity to practice the more time-consuming higher level cognitive skills is much more important than a quick exposure to a list of the "important facts to know" about the artifacts.

A further key aspect in developing an appropriate atmosphere in which questions can be successful is the quality of the response given to answers. It is crucial that this response be an accepting one.

The learner must be made aware that his/her ideas are valuable.

Beyond the passive "That's right," or "okay," the questioner should take an active role when responding. In this light, "No, I'm sorry that's not quite right." should be accompanied not only by a smile but by an explanation of why the answer may not have been correct. Even better, however, is the active probing of unacceptable answers by using further clarifying questions. Comments such as "Why do you say that?" or "How does your answer fit with the artifact we're look at?" help the slightly off-base learner to look again and clarify his/her thoughts. Another strategy is to involve the rest of the group in clarification by asking for further comments or explanations.

The learner must be made aware that his/her ideas are valuable. One way of accomplishing this is by further probing their answers as cited above. Correct aspects of partial answers can be salvaged and restated or summarized. The extra time spent in such activity is not at all wasted, but pays dividends in the levels of thinking and quality of answers elicited in the future.

While on the subject of time, it is also important that the questioner wait for an appropriate length of time for answers to be formulated. Often questioners wait no more than one second before proceeding to give the desired response, or to redirect the question. It is truly part of the art of teaching, rather than the science, to know exactly how long one should wait for an answer. It is important to remember, however, that the museum has been established for reflection, not a "Reach For The Top" reaction.

Another aspect of the ideal accepting atmosphere for the directed questioning technique is the flexibility demonstrated in accepting questions from the learners themselves. Remember, the whole point of the exercise in the first place was to raise questions in the visitor's own mind! Such questions need not be answered directly by the docent. Indeed, the docent must become comfortable in saying "I just don't know" rather than attempting to bluff a response. Very often the question will be more profitably answered by redirecting it back to the museum objects, or to the other members of the group.

The literature dealing with using questions in the museum setting has identified a number of guidelines and situations to avoid when employing the technique.

First, the "Do's":

— It is important to make sure that the learner understands that it is the *process* of thinking and the manipulation of ideas, not the "right" answer or facts, which have first priority. The goal is to develop the independent reasoning skills of the learner, not to improve his/her listening or memory skills. In addition, the learner should be encouraged and *allowed* to make his/her own conclusions. Questioners should encourage creativity and "thoughtful guessing," as long as the speculation is based on the exhibits.

— When at all possible, the learner's own experience should be associated with the subject at hand. Such an attempt to make the learning "relevant" will aid immeasurably in developing the motivation to pursue the learning.

— Finally, a very positive value is placed on flexibility. Indeed, in some cases it just might be more "educationally efficient" to drop initial targets and follow directions of more immediate learner interest.

Now for the "Don't's":

— One thing docents must do away with is the *fear of silence.* We must begin to realize that the dreaded silence after the posing of a question is precisely the time when thinking and real *learning* take place! In this light, don't be too quick with an answer or change of strategy. Allow time for significant thinking and learning to occur.

— Don't be trivial. Questions must be significant and challenging enough to warrant the risk of being wrong. One suspects that part of the reluctance to answer simplistic questions is the

increased risk of embarrassment for an incorrect answer. The harder the question, the less face one loses by being wrong. If a truly accepting atmosphere has been established, truly creative responses will not be inhibited.

— In this regard, don't avoid the tough or even the unanswerable questions. On one hand, the learner should be significantly challenged, and on the other be aware of the confidence in his/her own ability to think and answer. This is engendered in the mere asking of the question.
— In very practical terms, avoid designing questions which can be answered with one word: don't stick only to the simple factual type, don't dialogue with only one or two quick answers, and finally, don't ask rhetorical questions. There is no way of checking whether the inevitable answer, so very clear to the questioner, is clear, or even understood, by the learner. In other cases, an undesired and very "smart" answer may be forth-coming when it is least wanted.

The Socratic/directed questioning technique is as much an art as it is a structured body of strategies.

The above theory is all well and good, but what if it does not work as it should? Of course, one of the most dreaded consequences of asking a question is not receiving an answer at all. What do you do when you cannot get the slightest suggestion of an answer to build on. Again, the art rather than the science of documentship enters in.

Assuming that all the preconditions established above have been met, absolute and continuing silence can be countered with several strategies. Depending on the nature of the group in question (or is it under questioning?), cultural (language or ethnic background) and social (adult or high school status) factors may come into play.

In general, strategies which may help to overcome a lack of preparation or knowledge on both parts begin with the maintenance of a relaxed and friendly attitude. The situation will only deteriorate with a stiffening of the questioner's resolve to extract an answer one way or another. The threatening nature of the situation can be reduced by asking for group responses, which take the pressure off individuals who may shy away from being singled out for attention. A simple show of hands in answer to a question is one way to help to break the ice.

If no response to a question is forthcoming after an appropriate wait, the wording of the question might be changed, the cognitive level reduced, or cues given as to how the observable objects may furnish an answer.

Knowledge of the learner's background, gained before the tour commences, can help the docent to relate the question to the visitor's own experience. Hopefully, "starting where the learner is" will help to stimulate a response.

As a last resort, the questioner might have to answer his/her own question, but *not* without clarifying how the answer was arrived at through the object. This is important to help the learner come to feel more confident in his/her own powers of observation which more than likely had developed an answer in the first place. Approaching the leader or class teacher for help or suggestions might also be worthwhile.

If it seems appropriate, given the particular age and experience of the reluctant learner, and if the questioner him/herself feels comfortable in doing so, the situation can be increasingly personalized if the docent reduces the distance to the learner and perhaps establishes physical contact. An accompanying recognition of the fact that the questioner is confident that the learner just might have a good answer, and an appeal based on the *questioner's* own feelings "I'd feel very happy if you told me the answer you're thinking of" may help to elicit at least a whispered response.

The commonly-used cajoling or competitive-based appeal often may not be the most effective approach. Of course, it all depends on the particular situation and the group you are dealing with. It is up to the questioner to be sensitive to their needs.

In the case of reluctant junior high or secondary students, it is absolutely essential that all parties involved be well prepared and fully aware of what is to be expected in order for the questioning to be successful. Fear of potential embarrassment from the demands of the unknown is seen as one of the most significant inhibitory factors to participation by these age groups.

For adults who are much more self-motivated, self-directed, problem-oriented learners, questions have to be more closely related to their present interests and problems than questions for small children, who largely expect to be directed in their learning. In most cases, the average heterogeneous group of tourist visitors probably is not the most appropriate for responding favourably to questions. Special interest groups, unions, or various club memberships, in which common interests and problems are more focussed, might be more fertile ground for the questioning technique.

The bottom line to all of this is that use of the Socratic/directed questioning technique is as much an art as it is a structured body of strategies. For this technique to be really effective, the docent must be committed to the value of the question and accept the focus being elsewhere than on facts. After all, it must be remembered that the original intent of Socrates was not to predetermine, but to stimulate and clarify the learner's thought. Museums can only hope to emulate this goal.

In closing, this writer would like to gratefully acknowledge Nancy Vincent and the docents at the Manitoba Museum of Man and Nature for their help in a preliminary thrashing out of these ideas. Hopefully I have been more articulate in print than in person!

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QUESTIONS

INTERNATIONAL MUSEUMS DAY: What Can We Do?

May 18 has been declared International Museums Day. This event falls within a very significant time of year, a period of annual reactivation and busy preparation for a lively summer season. It is also a time when museums and galleries across the country re-affirm their presence and proclaim their relevance to their communities and their varied publics.

The Promotions Committee of the Saskatchewan Museums Association would like to encourage all museums and galleries to participate in some way in International Museums Day. As a starting point, the Committee has prepared the following list of suggested activities which may be used in the celebration of this special day:

1. Offer free admission to your museum or gallery. Perhaps free refreshments (coffee and doughnuts) could also be made available.
2. Officially open your facility for the season (if you are closed during the winter). Invite local dignitaries to participate.
3. Offer demonstrations — butter, ice-cream, craft demonstrations, etc. If possible, offer free samples of the finished product. Where possible, operate those artifacts designated for such purposes.
4. Invite your local media to your institution as a means of promoting public awareness. If you have access to a cable television channel in your community, you may be able to work with them to produce a program on your museum or gallery.
5. Encourage membership in your facility. Offer complimentary membership privileges to your first 10 visitors on International Museums Day.
6. Offer giveaway items to your first 5 or 10 visitors or to every 5th visitor, etc. These needn't be expensive items, but will offer some incentive — postcards, hastynotes, pin or button, etc.
7. Invite a guest speaker to your facility — this might be a local historian, someone from a neighbouring museum, or someone with a slide show which would be of interest to your visitors.
8. Invite a local craftsperson to demonstrate or to lecture on his or her craft.
9. Work with your local school system — offer special tours, organize an art or essay contest in the schools in your area. Art galleries might want to invite children to paint a mural or do some sculpture. Contests are always popular for history museums — there are countless ideas for "old fashioned" contests and games.
10. Plan an exchange visit to a nearby museum or gallery.
11. Honour a museum/gallery "Volunteer of the Month or Year."
12. Invite a local band or singing/dance group to perform at your institution.
13. Plan a puppet show, or invite a local group of puppeteers to perform.
14. Plan a special exhibition. Perhaps you might invite a local collector to display his or her collection at your facility. Or you may decide to put together a "What's It" quiz from your own collection.
15. Offer special sales at your gift shop.
16. Purchase an ad in your local newspaper in cooperation with the other museums and galleries in your area. This will enable all participants to obtain the benefit of a larger ad, but at reduced individual cost.
17. Prepare a bulletin board display of posters/literature from other museums and galleries across the province. In this way, you will be helping to promote other museums and galleries and the Saskatchewan Museums Association, as well as yourself.

These are but a few ideas . . . They were selected as activities which could be undertaken with minimum cost or time required for implementation.

We are looking forward to hearing what *you* did for International Museums Day 1982. We hope to be able to update this list yearly, based on your experiences and creative input. Let us hear from you!