

Engaging Young People in Gallery Spaces Through Embodied Learning

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Museums and gallery spaces are areas of cultural knowledge and deep value, but through long histories of exclusivity as an institution, they often alienate audiences. The conceptions of formality surrounding museums can pose a barrier for engagement and interest among young people, art museums being no exception. Many museum education departments strive to design educational programming that engages with a far wider audience, in spite of this history of exclusivity. A concept widely understood and practiced in art education classrooms that is adaptable for museum education is embodied learning. Embodied learning is the consideration of all aspects of sensory learning and the physical experience beyond rational thought. The following case study illustrates a moment of embodied learning involving physical movement in a gallery viewing with several middle school students. Analysis of this study and further research show how educational experiences with artwork that incorporate physical movement can engage students beyond written or verbal language and create lasting connections with art, artists, and museums themselves.



The Contemporary Art Studio is a weekly after-school program held at the Athenaeum for middle school students in the surrounding Clarke Central School District. The program focuses on studio activities and art-making often related to the work on display in the gallery

space. During the ten-week program, the ongoing exhibit at the Athenaeum was Kara Walker: *Back of Hand*, a collection of original drawings. The body of work confronts issues of systemic racism in America, its pervasive imagery, and violence. As the studio program was held in a community gallery space, the curriculum was designed to incorporate Kara Walker's work and encounters between students, the artwork on display, and their own creative response.

Session Five of the program focused on layering as an artistic process and tool as seen through painting. As an introduction to the concept, ideation, and connection to larger themes, the students participated in a short gallery viewing of Kara Walker's work. Two artworks were chosen for their layering techniques; *First Effort* and *Untitled (2020)*.



The students were split into two groups with an instructor each to view the art for five to ten minutes. Based on previous activities in the gallery attempting to initiate discussion about the artwork, we found most students were not easily engaged and seemed relatively uninterested. With this knowledge in mind, our group planned for a very short session with one or two brief questions about the layering of drawing materials. I was leading around ten students in the group viewing of *First Effort*. I began with a very brief explanation of what we were looking for in terms of layering in the work and asked if anyone had any first-glance observations. This was followed by quiet looks and shuffles of disinterest. I switched gears and remembered what I

found fascinating about the layers; a particular sheen of the materials that reveals an under-drawing that can only be seen from a certain angle to the side of the painting. I prompted the students to consider looking from the side angle and they were fascinated by the hidden drawing. I then asked the students to stand far away, move close, look from the sides and bottom and so on. Students who were initially tuned out and inching away became the first to move toward and around the piece. The activity became a game, a treasure hunt, and students noticed details and overall composition schemes that none of the instructors had noticed. These observations fed a vibrant discussion leading to themes and meaning-making through Kara Walker's process and use of material. Students then moved to the art-making activity and many students in later reflection exemplify the connection between the layering strategies within *First Effort* and their own paintings.



This case study exemplifies the power of physical movement as a disruption of the expected instructional format within a gallery space. This disruption surprises and excites most students and is an entry point for inquisitive minds to explore art in a new way. Activities involving movement have been continually present in classroom and school settings to engage young students with high energy levels, students with attention difficulties, and often entire

classrooms as a break from their daily routine. Movement integration in classrooms proves continually successful for sustaining engagement throughout instruction (Goh, Fu, Brusseau, Hannon, 2018). These activities can counteract traditional classroom norms such as a lecture format in the same way they can counteract outdated museum education practices. As permission and encouragement to move in a space as a differentiated instruction strategy is clearly welcomed, museum and gallery spaces become more accessible, inviting, and exciting for wider audiences.

Not only do sensory activities such as movement provide a disruption from traditional educational formats, but embodied learning forms lasting connections and depth for student knowledge. In *Complete Engagement: Embodied Response in Art Museum Education* (2007), Olga M. Hubbard writes,

Embodied experiences do not only aid in the construction of knowledge; they also help make this knowledge meaningful. If students are lucky enough to experience art through the different dimensions that together make them human, the works they see will enter their lives in more significant and memorable ways. (p.51)

Sensory experience provides an avenue of thinking that elicits new associations and understandings of an artwork that may not be understood from a conceptual standpoint alone. Bringing students into a conversation about a work of art involves recognizing their stance as young artists. Artists speaking about art involves building empathy through recognition, understanding, and curiosity about others artistic process. Movement, especially in the context of hidden images or meanings, prompts students to observe and respond as critical thinkers and artistic language and conversation follows.

Embodied learning in gallery spaces can manifest in many forms, particularly the action of movement around art. One example, as detailed in the case study, is viewing a painting from different angles; up close, far away, from the side, etc. This initiates a search for hidden elements dependent on perspective and provides insight into an artist's process. Another example commonly seen across social media is posing as figures in artwork. The physical act of mimicking a pose requires interacting with an artwork and its subject matter in a way that can combine an external and internal experience (Steier, 2014). This activity can initiate empathy with subject and artist as a translation of a moment, experience, or feeling while also engaging with the contemporary dialogue of posing as a common experience due to social media. In *Posing the Question: Visitor Posing as Embodied Interpretation in an Art Museum*, Rolf Steier writes, "In addition to talk, we also must consider the ways visitors use their bodies through actions such as posing. It is in the interaction between gestures and talk that unique meanings arise" (Steier, 2014, p.168). Ultimately, most museum education departments can alter existing programming and incorporate new elements of embodied learning through activities such as these to fit their museum's environment and needs.

Young audiences, especially art students, have innate curiosity about the culture and institutions around them, but may need accessible means of engagement to interact with artwork in more meaningful ways. Movement of the body as a component of embodied learning can provide a captivating way of connecting with artwork, history, and the museum space. Activities incorporating play and inquiry through movement break down anxieties or notions about museums as prohibitive institutions and open doors to engage all learners.

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