

CAGE Case Study Submission 2008

Project title: Developing Observation Skills at the Art Centre: A New Approach for Health Care Professionals

As a university art gallery, the Agnes Etherington Art Centre seeks to connect faculty and students with our collection and exhibitions. Most full-time staff members contribute to this goal, through supervising graduate students in research projects, training undergraduates as docents, delivering focused seminars and talks to classes, and many other means of access. One of the most in-depth experiences happens when a faculty member sees the potential of visual art to strengthen and enrich the course of instruction. The Case Study documents a new and unique relationship with the School of Rehabilitation Therapy that strengthens our inter-disciplinary reach across campus, but it is one element in the larger goal of Cultivating the University Student.

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Dates: 8 February 2006, 24 January 2007, 18 January 2008

Profile of gallery:

The Art Centre has a collection of 14,000 works. Founded in 1957, it is both a university and a civic gallery. The collection includes European, Canadian, contemporary, African, and Inuit works of art in all media, as well as decorative art and ethnographic objects, and a collection of Canadian dress. The Art Centre has 2,139 square metres of gallery space and produces 18 exhibitions per year, with an accompanying range of public programs: school and studio programs, art classes, tours, talks, lectures, panel discussions and symposia. Re-opened in May 2000, after a major renovation, the Art Centre also has a shop and Art Rental service.

Project Rationale/Audience Targets/Learning Goals

The study of visual art demands intense looking and honing of observation skills. Students of Occupational Therapy must develop such skills so they can assess clinical situations. The two disciplines meshed in an innovative program at the Agnes Etherington Art Centre, where 47 Master's students participated in a two-hour session in which they examined representational paintings to develop observational skills, and discussed other works of art to develop awareness of diverse attitudes. The session manifested: active engagement of students in learning; learning outside the classroom; a collaborative strategy of inter-disciplinary learning; a strategy for engagement of large numbers of students, and a method of motivating and challenging students.

Dr. Wendy Pentland, Associate Professor, School of Rehabilitation Therapy at Queen's, saw an article in *The Globe & Mail* on Nov. 26, 2005. It showed NYPD police officers

at the Frick Collection in New York City developing their observation skills. The Program had been developed two years prior by the Curator of Education: the goal is not art appreciation but improving observation & communication. Dr. Pentland immediately contacted the Art Centre to see if a similar program could be conducted for her Master's students in Occupational Therapy, who were taking a Systems-Level communication course.

She had two goals: to expand their observation skills, through pausing and really looking; **and** appeal to right brain learning by exposing them to something that has nothing to do with Occupational Therapy & science. The educational theory that provided a context for using this approach was:

- Transformational Learning, as expressed by Jack Mezirow in *Learning as Transformation*: "Becoming critically aware of one's own tacit assumptions and expectations and those of others and assessing their relevance for making an interpretation."
- Daniel Pink's theory, as expressed in *A Whole new Mind*, that we are entering an era favouring the right brain.

Method:

One challenge for me was the size of her class – 47 students. I consulted with the Curator of Education at the Yale Center for British Art, Yale University. She developed a similar program with a professor of dermatology, which involved examination of 18th and 19th century paintings in their collection. They also included an objective study, using a group of students who participated in a session at gallery, and a control group that did not. When both groups examined photographs of patients with skin conditions, they were able to prove that the students with the gallery experience scored better in observation. This convinced the Dean of Medicine to make the session a regular part of the curriculum. We did not undertake such a study but developed our program with this encouragement behind us.

Ricardo Gómez, former art professor, & docent, helped me develop the session. We used representational paintings that have strong narrative content. The lack of familiarity with the work means the participants have no bias as to which visual element is more important than another.

We gave the students a short introduction on the process: I spoke of the fact that surveys have shown that most people just spend seven seconds looking at a work of art before they move on, so part of the job of museum workers is to get them to slow down. We are bombarded by visual images but can we always absorb them? Ricardo spoke about the difference between looking and seeing: we all look for practical reasons, seeing is a deeper kind of looking.

We covered the labels with small pieces of paper, as our culture encourages reading, but not slowing down to study paintings. We divided the students into small groups of five and assigned each group to a painting. They had 10 minutes to look and list what they

saw, with no demand for interpretation, before we re-convened in groups of 23/24 and went to each work, and asked for a report. We pushed them to just report facts, not interpret. They could offer that once all the observation were covered, but their observations had to be grounded in visual evidence. We each offered some information about the paintings.

The second hour of the session focused on the appreciation of different perspectives: We assigned each group a completely different work, and left them to discuss as they wished. Their reports were more open, allowed for different interpretations, and demonstrated that art is a good vehicle for expression of different perspectives, which is also part of an Occupational Therapist's job.

Outcomes and Evaluation:

In the short de-briefing between sessions, students were struck by how much they had to look, and the amount of details they observed. One student spontaneously described it as research.

Dr. Pentland emailed two questions to them after the session, and received 20 out of 47 replies:

1. This lab was an effective learning opportunity to help me with improving observation skills. Average rating: 8.4 out of 10 (10 meaning complete agreement with the statement.)
2. This lab was an effective learning opportunity to help me with increasing my awareness of other perspectives. Average 8.3 out of 10.

Students also wrote comments:

“I loved this workshop! I thought it was a great way to enhance our observation skills and get us thinking about just observation as opposed to interpreting. Plus it was interesting to see how others perceive the same visual information. Thanks for such a neat learning experience.”

We de-briefed with Dr. Pentland. She considered it a highly effective workshop and now brings her class each year, at the start of the second semester. The workshop changes a bit each time, as it depends on the range of works of art on display.

Resources:

One Public Programs Officer, one docent and the exhibitions of the Art Centre.

Conclusion:

This workshop is paradigm example of how a highly motivated professor can look outside her regular instructional tools to find a new approach, and use a valuable campus resource. It is also an example of how a successful gallery education program can be adapted to another institution. I shall conclude with a short slide show that indicates other ways in which we cultivate the university student:

- Drama class doing tableaux in front of paintings.
- Informal learning: student docent with an elementary class; docent + 3 event; open house run by students.