



Peabody Museum

of Archaeology and Ethnology at Harvard University

11 Divinity Ave. Cambridge Massachusetts 02138 617-496-1027 www.peabody.harvard.edu

InVisible Museum Work

People, Spaces, and Relationships: A Discussion Guide

The goal of this guide is to help students think about the work of museums while experiencing a museum gallery, in particular the tasks and roles that may not be visible to them. The purpose is to ask students to consider the museum not just as a singular institution, but as an amalgamation of individuals and relationships that together produce the space students now experience. With this guide, students should be able to locate themselves as among these individuals and relationships.

This guide was inspired by spaces and staff within Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology. While it is most directly applicable for use within this museum, we encourage people to consider this guide even when visiting other institutions.

It should be accompanied by the document, Peabody Museum Staff Roles.

Instructions for Discussion Leader

The discussion questions provided below should be used in conjunction with the associated list of Museum Staff Roles. You should review these questions and this list in advance when planning your visit to the museum, to decide whether there are particular areas where you would like to focus your students' discussion and how you may adjust the questions provided accordingly. Think about how you want to prepare your students in advance of their visit, and how you may want to follow up after the fact on the ideas that arise in conversation while there.

Below are some suggestions for structuring your visit:

Before museum visit: Ask students to read through the Peabody Museum Staff Roles

Consider whether you want to ask your students to answer some of the discussion guide questions *prior* to their arrival at the museum. In particular, you may want them to articulate their expectations of the museum and of their emotional reactions to it beforehand, so that they can actively engage with these expectations upon arrival. An advantage of doing this would be to give your students more time and opportunity to deal directly with these questions. An advantage of waiting to introduce these questions is that it will allow students greater

opportunity for an unmediated experience of the museum, so they can enter the space not already looking for particular things.

Regardless, these topics always benefit from reflection, and may not be adequately addressed on the spot. Finding ways to return to the conversation at a later time will likely yield further interesting insights.

During museum visit:

- Before dispersing within the gallery, ask your class to reflect briefly on the list of Museum Roles. Consider:
 - Does anything about this list and these roles surprise you? What and why?
 - Do you expect to approach this museum space differently, having read it?
- Allow students to explore the exhibit unmediated for 5-10 minutes, after which distribute the discussion questions for students to jot down responses.
Remind students beforehand to bring pencils with them! They should not be using pens in museum galleries. Also recommend they bring a hard surface such as a clipboard or notebook they can easily write on.
- Leave time at the end of your visit to reconvene as a class for students to share their answers and discuss their different experiences of the exhibit, insights, questions, etc.
 - ◇ Alternative: Give your students time to discuss their answers and experiences with one another in small groups first, while still exploring the exhibit.
 - ◇ Alternative: Leave all class discussion for your next class meeting, and give your students as much time as possible to explore the exhibit and have informal conversations with one another before all reconvening.
 - ◇ Alternative: Invite a Peabody Museum staff member to answer questions students may have about museums and museum work.

After museum visit:

- Discuss the students' responses to each question, challenging them to think about the subsurface museum work.
- Have students write down their question for the instructor to submit to Peabody staff; discuss the Peabody's responses during next section.
- Assign a further reflection question. E.g.:
 - ◇ Choose one of the roles from the pre-reading list. Write three specific ways in which their work may have impacted the exhibit you viewed and their significance to the space.
 - ◇ Select one or two visual elements of this display and explain why you think they were actively chosen.
 - ◇ How might you change the exhibit in order to make an aspect of this work more visible, or to strengthen what you perceive as a goal or intended message of the exhibit?
Note: You may not replace the exhibit in its entirety, but should consider whether or how changing an aspect of the existing exhibit may alter its overall impact.
Note, too: YOU MAY NOT SIMPLY ADD MORE EXHIBIT TEXT.



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- How do you experience the museum space?
 - How does it make you feel?
 - What emotions are evoked?
 - What do you like? Not like? Are there areas you particularly want to explore or to avoid?
 - Are you starting to formulate an analysis of the space?
 - Can you separate your analysis from your experience of the space? (if you can, try only to experience the space; limit your efforts to discerning what emotions you feel there, and limit your analysis to articulating what is inspiring these emotions)

- What expectations may you have (un)consciously brought with you into the museum?
 - What did you expect to see and/or experience in the gallery?
 - (E.g. Did you expect to enjoy the exhibit? To be bored? To find a particular voice or narrative within the labels?)
 - Did you expect to feel included in the museum?
 - Do you expect generally to find lines of inclusion/exclusion operating within museums?
 - If yes, how would you draw those lines?

- What do you think you are intended to experience in this space, from the perspective of those responsible for creating it?
 - Which museum roles or kinds of museum work do you attribute to producing this space?
 - What might those creating it want you to take away from this space?
 - What makes you think this? (provide specific examples from the gallery)
 - How well does your experience match whatever it is you think you are *meant* to experience?

- Think of this space in terms of museum roles:
 - Which museum staff are present here? Whose work are you experiencing?
 - Are there roles here that you may not have previously considered?
 - Are any of them surprising? If yes, can you express why?
 - Do any of them impact your experience of the space?
 - What sort of individual and/or collaborative work can you discern?
 - What decisions do you think went into making this particular space?
 - What relationships are you witnessing?

- What people/relationships may be present in this space and impacting it who *aren't* museum staff?
 - e.g. university deans, faculty, university staff; university students; public visitors; creator communities; donors; others

- How much of this work do you think is invisible?
 - How much of this work is, in fact, visible if you look for it?

- Why do you think so much of this work is invisible?
 - Why do you think the visible work may *seem* invisible?
 - What are the consequences of work being (in)visible?
 - Is the museum responsible for this invisibility?
 - Does the museum have a responsibility to address or change the relative visibility of people's work?
 - Do visitors have a responsibility or role in any of this?
 - (e.g. in creating this invisibility, perpetuating it, changing it)

- Does this/how does this tie into conversations regarding (in)visible work elsewhere in society?