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JACQUELINE DU, MA

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# What's in a Museum Trip? A close look at how museum educators can facilitate critical thinking

JACQUELINE DU, MA  
City University of New York

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**Keywords** Museum Education; Critical Thinking; Kindergarten; Inquiry-Based Teaching

**Abstract** Elementary school groups visit museums to provide their students with an enriched learning experience supplementing classroom lessons. Museum trips are usually limited in time; about 60-90 minutes including transitions between arrival and departure, and often last-minute transportation woes. How can educators guarantee a successful learning experience in a constricted time frame to students they are meeting for the first time? This article considers voices in the field of museum education, examining critical pedagogy and previous field research of students' art experiences in museums. Through a case study of kindergarten learners at the Brooklyn Museum, New York, this article presents support for the use of essential questions in framing museum visits for school groups.

**About the Author** Jacqueline Du is an art educator for the New York City Department of Education. She is the co-founder of Young Artist Zine Alliance, a free workshop for NYC teens. She was an Education Fellow at the Brooklyn Museum and has also taught school programs at The Museum of Arts & Design and family programs at The Whitney Museum of American Art. She presents regularly at conferences including the National Art Educators Association and the NYC Museum Educators Roundtable. Her work can also be found in the publication *Museums and Public Art?* from Cambridge Scholars Publishing. Jacqueline received her BFA from Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University, and MA from City College at City University of New York.

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School trips to museums are exciting excursions and can be a fantastic motivating factor for students of any age. Venturing out of school can go beyond amusement when museum educators are able to provide students with an enriching intellectual experience. This article offers suggestions for museum educators to facilitate critical thinking for student groups. In this action-based research project, the primary question was: how can museum educators guarantee a successful learning experience within a one-time school visit?

This research analyzed the effectiveness of the use of an essential question for school groups visiting the Brooklyn Museum, New York. Essential questions provoke thought inquiry and more questions in the student. They are often used by classroom teachers as clearly stated topic questions for their lessons. The author first observed one group's visit where the museum educator did not have an expressed essential question and learned that many factors affected the students' thinking and learning. In moments of pause in conversation, the classroom teacher who brought the group often interjected and posed questions that demanded a correct answer, testing students' knowledge on material they learned in the classroom. While this engaged the students in their thinking about the related topic, this discouraged the museum educator from asking questions that perhaps would have led to an



expanded discussion about the art object and theme. While knowledge gain has been studied as a measurement of student learning,<sup>1</sup> fact-based questions stand in opposition with critical pedagogy and current museum educators' aims. At the conclusion of their guided visit, the museum educator gathered the group in a large open area of the museum and prompted the students to make summative statements about what they learned. Instead, students demonstrated curiosity about the architecture and were not able to demonstrate any conclusive statements about the art objects and theme of the visit. This suggested that the students had not thought critically about the theme throughout the visit.



Figure 1: Kindergarten students examine an artwork at the Brooklyn Museum.

The next phase explored using an essential question to guide the students' thinking about the theme. At the Brooklyn Museum, guided gallery visits aim to impart bigger ideas and spark further inquiry. Museum educators build their lessons around an essential question which is defined as:

*The essential question is open-ended, thought-provoking, and intellectually engaging. It calls for higher-order thinking, points towards transferrable ideas, and sparks further inquiry. The essential question underpins and links all elements of a visit.<sup>2</sup>*

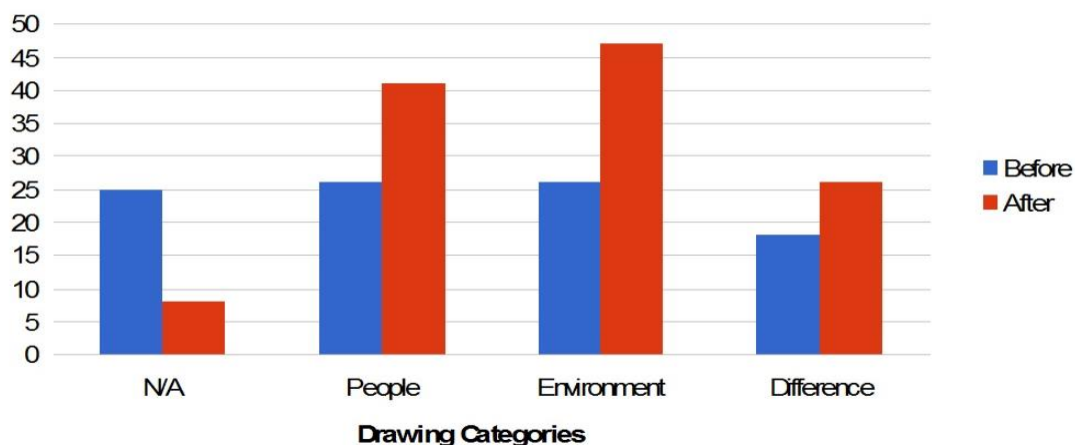
Each group of kindergarten students and their classroom teachers were asked to respond to the same question at the beginning and end of their visit to the museum: What are communities?<sup>3</sup> The kindergarteners were given a blank form for their responses, similar in

design to worksheets from their classrooms, with a box for drawing at the top of the page, and widely spaced lines for writing at the bottom half of the page. While this question was carefully chosen through meetings with the school teachers and discussion about what themes the students were learning about in their classrooms, museum educators can gather curricular themes through school contacts during trip registration.

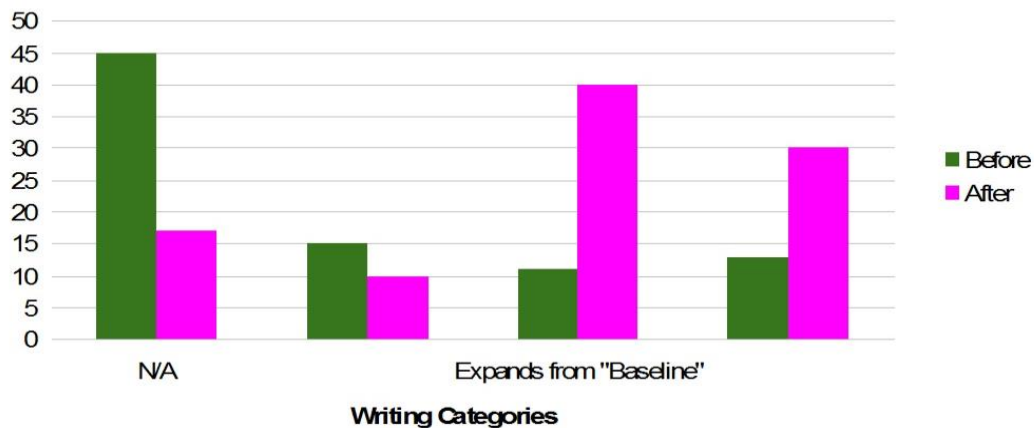
All four groups of students viewed the same artworks and participated in the same activities throughout each of their visits. Students posed as figures in *Winter Scene in Brooklyn* an 1819-1820 painting of Dutch-style barns and houses in downtown Brooklyn by Francis Guy. They interviewed one another about their own communities and discussed the community roles of artist Faith Ringgold's figures in *For the Woman's House*, a 1971 painting originally created to adorn the walls of Rikers Island Women's prison. The kindergarteners also sketched the shapes that comprised the figures in *Ebony Family*, a dress with a 1968 velvet collage by Jae Jarrell. The students then went to the art studio for some printmaking on the theme of community. They worked together in groups, printing together on a large poster board, accumulating their images of favorite community places and future visions of themselves. Students created artwork about their friends, families, and places they love to go.

In their first form responses, many of the drawing and writing areas were blank since the students were unsure of how to answer the question.<sup>4</sup> Many students wrote similar responses such as "communities are people in a group" or "people who work together," which I found mirrored their classroom teachers' responses. These initial responses were the "baseline" definition for each class.

### Drawings Before and After Galleries and Studio

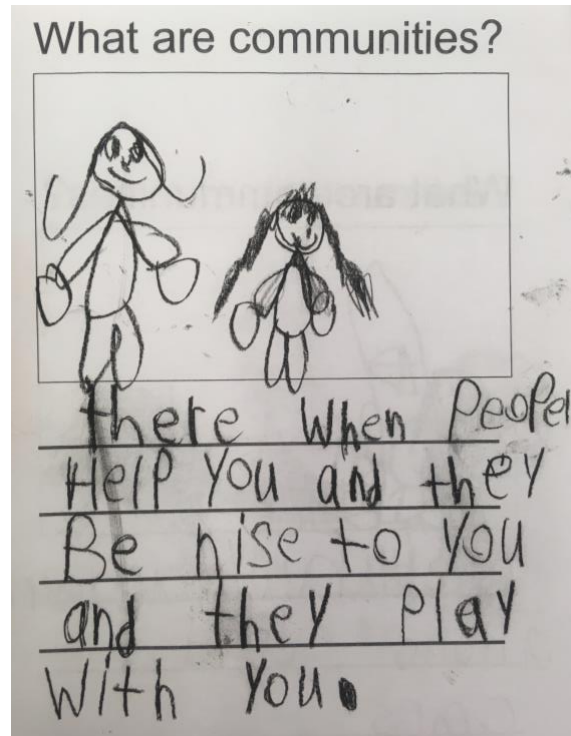
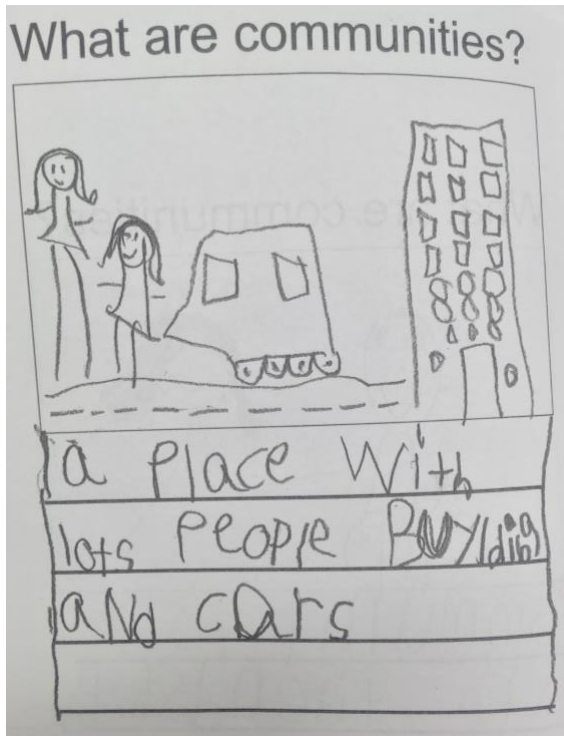


## Writing Responses Before and After Galleries and Studios



Figures 2 and 3: Visualization of data from student drawings and visualization of data from student writing responses.

In their second responses, most kindergarteners excitedly filled in the forms on their own with more elaborate drawings and lengthier sentences with more complex vocabulary.<sup>5</sup> This was impressive given that the 5 and 6-year-old children were just learning to read and write on their own. In their second drawings, they included more people<sup>6</sup> in closer proximity to one another, expressing a critical understanding that communities are defined by people being together, interacting with one another, with different roles, performing different actions or jobs. Many people were drawn in close proximity to one another, for example, some are holding hands, and expressing joy through smiles on their faces. This was interpreted as friendship, which was a community role we discussed at the artworks. Another students' drawing depicted people united in their togetherness with matching shirts. One drawing showed figures sitting together on a rug or table, perhaps reading books or making art. The second form response drawings also included more references to specific places with an eight-story building, a playground with a child at the top of a slide, and a detailed sidewalk.<sup>7</sup> These details demonstrated that the students had related the theme of "community" to their own lives, creating meaning for themselves. Their ability to express their varied understandings of communities with examples seen in the museums' artworks, as well as examples from their own lives, demonstrated that they had thought deeply about the topic of community.



Figures 4 and 5: Student drawing and writing response to the essential question.

The distinction of an educator-led museum-based thematic learning experience is that students can engage in discussion and activities surrounding an essential question within multiple contexts in a short amount of time. Original art objects incorporate a temporal element, connecting students with historical moments. Ideas can exist beyond secondary texts and reference materials students are accustomed to in their classrooms. The museum space offers concrete and tangible experiences in paintings and artifacts. To support school groups in making the most of their trip experience, museum educators should aim for students to engage in critical thinking about the art objects.

In the field of museum education, critical thinking and higher order thinking has been defined and measured in a myriad of ways. Educational philosopher John Dewey considered learning to be an evolving process that flows between learners and educators,<sup>8</sup> with intellect inseparable from emotion.<sup>9</sup> The antiquated model of a dictating lecturer and the passive student was renounced by the activist educator Paolo Freire who declared that learning should be problem-posing, in which students and educators “become jointly responsible for a process in which all grow.”<sup>10</sup> The museum educator today engages students in an inquiry-based model, facilitating students to build their own meanings and connections with artworks throughout their museum experience. Applying an essential question to the planning process allows for their learning to be specific while addressing the overarching theme.

Brooklyn Museum's use of the term higher-order thinking can be traced to past analysis of critical thinking in the field of museum education. Several educators and researchers have studied student learning within art museums and measured the impact of inquiry-based experiences on higher-order cognitive thinking. The early 90's came with a renewal away from docent-guided informational tours in the field of museum education with co-founders of Visual

Thinking Strategies (VTS): cognitive psychologist Abigail Housen, and educational researcher Philip Yenawine. They coined the usage of three specific questions: What is going on here?; What do you see that makes you say that?; and What more can you find.<sup>11</sup> This inquiry-based approach is frequently incorporated into experiences led by museum educators today. Housen and Yenawine found evidence that VTS “caused the growth of critical thinking and enables its transfer to other contexts and content.”<sup>12</sup> At the Nasher Museum of Art, educator Juline Chevalier measured when students were able to engage in critical thinking beyond the surface appearances of the art objects— of key details beyond color, line, and shape; how objects may have been used; and narrative elements beyond the scene depicted in a painting.<sup>13</sup> Two recent studies conducted at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art also discovered that the educator-led art experience had a positive impact on students' critical thinking skills.<sup>14</sup> These measurements of student learning provide concrete examples for museum educators to model their markers of students' critical thinking.

How can museum educators best ensure that they lead students towards critical thinking? When educators set goals and draft markers of student achievement in a museum setting, we can aim for students to engage in critical thinking within a specific topic and essential question. In this research, exploring the chosen theme through an essential question at each art object allowed students the opportunity to engage in critical thinking about the specific theme continuously throughout their museum experience. Additionally, studio artmaking following the art object viewing component allowed students to visualize a personal connection with the theme of the visit. For school groups visiting museums, learning in a short amount of time framed by an essential question allows students to engage in critical thinking about a topic in relation to their personal lives.

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Figure 2: Visualization of data from student drawings.

Figure 3: Visualization of data from student writing responses.

Figure 4: Student drawing and writing response to the essential question.

Figure 5: Student drawing and writing response to the essential question.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> J Donald, “The Measurement of Learning in the Museum,” *Canadian Journal of Education*, Vol. 16, No. 3(1991): 374-375.

<sup>2</sup> Brooklyn Museum Education Division, “Gallery Experience Map” (internal documents, Brooklyn Museum, 2016): 1-4.

<sup>3</sup> Author taught four kindergarten class groups in total, administering the form to all classes.

<sup>4</sup> In the first survey, 45 out of 90 students left the writing area blank or wrote incomprehensible text.

<sup>5</sup> In the second survey, teachers and chaperoning parents were asked to allow their children to fill out the forms without any assistance. 17 out of 91 students left the writing area blank or wrote incomprehensible text. A significant number, 29 students, wrote expanded definitions for their second survey. In total, 40 students wrote comprehensive sentences for the written area.



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<sup>6</sup> 26 of the first drawings included two or more people, whereas 41 of the second drawings included two or more people.

<sup>7</sup> In the first drawings, 26 included some suggestion of an environment or location. In their second drawings, 47 included a suggestion of environment or location.

<sup>8</sup> John Dewey, "Individuality and experience," in *Art and Education: a Collection of essays*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (Merion, PA: The Barnes Foundation Press, 1929): 35.

<sup>9</sup> John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, (New York: Penguin Group, 2005), 77.

<sup>10</sup> Paolo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 1<sup>st</sup> ed. (New York: Continuum, 1970), 80.

<sup>11</sup> Abigail Housen, "Aesthetic Thought, Critical Thinking and Transfer," *Arts and Learning Research Journal*, Vol. 18, No. 1, (2002): 45-46.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Juline Chevalier, "Words & Pictures: Literacy, Art and Common Core Together," *Journal of Museum Education*, Vol. 40, No. 3, (2015): 227-237.

<sup>14</sup> Brian Kisida, Daniel H. Bowen, & Jay P. Greene, "Measuring Critical Thinking: Results From an Art Museum Field Trip Experiment," *Journal of Research on Educational Effectiveness*, Vol. 9 (2016): 171-187.

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