

From Passive Viewing to Engaged Inquiry: Positioning and Reconstruction of Museum-Based Study Tour

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Abstract: As an emerging form of study tour, museum-based study tour has garnered significant attention from various sectors and possesses considerable potential for development. However, within these activities, organizers often prioritize the "study tour" rather than the "museum" itself, leading to a phenomenon where "museum-based study tours" essentially become "study tours at museums". To clarify the role of museums within museum-based study tours, this paper explores the positioning and distinctive characteristics. Furthermore, it addresses some challenges currently encountered in museum-based study tours and proposes reflections for their implementation.

Keywords: Museum, Study Tour, Museum-Based Study Tour, Education.

1. Introduction

In recent years, China has witnessed a surge in the popularity of study tours. Broadly defined, these are travel activities undertaken with the primary goal of research and learning. With education as their core objective and itineraries structured around specific academic themes, study tours demonstrate greater focus and specialization compared to conventional tourism. Currently predominant in the education and tourism sectors, study tours have also gained a foothold in the cultural heritage and museum industry, which leverages its unique cultural resources to become a significant study and practice education base [1]. Museums endowed with abundant cultural resources function as social education venues for the public, demonstrating significant alignment with the objectives of study tours. Consequently, many organizations and schools have partnered with museums to develop a series of museum-based study tour programs tailored for primary and secondary school students.

However, in many study tour programs, museums often serve merely as venues. While organizers capitalize on the cultural resources of museums, they frequently overlook the institution's unique characteristics. Museums tend to participate in these activities in a secondary role [1], resulting in a lack of distinction between museum-based study tours and other types of study tours. The root cause of this issue lies in the imprecise positioning of museum-based study tours. Many organizers categorize any "viewing and learning activities in a museum" as a "museum-based study tour," and many museums themselves share this simplified understanding. They equate learning in a museum with a genuine study tour experience, focusing primarily on guided tours and explanations when collaborating with schools or institutions. This approach fails to leverage the museum's inherent advantages, thereby weakening the program's professionalism. Furthermore, as most study tours primarily target primary and secondary school students, many organizers tend to design activities that mimic classroom instruction. This turns the study tour into "classroom teaching within a museum," leading to oversimplified, one-dimensional, and monotonous activity formats.

2. The Positioning of Museums in Museum-Based Study Tours

Museum-based study tours, as a component of the broader study tour framework, must align with and serve the general objective for study travel [2]. The conceptual foundation of museum-based study tours is derived from the concept of study tours, which inherently dictates that their logical structure cannot deviate from the educational characteristic of study travel itself. However, as independent cultural institutions, museums inevitably exert a reciprocal influence, shaping the very model of study tours. In other words, the positioning of museum-based study tours must not only respond to the overall framework of study tours but also emphasize the unique cultural, knowledge-based, and educational functions of museums.

Nevertheless, definitions of study tours put forth by relevant scholars and departments in recent years have been limited, consequently imposing significant constraints on the conceptualization of museum-based study tours. The 2016 "Service Specifications for Study Tours" defines a study tour as: "an educational tourism activity targeting primarily primary and secondary school students, using group travel as a vehicle, aiming to enhance student competencies, and leveraging social resources such as tourist attractions for experiential education and inquiry-based learning." [3] In the same year, guidelines issued by the Ministry of Education and 10 other departments emphasized the significance and goals of study tours for primary and secondary school students. Both documents identify "primary and secondary school students" as primary participants and stress the educational purposes of study tours. Should the conceptual framework for museum-based study tours be derived exclusively from this 2016 definition, then the organizers logically become "educational departments and schools," and the participants are confined to "primary and secondary school students." Such framing reduces museum-based study tours to off-campus practical activities within the school curriculum, where the museum serves merely as a venue for activities conducted in cooperation with schools and relevant departments, thereby lacking the expression of its own intrinsic value. Consequently, numerous study programs are

designed as extensions of the school curriculum, leading to a gradual narrowing and even "another part of the school class" of study tours. This trend naturally affects museum-based study tours, orienting many activities towards fulfilling tasks within the educational system rather than fully leveraging the museum's strengths in cultural learning.

While it is true that primary and secondary school students constitute a major participant group, and study tours can be a form of extracurricular practice, this does not mean study tours are only "after-class practice." Although museums are often regarded by educational authorities as a "second classroom," they are ultimately not schools. Cognitive education is not the fundamental duty of a museum; museum education should uphold a diverse educational philosophy catering to the needs of different groups. The same should hold for museum-based study tours [1]. Therefore, while study tours for primary and secondary school students are a crucial part of the study tour ecosystem, focusing solely on this demographic leads to a homogenization and juvenilization of the study tour.

The 2022 "Service Specifications for Study Tours" (Draft for Comment) defines study tours as: "an educational tourism activity organized and arranged by organizers according to plan, which combines inquiry-based learning with travel experiences through collective travel and centralized accommodation." If this definition is extended to museum-based study tours, then the "organizer" could be the "museum" itself, not limited to "educational departments and schools," and the target participants would no longer be confined to primary and secondary school students. Such a definition would allow museums to assume a leading role, facilitating the design of study activities that leverage their unique advantages and demonstrate their intrinsic value, rather than tailoring programs solely to school curricula. However, there is currently no authoritative or clear definition of "museum-based study tours" in academia, reflecting ongoing exploration by experts and scholars into questions such as what truly constitutes a "museum-based study tour," how it differs from other types of study tours, and how it should be implemented. Therefore, the author argues that addressing these issues requires first examining the most distinctive feature of museum-based study tours, that is, what sets them apart from other study tours. Only by clarifying this point of differentiation can museum-based study tours establish their unique value within the broader study tour system, avoiding homogenization, marginalization, or being simplistically understood as "visits to museums." The articulation of this conceptual framework will be instrumental in advancing the systemic development, standardized implementation, and professionalization of museum-based study tours.

3. Museums Represent the Defining Feature of Museum-Based Study Tours

The latest definition of a museum released by the International Council of Museums states: "A museum is a not-for-profit, permanent institution in the service of society that researches, collects, conserves, interprets and exhibits tangible and intangible heritage..." This demonstrates that a museum is not merely a venue for displaying cultural relics but an institution endowed with numerous functions. This implies that museums undertake not only the mission of

knowledge dissemination but also play an irreplaceable role in social education, the construction of public culture, and the shaping of cultural identity. The collections, exhibitions, physical spaces, and public educational programs within a museum collectively constitute a knowledge field that learners can "enter," "experience," and "interact" with, thereby providing inherent interdisciplinary and immersive learning conditions for study tours.

Study tours require a clearly defined academic theme. Given the distinctive "label" or character of each museum, the process of arranging the itinerary essentially involves selecting museums that align with this theme. An exemplary museum-based study tour must feature museums that are intrinsically relevant to the chosen theme, and the specific study activities should be designed around these museums' resources. Simultaneously, each museum possesses a strong, unique identity. Consequently, the most distinctive feature of a museum-based study tour is the museum itself. Without the museum, the study tour would lose its differentiating factor from other types of study tours. It is precisely for this reason that the uniqueness of a museum-based study tour stems not from the "travel" component but from the autonomous utilization, in-depth exploration, and educational transformation of museum resources. The more prominently the museum's own character is highlighted, the more distinct the study tour becomes. Specifically, the leading role of the museum is the foundation for conducting a museum-based study tour. Crafting study programs and curricula through a museum-centric lens and implementing activities aligned with the museum's core missions and goals is fundamental to unlocking the museum's inherent value and significance [1]. The museum is not merely a stop on the itinerary or a passive venue, nor is it an appendage to classroom education; rather, it is the core of the experience. In other words, the reason study tours can effectively extend classroom knowledge to real-world contexts is that museums provide a visual, situational, and structured learning environment. Students' observations, questions, note-taking, and discussions within the museum are all facilitated by the exhibition contents, artifact information, and educational activities, leading to a deeper learning experience.

4. Practical Reflections on Museum-Based Study Tours

Recognizing the museum as the defining characteristic of museum-based study tours is crucial for clarifying their positioning. However, enhancing the quality of these programs and shifting from merely "study tours at museums" to genuinely "museum-based study tours" requires concrete practical strategies. Currently, many museum study tours remain limited to traditional activities such as guided visits, lectures, and note-taking, which fail to meet learners' inquiry-based needs or reflect the professionalism of museum education. Therefore, a systematic upgrade is necessary—focusing on curriculum design, audience categorization, and educational objectives—to establish a sustainable development mechanism for museum-based study tours.

4.1. Collaborating with Schools and Relevant Institutions to Design Innovative Curricula

Currently, the primary participants in study tours in China are still primary and secondary school students. However, as

museums are not institutions specifically designed for students, museums need to collaborate with schools or external organizations to develop museum-based study tours. At the same time, as mentioned earlier, museums are not schools, and their educational function should not be fundamentally centered on cognitive education. Simply relocating the classroom to a museum may lead to boredom and resistance from students. Therefore, museum-based study tours should be designed from the museum's perspective, integrating its collections to highlight distinctive features, while also aligning with school curricula to deliver innovative and expansive learning experiences for young learners. Furthermore, innovation in course design can be reflected in the adoption of technological means-such as digital exhibitions, AR-guided tours, and interactive terminals-to enhance student engagement and transform study tours into environments conducive to knowledge construction rather than passive information reception.

4.2. Categorizing Target Audience Groups

The audience for museum-based study tours is not limited to primary and secondary school students but includes individuals across all age groups. Therefore, when designing such a program, organizers must first identify the target demographic before proceeding with planning. While students remain a primary participant group, it is inadequate to design study tours exclusively for them. The current predominance of young learners partly stems from the fact that most study tours in recent years have been tailored specifically for this demographic, overlooking the needs of other populations. In reality, audiences of different ages, cultural backgrounds, and learning objectives possess distinctly varied educational needs. For instance, adult participants may focus more on the cultural context and historical value behind exhibits, family groups may prefer interactive experiential activities, while elderly participants might prioritize leisurely exploration and general understanding. Thus, categorizing the audience and developing targeted museum-based study tours is crucial for advancing not only such programs but the entire study tour field. By adopting an audience-specific approach, museums can allocate educational resources more precisely and design a diversified curriculum system.

4.3. Defining the Objectives of Study Tours

Since 2016, when the Ministry of Education and ten other relevant departments proposed to "incorporate study tours into educational plans," the development of such programs has seen a shift in motivation. For many, the primary goal is no longer cultivation but rather the fulfillment of quantitative targets. Consequently, study tours have been transformed from a form of curriculum into a mandatory task. Museum-based study tours organized merely to meet these indicators often adopt a simplistic "tour-and-lecture" format, which fails to engage students and frequently results in "travel without learning." In essence, such activities deviate from the original intent of museum-based study tours and, strictly speaking, do not qualify as genuine study tours-they are merely conducted under the guise of "study tour." However, this phenomenon is now widespread, leading the public to misunderstand "museum-based study tours" as nothing more than organized

museum visits. This misconception, in turn, encourages more programs to adopt the same superficial format, creating a vicious cycle. Therefore, a crucial prerequisite for organizing a museum-based study tour is to clearly answer the question: "Why are we conducting this study tour?" Organizers must ensure that the activity is driven by educational purposes rather than external objectives. Moreover, the lack of a robust evaluation system is another factor contributing to the distortion of study tours. Establishing an outcome-based assessment mechanism would not only help verify learning effectiveness but also guide museums and schools back to the educational essence of study tours, making "cultivation" the true goal and result of these activities.

5. Conclusion

As a comprehensive activity integrating cultural education, social education, and experiential learning, museum-based study tours still hold tremendous potential. However, critical aspects such as the definition and implementation models of these tours urgently require clarification. All sectors of society must recognize that "museum-based study tours" are not synonymous with "study tours at a museum," so as to avoid oversimplification and a one-dimensional approach. Museum-based study tours must ground every initiative in the institution's authority, articulate explicit learning goals, categorize learners into different groups, and enrich curricular content, thereby diversifying program offerings and systematically elevating educational quality. Furthermore, as a vital connection between cultural institutions and learners, the value of museum-based study tours extends beyond knowledge transmission to include the construction of cultural identity, the enhancement of aesthetic appreciation, the promotion of interdisciplinary learning, and the cultivation of lifelong learning awareness. With the public's growing demand for cultural engagement, museums are increasingly assuming social educational functions, which in turn provides broader development prospects for museum-based study tours.

Therefore, promoting the high-quality development of museum-based study tours requires not only adhering to the primacy of museums but also continually exploring diverse models in practice that adapt to different groups, themes, and learning objectives. Only through concerted efforts in both theory and practice can museum-based study tours truly break free from the predicament of formalism, emerging as a significant pathway for fostering cultural heritage transmission and improving the quality of citizens, thereby realizing their social value and educational objectives.

References

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