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PREPARING YOUNG CHILDREN TO RESPOND TO ART IN THE MUSEUM

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Preparing Young Children to Respond to Art in the Museum

Appreciating artwork may be a matter of liking what you know more than knowing what you like. The challenge is getting people of any age to engage with a work of art. When it comes to young children, museums may want to consider a new approach. This paper describes a research study, conducted in the Museum of Art at Brigham Young University designed to prepare kindergarten children to respond to an artwork with genuine interest. The study prepared children in a collaborative, hands-on previewing experience, in the museum, to view an outdoor sculpture. In its entirety, the study presents liberal amounts of visual and verbal data documenting the responses of the children to the experience, which is not possible to include in this publication.

Inspiration for the Study

The study was inspired by exceptional learning experiences for young children the Investigator observed in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York City, the preschools of Reggio Emilia, Italy, and the Museum of Art at Brigham Young University. Each experience was unique but shared similarities. Common to each were happy children genuinely interested in what they were learning; visual-arts based experiences; professionally designed spaces; and a social community of peers, and adult guides.

Previewing Experiences Uncommon

Previewing experiences in museums, that prepare children to view artworks, are uncommon. Standard museum practice involves children in art making processes after viewing works of art, if at all. More commonly, children are welcomed into museum galleries to enjoy, as Lewis Carroll would say, “pictures and conversations” (2009, p. 12), stories, costume tours, and treasure hunts. This study was designed with two purposes in mind. First, to provide children

with an enjoyable hands-on previewing experience that prepared them to respond to an artwork. Second, to document their responses to the experience.

Participants, Artwork, Preparation

Participants in the study included a morning and afternoon group of five kindergarten children from the University's Child and Family Studies Laboratory. Both groups of children were prepared to respond to the outdoor sculpture *Koda*, by Utah artist Ray Jonas. *Koda* is made from ten, large geometric steel shapes on a concrete base. Children prepared to view the sculpture by exploring shapes one-third the size of those in the sculpture, finding shapes in a poster, and collaboratively solving, open-ended design problems with shapes.



Figure 1.¹

Key Components

Key components of the study include (1) the use of large shapes as artistic material; (2) the exploration of materials as appropriate artistic practice for young children; (3) collaboration; (4) the use of open-ended design problems to direct artistic experience.

Large shapes

Large shapes were chosen as the medium for the study for many reasons (1) they related to the large geometric shapes in the sculpture; (2) they encouraged collaborative play and large movement; (3) they related to children's past experiences with block play; (4) the shapes created large three-dimensional compositions that young children enjoy.

Exploring materials

¹ Brooke Parker. "Uh, This One's Heavy." 2010. Digital Photography.

Exploring materials is an important element of appropriate art practice for young children defined in the National Visual Arts Standards, Content Standard # 1 “Understanding and applying media, techniques and processes” (1994, p. 2). As children explored large shapes in the study, they became familiar with their characteristics and expressive possibilities.

Collaboration

The study was designed to be collaborative to create a sense of belonging and ownership for each child. This helps to place the children and guide on equal ground. Creating a sense of belonging was important for children who were in an unfamiliar place, with an unfamiliar guide, experiencing something they had never done before. Placing the children and guide on equal ground gave children a sense of ownership and “[allows] for necessary dialogue and conversation...[which leads] to innovative exploration of materials and concepts. In this situation, [children] can become active learners as opposed to passive participants, and teachers learn to strategically listen and watch for teachable moments ” (p. 34). Equality between children and guide does not mean that both parties come together with equal amounts of knowledge and experience, but rather, a healthy exchange of ideas can take place.

Open-ended problems

Open-ended problems provided structure for children’s explorations of shapes, the possibility for imaginative outcomes, and they engaged their minds. According to Mulcahey, “open-ended activities, does not mean that children should have free reign to do whatever they want” (p. 21). Rather, open-ended activities should provide structure for creative thought and exploration. They allow children to discover personal, child-like solutions rather than limit themselves to one right answer someone else has provided. Art activities that engage the mind as

well as the hand are stimulating to young children, and necessary for meaningful artistic expression.

The Study's Design

The study included an orientation, a previewing experience and viewing of the sculpture.

The orientation

In a brief orientation, children were informed that two cinematographers would be filming the study, and they would be exploring shapes and spaces in the museum. Children were also invited to find shapes and spaces in the room.

The previewing experience

The pre viewing experience took place in the media room next to the orientation room. The room was perfect for the experience. Everything about it supported children's explorations with large red shapes. Uncluttered and spacious, it allowed the shapes to be the focal point of the experience and encouraged children to physically explore them with large movement. Taupe-colored carpet and walls, and navy-blue benches complimented the shapes and soft canned ceiling lights highlighted them. The carpet also prevented shapes from chipping when dropped, and kept noise to a reasonable level. The professionally- designed room was unique to an art museum. Additions to the room were a poster of a painting of Paris and two, three -foot- high cutouts of a religious building and the Eiffel tower. They were intended to provide contexts for the shapes.

In the previewing experience, children explored shapes, and solved open-ended design problems with them. Examples of problems included asking children if they could make circle and square shape arrangements, an "underneath place," "a hiding place," and "a doorway to someplace they wanted to go." How children explored the shapes and solved problems with them

was the story I was interested in documenting. It was a story based on risk and discovery. When we entered the media room I didn't know how children would respond to the environment, the shapes, or each other. Rules for the experience were purposely not given. Would children be attracted to the shapes? The poster? The cutouts? Would they want to handle the shapes? If so, would they do so responsibly? Would they stand or sit on them? Want to hit each other with them? Cry and want to go home? Were they capable of solving problems as a team? What would that look like? Would they like the compositions they made? These were questions the children would answer. My role was to support their positive explorations with large shapes, which I hoped would meaningfully prepare them to respond to an artwork made with similar materials.

Viewing the sculpture

After children solved their last design problem, I invited them to walk around their composition. As they did, I explained that an artwork someone can walk around is a sculpture. Then I told them they would be going outside to find a sculpture made from shapes like the ones they used in their arrangements. When they discovered the sculpture, they responded to it spontaneously and answered questions about its characteristics. They searched for the title plaque and handwritten name of the artist. The pre viewing and viewing experiences took approximately twenty minutes each.

The Study's Significance

This study is significant for several reasons. First, it models a previewing experience unique to standard museum practice. Second, it supports a child's aesthetic nature. Third, it provides generous amounts of visual and verbal data documenting children's responses to an artistic learning experience.

Unique previewing experience

Previewing experiences in museums are not common. Standard museum practice engages children in art making activities after viewing original artworks, if at all. According to Tom Anderson (1986) hands-on previewing experiences, would allow children to engage in artistic processes that help them to realize that "one activity leads organically into another [creating] a sense of connectedness... between making and perceiving art...and that both are mandatory parts of the communicative nature of art" (p. 5).

Research on previewing experiences, in museum-like settings, that provide collaborative opportunities for young children are limited, and include studies by Piscitelli & Weier (2002), Vecchi (2004), and Danko-McGhee (2009). These studies differ significantly from my study, but elements of Vecchi's study inspired mine. Her study was designed to prepare young children to respond to an exhibition of artworks by the artist Alberto Burri. In classrooms, over a period of one to three months, children made their own compositions by individually and collaboratively exploring many different materials and processes related to Burri's works.

The aesthetic nature of the child

My study, which provides an artistic learning experience for young children, supports their aesthetic nature. The following composition from Vecchi's study demonstrates this child-like quality.



Figure 2²

² Reggio Children. 2004. *Children, art, artists the expressive language of children, the artistic language of Alberto Burri*. Reggio Emilia: Reggio Children.

This is an arrangement made by two five- year- old children, Edoardo and Lorenzo, in Reggio Emilia, Italy who were part of Vecchi's study. The compositions were part of a collection of children's works called *Blacks and Whites*. About the composition 5- year-old Lorenzo said, *"I'm going to put these circles in the corners-perfect"* (p. 42)! He added, *"You need four [buttons] because there are four corner."* (p. 42). Then Edoardo discovered that *"We can wind the string around the circles"* (p. 42)! This collaborative composition demonstrates several things. First, children enjoyed working together to create a composition. Second, they enjoyed discovering what attractive materials are like and what they can do. For example, Edoardo discovered that string could be wound around buttons. Third, they were sensitive to finding harmonious resolutions with materials. It was Vecchi's study that caused me to trust that children would respond to my study with an aesthetic sensibility.

The data

My study provides generous amounts of visual and verbal data documenting the responses of children and the Investigator to the study. The data gives a rich description of an artistic learning experience for young children, which can be helpful in planning future learning experiences in museums and other settings. Kenneth Kosik (2009) co-director of Neuroscience at the University of California said, "...getting the data- learning by detailed observations of children and teachers in the classroom-should be the priority for educational research" (p. 8).

All data collected in my study was analyzed according to methods described by Patton (1990). Data was organized according to patterns that emerged from each group of children, which determined significant happenings in each group.

What Happened- The Morning Session

Two patterns emerged from the morning previewing session, which included three girls and two boys. All names have been changed to protect their privacy. First, children were attracted to the shapes and wanted to handle them. Second, they were capable of, and enjoyed solving collaborative design problems with large shapes.

As soon as the children entered the room, they headed for the shapes and Sam (The names of the children have been changed to protect their privacy.) exclaimed, "Those are big blocks!" I asked what the shapes were like and Sam (pointing to a large curvy square) said, "What about that one!" I responded, "What about that one? And Lizzie (pointing to a square shape) said, "There's a square!" Then I suggested children remove square shapes from the base, which they did with enthusiasm. When they discovered that a wedge shape looked like a roof I asked if they could find a roof shape in the poster of Paris, and other favorite shapes

The second pattern that emerged from the morning previewing session revealed that the children enjoyed solving collaborative design problems with large shapes and were capable of doing so with respect for the shapes, their peers and guide. Their responses were exciting to watch. Significant happenings in the morning previewing experience were given names, and include: "All Alone," "This is not Even Heavy," "Ah-Ha!" and "All Tall Things."

“All Alone”

"All Alone" documents Jill privately enjoying a balancing problem with her favorite shapes, while the rest of the children are finding shapes in the poster. I didn't realize she was missing from the group until video footage disclosed her secret. It clearly demonstrates her delight in handling large shapes- all alone.

"This is not even Heavy!"

After children found shapes in the poster we went back to the shapes on the base.

I suggested they take all circle shapes off and put the square ones back on. As they did, children became aware of weight.

Jill (holding the large cylinder): "This is not even heavy!"

Sam (picking up the square wall): "This one is heavy!"

Guide to Jill: "No, it's *not* heavy. That's why I

made them out of foam."

Sam (holding the large curvy square): "Uh, this one's

H e a v y!"

"Ah-ha"

After interest in heavy things passed, I called attention to one square shape that wasn't on the base. Sam picked it up, and one of the Girls said: "Now we have to make one with these (referring to an arrangement of square shapes)?" I replied in the affirmative, Ben started jumping up and down excitedly, and Jill (holding one end of the square wall) said: "Hmm, Ah-ha!" Then she moved the square wall to a new place in the composition, and it was finished.

"All Tall Things"

When the square shape arrangement was complete, children were asked if they could find "an in between place," which turned into "A Nice Hiding Spot." Then I asked if they could make "an underneath place." Jill realized that high shapes would help create the space. She said, "I think we sh- I think we move everything *high*." Everyone seemed to agree, but had trouble realizing what else they needed to do to make the space. So I asked if something needed to go on the top to make "an underneath place." Lizzie said, "Yeah it could" and Sarah (pointing to the big curvy square) said, "That!" When the children figured out how to support the curvy square

top, I asked if they could use all of the shapes in the composition. When they tried putting the extra ones on top the whole thing wobbled and fell apart.

Guide: "...let's try it again...See if we can get it back."

Jill (smiling): "Ok. Ok."

Jill: "I suggest we put all tall things on."

Guide: "The bottom?"

Jill: "We put all the tall things on first, then we put the top on."

Child: "All tall things."

Jill "Uh huh, all tall things."

"All Tall Things" demonstrates children's sensitivity to metaphoric expression and their inclination to see the world through a poetic lens. Their ability to see elements of "an underneath place" as "All Tall Things" was magical as were the responses of the boys to the entire previewing experience. Before the study began, both boys were labeled as poor candidates for the study by their school. More accurately, they were often the group's catalysts, especially, Sam.

Viewing the Sculpture- Morning Session

After the previewing experience we went outside to discover the sculpture. Two patterns emerged as the children viewed the sculpture. First, they were very excited to discover it.

Second, they wanted to physically explore it.

Sam was the first child to announce he had discovered the sculpture.

Sam: "I FOUND IT!"

Children yelling: "I found one (referring to their favorite shape)!"

Guide: "Look at that sculpture!"

Children: "Yeah!"

Lizzie: (listening to Carillon Bells that were ringing): "I hear
bells!"

Sam : "Teacher, come over here!"

Lizzie : "Look!" It's a sculpture!" Lizzie (pointing to her favorite dome shape on the
sculpture):"Look at that! "Look at that!"

Children's initial response to the sculpture exceeded my expectations. It clearly demonstrated they had been prepared in a previewing experience to respond to it with enthusiasm. The bells that were ringing from the time we stepped outside until the children discovered the sculpture made the experience even more exciting.

The second pattern that emerged from the morning viewing experience demonstrated that children enjoyed physically exploring the sculpture, rather than answering questions about it. They treated the sculpture like playground equipment. They wanted to explore it with movement, the same way they had explored the red shapes. They enjoyed hunting for the little window in the big curvy square, walking around the base, jumping off the base, and finding the title *Koda*.

The Afternoon Group

Briefly, the afternoon group of children had its own unique responses to the experience, but patterns that emerged were similar to the morning group. Differences between the two groups of children were probably due to the time of day and the dynamics of each group. The morning group included three girls and two boys, and the afternoon group included four boys and one assertive girl.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates several things. First, young children can be prepared in a museum, to respond to an original artwork with genuine interest. Second, children can collaborate to solve design problems. Third, children are aesthetically inclined, which allows them to respond to artistic experiences with poetic sensibility. Maybe knowing what you like, really is a matter of liking what you know. Hopefully, this study models a learning experience for young children that can benefit them in the future.

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