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Diálogos com a Arte - Revista de Arte, Cultura e Educação

4 Universal Communication through Art

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Abstract

Dating back to prehistoric times, art has been serving as a means of communication for humans (Blundell, 2006). Considering that communication is the process of transmitting information and common understanding (Keyton, 2011), does communication through art occur only when people share a common understanding of art? When looking at art, do people need to look for the message as intended by artists and as defined by art historians? At a time of intense social, political and environmental changes, art museums could serve as social spaces that encourage communication among the public. This article explores the concept of art as a universal communication regardless of one's artistic abilities and art background vis-a-vis my research projects concerning the national art museum as a public educational resource. As part of my research, I carried out three community projects with young adult participants (aged 21-30years). I exchanged ideas with the participants about the way they engage with the national art museum collection in Malta. Throughout the three projects, regardless of their artistic ability and aesthetic background, all participants communicated experiences, feelings and ideas through art.

Keywords: art museum; learning experience; communication; community outreach.

Communicating Meanings

In this article, the definition of 'universal communication' is based on the concept that throughout history, art has communicated different meanings universally—in the form of ideas and/ or emotions as people create, express, interpret and respond to art. Meanwhile, art museum collections have no meaning unless public viewers construct narratives around displayed artworks, by sharing multiple meanings. At a time of intense social, political and environmental changes, museums could play a significant role as educational resources (Janes, 2009), serving as social spaces that encourage communication among the public through art. Since "…objects do not speak for themselves…they are given meaning…" (Hooper-Greenhill, 2006: 236), museum staff need to explore ways to reach out to diverse communities from all walks of life through providing educational community outreach programmes.

The main focus of a study I conducted in Malta during 2016-2017, concerned holistic educational strategies with reference to the national art museum as a public educational resource in the 21st Century. Research shows that exploring the visitors' ways to use museums within their cultural range is essential to understand the ways in which museums communicate (Martin, 2003;

Coffee, 2007). An aspect of my study's investigations focused on the participants' practice of communication skills embracing their multiple narratives as they interacted with each other to interpret the museum collection.

Research Context

For my research, I carried out three community projects with reference to the national art museum collection in Malta. The projects specifically aimed to address the needs of three communities of young adult participants (aged 21-30years). This age group is often considered as challenging to reach out to. Thus they are often excluded from local cultural projects and events which focus mainly on families, school children and teenagers. At the time of the projects, the only art museum in Malta (National Museum of Fine Arts, 2017) happened to be going through relocation and reconceptualization to eventually be converted into a community-oriented museum named 'MUŻA' (MUŻA, 2018), planned to open in 2018. Its premature closing in 2016 directed my projects' intention to provide community outreach to split into two approaches. One approach engaged the participants directly with the collection within the museum building while the other involved the participants in activities with reference to images of the collection, either digitally or printed.

The first project was carried out with a community of residents at a Drug Rehabilitation Centre. The second project was held with a community of inmates at the Correctional Facility. The third project was carried out with a community of University students following a Bachelors in Art Education course and thus already had an artistic background. Of all three communities, I was biased in expecting that the participants of the third project would find the museum collection relevant to communicate their interpretations and ideas through.

The early interviews carried out with the participants before the start of each project revealed that the communities of the first and second projects would not visit the national art museum on their own initiative. They felt that they were not appropriate visitors for an art museum. Most of them believed they would feel out of place at an art museum due to their inability to understand and communicate through art. For them, 'understanding artworks' required the ability to look at art by linking it to knowledge of historical facts and artistic techniques and therefore an ability which so far they did not learn or have been deprived of.

The participants' ability of 'understanding artworks' through a lens of previous artistic and historical background marks an ingrained mentality. It probably derived from social constructs passed on from one generation to the next, leading these participants to believe that art

museums were only relevant for the few, such as artists, art collectors, academics and art historians. This recalls what Bourdieu (1997) calls *habitus*—cultural personality rooted in family upbringing and schooling experiences. Yet, my research findings revealed that guided through a task-oriented project, the participants who lacked an art background still achieved the ability to talk confidently about art and communicate their meaning. Moreover, through social interaction where personal interpretations were communicated with and challenged by their peers, the participants gained confidence in appreciating the museum collection. Due to such dialogic practices happening in front of museum collections, Coffee (2007) maintains that museums are often recognized as a resource for social experience.

Awareness of Individual and Social Learning Cycles

Throughout the projects, I could observe the participants' constant dynamic communication with each other. Some shared personal narratives related to an artwork they discussed, others provided recommendations and challenged each other's interpretations. Moreover, the projects' main task engaged the participants to choose a theme, and develop it with reference to their choices of artworks from the museum collection. In dealing with this main task, the participants had to go through a communication process not only with others but also with themselves while reflecting, analyzing and evaluating their interpretations. In fact, the participants' art journals contained self-evaluations and comments about their discovered learning strategies while dealing with their theme development vis-à-vis the museum collection.

The participants' documentation of individual knowledge construction helped them to communicate with each other. By flipping through their art journals and mind-maps, they presented their work in progress, explaining reasons for choosing particular artworks and their links to the theme they were developing. In communicating their work in progress, they generated discussions and constructive criticism with the rest of the group. As they communicated their work-in progress and provided each other with alternative ways of seeing, the participants became aware of their learning process recognizing "…the understanding gained as superior to their previous understandings" (Ash, 2004: 862). Eventually the new and/ or alternative connections to the collection evoked by interacting socially with their peers, provided the participants with an internalized dialogue leading them to reflect further on different meaning-makings.

The projects' findings revealed that the participants of the first and second projects, who did not have any art background, were grateful for being provided with a learning opportunity to

communicate through museum artworks. One of the participants admitted that "… had I not participated in this project, I would have never realised that I could learn to appreciate art." Throughout all three projects, by setting tasks to encourage the participants to choose artworks and explain the reasons for their choices, with an emphasis that there was 'no right or wrong answer', the participants could feel safe to communicate their reflections and meaning-makings about art. In doing so, the communities of drug rehabilitation centres and that at correctional facilities, participants of the first and second projects gradually realised they did not have to be art historians or experts to communicate about art.

Beyond the premises of the national art museum, through digital images and high quality printed images of the collection, the participants were still engaged in communication through the museum collection. This was carried out in view of the theme they had chosen to develop, as explained further on. During the evaluation session of the first project concerning the workshop which included the museum visit, the participants agreed that the task of interpreting images of the collection served to boost their confidence in appreciating art and communicating it with the rest. This was especially due to having to deal with the role-playing task[1] (Fig.1), imagining themselves as a museum guide.

Figure 1. Participants at the Museum carrying out the Role-Play task

The participants also felt comfortable to present their opinions to each other as a relationship of trust has been nurtured. Such attained self-confidence would probably serve to encourage the participants to visit other art museums and feel confident to interpret artworks vis-à-vis their own life and/ or social issues. However, for the time being, the interview replies and

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[1] Role-play Task at the Art Museum consisted of the following guidelines:
    1. Imagine that you are the new Museum guide.
    2. Prepare a guided-tour concerning three selected Artworks in relation to your selected theme, eg. 'Relationships'.
    3. Prepare two questions to ask to the rest.

evaluation sessions showed evidence that the first and second projects' strategies provided the participants with a sense of confidence to communicate through art.

Throughout the projects, the practice of communication skills eventually led the participants to practice interpretation skills through thinking of alternative contexts for their selected artworks stemming from their own meaning-making while developing their chosen theme to create their own artwork (Fig.2a, b, c).

Art Museums as Communicators

In rethinking the museum experience being offered to visitors, Hooper-Greenhill insists that "we need to consider the museum as communicator" (2000, p. 12). This aspect of communication through art museums focuses on the ways museum staff strives to provide relevant experience for their visitors' meaning-making. For this aim, they have to keep in mind that museum visitors are a "…diverse array of audiences…not comprised of a single culture…" (Ash, 2004, p. 862), but of multiple cultures. In view of this, my projects' tasks encouraged the participants to engage with the museum collection through their own interests based on the multicultural backgrounds they brought with them.

The knowledge the participants exchanged with me (the educator/researcher) and the rest of the community served to inform my study about multiple interpretations resulting from their engagement with the museum collection facilitated through social interaction. This recalls Giroux's (1992) perspective of culture as complex and unequal site of multiple experiences where communication consists of negotiated processes of meaning-making of everyday life.

What follows are three examples, extracted from each project's results, indicating the participants' **meaning-making** of their chosen theme which also reveals the ways the museum collection ultimately served as a means of communication, grounded in the participants' reflections on life.

A participant from the first project chose the theme of 'Family', which he developed through the peace symbol (Fig.2a). He combined two artworks from the collection that inspired him to create his own artwork. He communicated his meaning-making of his chosen theme, linked to his chosen artworks from the collection and personal needs as follows:

> "My family is my life…and I know I ruined it. My family suffers because of me. The painting 'Christ on the Cross' and the sculpture of 'Rythmii Vitae' inspired my work, because in the first I see the pain I put my family through…they suffer the cross because of me… and in the second, I see the strength of love between a man and a woman, no matter what

happens…Then I developed it as a drawing using the symbol of peace…the peace when a family provides love…this is what I want to find when I am out of here…I will not ruin my family this time".
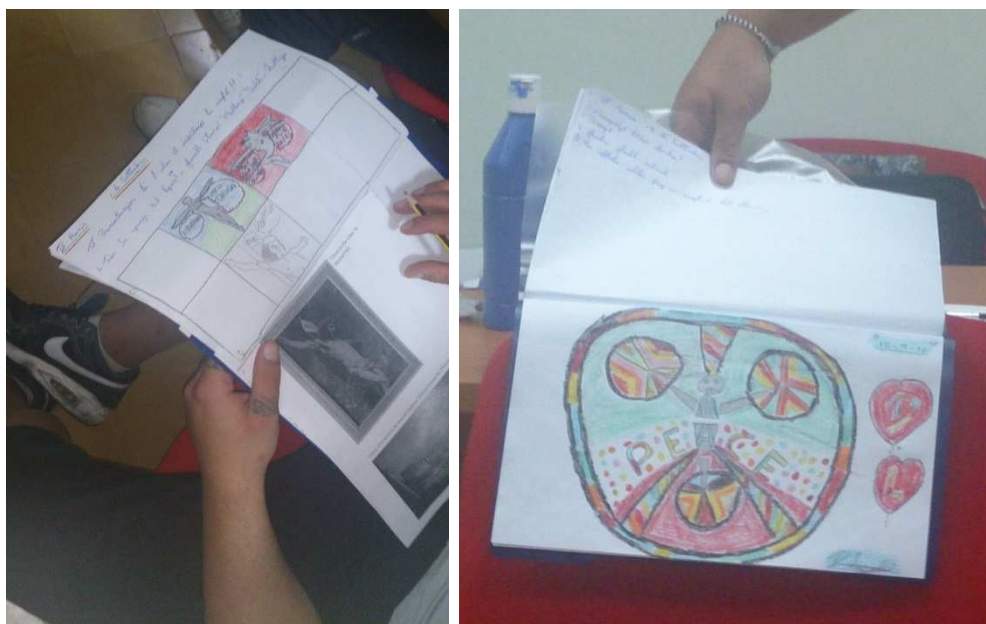
Figure 2(a). A participant's reinterpretation of the museum collection

One of the participants from the second project communicated his chosen theme of 'Social Relationships' by reinterpreting an artwork depicting the village feast, from the reserved contemporary collection of the museum, as follows:

> "…me as a hairdresser… looking out of my shop onto my next customer and also showing the way I can connect with people that are from different cultures and ages".

While selecting artworks relevant to his own identity, he practised communication skills with his own thoughts and those of others to see alternative choices and eventually reinterpreted the chosen artwork in a different context than that originally communicated by the artist (Fig.2b). His meaning-making while observing the chosen artwork led him to identify his hairdressing job with that of a villager at the doorstep who daily connects to other people from all walks of life.
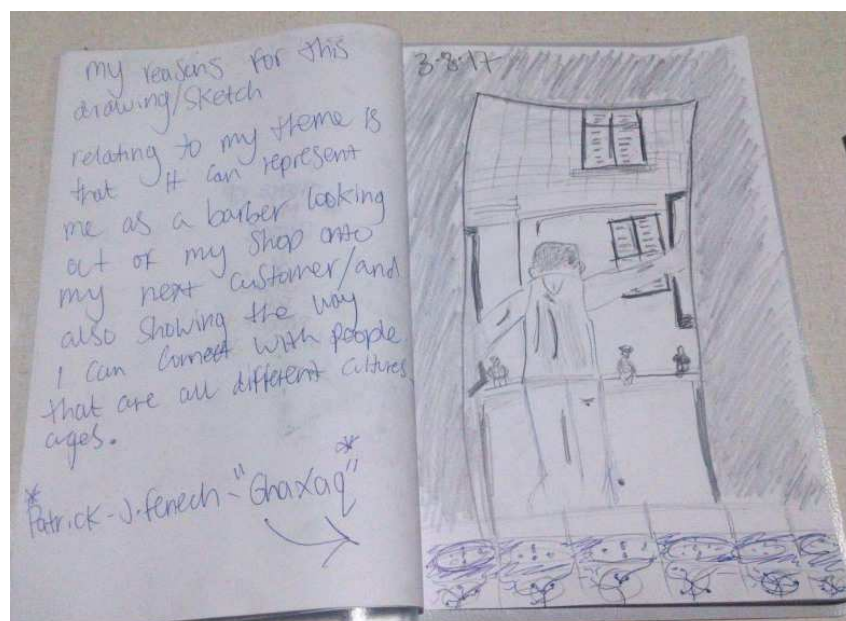
Figure 2(b). Identifying with an artwork from the museum collection

In the third project, there were two participants who chose to focus on the theme 'Exploring the Truth', through constructing an online virtual exhibition (Abigail and Gabriella, 2017), including several images they found relevant from the museum collection (Fig.2c). To achieve this, they communicated while exploring interactive digital strategies to provide the viewers with an interactive communication process through the museum collection. Their meaning-making and overall connections of their chosen theme, selected artworks and universal human needs have been communicated as follows:

> "Education is very important, actually it is the key to everything: the key in being knowledgeable, into getting out of poverty and most important, it helps you understand the truth without letting other's opinions affect your own. This virtual exhibition's aim is to help the individuals reflect on their own lives and see what they can do to improve their lives or the lives of others."

Figure 2(c). Reinterpretation of several artworks from the museum collection

Art Museums for Universal Communication

Despite my prejudice that University students' art background would automatically make them confident to communicate their interpretations of the collection, they still complained that most of the artworks on display are uninspiring as they belong to baroque era. In addition, they considered the atmosphere at the museum as hostile as it lacked human communication with museum staff. Despite having an art background, a participant still suggested the importance of having museum staff ready to help out as required, arguing that:

> "I am a young adult who loves art, but then there are young adults who find art irrelevant. So, what I would like to see in a museum… maybe more interaction… more experts around the museum who can talk with you. For me that I'm studying art… if I go to a museum and there is no one, I'm just looking and only maybe read the label, but that's it…"

To provide meaningful museum experiences, Simon (2010) suggests that museum staff need to understand visitors' needs by greeting them and asking questions about exhibitions. On the other hand, another participant did not recommend museum personnel to guide or facilitate the art museum as communication. Instead, she said that the national art museum requires better curatorship in selecting the museum's displayed objects to appeal to a variety of audiences. She explained that:

> "… the museum collection should include different forms of art rather than simply paintings and sculptures, for example, installations that focus on engineering so that the museum can attract young adults who are into other aspects of life, not only those who are into art".

In view of their own art museum irrelevant experiences, throughout their participation in the project, the participants aimed to bring about a change to the earlier mentioned mentality, so that anyone can communicate through art museums. Unlike the participants of the first and second projects, the participants of the third project grounded in their contemporary art education training knew that an art museum could serve for public learning, irrespective of whether one had art background. The required public learning through art museums which they referred to concerned people's need for social connection to make meaning of life, social issues and the world around them while communicating through art. But do people intrinsically feel the need to visit museums to communicate through art, especially when most of them are not even aware of art museums as public social learning facilities?

In an increasingly image-dominated world, art museums could serve as a space to address public communication. In fact, if museum educational outreach programmes are offered to several public communities, they could be a means of encouraging people to interact with each other

face to face. Public communication could be facilitated by engaging them in interpretation of the museum collection and share their various constructions of meanings.

Since my research projects were participatory, the participants were encouraged to forward their suggestions for better relevance of museum outreach. Quoting from the participants' replies to the interviews, a participant admitted:

> "… I realized that spending some time to think while looking at art helps me feel free as I understand life better."

Another participant voiced what he observed and heard from the rest of the participants while affirming:

> "… we could reflect on our life's choices, clarify confused thoughts and connect art to life."

These participants' voices align with the opportunity of communicating with oneself while engaging with the museum collection. Meanwhile although people use their individual strategies through preferred learning styles, "… the interpretation we make is not ours alone…" (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p. 25). Aligned with this, Mayer (2005) sustains that through dialogic looking at works of art in museums, one approaches interpretation while communicating with others, with one's own private thoughts and with the artworks themselves.

In conclusion, these days, despite the overwhelming digital connection, people are increasingly feeling disconnected, and therefore the target of 21st century art museums should focus on strategies that evoke communication through exhibited art. They should also strive to provide relevant educational outreach programmes that engage the public's practice of communication through art so that they make can meaning of life and share such meanings. That way, art museums can become spaces that enable universal communication through art, regardless of one's art education background.

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