

Accessible Wellness Workshops at the Philadelphia Museum of Art

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Abstract

In this article the authors explore the roles of museums in promoting wellness within the context of their mandates to be accessible to everyone. They describe a series of workshops for people with disabilities that have been conducted for nearly two decades as part of the Philadelphia Museum of Art's Accessible Programs. In these workshops, participants have opportunities to develop their observational, technical, and aesthetic decision-making skills. The authors present strategies that enable people with cognitive, social, and physical disabilities to participate fully in making art. They discuss the benefits of their accessible program from the points of view of different stakeholders and address the factors that are important to the success of the workshops. The design of this program can serve as a guide for museums that are exploring their evolving role in promoting accessibility for a growing number of groups in their communities.

About the authors

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Since 1982, the Accessible Programs Workshops at the Philadelphia Museum of Art (PMA) have been offering new ways to give people with disabilities the experience of making art that is informed by the rich cultural heritage of the Museum's collection. PMA's Accessible Programs Workshops have been bringing art and its vital benefits to the broadest possible audience since 1966.

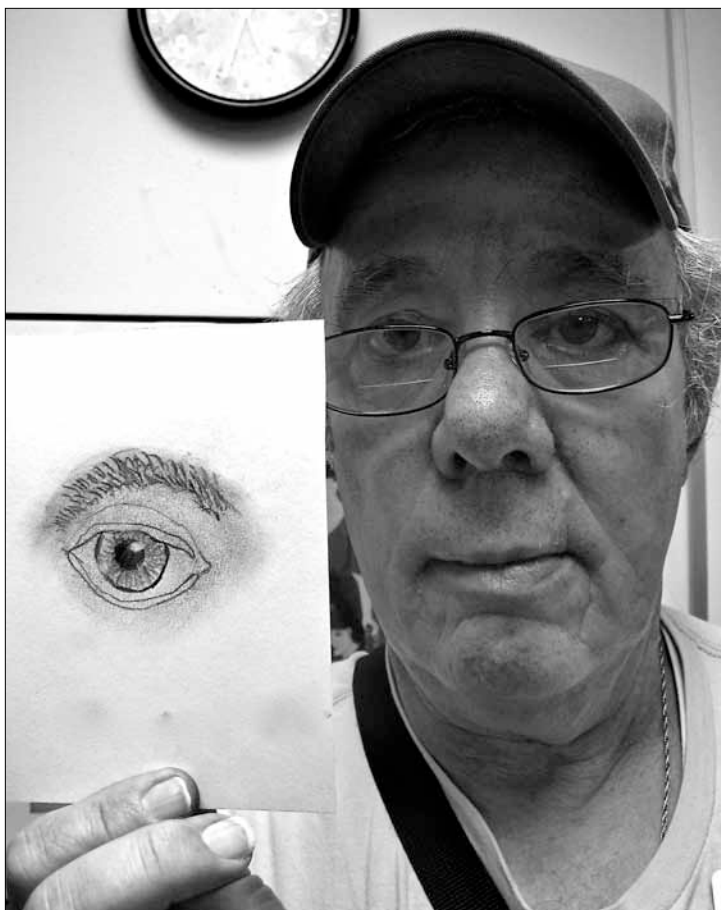
The workshops are designed to allow people with disabilities to determine for themselves their relationship to art. Workshop sessions include a 45-minute customized gallery tour and a two-hour studio art project. Participants include adults and teens who have developmental or acquired cognitive, behavioral or physical disabilities. This article includes descriptions of the workshops' basic approach and emerging principles, and discussion of the practical considerations of how to implement the museum's mandate to be accessible. The authors also address the implications of this program for providing meaningful and enriching experiences to the museum's entire audience in a way that embraces both excellence and inclusiveness.

Background

Wellness

The premise of these workshops is that opportunities to discover and develop aesthetic skills contribute vitally to disabled people's well being. It has been 65 years since the International Health Conference adopted an expansive concept of health, defining it as a state of "complete physical, mental, and social well-being and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (WHO, 1948). Since then, the concept of wellness has evolved to encompass more than the optimal end-states of the different spheres of our lives. As it is often used now, the term *wellness* refers to the life-long process of searching for, and making choices that move us closer to, our own definitions of self-fulfillment (National Wellness Institute, as cited in Library Index, 2011).

Although the mission statements of art museums do not refer to wellness as such, they generally embrace their potential role in advancing their audience members' personal development. The PMA, for example, "seeks to preserve, enhance, interpret,



Participant achieves a likeness in his drawing from the workshop *I've Got My Eye On You: Romantic Gestures and Curious Portraits*. Photo courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.

and extend the reach of its great collections in particular, and the visual arts in general, to an increasingly diverse audience as a source of delight, illumination, and lifelong learning” (PMA, Mission Statement).

Museum visitors themselves can be quite poetic about the museum’s responsibility to enhance the public’s quality of life. When the Museum of Modern Art asked its followers to state the “single most important function of museums,” many of their

responses comprised a variation on a theme: “to quench the thirst of souls and awaken the parts of them that are asleep” (NewCurator, 2009, para. 13). We now take it as a given that cultural institutions can help their audiences “achieve lives of greater integrity, coherence, and balance, lives that are continuing acts of reflective self-renewal, lives that the individuals themselves...can learn to shape, craft and construct” (David Carr, cited in Weil, 2003).

Accessibility

Making a museum’s enriching activities accessible to its entire potential audience is a mission that museums are still negotiating and learning how to implement. The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990 not only required museums to make their buildings and programs minimally accessible to all visitors, but also spurred many to go “beyond legal obligations and think about the benefits and advantages of exemplary accessibility” (NEA, 2003, 156). The impact of the heightened importance of accessibility on the role of the museum educator was formally addressed in the American Association of Museums (AAM) landmark 1992 report on *Excellence and Equity*. Its ten recommendations outlined how museums should “combine intellectual rigor with the inclusion of a broader spectrum of our diverse society” (AAM, 1992, as cited in AAM, 2002).

Ten years after its initial report, however, the AAM recognized that most museums were still struggling with the “complexity of engaging a diverse audience in vital and meaningful learning experiences.” The subsequent *Excellence in Practice* publication provided museums with guidelines to help them with the difficult task of translating principles into practice (AAM, 2002). In the years since then, museums have learned many lessons about how to develop new ways to engage broader audiences. In this paper, the authors offer the lessons they have learned in running one of the Accessible Workshops programs at the PMA.

The Workshops

Participants

The workshop participants come to the museum from a variety of residences, day programs, rehabilitation centers, and schools, as well as the Veterans Administration. More specifically, several of these organizations describe themselves as:

- Vocational training facilities that prepare those with disabilities for competitive employment;
- Special programs for mainstreamed adolescents with various intellectual disabilities within public high schools;
- Schools for children and adolescents with mental illness, emotional disturbance, autism, developmental delays and behavioral disorders.

Many participants have been returning for years, allowing the workshop leaders to form long-standing relationships with them and allowing them to progress from project to project.

The Program

Every year three projects are offered, each of which is repeated ten times and can accommodate a maximum of twenty people. Before each workshop, the members of the groups are met and greeted at the door of the museum, where brief discussions help to acquaint them with the people they will be working with, and give them time to acclimate. Each workshop is supported by:

- Personal attendants from the participants' groups
- A docent for the tour
- Volunteers
- The program's director and its coordinator
- The art instructor from the museum

Design of the Projects

Several pedagogic and logistic principles inform every project's design, some of which may be counterintuitive. The art instructor looks first for an exercise or a part of the collection that she would

like to learn more about. The reasoning behind this is twofold: it allows her to convey a fresh enthusiasm for the project and it also puts her in the position of having to find a way through an unfamiliar process or subject that she will later explore with the workshops' participants.

It is of primary importance that the lessons are challenging for everyone. Each workshop is an opportunity for participants to experience the full range of emotions that come with learning any new skill. Because the level of capability varies from person to person, the same project must be adaptable in order to be challenging to all. Those who have more skills can add greater complexity, while those who have fewer skills can still make aesthetic decisions, in some cases giving instructions to a personal attendant for assistance in steps that they have already tried but are unable to execute themselves.

The primary objective is to design projects that provide many opportunities for participants to make works of art that are unique and expressive of their preferences. The projects must be sufficiently complex so that there will be many decision-points that require aesthetic judgment.

Discussion

The Value of the Workshops

Feedback from the workshops shows that they contribute to participants' feelings of emotional well-being, a key component of wellness (National Wellness Institute, as cited in Library Index, 2011). A personal attendant of one of the participants commented on the unique value of the workshops:

At [the] ...Veterans Affairs Medical Center, I use the Accessible Programs as a modality for Recreation Therapy Services. These workshops provide a setting, content and hands-on experience that I could not provide in a hospital setting. (Personal communication, January 6, 2011)

In the same communication, that attendant highlighted how the transformative power of art can provide powerful emotional and other benefits:

I am always amazed when we go into the studio. Generally, the Veterans do not naturally think of themselves as artistic or able to successfully create the studio project. I observe the focus and attention they give to the museum staff providing instruction. I can see the expression on the participants' faces and observe their body language as they get closer to a finished project. When the participants see that they are able to create the project, they sit up taller. They relax and even smile! As the project comes to completion, it is obvious that they feel good about their accomplishments and sometimes even [have] a realization that with some assistance and small steps, they can create or do just about anything they set their minds to.

When art activities are offered to people who have physical, cognitive, or behavioral disabilities, the focus often tends to be on therapeutic or compensatory value rather than on the intrinsic value of art making. The PMA workshops, however, focus on producing art, not on providing therapy. The workshops enable participants to see art as a human activity that they can take part in.

When participants experience making art they have a chance to identify with the process and gain a greater understanding of what it takes both practically and aesthetically to produce such work. Everything from the manipulation of the materials, the planning, the perseverance and the nuanced decision-making offers an opportunity to identify with the artist. Participants may begin to see themselves differently and develop new strategies to accomplish a task, grapple with aesthetic and technical challenges and break through self-imposed constraints.

Attendants also benefit from exposure to the wide range of subjects the workshops cover by encouraging new conversations between them and the workshop participants. One attendant commented that, after attending the workshops, the staff members discover new and interesting things about the people with whom they work (Staff member, personal communication, January 4, 2011).

Although attendants see the workshops as a way to contribute to therapy while improving relationships, participants emphasize the creative possibilities that open up for them:



Practicing brush strokes for painting bamboo after seeing the Ike Taiga and Tokuyama Gyokuran: Japanese Masters of the Brush exhibition. *Photo courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.*

Going to the Philadelphia Museum of Art and back to college at the same time has opened my mind. Seeing the major works displayed was one thing, but seeing the presentation of completed works of other participants in the accessible program was even better. This stimulated me in such a way that my interest in photography was re-sparked and I have now taken it up as one of my courses in college. (Workshop participant, personal communication, January 7, 2011)

The Assumptions of the Workshops

The factors that are essential to the success of the Accessible Programs Workshops suggest characteristics of successful programs in general. Implicit in this approach to teaching art is the premise that art is a societal imperative, like reading. As a universal good and a teachable skill, it demands that the instructors provide a system to make it accessible. In cases where individuals have difficulties, there must be a willingness to invest significant resources in order to identify and eliminate the causes of any obstructions the individuals may face.

Structured creativity. Participants' creativity is structured when they are presented with a conceptual map, one that includes a set of possible starting points and a set of structured decisions. They can then use these starting and decision points to move along the map. (This is not a conventional step-by-step approach to art because the path is not defined. That method of following along a chain of specific instructions provides little room for individual choice.) In all of the workshop lessons, the participants' creative choices can be generalized to teach the underlying art principle.

For example, one workshop that focused on drawing the eye was presented as a series of observational questions with no pre-determined answer:

- What is the direction of the axis between the inner and outer corners?
- How much of the iris do you see?
- How much distance separates the eyebrow from the upper eyelid?

Such a sequence of observational questions makes each participant's perceptions the primary source of knowledge. Other sequences of questions require participants to make more aesthetic decisions:

- How do you want to pattern the room?
- What architectural furnishings and features do you envision?

The instructors know from experience that these kinds of questions are signposts that allow participants to see several approaches to a problem and to make art with intentionality. Paradoxically, creativity can be encouraged best not by talking about it but rather by making it an integral part of the program – implicit rather than explicit.

Reassessment of risks. One of the challenges of making museums accessible to a wider audience is understanding how instructors' attitudes toward safety and risk affect the kinds of experiences they make available to different groups. The instructors have discovered that when they reassess their risk estimates they often develop innovative approaches that allow them to broaden the audiences that can participate in their workshops.

For example, our workshop entitled "Pillars and Portals" involved the use of carving tools that would not have been possible had the instructors assessed that using potentially dangerous tools was an unacceptable risk for their participants. The fact that the carving tools introduce risk is undeniable. If the instructors believed, however, that people who have disabilities have the right to be included in the community of rational risk-takers, then they had to weigh rational risks—not against the absence of risk but rather against the benefits of engaging in the activity.

So the question was: "How do we create arrangements that allow the maximum number to participate on an equal footing and at an acceptable risk?" This kind of risk assessment frequently leads the instructors to seek ways to give their groups as complete an experience as that provided to any other visitor.

Providing challenges. A similar balance had to be found when designing the specific challenges workshop participants would face. Ironically, experience has shown that workshops succeed best when an effort is made to make difficult challenges accessible rather than to present more accessible challenges. Ideally, workshop participants seem to derive satisfaction from multiple sources:

- The ideas and decisions they are asked to ponder;
- Their aesthetic response to the works in the PMA collection;

- The challenges of the workshop task itself;
- The justifiable pride that comes from exceeding their expectations and confronting self-imposed constraints.

Stretching to make progress in a goal a person finds meaningful is more satisfying and valuable than success in a more simple or trivial effort. For example, in the observational drawing exercise, the instructors debated whether to simplify the exercise to make it easier. In the end they decided that it would make it harder to convey the ideas they wanted to express in a watered down process. Instead they sought to give participants multiple ways to engage with the project, from drawing finer distinctions in their observation of their own eyes, to the historical narratives behind the eye miniatures in the PMA collection, to technical aspects of making a three dimensional form emerge from the two dimensional page, and even to a mini-anatomy lesson on the eye and its parts.

Participants were encouraged to observe their eyes and identify how their drawings could be improved, even though this might encourage them to confront “flaws” in their particular drawing. Yet, if it is assumed that people learn from their mistakes, opening oneself up to the risk of failure can significantly enhance the possibility of learning and being changed by an experience.

Empowered, flexible team. The presence of an empowered team enables the Accessible Programs Workshops to respond to unanticipated circumstances. For example, instructors have strategically located “go-to” quiet places if in the very rare circumstance a personal attendant needs to temporarily separate an individual from the group. The flexibility to improvise minimizes the effects of an individual’s disability and better ensures the full participation of a much more diverse audience.

This flexibility benefited one young student whose attendant mentioned on arrival that he was having behavioral issues in certain situations that might be encountered on the tour. Rather than excluding the student from the tour, however, the instructors improvised a plan. The volunteers, coordinator, and an instructor

walked ahead of the tour guide to scope out the galleries that were on the route. If they spotted a potentially awkward situation, they motioned to the guide to take an alternate route. Because of the flexibility of the collection and the guide's enhanced training, the student completed the tour with his group without incident. Several years later, this young man and his entire class continue to attend and enjoy the Workshops program.

Accessibility training.

Guides: All of the guides at the PMA are volunteers who generally go through a rigorous two years of training, portions of which include an overview of accessible programs. If they want to become guides specifically for accessible programs, they receive further training. The supplemental training sessions for guides who give tours for people with cognitive and communication disabilities have featured guest speakers from facilities that bring participants to the workshops. Guest speakers give detailed explanations of the training given to their own employees, which gives guides a greater understanding of the prospective participants. Guides learn that the personal attendants of these participants, who are responsible for their behavior, know their specific needs.

Guides also receive practical information about what to expect in a general sense. In the training, however, it is stressed that each group or individual is different and might require a different approach. Therefore, flexibility is imperative, which is not something new to guides. Instinctively they observe the audience reactions, body language, and facial expressions and adjust from there. It is important, however, that the level and content of the tour be what the guides would give to any other group visiting the museum. Their training has made them aware that they may need to give more explanations or engage with the participants by encouraging and asking questions.

Volunteers: Volunteers, in most cases, are art students or graduate students planning to become educators. Many of the workshop volunteers have gone on to teach children with disabilities or to become museum educators themselves. Volunteering gives them a wealth of hands on experience to take with them. Just like the



Showing one-point perspective of a room made with collaged papers and a beaded chandelier. *Photo courtesy of the Philadelphia Museum of Art.*

guides, volunteers receive practical guidance as to what to expect. In the studio, volunteers do not do the projects for the participants, but rather interact with them, encouraging and assisting when asked.

One of the tour guides noted ramifications of the workshop's commitment for inclusiveness:

I have found it incredibly gratifying to be part of these workshops, not only because of the pleasure they bring to the participants, but also because of the opportunity they provide for museum staff and clientele to interact with a population often hidden from public view (Personal communication, July 17, 2009).

It is necessary for volunteers to be able to adjust their assumptions in order to help participants be fully engaged in the workshop. During a ceramics project, participants could make either

a bowl or a plate using the Japanese technique known as *nerikomi*, which involves layering designs with two colors of clay. The instructors expected that rolling out the clay and forming shapes would be especially challenging for one participant who could use only one hand. Undeterred, he decided to create a mug instead, a more complicated form than the others. The assumption that he would need extra help was mistaken. He not only worked independently, but completed the project using the techniques as shown to create a piece that was more polished than most.

Being willing to be flexible and making options available in the event that something goes wrong reduces the cost of overestimating participants' abilities. This flexibility allows all stakeholders to take risks that they could not afford to otherwise. Empowering museum staff who interact directly with visitors to improvise solutions minimizes the probability that a visitor's disabilities will jeopardize his or her full participation in the museum experience.

Implications

If museums are going to expand access, they will need to develop strategies to attract and retain new audiences and integrate them into the general museum population. They will need to ask themselves, "Do we create separate programs or try to create a common space where diverse groups can share a museum experience?"

If the benefits of the PMA Accessible Programs Workshops are seen to be primarily therapeutic, then the opportunity for cross-pollination between groups of people with disabilities and those without is limited. On the other hand, there are important implications if the workshops are seen—as they are by the participants and many of the personal attendants—primarily as opportunities to express their creativity while learning more about the museum's collection. Health and wellness are promoted when we create a space that brings "visitors together through their shared human experiences...[and] facilitate opportunities for the expression of their diverse perspectives" (Sweeny, 2009).

Accessible Programs Workshops attract wider audiences to the PMA collection by giving groups opportunities to interact with real objects of cultural value and at the same time place

those objects in meaningful contexts with stories and background information. These experiences prepare the participants for related art-making experiences by having them view these objects with specific artistic intentions in mind. It is interesting to note that these experiences would be difficult to reproduce online or in a virtual environment. In today's world our virtual lives can distract us from the rich experiences of interacting with people and relating to cultural objects. Museums have unique opportunities to facilitate the kind of learning—interacting with and creating art—that can inspire and transform us. These opportunities argue for the continued relevance of museums and their collections in an increasingly wired world.

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