

NATIONAL DOCENT SYMPOSIUM 2015

TALKS ON THE DOT: BRIDGING THE GAP FOR THE TOUR ADVERSE

WHAT ARE DOT TALKS?

Talks on the dot, or Dot Talks, are 10 minute scheduled talks given by a docent (we call them gallery guides) in front of a work of art.

The idea for the dots came from Melissa Smith's experience at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa.¹

Melissa developed the idea at the AGO to make the dots bigger, have more of them, and to ensure that they were safe. She had the AGO designers work with her on flexible red rubber dots that are hard to miss, and are slip proof.

Red rubber pads have been produced with a time for each slot the talk is offered, and typically the docent giving the talk will put the pad down in front of the art about 30 minutes to an hour in advance, so people can plan to come back if they see the dot, and are interested.

The Dot Talks are typically given in front of one work of art, but some docents give them for a room of art, or for a provocative pairing of pieces.

Our docents have had great success giving Dot Talks in our children's gallery to small children.

¹ In 2010, Beatrice Djharbin, Education Officer, Léo Tousignant Chief of Visitor Services, Megan Richardson Chief of Public Programming and Learning, and Gary Goodacre, Manager of Public Programming and Learning formed a committee to develop a better vehicle to feature docent and visitor engagement. They formulated a signage strategy that involved grey dots placed in front of artworks and a larger sign that indicated where the dots could be found in the gallery. This larger sign involved mini reproductions of the artworks, so that visitors had a visual cue to help find the dots.

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The resources required have been quite minimal: we initially produced 6 pads for \$1200.

WHY DOT TALKS?

- BENEFITS FOR THE VISITOR:

Have you ever offered visitors a scheduled tour, and been asked: “but how long will it last?”

This happens to me a lot. The AGO offers scheduled Highlights tours and Feature tours that last about an hour. Many people are leery of committing to a tour for that long for a number of reasons:

- they may not really be sure if they want a tour for an hour because they are new to the museum, or new to the activity of taking a tour, or in Toronto especially where we have a very multicultural population, they may be worried about understanding the language
- they are mobility impaired, or elderly, and may not wish – or even be able -- to walk around the galleries for an hour
- they have small children or teens and they are really not sure how its going to work out, but they don't want to split the family up for an hour

So a short ten minute talk in one spot can be especially ideal for these 3 groups of people. The visitor who isn't sure about a tour, or who is new to tours, can get a taste. The visitor who is elderly or mobility impaired can take a seat and sit for the entire talk. Children or teens may be able to commit to 10 minutes or a family can briefly split up.

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In addition, a good talk can whet the interest of the visitor to see more, and give him or her, **some tips** on how to view the rest of the collection. And of course this mini introduction to a tour can encourage them to participate in a longer tour. And to keep coming back!

Looking at the Falk Motivational Identities of museum visitors, the Dot Talks hit three key audience segments – The Explorers, the Facilitators, and the Experience Seekers. To summarize: “Explorers visit museums because it ... appeals to their curiosity. They typically don’t want a structured visit. ... Facilitators visit museums in order to satisfy the needs and desires of someone they care about rather than themselves. They are price conscious and aware of time. ... Experience Seekers collect experiences.”² In relation to the dots, the unique pop up nature of discovering a talk, the short time frame, and the less structured engagement appeal to these quite different types of visitors.

BENEFITS FOR THE DOCENT:

Docents at the AGO love doing dots.

There is no time lost moving from one piece to another as in a regular tour.
And herding crowds ...

Dots give docents the flexibility to decide on a work of art, and what to focus on.

² Duplessis, Anoinette. The Five Minute Falk: A very brief explanation of John Falk’s Visitor Identity Related Motivations. iMuseum Symposium Toronto March 24•25 2011. Accessed June 2015.

<http://www.museumsonario.ca/newsarticle/publications/imuseum/pdf/RTAudienceResearch-FalkVisitorMotivationHandout.pdf>

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Docents appreciate the opportunity to research one piece in depth, and add variety to their shift by changing the subject of their dots as they wish.

The gallery can have multiple dots per day, so there are more opportunities for docents to do what they love: engaging visitors in the exhibits.

- BENEFITS FOR THE MUSEUM

Although the prime motivation for the Dot Talks is visitor satisfaction, we have found that they bring many benefits to the AGO:

The Dot Talks can build on the excitement of a special exhibit, and help the visitor to get the most out of it

The museum can continue to provide audioguides for special shows (and receive the revenue from them) while providing enriching personal interactions with museum guides which do not compete with the audioguides

Crowd management is enhanced because with a dot there is no need to move large crowds of people through multiple rooms and floors.

There is an element of surprise when people come upon a dot

The Gallery Guide programme is given more visibility within the institution. The institution looks good. The docents look good. The visitor wins.

And finally, there is an opportunity to bring in community guides for special exhibits.

For example had special yellow dots made for temporary community youth docents to give talks on the dot for an edgy exhibit of the works of Jean-Michel Basquiat. These dots were funded by a Canadian foundation started by our first

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black female governor general to work with disadvantaged youth through the arts.

WHAT MAKES A GOOD DOT TALK?

(NOTE: HANDOUT OF TIPSHEET)

1. Location, location, location.

Choose a spot that gets traffic – but has room for a crowd to gather around. Or place the dot in a better spot to collect visitors, who you then take to the site of the talk.

2. Advertise!

Ensure that the front of the house knows where the dots will be that day and can direct visitors accordingly.

Make sure the dot pad is laid down well in advance of the talk.

Tactfully mention the upcoming talk to people in the gallery who might be interested, and encourage them to come.

3. Hook them!

Grab their attention within the first few minutes -- or they may drift away. Try to ask a challenging open-ended question of the audience very soon in your talk after you have briefly introduced yourself and the piece. Or make a provocative statement about the work. We have found that people often love to be asked to look closer and offer their thoughts. And they enjoy being privy to an

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important, provocative bit of information about a piece they might not otherwise learn about.

For example these paired stone carvings: An introduction might go like this: “The piece on the right is called Ship Captain and was carved around 1840 by an anonymous Haida (West coast First Nations) artist. The Carving on the left is called Queen Elizabeth and was carved in 1998 by the Inuit carver David Ruben Piqtoukin. Then you could ask this question: Why do you think the curator may have placed these two pieces next to each other?”

4. Get personal!

You’ve picked the art work for the dot: you might tell the visitors why. Tell them your personal connection to the work, why it appeals to you. In this case, of the two colonial figures, I might mention something in the news about the Aboriginal culture or protests, or something like our recent Truth and Reconciliation Report.

5. Repeat comments from the floor in case others don’t hear them. Remember the gallery behind them may be noisy.

6. Look around at everyone and make eye contact. They are important (or you wouldn’t be there).

7. Have a few open-ended questions prepared in advance to ask the visitors to encourage them to look closer. For example, the one just mentioned, “Why do you think the curator may have placed these two pieces next to each other?”

8. Have a few themes or important points about the art to which you would like to lead the audience. In the example above, a discussion can ensue of anonymous vs signed artists, the condescending posture of one vs the conciliatory posture of the other figure, the history of Canadian relations with Aboriginal peoples, and of Aboriginal art in the 150 years between the pieces, the materials used. etc. etc. You can alternate funding information with

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questions as you elicit responses to the art. A give and take. An informative conversation between the docent and the visitors that will occur over 10 minutes.

9. Segue into your ending at about the 9 minute mark by suggesting what the visitors might wish to look for when they are looking at the exhibits independently. (In our example, we might suggest they look for the Canadian Aboriginal art that is in most of the rooms alongside Canadian “settler” art, in conversation with the settler art, and ask yourself why the curator might have juxtaposed the Aboriginal and settler art in the room.) Mention any tours happening later. Thank them, and offer to stay and answer questions.

VIDEO: A SAMPLE DOT TALK (12 MINUTES)

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NEXT STEPS

Before I turn it over to you for discussion, I want to mention that we see great potential for the future of this programme.

I have already mentioned the children's dots, and the community youth dots.

There is also the possibility of doing Dot Talks on themes such as colour, or landscape, and so forth.

Or Dot Talks in different languages, which would be great in a multicultural city like Toronto.

Or Dot Talks as an introduction to an optional longer tour.

Or conversely an optional Dot Talk at the end of a regular tour to look at one piece of art in more depth. There are lots of possibilities for this simple, yet elegant tool.

DISCUSSION: COULD DOT TALKS WORK IN YOUR INSTITUTION?

So, now over to you. Can you see Dot Talks in your institution? Do you have any questions?