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Activities in the Art Museum

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A combination of teaching strategies can help make education more engaging (Benaiges, 2005). Learning in the art museum is no exception. Even within a single session, museum educators can help visitors discover meaning in artworks through different approaches. For instance, educators might complement a whole-class discussion with small-group work, partner explorations, or individual responding. Similarly, they might supplement a group conversation by inviting students to interact with an object through writing, drawing, sound, or movement.

Strategies other than group conversations have casually come to be called activities in many art museums. Museum educators are constantly inventing, sharing, and adjusting activities to address the needs of different artworks and audiences. Activities are popular because, as they change the dynamics of the interaction, they help enliven a museum visit and reach different types of learners. But beyond these general contributions, different activities add to a museum experience in different ways. Specifically, some activities frame the dialogue between a viewer and an object, others work to deepen and enrich this engagement, and yet others connect experiences with art to other realms of learning and experience.

In the outline below, I offer concrete examples of these three kinds of museum activities. My goal, however, is not to provide an exhaustive list of the activities that museum educators can use, but rather to highlight and illustrate some of the roles that these activities can play.

Activities that Frame Encounters with Artworks

1. Activities Can Introduce a Key Concept. An educator asks visitors to work with a partner—one person is to be the sculptor and the other the sculpture. The sculptor is charged with positioning her partner's body to create a human sculpture that epitomizes action. As participants begin to move the arms, legs, and torsos of their peers, it becomes apparent that the human body resists certain postures and accepts others with ease.[1] The students thus realize that the qualities of a particular material play an important part in the final shape an artwork takes (Armstrong, 2000; Burton, 1997; Eisner, n.d.). With this idea in mind, they go into the galleries where they will examine the role of materials in a variety of artworks.
2. Activities Can Act as Hooks Into a Work. An educator gives a riddle to a group of young children. The solution of the riddle points to a particular work in the gallery. The children, excited from having solved the mystery, are poised for a deeper investigation of the work.
3. Activities Can Help Record a Sequence of Encounters. At the start of a session, the educator gives visitors a piece of paper and invites them to make a booklet with one page for every work they are to see. Throughout the session, students draw or write something that captures their experience with each object. At the end, they have a record of their journey.
4. Activities Can Facilitate Reflection About a Museum Session. Before ending a session, the teacher distributes blank postcards to visitors. He invites them to make a drawing or write a note that tells a friend or family member about their experience in the museum.

Activities that Deepen and Enrich an Engagement with a Work

1. Activities can Foster Close Observation. (a) Using a viewfinder, students draw the details in an artwork. (b) Visitors bend a piece of wire to follow the lines in a picture, or they tear and arrange paper to explore its composition. (c) Visitors describe an object to someone who is not looking at it.
2. Activities Can Access Immediate Responses. (a) An educator asks visitors to write or say the first word that comes to mind upon seeing an artwork. (b) The teacher encourages viewers to draw a quick gesture that captures their first impression of a work.

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3. Activities Can Elicit Embodied Responses. (a) The teacher invites small groups of students to position their bodies so they may "become" an abstract sculpture (see Asher, 2002). (b) Visitors imagine they are inside a landscape and write a mock letter home describing what they see, hear, touch, and smell.

4. Activities Can Access the Emotional Tone of a Work. (a) Students write prose or poetry that captures what a character in a painting may be thinking and feeling. (b) Using their voices, students create a simple soundtrack for an image.

Activities that Connect Experiences with Artworks to other Realms of Learning, Creation, and Experience

1. Activities Can Take an Idea Put Forth by an Artwork to Other Areas of Learning (or of the Students' World). During a visit, a class discusses a series of artworks that portray cultural icons—Marilyn Monroe, Gertrude Stein, John F. Kennedy. Before ending the session, the educator asks each visitor to identify a cultural icon from their own world and to use words or images to describe that person's salient characteristics on paper. The students might then deepen their investigation of contemporary cultural icons in their social studies class.

2. Activities Can Help Develop Non-art Skills Related to the School Curriculum. An educator asks students to come up with particular types of words—adjectives, nouns, verbs—inspired by an artwork and to use them to construct correct sentences.

3. Activities Can Help Inspire Artistic Creation. (a) After looking at several artworks that show special places, visitors make a painting of their favorite place. (b) Students choreograph a short dance piece inspired by the narrative, form, and composition of a sculpture.

4. Activities Can Help Develop Discrete Artmaking Skills. Students draw the sculptures in a museum to hone their contour and gesture drawing skills.

Final Thoughts

The more clarity educators have about their educational goals and about the roles activities can play, the more informed their decisions will be when they choose to use one strategy over another. Even in this limited outline, it has become evident that the same activity can play more than one role—visitors can draw to deepen observation or to improve their drawing skills; they can write to reflect about a museum session or to connect to the emotional tone of a work; they can use movement to foster an embodied response or to construct an artistic response to an object. Therefore, reflection about goals and roles will not only aid educators in the selection of strategies, it will also help them decide where in a particular activity to place emphasis so museum visitors will have the richest experience possible.

References

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Endnote

[1]I am grateful to Irene Suris, formerly from the Guggenheim Museum, for sharing this activity with me and my students.