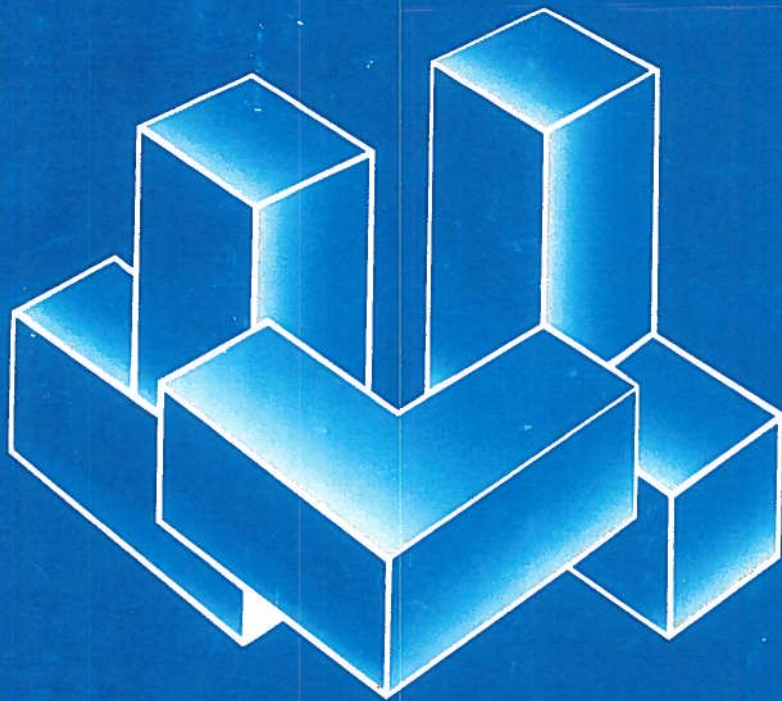


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Fostering Adult Literacy in Art Museums

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Abstract

The author links adult literacy skills and visual literacy through art museum experiences. It is possible that art museums can help develop both visual literacy skills and reading skills for illiterate adults through public educational programs. This paper describes the connection and possibilities.

“I like art and when I think about it, I think it’s pretty, it shows beauty, and it shows what the person is thinking, what he desires, and indicates his moods, and the types of colors he uses describes what he is feeling” [sic]

Adult Learner with Literacy Difficulties, Project Read, San Francisco Public Library, during site visit to San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, April, 2002

During the course of researching for my master’s project in museum studies at John F. Kennedy University in California, I spent time working with adult learners from Project Read, a literacy tutoring program for adults offered by the San Francisco Public Library. Through conversations with these adult learners I discovered that, by and large, people with literacy difficulties are not intimidated by museums but are in fact eager to explore different learning opportunities that these institutions can provide. This was a surprising finding as literature profiling adult learners with literacy

difficulties tends to frame them as fearing being wrong or appearing stupid when they are reading and so surely they would feel excluded from an exclusive institution such as an art museum. This was not what adult learners from Project Read conveyed at a focus group at the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art (SFMOMA), April 2002 as they talked eagerly about their feelings about art and its role in their lives and society in general.

Another outcome from this focus group was when these adult learners with literacy difficulties commented to me that they were aware that they had heightened visual skills. They attributed this to their need to use alternate interpretive “tools and methods” to address daily challenges. I have been unable to find any evaluative academic study to substantiate these claims but remain intrigued by the openness of these adult learners to the idea of visual learning and the potential that this offers for art museums to serve this audience. If adult learners with literacy difficulties are more dependent on images than text for direction in their daily life, can this visual awareness be harnessed in an art museum environment towards improving their reading skills?

This question led my research towards exploring the relationship between the act of looking at a work of art in an art museum and the act of reading for an adult learner. The act of reading text and the act of looking at art are, of course, quite distinct, physically and cognitively—reading is linear, sequential and deliberate, while looking is arbitrary and often subconscious. The act of reading is based on four sources of knowledge needed by the reader to understand text: orthographic knowledge (letters, sounds, spelling); lexical knowledge (knowledge of words), syntactic knowledge (knowledge of sentence patterns); and semantic knowledge (knowledge of meaning) (Clark, 1998, p. 3). The act of looking does not follow such a systematic process. Michael Baxandall explains how we look at a work of art:

When scanning a picture we get a first general sense of a whole very quickly, but this is imprecise; and since vision is clearest and sharpest on the foveal axis of vision, we move the eye over the picture, scanning it with a succession of rapid fixation. The gait of the eye, in fact changes in the course of inspecting the object. At first, while we are getting our bearing, it moves not only more quickly, but more widely; presently it settles down to movements at a rate of something like four or five a second and shifts of something like three to five degrees—this offering the overlap of effective vision that enables coherence of registration (1986, Introduction).

Although we need tools to address a picture from an aesthetic point of view, including an understanding of composition, line and color, they are not the same tools needed in learning to read. However, there is a common denominator between interpreting images (visual literacy) and reading text

(reading literacy); the ability to make meaning from the abstract concept represented. Both require the ability to interpret the intended message of the artist or author. In reading text, the ability to make meaning from a body of text is called “comprehension.” In looking at art, the ability to make meaning from an artwork is called “interpretation” and according to Ann Alejandro, an elementary school teacher in the Rio Grande River Valley School District in Texas, “students need to learn *how to see*, to interpret data from the world, the canvas and the page” (Alejandro, 1997).

Working within an art museum environment gives adult learners the opportunity to learn how to look at art images firsthand rather than in the form of mass-produced reproductions. Firsthand experience viewing works of art can trigger a personal reaction, good or bad, that impacts the ability to retain information due to the emotional and spiritual memory, as conveyed by the enthusiastic responses from the adult learners in Project Read case study. These learners even discussed applying interpretive skills, acquired during their art museum experience, to other learning activities such as reading.

Over the past twenty years, art educators have developed viewing methods that are beneficial learning tools for practicing interpretation and meaning making. Object-based learning, discipline-based art education, and visual thinking strategies are the methods that allow the practice of visual communication skills. These skills facilitate language development and critical thinking by developing identifying, observing, describing, questioning, and classifying skills, all key ingredients for reading comprehension.

Art educators already use these approaches for program development and so we used all three practices for looking together at works of art at SFMOMA. Object-based learning was an excellent warm up approach for adult learners with literacy difficulties on their site visit to SFMOMA as it used open-ended questions that have no right or wrong answers but that can be answered through observation: What does it look like? What size is it? What is it made of? Is the object complete or do you only have a fragment? Has it ever been repaired? I noticed that the adult learners were able to respond to the art intellectually, creating links between artworks and periods of art history. They were able to list all of the main features of the artwork through the exercise of visual skills, without any support from background information. Furthermore, they noticed details, expressed personal reactions, and inferred relationships between other artistic movements.

The Visual Thinking Strategies approach encouraged a more focused approach to the artwork of Jackson Pollock’s *Guardians of the Secret*. Students were invited to reflect upon multiple meanings of the artwork, giving reasons for their answers based on evidence they saw before them. This technique consisted of three questions:

- What’s going on in this painting?
- What do you see that makes you say that?
- Is there anything more you can find?

Although the group was excited about identifying various features in the work, such as the dog lying under a richly adorned table, they were reluctant to come to any consensus regarding the main message of the piece. This was not an unusual outcome, as art historians themselves have not agreed on a definitive interpretation for this piece.

The information-based approach, which was derived from discipline-based art education, was successful in stimulating the group's interest in attaining more information about the historical information behind an artwork. But even though they enjoyed the learning experience, I felt that they were overwhelmed by the amount of art historical information that was provided by my mini-lecture on the tour and intimidated by the vast amount of knowledge needed for aesthetic appraisal of art.

Although such art museum education programs are potential opportunities for fostering visual learning, the art museum itself may also have a variety of visual and text-based media that could be of assistance to adult learners with literacy difficulties. Art museums produce curriculum guides with visual media, such as slides, along with lesson plans and classroom activities. Art museums have websites and interactive media that could be an appealing learning tool for tutors and learners. Most art museums offer audio guides to their collection, which could enhance the visual learning experience for an adult learner with literacy difficulties.

I always have believed that art museums offer rich visual resources that are valuable learning tools for the learning community. I directed my research specifically towards adult learners in library literacy programs because of a number of factors:

- Over one third of the U.S. English speaking population operate at second-grade reading level and library literacy programs are directly addressing this problem;
- Adult learners enrolled in literacy programs are already motivated learners; and
- Unlike other education providers, libraries do not receive funding that depends on how quickly they move students into employment or advanced education (Comings & Cuban, 2002).

According to Randy Weaver, Director of Project Read, San Francisco Public Library, many library literacy programs are lacking in resources, such as suitable reading material and access to visual and digital media. They would welcome additional support and resources from other educational institutions. Also, there is a growing trend in the museum field toward museum-library collaboration due to common educational missions, and this is endorsed by the U.S. government due to the necessity to share scarce financial resources in an increasingly unsure economic climate (Weil, 2001). The Institute of

Museum and Library Services (IMLS) was created by the Museum and Library Services Act in 1996 with the intention to build on the complementary strengths of museums and with the allocation of funding of up to \$500,000 per annum for the National Leadership Grants for Library-Museum Collaboration Award (NGL). A key component of the NLG program focuses on museum and library collaborations that "support innovative projects that model how museums and libraries can work together to expand their service to the public with emphasis on serving the community, using technology, or enhancing education" (Institute for Museum and Library Services).

In partnering with library literacy programs, art museums would be fulfilling their obligation to be inclusive and relevant community organizations in accordance with the American Association of Museums mandate. Art educators need to look beyond the formal school system and become more aware of the society-wide problems of literacy. Additionally, this collaboration would offer art museums an opportunity to assess how the visual arts impact the reading skills of adult learners with literacy difficulties. As informal educational institutions their missions for intellectual inclusiveness oblige them to pursue such research in an effort to address this society problem.

Art museums and library literacy programs have the potential to form a mutually rewarding relationship. But first they need to become more aware of each other, along with their common bonds and differences. According to the findings of this master's project both are operating as learner-focused institutions and using informal educational theory. However, both are operating solely within realm of their own disciplinary communities – art and literacy – completely unaware of how fusing their common knowledge could benefit the literacy community. Successful collaboration between art museums and library literacy programs lies in the sharing of knowledge between both organizations.

Adult learners in library literacy programs are, as yet, an untapped resource for research into how promoting visual literacy can enhance reading skills. Rigorous evaluation designed to assess the impact of the arts on reading and writing is still in its early stages and focuses mainly on the formal school system. More focus groups conducted in different geographic locations outside San Francisco would offer valuable insight in assessing how adult learners with literacy difficulties view art museums. More evaluative research projects could further examine how effective the different looking strategies—object-based learning, visual thinking strategies and discipline based art education—are in tandem with a variety of different types of artworks. As tutors work one-to-one with learners they are an excellent resource for staff to garner information regarding the impact of this collaborative project on learners. This research would provide further insight into the links between adult learners with literacy difficulties and how their visual awareness affects their reading skills, which would be of immense value to the literacy community in general.

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