

RENAISSANCE NORTH WEST museums for changing lives

Creative Spaces

Children as co-researchers in the design
of museum and gallery learning



In what different ways do gallery and museum spaces foster learning for Key Stage 2 visitors?

This overarching question was the starting point for **Creative Spaces**, a research programme commissioned by Renaissance North West for four of its venues in 2007 and led by **CapeUK**.

The research team consisted of Dr. Catherine Burke (Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge); David Dobel-Ober (freelance researcher); and Rosie Marcus (NW Director of Cape UK).

The research team identified the research questions for each site by accompanying museum/gallery staff on a tour of their respective venues and talking through their impressions of how children experience the space. This process of looking and talking, supplemented by a reading of relevant research, helped define four discrete but complementary areas of enquiry.

Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester:
“What is an art gallery? What would an art gallery designed by children contain and how would it feel?”

Manchester Art Gallery:
“How do current ideas about time impact on children’s learning in gallery visits? How do children feel about the timing and pace of gallery visits? What are our assumptions about the pace of gallery visits?”

Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston:
“Is the building, interior and exterior, an attraction or a distraction or a mixture of both? What can we learn from that that is useful in designing children’s experience of museums and gallery spaces?”

Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, Carlisle:
Beyond trails: what is the value of informal learning?”

Children as co-researchers

In seeking to involve children as co-researchers, the team adopted elements of the **Mosaic Approach** pioneered by Professor Peter Moss and Alison Clark in their work with young children. The ‘mosaic’ of the title refers to the use of a range of research tools to build a composite picture of children’s response to their learning environment. It is based on the principle that children are experts in reporting on their own learning.

At three of the venues, children recorded the museum/gallery environment with disposable cameras and subsequently used the images as the basis for writing, drawing and discussion. Adults provided support, but not direct supervision.

How was the project structured?

One class of Key Stage 2 children worked with each of the venues and took part in four “sessions” of activity:

- ★ preparation in school for their role as researchers
- ★ gallery/museum visit
- ★ two follow-up sessions in school

Towards the end of the programme, Catherine Burke revisited each venue to discuss its research question in the light of subsequent findings.

At the **Whitworth Art Gallery**, children responded in many different ways to the gallery environment, producing gallery designs of their own which reinterpreted elements of the existing building and displays, while also incorporating ideas from other contexts. Their designs had many recurring features:

- ★ a perception of the building and its content as one, with artworks an integral part of the whole – ‘*upside down room*’, ‘*room with different lights*’.
- ★ areas with different functions – ‘*music*’, ‘*puzzle room*’ ‘*cat walk (for trying on clothes)*’.
- ★ designated areas for adults and children, ‘*Adults room with information on all the paintings and sculptures*’, ‘*play room where kids can play and also make new friends*’.
- ★ easy access to refreshments.
- ★ areas that would trigger feelings and emotions; for example the house of horrors (fear), the maze (sense of being lost) and feeling boxes (sense of surprise and excitement).

Children expressed strong feelings about the representation of nudity (which they perceived as rudeness), religious subjects and cruelty. An exhibition about slavery revealed that many children thought the act of representing and displaying something meant that the artist (and the gallery) condoned it. Clearly, museums and galleries can play an important part in promoting public debate about controversial issues, but need to consider carefully how this can be done with children.

Manchester Art Gallery's education team chose one of its standard Key Stage 2 sessions about 'Portraits' as the focus for its research. The intention was to test their judgement that its timing and pace was just about right and then use the findings to 'calibrate' other sessions.

The two-hour 'Portraits' session is designed to introduce children to the gallery and stimulate return visits. More specifically, it shows them how to interpret portraits through a close analysis of six different works, followed by practical art activities in the education studio. The session moves at a fast pace in order to present as much material as possible and initiate creative processes which children can continue later at school or at home.

Children used scales to assess the pace, duration and interest of the overall session and its component activities. These assessments then became the basis for discussion back at school. The key findings were that:

- ★ children found the pace of the session fast, with a sharp increase in the speed of delivery during the final studio activities.
- ★ most of the children would have liked a longer session. They particularly wanted more time for activities which involved actively carrying out a task.
- ★ there was no clear correlation between children's interest in an activity and its pace; they assessed it as 'very fast' or 'fast' whether or not they were engaged by it.
- ★ there was a direct relationship between children's interest in an activity and the length of time they wanted to spend on it.

The children greatly enjoyed this session and learned a lot from it. For the session's aims to be fully realised, children need the opportunity to complete the work at school or home and to apply the knowledge they have acquired to other art works. The education team encourages follow up work in a variety of ways and is considering how this could be further supported through its website.



The Harris Museum and Art Gallery's research question reflects the mixture of opportunities and challenges presented by its large, classical building. On their exploratory visit with cameras, children recorded the things that most interested them and then discussed their impressions after the event. Their responses reveal that:

- ★ some were aware of the building's classical architecture. (*'It's like a Roman Temple'*).
- ★ they were not daunted by the size and appearance of the building (*'It makes you want to go in', 'I wanted to go and explore'*), even when they made a visual association that adults might perceive as negative (*'It's like a prison'*).
- ★ they were most interested in the building's layout and ornamentation. (*'It's simple really, it just goes up and around', 'Stone pictures' [relief carving], 'golden doors'*).

It was very noticeable that children wanted to explore the whole building before they settled to look at a particular area, a process of 'cognitive mapping' which is known to be an aspect of the way children respond to new places. Interestingly, children wanted to do this both at the Harris Museum and Art Gallery and at Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery, even when they already had some familiarity with the buildings. Previous visits, whether with the school or family, had probably been 'led' by an adult; during the more autonomous visit to do the research the children wanted to make sense of the building for themselves. As a result, the education team has decided to trial the introduction of a 'free exploration' of particular areas of the museum at the start of school sessions, before focussing more closely on particular aspects of the collection.

Tullie House Museum and Art Gallery runs most of its current sessions for school groups in a classroom adjacent to the main site rather than in the galleries themselves. The aim of the museum's research question was therefore to explore ways of working in the gallery spaces.

During the first classroom session, children compiled a list of themes they knew, from prior visits, they would encounter. On their visit, they investigated two of these themes, using a camera to document things that they found helpful or unhelpful in their quest.

They subsequently used these photographs, drawings and annotations to create a 'personal trail' – in effect the story of their visit. These in turn were used as a stimulus for discussions. Subsequent analysis revealed that:

- ★ children tended to investigate what they were already familiar with and showed less interest in other subjects.
- ★ although the children knew the building, they enjoyed the unaccustomed autonomy of this visit and consequently took more responsibility for their own learning.
- ★ the children were more attracted to individual items than to themes. They often wanted to communicate their sense of 'discovery' in finding something special to their friends. The museum now wants to capitalise on this in the way it organises displays and facilitates class visits.
- ★ the information available about exhibits was not generally accessible to young children, either in form or content. They needed much clearer signage of things they were allowed to touch – such as clothes for trying on. The rationale behind what was, or wasn't, for touching was not made clear.
- ★ informal museum visits have huge potential in terms of stimulating children's enthusiasm for learning. But this needs to be complemented by careful planning and follow-up work.

Conclusions

The Creative Spaces programme reveals the benefits of regarding children as co-researchers rather than as subjects for research. The autonomy children were given appeared to have a positive effect on their enthusiasm for learning. The data generated reflects a richness of response often missing in more conventional research projects and demonstrates the power of gallery visits to support the social and emotional dimensions of learning – something museums and galleries should arguably emphasise more. However, it takes time to create a climate in which children feel safe to say what they think as opposed to 'giving the right answer'. It can take several encounters and a radically different pedagogical approach (e.g. giving each child complete control of a camera) to build a sense of trust. It is also essential for class teachers to embrace the process, so that a genuine four-way partnership can develop between children, researcher, teacher and gallery/museum staff.



Tullie House Museum & Art Gallery – Adam Naylor-Whalley

To find out more

The full report is available on the Cape UK website www.capeuk.org.

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