

Museum Art Education— a partnership approach to 'Ways of Looking' at visual art in Oman

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This article will explore the long-term partnership between Bait Al Zubair and the Sultanate of Oman's Ministry of Education with a focus on a more recent collaborative project between the organisations, which built on previous experiences to develop a more sustainable teacher-training programme. This arts education programme was specifically designed by the Ministry of Education's Specialised Centre for the Professional Development of Teachers for new teachers, and recently delivered to over 120 arts teachers who work at government schools across the Sultanate of Oman.

Establishing a culture of gallery education at Bait Al Zubair

Bait Al Zubair opened in 1998 and since then some 20,000 school children per year have been visiting the museum. The Ministry of Education book these visits, and the students' teachers would usually show them around the museum. Bait Al Zubair visitor relations team would help by briefing the students on the heritage collection. Although there was little formal gallery education, the rich heritage of Oman was clearly communicated to the students.

Since 2011 Bait Al Zubair has been collecting contemporary Omani art and it became apparent that schools were not taking their students to engage with this collection during a visit, as teachers did not feel comfortable talking about art in a museum context. It was also apparent that very few art teachers were attending exhibitions and often non-specialist teachers were supervising visits.

In 2013 the Cobra Museum of Modern Art in the Netherlands curated a major exhibition for Bait Al Zubair, and an opportunity arose to explore how both the Ministry of Education and the team at Bait Al Zubair could improve gallery education during the

exhibition's run. The childlike, naïve work of Dutch artists Constant (1920-2005), Karel Appel (1921-2006), Corneille (1922-2010), and other artists encouraged teachers and learners alike to access the exhibition.

During Bait Al Zubair's negotiations with the Cobra Museum of Modern Art they visited the Ministry of Education International Programmes department to discuss possible teacher development opportunities and access programmes for young learners. Coincidentally, some fourteen teachers and six supervisors were planning to travel to France for a study tour on art education—a natural link was developing to further their skills on return, using trainers from the Dutch museum as well as to develop a schools gallery education pack based on the Dutch experience and methodology.

A project proposal was approved by the Ministry of Education, facilitating training for twenty teachers and supervisors as well as visits to the Cobra exhibition for over 1,000 school children during a two-month period during the exhibition's spring 2015 run. Teachers underwent a half-day training session on the art history aspect of the exhibition and were introduced to the concept of gallery education activities for children. Bait al Zubair staff were trained to lead informal sessions with worksheets based on the essence of Cobra: "that everyone has the need to express himself creatively and that that expression should have no restricting rules imposed upon it" (Cobra Museum of Modern Art 2015). The children's workshop explored emotional reactions to the work they saw as well as creating new art pieces based on what they had observed.

It should be noted that this was the first time both art teachers and Bait Al Zubair staff had engaged in such gallery education activities. The experience was positive.

However, feedback from staff and teachers revealed that the worksheets were too complex for their children. The drawing aspect of the workshop was perceived to be accessible and moreover enjoyable whereas the writing aspect was too complex. It was also the case that teachers accompanying their students were not always the ones that had been trained for the gallery visit, Bait Al Zubair having trained fourteen teachers. In total over 400 children and 50 teachers visited the exhibition.

Following this experience it was decided that future gallery education programmes would focus on pair and group discussions rather than writing activities, and these sessions would be led by Bait Al Zubair staff unless the teacher had had specific training prior to the visit.

Building creative partnerships with arts organisations

In August 2015 Sarah Nunn, Lead Consultant for the New Teacher Programme at The Specialised Centre for the Professional Training of Teachers (Ministry of Education), approached Bait Al Zubair to inquire about delivering a bespoke training session for the Centre's Art Trainers that would be followed by a comprehensive schedule of one day workshops for over 120 new teachers from public schools at the museum, led by Omani trainers.

Bait Al Zubair was selected to host this innovative arts education initiative for the new teachers programme as it is an established cultural institution in Muscat, providing a familiar, rich and tangible creative environment for teachers to explore the value of learning beyond the classroom. The Centre's leadership team recognised that this immersive approach to arts education would inspire new teachers to apply similar creative strategies in their regions as well as ensuring there was



Above: Children holding their artwork. (Image courtesy of Bait Al Zubair.)

continuity in pedagogy and arts education delivery across the schools in the Sultanate. International research reveals that creative partnerships enrich students' appetite for arts and concurrently enhance their critical thinking skills and activate language development (NACCCE 1999: 142). Dr. Badriya Al Nadabi, Assistant Director at the Centre believes that:

Building creative partnerships with our esteemed arts and cultural organisations in Muscat has provided the Centre with a wonderful opportunity to enrich our new teacher programme. It has inspired our new teachers to invigorate their teaching practice and develop captivating learning experiences for our students that will in turn, raise their academic achievement, heighten their enjoyment of school and raise their aspirations (2015).

Following a series of consultations with new teachers from public schools the research revealed that many teachers wanted to broaden their arts practice and extend their knowledge of Omani artists. There was a genuine request from teachers to understand how to plan a comprehensive arts programme that could be sustained over a term and would follow a distinct theme or artist while integrating the fundamental formal elements of art making. It was also apparent that there was an opportunity to utilise access to the Omani artists' work within a gallery environment. Providing a real-life context during the training would expose teachers to the 'creative learning cycle' undertaken by an artist, which they could subsequently communicate to their students.

Exploring the 'Ways of Looking' and Creative Learning Strategies

The field trip to Bait Al Zubair became a fundamental part of a five-day practical art and design course devised for teachers, and delivered at the Centre. The overall programme focused on exploring the elements of art using international and local Omani artists as a starting point for investigation, providing teachers with the “vocabulary of interpretation, exploration and expression of idea[s]”, in advance of their visit to Bait Al Zubair (Charman & Ross 2004: 2).

A sequence of art appreciation activities were developed by the Ministry of Education Lead Consultant taking teachers on an interactive journey among the Omani artworks on display in the main gallery. These generic strategies, when accompanied with thought-provoking questioning from the facilitator, could then be adapted and applied by the new teachers to any art exhibition, and were consequently explored in the proceeding Italian exhibition at Bait Al Zubair immediately after the training. (*Colours of My Liguria*, December 2015 – January 2016).

This immersive approach to investigating the structure, composition and content of the artwork ensured that the teachers had a meaningful encounter with the work and experienced first-hand the critical thinking approaches that they expected their students to apply. From experience, this empathetic methodology to arts education is effective as it is a process that directly immerses the teacher in the students' perspective. While in the gallery space, teachers are given an opportunity to analyse the immediate experience and ascertain the most effective strategy to apply to their context in order to reap the same positive engagement and learning outcomes from their students.

Prior to the teachers' workshops, seven Omani Art Trainers attended a one-day 'Training the Trainer' workshop at the museum as part of their preparation. The Bait Al Zubair team provided a comprehensive insight into Oman's art history, starting as far back as the cave paintings from 5,000 years ago at Jebel Akhtar and Musandam. The artwork and practice of four Omani artists' in the museum collection were explored: Issa Mafraji, Juma al Harthy, Radhika Hamlai, and Maryam Al Zadjali. This was followed by a practical workshop in the gallery space that included guided discussions and group activities inspired by the Tate's 'Ways of Looking' strategies (see Charman & Ross 2004; Tate Modern Teachers Kit 2002).

The Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS) developed in America over twenty years ago by Abigail Housen and Philip Yenawine also uses the power of the visual arts to inspire conversations and activate students' critical thinking and engagement with artwork (Visual Thinking Strategies 2016). However, the Lead Consultant decided to work with the Tate's 'Ways of Looking' methodology, as it was felt the multisensory approach provided greater opportunities for student interaction and independent exploration with the artworks. The activities selected involved matching objects, adjectives, and textiles to the paintings on display in the exhibition. The tactile and collaborative approach would enable students new to arts appreciation to discuss ideas and concepts with peers before sharing their findings with the teacher who could then facilitate deeper discussions.

The group activities centred on the Tate's personal approach to art appreciation: yourself, your world and your experience, and concentrated on “meaningful, enjoyable and memorable” encounters with real works of art in the gallery (Barnes *et al.*

2006: 85). Emphasis was placed on encouraging the individual to bring their personal observations and experiences to a group discussion about a painting thereby generating multiple viewpoints and ideas. Everybody's opinion was valued and considered—there was no 'right or wrong' answer. This approach to engaging with the artwork was a liberating notion for the Omani trainers and new teachers alike. Simple questions such as, 'What can you see? How does the work make you feel? What does the work remind you of? Why does it make you feel or think of that?' opened doorways to new ways of thinking, looking and engaging with the artworks in the exhibition.

These carefully facilitated discussion activities were followed by opportunities for the participants to investigate the exhibition independently. Inspired by the Tate strategies, they matched key words from the elements of art, objects and

different coloured materials to an artwork on display. Each activity further drew the observers in, sparking discussion and discourse as they collectively decided which artists' work connected to their inquiry question or interactive task. Artworks were interviewed, soundscapes created, and the curator's decision-making was imagined. Large whiteboards and pens generated quick responses, freeing the participants and encouraging them to be bold and experimental. Each group became totally immersed in the tactile and practical approach; the environment was filled with absorbed discussion as they discovered new perspectives and viewpoints about the exhibition. "The visit to Bait Al Zubair was one of the best sessions for the art teachers. It demonstrated how art teachers can connect life, scientific thinking and practical skills in one rich experience", noted Said Al Nahawi, Lead Omani Art Trainer (2015).



Above: Training the Trainer at Bait Al Zubair. (Image Courtesy of Creative Elements.)



Above: Trainer training with teachers at Bait Al Zubair. (Image Courtesy of Creative Elements.)
Below: Teachers participating in a one-line 'Ways of Looking' activity at Bait Al Zubair. (Image Courtesy of Creative Elements.)
Opposite: Training circle Bait Al Zubair. (Image courtesy of Bait Al Zubair.)



Over the course of five weeks, 120 new art teachers participated in one-day 'Ways of Looking' exploratory workshops at Bait Al Zubair, using the Tate's methodologies alongside additional creative learning strategies to analyse artwork and inspire their imagination. The teachers embraced the active approaches and as part of the course began to devise 'Ways of Looking' activities that could be applied with their students.

New art teachers commented:

The field trip to Bait Al Zubair was an opportunity to identify and share new learning strategies. We looked at artwork by using interactive activities and role play. We were encouraged to think quickly, and share ideas and opinions (Al Gabry 2015).

The visit was very positive, as all activities and tasks were motivating students to learn about art, through art (Al Hadifi 2015).

The field trip introduced us to new strategies and was an opportunity to acquire new skills and experiences that are useful and fun for both teachers and students (Al Kaabi 2015).

Applying of 'Ways of Looking' strategies at Bait Al Zubair

An opportunity for some of the new teachers to apply and practice their newly gained skills and knowledge was provided by Bait Al Zubair's exhibition *Colours of my Liguria* by Italian artist Gian Marco Crovetto (December 2015-January 2016).

Crovetto's works are heavily influenced by the Fauvist movement (an early twentieth-century modern art movement in Europe) with very colourful images of mountains, seascapes, and use of windows to frame

and describe a view. The exhibition attracted over 4,000 visitors within a five-week period. Again via approaching the Ministry of Education, Bait Al Zubair provided gallery education activities for school grades three to seven.

Bait Al Zubair developed learning resources using the 'Ways of Looking' methodology, with materials created to guide students through the exhibition, emphasizing that all opinions and feelings were appropriate. These resources were shared with the Centre and made available via an online platform for the new teachers to review ahead of their visit. Rather than worksheets being given to students to complete, as with the previous Cobra exhibition, both the teachers and Bait Al Zubair staff were provided with 'Ways of Looking' activities to use. These included paired work, group work, and discussions focused on students' feelings, thoughts and emotions throughout the sessions.

More than 375 students from twenty public schools attended the sessions. Feedback from the Bait Al Zubair team confirmed that the Tate methodology was appropriate for Omani children who wanted to talk more about what they saw and felt, rather than write about their opinions, as talking as opposed to writing gave the student a more immediate tool to use to express their feelings. Creating work in the gallery space was also seen as a positive experience.



Impact of the 'Ways of Looking' approach

The major impact of this work with the Bait Al Zubair team—who have worked with more than 1,300 children over the past year—has been their confidence and immense growth in understanding how to engage young people with exhibitions. Equipped with 'Ways of Looking' strategies and gallery approaches they are able to actively connect students with exhibitions, and their personal interest and confidence in the contemporary art galleries has increased significantly. As a result the team have a desire to do more activities in the space over the coming months in addition to the heritage galleries in the museum where the content is comfortable and familiar.

Additionally, teachers who attended the Italian exhibition after their initial training provided by the Centre acknowledged a sense of personal achievement. The sessions had given them practical and accessible guidelines to engage their students with the exhibition. Initially most teachers were hesitant about managing their class in a public space and were divided as to whether all their students would stay focused on the tasks as they moved freely around the gallery. However, these concerns were quickly dispelled as the session progressed. This was mainly due to the genuine engagement of the students who enjoyed the decision-making activities and the opportunity to





Above: Teachers participating in 'Ways of Looking' at Bait Al Zubair. (Image courtesy of Creative Elements.)

select which painting connected to their word or colour swatch.

The impact of the sessions on the students was overwhelmingly positive with teachers recording in the museum's visitor book how much the children had learnt and how the new method of teaching engaged their students. Heather Ford, a primary school art teacher stated: "The workshops inspired the children, they made them think about the artists choice of colours and themes, gave an insight into the artist's message. The children were able to compare and contrast art from different times and places and the workshops made them want to create their own" (2016).

It was clear that there was immense enjoyment and engagement from the students who loved the activities that involved selection and generated debate. The opportunity to move freely around the gallery with a focus inspired them, stimulated their imaginations, and allowed their opinions to be valued. In an ideal situation, a pre-visit worksheet about the art and artist could be sent to the visiting schools in order for the teacher and students to know a little more about the work they were to engage with and to develop an understanding of where the exhibition lay in terms of art history. Furthermore a post-visit activity could be provided to the teacher; for example, one school took Crovetto's style of painting views through a window and used this to create work that was then framed by Omani windows and doors.

Conclusion

The Tate's 'Ways of Looking' approaches have provided Bait Al Zubair and teachers from public schools with a common language that is accessible for all learners. To build on these past experiences, Bait Al Zubair has recommended that both organisations create a range of additional 'Ways of Looking' materials that will be available for the Ministry of Education's trained art teachers throughout the year. In addition, The Ministry of Education, the Centre and Bait Al Zubair should maintain close communication to devise a programme of regular arts education visits. These visits will increase art teacher's capacity to engage their students with the permanent collection and, as highlighted by the Centre's Lead Consultant, contribute to developing students' critical thinking, improving their confidence and cultivating their ability to formulate opinions. These real-life skills, that are an integral components of 21st century living, demonstrate "the potential of galleries in contributing to the cultural lives and educational experiences of young people, perhaps even sowing the seeds of a lifelong passion for the visual arts" (Charman & Rose 2006: 7).

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Paul Doubleday is Director of Bait Al Zubair a private museum opened to the public in 1998. It is funded by its founders, the Zubair family, who in 2005 established the Bait Al Zubair Foundation as the cultural and social arm of the family-owned business, The Zubair Corporation. The Foundation manages Bait Al Zubair and projects relating to culture and heritage, the arts, the community, history, and publishing.

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