

An Activity-Based Approach to Cultivating Skills and Thinking Dispositions

Liliana Milkova

¹Ph.D., Nolen Curator of Education and Academic Affairs - Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven, CT, USA

Liliana.Milkova@yale.edu

BACKGROUND

Thoughtfully designed learning experiences in the museum can impact participants significantly. Research shows that experiential learning and activity-based teaching—which lie at the heart of the Yale University Art Gallery’s educational practices—are especially effective (Kai-Kee, Latina and Sadoyan, 2020). The opportunity to move to a different learning environment, slow down, look closely at art, activate the entire body as a perceptual instrument, and engage in conversation with others offers a productive (also low-stakes) means of cultivating or enhancing skills (e.g. critical observation, evidentiary reasoning, immersive attention, storytelling) and thinking dispositions (e.g. empathy, curiosity, self-reflection) relevant to both trainees and practitioners in the healthcare sector (Tishman, 2017; Slavin, Williams, and Zimmerman, 2023).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper presents an overview of an activity, which the author has facilitated at the Yale University Art Gallery for different medical. Titled “Back-to-Back Drawing,”

this activity is conducted in a discreet museum or gallery space with three-dimensional works on view. Participants pair up and sit or stand with their backs to each other. One partner sketches an object they cannot see solely based on the description of it given by the other partner who is facing the object but cannot see the drawing in progress. After 5-7 minutes, the partners switch roles and repeat the activity. Next, the group joins back together to discuss the experience.

RESULTS

Setting aside ample time for reflection is key to the activity's effectiveness. The author has observed the consistently positive impact of this exercise on every medical group with which she has worked. To open and frame the discussion, she poses questions that spur reflection on moments of discovery, realization, difficulty, connection, understanding, or joy, thereby anchoring the learning experience in the tangible linguistic and creative acts the activity requires. These questions elicit authentic responses about the subjectivity of seeing and the perception of self and other. They raise awareness of the importance and challenges of sustained looking, attention to detail, close listening, accurate word choice, unambiguous explanations or instructions, formulating questions to receive necessary information, the ability to grapple productively with uncertainty or discomfort, and of communication as a form of multilayered translation. Sample questions include "How did it feel?" "Did anything surprise you?" "What was harder – to describe or draw – and why?" "What was your approach to describing?" "What did you do when you felt confused or unable to proceed?" "How did you select the object to describe?" "For those who were describers second, how did being a drawer influence your process as a describer?" "How might this experience apply or transfer to your studies/practice?"

DISCUSSION

“Back-to-Back Drawing” is versatile and scalable, and based on feedback, always enjoyable. The activity can be done with small and large groups, the different components can be allotted more time, the art selection can include one or many objects, and it can align with course content. The discussion can focus on certain skills or dispositions. One additional benefit is that participants connect with each other more deeply and the activity can serve as a fun community- or team-building experience.

CONCLUSION

The benefits of the described activity have been observed during single sessions in the museum. The author hopes to study how participation in two or more iterations of this activity affects skill-building.

REFERENCES

- Kai-Kee, E., L. Latina and L. Sadoyan. (2020). *Activity-based Teaching in the Museum: Movement, Embodiment, Emotion*. Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum.
- Slavin, R., R. Williams and C. Zimmerman. (2023). *Activating the Art Museum: Designing Experiences for the Health Professions*. Lanham, MD and London: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Tishman, S. (2017). *Slow Looking: The Art and Practice of Learning Through Observation*. New York: Routledge.