CHILDREN, ART AND MUSEUMS

Barbara Piscitelli

Over the past 25 years, we have seen a big change in the way art museums and galleries view and value children. In 1987, I conducted a small-scale research project to look at how preschoolers and their parents used the gallery as a learning place. Our results were seen as important in putting forward new programmes and new practices for very young audiences at the Queensland Art Gallery.[1]

Ten years later, along with museum educators from state and regional collecting organisations, I formed a collective of researchers to study how young children learned in museums. The QUT Museums Collaborative (1997-2004) conducted several studies of young children's engagements with museums and their collections, including a major three-year project investigating young children's interactive and informal learning.

We used multi-focal research methods to investigate children's learning; that is, we examined learning from many points of view. First and foremost, we sought to take a child's-eye view; investigations included not only observations of children, but also in-depth interviews with children and collections of their drawings and stories about museums and the objects in their collections. In addition, we surveyed young children's perspectives and conceptions of museums at the beginning, and again at the end, of the project. To represent adult perspectives on the matter, we gathered the views of museum staff, parents and teachers through interviews, diaries and questionnaires.

Our investigation of learning was intentionally broad. We examined learning using multiple lenses, including cognition, motivation, sociocultural learning, collaborative learning and aesthetic learning. The focus of the project was the immersion of children in the topic of "museums," involving a school-based component of studying about museums and a series of visits to museums. Our programme model incorporated a combination of classroom lessons (12 in-school class sessions led by a museum teacher and the regular classroom teacher) and nine museum visits, contributing about 40 hours of direct contact with the topic of museums for each child.[2]

SOCIAL LEARNING IN THE MUSEUM: THE IMPORTANCE OF A GUIDED EXPERIENCE

Theories about learning in museums acknowledge the value of learning through "primary sources," through direct experience and through active engagement. Xanthoudaki noted that in the context of school visits to museums, the experience of the "real thing" encouraged acquisition of new knowledge and consolidation of already acquired information, and brought the individual into the forefront of the learning process.[3] Moreover, new knowledge and ideas developed with the help of the real thing are "absorbed more easily and with greater enthusiasm, remembered longer and generate enthusiasm to know more."[4] Furthermore, in collaboration with an adult, the child constructs new cognitive abilities, then internalises these ideas to become part of the child's knowledge or skill base.

This social learning concept is described as "loan of consciousness"[5] or "funding,"[6] whereby a mentor assists a learner to fuse meanings or associations from past experiences with immediate perceptions. These social constructivist views, in the same vein as the work of Vygotsky,[7] have been endorsed as important learning supports in the museum context.

HOT AND SWEATY PLAY

Among many things, we noticed that children were getting "hot and sweaty" at the museum.[8] Their engines were turned on and little beads of sweat would form around their hairlines above their red faces. Some of the most vigorous activity observed was at the Queensland Art Gallery (QAG) when they hosted "Play," an innovative interactive exhibition. Designed and curated by one of the research partners, "Play" featured several important elements:

- art from the Queensland Art Gallery's collection interpreting the theme of "play," including photographs, decorative arts, paintings, sculpture and installation by Picasso, Miro and others;
- interactive elements such as computer-animated puzzles, foam building blocks, and a multi-sensory tunnel;
- children's programme activities and special events;
- a guidebook for children, and
- a children's art exhibition.

For children in our study, "Play" was a very exciting learning site. Coming at the end of a year of visiting museums, our museum-literate young children found "Play" exciting, extraordinary, compelling and memorable. They were able to navigate between the hands-on elements and hand-off aspects with relative ease and comfort, and explored all elements of the exhibit. This demonstrated that they had clearly understood the code of conduct for visitors to museums.

"Play" presented many challenges to traditional conceptions of a visit to an art museum, and attracted many new and first-time visitors. To accommodate the new audience, museum staff planned their programmes and services to make the visit an enjoyable one. As a museum, they coped with blockbuster-sized crowds of hot and sweaty young visitors because they had prepared for their arrival with a purpose-designed exhibition and a prepared workforce. According to museum staff, the capacity to deliver a high-quality result was due to a process of continuous improvement over a five-year period with each successive exhibition. In other words, the museum staff adopted a client-centred (or child-friendly) approach and research findings to transform museum practice and meet audience needs.[9]

Utilising this knowledge, museum staff began to innovate with programmes and exhibitions for children. They moved their activities from the small outer galleries into prime gallery space and ran a series of exhibitions curated especially for children.

"LOST AND FOUND"

In 2003-04, I worked as chief investigator on a project with staff from the university and the gallery. Together, we researched children's learning at two contemporary art exhibitions, curated especially for children. "Lost and Found" was a large-scale exhibition for children, featuring work by artists who worked with found objects.

Children in our study at "Lost and Found" displayed a high level of curiosity about how particular artworks had been created, as indicated by the following examples of their in-gallery questions to adult guides and to one another in small groups:

Did an artist make this?
How do they do all this?
How'd they build this?
How long's this been here?
Did they just come in and do it?
Did the artist have to come in here and set it all up?
How do they do that?
How do people make this stuff?
How did this happen?

As first-time or relatively inexperienced visitors, the children's questions were basic, highlighting the importance of adult prompting and scaffolding to extend their observation and inquiry, and to alert them to the processes used by artists. With support from an accompanying adult, children were able to deconstruct works, making thoughtful judgments about how they were made. Recorded conversations revealed children's thinking about the preparation and planning involved in art-making; about sequencing, formation and patterning; and about construction methods used.[10]

Adult: *Why do you think this artwork* [Simryn Gill's *Forking Tongues*] *is on the floor?*

Sarah: *It would be hard to hang the forks and chillies on the wall without them falling.*

Another child, Lauren, observed that there was an ascending size in the chillies towards the middle of the spiral. She spoke about the patterns created, noting how there was an alternation between the objects:

Lauren: *It goes utensils and chillies, utensils and chillies.*
It would be better to plan this artwork than make it as you go.

"COLOUR"

In 2003, the gallery hosted a three-month exhibition, "Colour," and we studied school children's responses to this large-scale exhibition. The exhibition featured a large number of important contemporary art works from the Queensland Art Gallery's permanent collection. Alongside the works, children had the opportunity to engage in interactive and reflective experiences.

We were particularly intrigued by children's reactions to the journey of the "Yellow Man". Lee Wen is a performance artist who has made numerous walks throughout cities all over the world. Stripped down to his underwear and painted in bright yellow paint, Lee Wen transits urban environments. On walk #13 in Brisbane, Lee Wen traversed the city and was followed by a documentary team during the Third Asia Pacific Triennial of Art in 1999.

A video of this event was the subject of great interest to the children in our first study. While we were on a tour of the Queensland Art Gallery, children noted a video monitor and stopped to see what was on the box. Immediately, they began chatting and giggling as they speculated about what was happening before their eyes.

They knew the cityscape well enough to see that the "Yellow Man" was walking through Brisbane, and wondered when it happened. Was it happening now?

Why was he painted yellow? When did he do this walk? Was he cold in his underwear? Was he embarrassed to be walking through the city in his undies?

When the cameras zoomed in to a close-up focus, the children began to notice that the "Yellow Man" was carrying something in his hands – but what was it? At first, no one could tell.

Soon it became apparent that he was carrying a large heart. The children wanted to know whose heart it was. They asked:

Where did he get the heart?

Why was he carrying it?

The children watched with interest as the "Yellow Man" with the broken heart arrived at the front steps to the Queensland Art Galley – the very building where they sat transfixed watching the video. Their mouths dropped as they watched the "Yellow Man" break open the heart.

And then they speculated about his words to the camera: "Broken heart." Or, did he say: "Open your heart"?

For the children, this encounter with a video projection of a contemporary art performance was compelling. Though the exhibit was not part of our planned tour, it was highly engaging. The children were all very intrigued with what was happening and many new theories were generated about the "Yellow Man" with the broken heart.

Of interest to all of us on the observation end of this event was the fascinating interest the children showed for contemporary performance art. Many shy away from presenting contemporary art to young children but, in this case, the children themselves led us to a new understanding about their capacity to appreciate and interpret challenging works made in their lifetimes.

This performance piece was exhibited again in the blockbuster-sized show "Colour," held at the gallery in 2003, and attracted a wider audience and prompted more discussion about performance art, about the meaning of the "Yellow Man", and about race and identity.[11]

Children interpreted the work in various ways:

He says, "Open your heart," so even if people look strange, be nice to them and don't make them feel bad and don't hurt their feelings.

In the movie, he's trying to tell people to be good to each other, so everyone's being nice, and he's just walking around places to tell people that.

Children also judged the worth of the work variously:

You have to have confidence to walk around like that.
Nobody would go around with him 'cause he's yellow and he just wears his undies.
Got no friends.
He just wants attention.
I think he's poor… 'cause he has no money, or anything, and he looks sad. He looks sad.
He's lonely.

NEW PROSPECTS FOR CHILDREN AND MUSEUMS

Childhood is a time of great growth, exploration, discovery and creativity. It is a time of intense productivity as children learn to speak, navigate, play, create, relate and act. Article 31 of the Convention on the Rights of the Child states that "States Parties shall respect and promote the right of the child to participate fully in cultural and artistic life and shall encourage the provision of appropriate and equal opportunities for cultural, artistic, recreational and leisure activity." This fundamental human right for children's full participation in cultural and artistic life provides a challenge about how best to provide for and promote children's artistic and cultural lives.

The range of cultural policy initiatives for young children is widening every year, as more nations become concerned about securing a place for cultural participation amongst the youngest members of their population. With about one-quarter of the world population under the age of 25, there is a big potential market for cultural flagship organisations such as museums to recruit and retain, so there is growing emphasis on connections with young visitors in many places. The challenges for the future will be to grow an innovative approach to cultural citizenship – one that engages children and young people in full arts and cultural participation – as consumers, as creators and as connoisseurs.

While some may argue that the best cultural policy is no cultural policy,[12] it remains to be seen if generating cultural citizenship can happen without a structural framework to facilitate, guide and respond to the artistic, creative and cultural lives of children. Following on from the work of McCarthy and Jinnett,[13] it seems best to remain engaged in the process of "broadening, deepening and diversifying" cultural citizenship. Thus, it is better to be in the policy arena as advocates for children – doing research, promoting sound practice based on full engagement, and developing fully participatory programmes to develop cultural citizenship – than to remain on the outside complaining that there is nothing of value for children.

Much remains to be done for young children in providing greater access to museums. Participation rates could certainly show improvement, particularly in non-traditional audience groups (e.g., Indigenous, migrant, rural, disadvantaged and NESB or non-English Speaking Background). The greatest challenge facing museums is in expansion of access to arts and culture for children from diverse and remote backgrounds, thus ensuring their rights to education, recreation, play, culture and the arts.

It is possible to make change, to scale up initiatives that work, to involve more people in guiding, shaping, presenting and researching sound connections between children and art. We have a long way to go, but we have made some good ground in the past few years. There is plenty of work ahead to generate excellence and equal access for all in visual arts education.

Over the last 20 years, I have seen how change can happen – one step at a time, based on real evidence and sound research. It is possible to make sure every child gets a sound and positive arts education. It is possible to renew efforts to strengthen children's knowledge about the practice, the discipline and the history of art. It is possible to cause a shift in thinking about children and art with new practices in schools, galleries and communities. It is possible to develop new partnerships and participants to create a critical mass for change for children and art.

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